PERFORMATIVE UTOPIAS:
MAKING SPACE, TAKING TIME, DOING DIFFERENTLY?

TEEMU PAAVOLAINEN TAMPERE UNIVERSITY

The global rise of fascist politics, war and genocide, parts of the planet becoming uninhabitable due to global heating: this is the most urgent background against which many artists and scholars feel newly obliged to train their more utopian imaginations. In the derogatory vernacular of passive daydreaming, it might appear that there is precisely no place for utopia in such a dystopian reality—and in the later twentieth century, the idea was largely denigrated as impossible. Whether blamed on naïveté or fanaticism, the outcome seemed inevitably oppressive and totalitarian, or then just a failure in scale, longevity, and 'realism,' against 'human nature': a no-go, much as Thomas More's 1516 coinage combines the 'good place' (*eutopia*) with 'no place' (*outopia*).

In the current climate of disillusionment and cynical resignation, however—the alternatives often reduced to plain survival or extinction—the concept has become topical once more, covering not only literary fiction but a wide variety of social theory (feminist, anarchist, sociological) and, crucially, cultural practices (for overviews of the field, see Levitas [1990] 2010 and Lakkala 2021). Rather than the static blueprint of old, forcefully imposed or forever deferred, today's utopian revivalists address their utopias as *real*, *critical*, *minor*, *grounded*, *lived*, *immanent*, *practical*, or *sustainable* (e.g. Wright 2010; Firth 2012; Allen 2022). Not just a goal, utopia is identified as a "key political skill" or a "method for fostering political imagination" (Eskelinen 2020, 4, 9). Crucially, then, I argue it should also be understood as a matter of performance, as in *doing differently*.

Performance, for its part, has long been aligned with radical critique, defined by 'efficacy' not entertainment, and extended across the 'broad spectrum' of social conduct (Schechner [2002] 2013). Against such ideals, however, most Performance Studies work seems securely framed by aesthetic, and specifically theatrical practice—this is also the case with Jill Dolan's (2005) commendable *Utopia in Performance*, premised on "evanescence" rather than sustainability, and on the "activism" of "getting more … people into the theater" so they too could experience the affective power of its 'utopian performatives' (8, 170). In switching the polarity to *performative utopias*, then—in this theoretical essay and the larger project it serves to initiate—I merely wish to signal a wider focus on cultural performance and performativity (cf. Muñoz [2009] 2019; Bowditch and Vissicaro 2017), not in the sense of representing let alone feigning, but as *bringing something into being*, in the more social-scientific idiom of creating or affecting real-world states of affairs.

And yet, theory aside, in common parlance the notion of performance shares much the same fate with utopias. Either it is ignored as unreal or otherwise less important—as when 'performative activism' is casually ridiculed as mere theatrical posturing (cf. Paavolainen 2023)—or then the most widespread usage of both concepts, be it in terms of techno-utopias or 'performance metrics,' is fully in line with business as usual. Here, though, if indeed there is a shared prejudice pitting utopia and performance against some allegedly more real kind of realism (as "just a utopia" or "only performative"), this very bias suggests two general premises and a conceptual strategy for this essay.

Premise 1: reality as performative, utopia as made-utopian?

First of all, it could very well be argued that the kinds of 'reality' which repeatedly deem any 'alternatives' impossible are themselves utterly utopian and performative: not a matter of how things just 'are' but of how they are *made* to be, from a specific point of interest. Granted, their utopian benefits fall on a very limited group of people, who also happen to control large machineries of violence, money, media, and identity—and indeed, these latter do define one very performative kind of 'realism': the "political ontology of violence," in anthropologist David Graeber's (2011) blunt term, whereby "the very parameters of social existence and common sense" are reproduced by force (46). Even more powerfully, this common sense is constantly reproduced in a global, corporate media space in which any positively utopian aspirations are regularly presented as if they were an already achieved dystopia: a fake reality if ever these was one, against which more authoritarian utopias take seed and which they will conveniently keep on blaming for their own broken promises (yes, I am thinking of Trump 2.0 here).

Conversely, if we go by this proposal that common-sense 'reality' is largely aligned with the utopias of those in a position to make their utopias real and to deny their performative basis, then arguably, the alleged 'impossibility' of utopia, too—in the standard derogatory sense—is a function of its being *made impossible* in that reality.

