



No future. Utopia now!

Martin Parker

review of

Bell, D.M. (2017) *Rethinking utopia: Place, power, affect*. New York: Routledge.
(HB, pp. 188, £88, ISBN 9781138891333)

Introduction

Towards the end of this intriguing book (157), David Bell tells us how he fell in love with free jazz, of the improvised and generally impenetrable kind, when he was 17. It took him a while, but when he got it, it was music that opened up onto a world in which form was always being made at every moment, and the players slid and bopped off each other, making something new each time that they played. The musicians augmented each other's capacities and creativities when they played attentively and sympathetically together. Together, because this was not a question of one solo diva elevating themselves on everyone else's back, one boss with one vision, or one set of dutifully repeated clichés. This was music as collective making, and (in this book) an opening to utopianism, to the making of utopias.

It's a lovely metaphor, and I wish he had told me that at the start of the book. I wish that the practice of music making that holds so much promise for what he wanted to say was a theme introduced strongly at the beginning, and that then was used as a counter-point to the incessant beat of theory and academic reference. The hammering of not-this, and obviously not-that, of corrections to certain readings of Deleuze, or Bloch, or Negri, or Mouffe. There was a lightness and flexibility to the central argument here that I felt was largely trammelled by the genre conventions of writing 'politically engaged social theory for academic publishers'.

For myself, I wanted more jazz, more of David Bell's evident care and wit, and less academic bell ringing.

So what is the central argument? It's a smart one, that most radical understandings of utopianism throw away 'place' far too quickly. (I'm going to leave the right wing and market utopians out of this review, though he does have some nice things to say about their microfascist 'sad joys' too.) Using a range of writings from utopian studies (Moynan, Levitas, Kumar and so on), as well as extended readings of two novels – Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921) and Ursula le Guin's *The dispossessed* (1974) – Bell suggests that the dominant radical narrative is of the other place and other time, utopia as a kind of longing for that which is not now. Utopia is often framed as a desire, an impulse or method to expose the insufficiency of the present and the possibility of elsewhere and elsewhen. Utopia is exodus, escape, hope.

His problem, summarising very quickly, is that this defers and depoliticises so much, pushing utopianism into fiction, dream, desire, rather than thinking and doing it as a noisy and improvised prefigurative present. Utopia is instead co-opted as a 'nice idea'.

Half an hour on the radio. Forty-five minutes in an art gallery. An article in the weekend supplement. A lifestyle book. A quirky module at an elite university. (136)

The anger and joy stripped out, all that is left is a postcard from somewhere we might want to visit but not live, and also the endlessly repeated warning against the dangers of blueprints, means that become ends in themselves. (Yes, yes – we know. And as Bell shows, such cautions can so easily become a dully pragmatic post-utopianism, or even a strident principled anti-utopianism.) Instead, he says, let's make utopia a co-produced place here and now.

Now I might quite possibly be simplifying far too much here, but I think that Bell's argument works best when he (nodding to Spinoza) frames utopianism as a practice which enhances the powers of acting of bodies, self, other and collective (38). We play together and produce joy, individuals only possible because of others, their affect a function of how they are themselves affected, our freedoms made collectively, our collective being the precondition for our freedom. This means an insistence that utopianism can be here and now, not just there and then. This is what Valerie Fournier (2002), quoted approvingly by Bell, has called 'utopianism', the practical cultivation of contemporary possibilities. Bell's utopianism is not a nostalgia for the future, but a practice that aims at producing new forms of affect in the present. Never mind the future, as a Novara media slogan has it, let's have utopia now!

I like the way that Bell tilts at some of the comfortable reading lists of ‘utopian studies’, particularly when it becomes no more than a variety of literary studies, and I very much like his suggestions that this version of utopianism is about making a place together, with anger and joy, against capitalism and the pale, male and stale (always acknowledging that he is part of the problem too). What saddened me was the way that this book, which could have been a carnival, an explosion, a joyful improvisation with a reader, felt too much like a text for a quirky module at an elite university. (Around a quarter of it is endnotes and references.) There are moments in which kittens dance across keyboards, the author lets his ideas and words spin and sway, and Ornette Coleman says mysterious things, but the backbeat is the sound of academic posts being staked.

Showing readers what this practice of utopianism might do is a really timely task, and one that chimes well with writing on prefiguration, Occupy, organizing without organizations, immediatist organizing, anarchist, green and feminist organization theory and so on. I want to know how Bell’s version of utopianism might feel, sound, smell – not as blueprints (yes, yes – we know) but as an invitation to a different way of being. It seems to me, as a reader concerned with alternative organizing (Parker et al., 2014) that we now have a lot of thinkers converging on a different sort of organization theory. How can we do things together without trapping each other? How can we organize without building institutions that do our thinking for us? How can we continually remind ourselves that organizing is politics? These are questions that don’t throw away organizing but rather, as Bell does, try to take it much more seriously than the business school ever does.

I’m very happy to call this utopianism, but I’m sure that very well referenced hardback Routledge books written with this kind of density aren’t going to help that much. Instead, rather than annotating the score, I want David Bell to be showing me what sort of collective improvisations might help make a future that I would like to play in. He is clearly capable of such a task, and clearly recognises that it needs to be done. I want to join him there, in this place, though he can keep the free jazz.

references

- Fournier, V. (2002) ‘Utopianism and the cultivation of possibilities’, in M. Parker (ed.) *Utopia and organization*. London: Blackwell.
- Parker, M., G. Cheney, V. Fournier and C. Land (eds.) (2014) *The companion to alternative organization*. New York: Routledge.

the author

Martin Parker is at the Business School, University of Leicester. His next book is called *Shut down the business school* (Pluto Press, 2018).

Email: mp431@le.ac.uk