Often, political alternatives are rendered impossible simply by burdening them with impossible demands. Even as almost everything now seems acceptable as 'reality,' utopia, like fiction, has the high responsibility of being somehow more believable: for all the critique of utopias imposing

'blueprints' on unsuspecting victims, precise blueprints are what their proponents should provide, lest they be discarded as 'mere utopias.' Not least, this biased burden of proof sows division within progressive social movements and social theory. Whatever the temporal horizon, a default range of criticisms is easily amassed on any utopian aspirations: If you look for inspiration in the past, you will be deemed nostalgic or romantic, seeking the impossibility of reversing 'progress'; if you locate seeds of 'real utopias' in the present, you are giving in to the current system—nay, actually reproducing it ad infinitum; if you trust the future to open unforeseen possibilities, you are just utopian or perhaps suspiciously entrepreneurial, in the sense of reproducing the capitalist cult of newness and innovation, expecting sheer profit in return.

Premise 2: the necessity of utopia and the benefits of a performative framing

The other proposition is that this 'anti-utopian prejudice' is so aggressively being boosted for a reason. While it does threaten the powers that be, the utopian 'other world,' possible or not, is quickly becoming imperative, at least for the vast majorities for whom the currently dominant reality has long since outlived its utopian credentials. If human societies remain—or better, are kept—incapable of relating to the rest of the biosphere differently, fully unknown other worlds will wash them over as the current order reaches its tipping points (climate chaos as the final failure of a foregone utopia). These being the odds, it might be advisable to start defining our shared social reality not only by the forces that are so efficient at destroying it, but also, and more importantly, by those that "bring things into being" in the first place. This is the basis of what Graeber (2011) called a "political ontology of the imagination," whereby artists and revolutionaries stand united in the performative-utopian commitment that the world is still "something that we make, and could just as easily make differently" (42, 47).

If there is a more strategic angle to be derived from the common dismissal of utopia and performance, in the public sphere, the first step taken in this essay is to ask how each of the two concepts might help address the other's perceived weaknesses and blind spots. One way around, a utopian horizon might at least amend the sense of passive determinism that seems to colour some dismissive attitudes to performativity as a concept. The other way around, a performative framing might quite fruitfully relativize some default criticisms of utopia, too briefly listed in the first paragraph: hence the very issue of reality could be redefined through J. L. Austin's ([1955] 1962) initial twist toward causality—'performatives' judged as "happy" or not rather than true or false—whilst the claim of utopias negating some selfish 'human nature' could be countered by Judith Butler's (1993) insistence that any such 'essence' is only ever a performative effect.

In the following section, accordingly, I explore how a very general definition of performativity might rid utopia of some of its overly static connotations. If the former is a matter of doing, then the latter can be understood not only as a distant aspiration, but as a matter of *doing differently*, in the embodied present of some social formation. In the concluding section, I use the ambiguous etymology of utopia to suggest where its performance could concretely begin, against the very 'realities' that deem it impossible. If those realities are so designed as to drain the time, space, and energy from any more utopian pursuits, to start rehearsing their own utopias, people need to somehow *take the time and make the space* for their performance (as the powers that be certainly

are). Again, this is a social process that implies difficult questions of oppression and privilege, but at least, in targeting what makes utopias 'utopian'—from the crude performative perspective proposed—it opens a way toward performing them into new reality.

On Performativity, or Doing Differently?

The basic dynamic through which I will be approaching the concept of performativity is fairly straightforward: people *do* something, and it begins to look like some *thing*. Hence acting in specific ways comes to suggest an inner essence or 'character,' and cherishing societal alternatives is soon dubbed 'a utopia,' meaning essentialist escape.

While this is based in etymology (the Old French *parfornir*, "to do, carry out, finish, accomplish") and in Austin's initial discussion of "doing things" with words (1962), similar accents are found in two recent PhD dissertations in Utopian Studies, by the political philosopher Jerry Burkette (2022) and the sociologist Keijo Lakkala (2021). For Burkette, strikingly, utopia is not a thing but "something that people do," hence its "proper grammatical usage" should actually be as a verb— as in *to utopia* (42, 28). For his part, Lakkala finds contemporary utopias' future horizons reduced to utopian 'counter-practices,' in the present, that instantiate "a radically different logic of doing" (129). In this, his main influence is *Crack Capitalism* by the Marxist sociologist John Holloway (2010), defining his concept of 'the crack' as "the perfectly ordinary creation of a space or moment in which we assert a different type of doing" (21), "a different way of doing or relating" (29), "a different set of social relations" (55–6). Elsewhere, this most poetic of Marxists calls for a "revolt of verbs against nouns," these latter having "swallowed up the verbs that created them," and places his hope in "the latent [as] the crisis of the apparent, the verb [as] the crisis of the noun" (Holloway 2019, 268–75).

The verb as the crisis of the noun: this is the key to why performance is so integral to utopia. If the danger of utopia is that it becomes a rigid 'thing' forcefully imposed, then performance is needed to keep the promise of utopia alive—to keep its verbs from rigidifying into nouns, the varieties of its doing from becoming one settled 'thing,' the temporality of its making, from being bounded into one 'good place' (good for whom?). If both concepts are attacked for their virtual connotations—as a mirage or illusion—then the materiality of utopia stands to gain from the more playful materiality of performance: as stereotypes go, it's no longer 'look at the Soviet Union' but 'come and join the fun'!

From a performing arts perspective, to be sure, this notion of performativity is far and wide, merging with practice at one end (doing) and production (of things) at the other. With a utopian orientation, however, the very point is to try and remember the connection: that what we practice *has* been produced and that other practices *can* always be produced. Theoretically, if at the risk of naïve universalism, this generic formulation becomes highly 'performative' when applied to social contexts that are *not* customarily regarded as 'things done' let alone utopian—to see them as such is to effectively defamiliarize them not only as merely habitual but also as changeable. This is akin to what Simon Shepherd (2016) suggests in his critique of Performance Studies: that whereas definitions of 'performance' by means of performance risk an uneasy universalism making

everything the same and losing the specificity of practice, such specificity is better respected when performance is used as a metaphorical lens for something else (217, 197). While the field of its application is wide already, utopia is something else indeed.

Elaboration: repetition of norms, utopian aspiration and failure

To better specify the basic dynamic I am suggesting, Judith Butler's (1993) account of gender performativity remains a useful starting point, even if the context is very different. In Butler's terms, the above 'doing' of performative 'things' would reflect aspects of *reiteration* (in some social context) and *normativity* (with its excluded outside): to properly perform 'masculinity,' say, and not be excluded as 'queer,' one has to repeat the sort of behaviour one's society considers masculine. Hence, gender performativity is simply defined as a "reiteration of norms" (234). However, Butler also insists that the two aspects are not really separate, and provides us with four important qualifiers as to how the doing and the done relate; these are italicized in the following recap.

On the one hand, any norm—or utopia!—can only ever be *approximated* by its performances, and yet its reiteration may appear *compulsory*: one can never quite embody it, but one has to perform accordingly, or else one will be excluded from the community. (Yes, so far this chimes well with the anti-utopian reading of utopias as necessarily totalitarian, albeit here they might become so without our even noticing.) On the other hand, insofar as any norm is only ever *produced* in its repetition—i.e. it only becomes a done thing when people actually keep doing it—this very historicity needs to be "*concealed* or dissimulated" (Butler 1993, 12; emphasis added) for the norm to remain potent and the performance to appear natural. As a 'girl,' then, it is assumed that one is not performing anything but only expressing an inner essence of one's own; here, the utopian variant could be something like '*this* is no utopia, this is the reality you all need to live by.'

So, the doing of things implies a repetition of norms; verbs congealing into nouns again. Insofar as Butler is concerned with the constitution of social identities by norms repeated and concealed, however, the inverse of this would be the constitution of norms by *actions* that themselves need to be obscured for the norm to stand. The first focus aligns with the determinist reading of Butler— where any opposition is always already "implicated in that which one opposes" (1993, 241)—and with the long tradition, in social theory, set to convince people that their utopias don't really count against the forces of discourse, desire, debt, 'the economy' or some other overwhelming 'reality.' The second, more utopian option is simply to begin with the doing or the action itself, as radical theorists like Graeber and Holloway would advise us; it is not unconstrained, and it need not be only human, but neither is it an unchangeable force of nature. Hence, too, the 'things' done or performed are "really just patterns of action" (Graeber 2001, 59): whether social constructions or more material realities—identities, utopias, places, institutions—they both reflect and constrain action, and remain therefore vulnerable.

Crucially, the latter is not a voluntaristic account either: not a matter of single actions, performativity kicks in when the thing *done* lingers on and affects further *doing*. As cultural critic Max Haiven (2014) elaborates on Holloway's poetic categories, whatever people collectively create, it will "inform, discipline and shape how [they] act and cooperate"; rather than there being a perfect

utopia ever in reach, "the solidification of the doing into the done cannot be avoided, just worked on and through" (162–6). Hence, norms and nouns can never quite be avoided (if people like some norm they call it 'values,' if not they call it 'ideology'), but they might be considered as more aspirational than absolute. If one aspect of Butlerian gender performativity is to denounce assumptions of pregiven 'essences'—the grounding of gendered acts in essential differences in nature—then perhaps utopia could still allow us to intuit an *essentially different* future, inexorably intertwined with its performances: that which orients our actions even if it becomes "real only to the extent that it is performed" (Butler 1988, 527)?

Notably, this is different from the kind of imagery through which utopia is usually denounced. Rather than a detailed blueprint forcefully imposed on unsuspecting victims, it begins as a vague aspiration of a better way of being or relating, a receding horizon which, when performed over time, may eventually stifle into a habit or a norm that rather inhibits or conceals other ways of relating and should better be abandoned. While the very idea of social 'norms' could be seen as utterly utopian—the idea that people would behave in a predictable way—any performative utopia first emerges as an exception to some norm and may even be fiercely refused, but then, once broken through, it might itself evolve into a new norm, a done thing, defining common sense. If this looks like a failure of the initial aspiration, it often is. If we think of utopia as performative, it will fail by default; it is precisely because the utopian vision can never be fully embodied that it needs to be constantly performed or assimilated—in Butler's view anyway, performativity "not only fails" but indeed "depends on failure" (2010, 159).

Utopian dramaturgies: from promise to warning, imagination to common sense

This also begins to point toward some implicit temporalities that seem crucial indeed. Focusing on its very unfolding, first, perhaps the concept of performative utopias allows us to recognize real-world utopias at different stages of their performance? If we define utopia as a more open way of doing that also risks its own institutionalization, there is a sense in which this dynamic already contains the anti-utopian critique in itself: reduced to its basic speech acts, a utopia may begin as a *promise* but end as a *warning*. In the language of doing things, the good and bad of utopia and dystopia only go to identify a general sense of openness or closure: whether the performed utopia still affords further movement or if it is already 'fully furnished,' in the sense of *per*-formed. Stated otherwise, the far ends correspond to the more antitheatrical and philosophical connotations of performance, as conspicuously 'unreal' then silently creating reality itself.

From one perspective, including both the negative and the positive under one concept is just one more way to extend it beyond any usability. From another, though, it does remind us that things are mutable and have life cycles, that they often contain the seeds of their own reversal, and that the worst of times, too, shall pass—a glimmer of hope that will feel scant when the time scale extends over generations. In a more theatrical idiom, if *representational* utopias and dystopias depict conditions in societies that are respectively 'better' or 'worse' than the reference reality of their writing, then *performative* utopias would cover the range from one to the other, and might even be measured by whether people can still do things with their lives or become generally stuck in arrangements that don't perform anymore yet are still performed. (Hence the ethics is still there:

a fascist utopia can be highly utopian and performatively efficacious, and yet it is a utopia of violence and closure, not one for opening up the common imagination.)

Ultimately, then, performative utopias are precisely about making social realities. The *most* performative are those that are accepted as 'common sense' for longer periods of time—and still, as disciplines like history and anthropology tell us, each such common sense only presents *one* way of doing things which can and will be changed over time. Beside such social scientific approaches, theatre, performance, and artistic research provide a vast field of experimentation on the as-ifs of human (re)production: to bring utopia together with performativity is to remind oneself that, on the one hand, utopias need to be performed, and on the other, that there is a gap between performative doing and the not-yet or the no-longer of the thing done. In the early stages of any utopian cycle, the gap is sure to be wider—in line with those who would reduce utopia to a fully mental phenomenon—but later on, with both the idea and the practice equally embodied in everyday life, they may longer be recognized as 'utopian' or 'performative' at all.

Against ideas of utopia as somehow free of conflict, performative utopia, as it emerges from the above, will only ever point to an unsolvable duality, tension, or paradox—one that we are constantly called to deal with in our attempts to make sense of our realities, or to make our realities make more sense: the hiatus between doing and done, intention and outcome, aspiration and imposition, imagination and violence. As activist author Astra Taylor (2019) argues in her presciently-titled *Democracy May Not Exist, but We'll Miss It When It's Gone*, often the real challenge is precisely that of living with these paradoxes (hers include perennial questions of freedom/equality, conflict/consensus, inclusion/exclusion, spontaneity/structure, and present/future). For utopia, I now proceed to suggest, the main tension is with the very realities that seek to define it as such.

How to Perform Utopias: Making Space, Taking Time?

Beginning with loose etymologies, again, there are several paradoxical connotations to the utopian tradition that might help us qualify its proposed performativity as well. First is the tension between the *negation* (the no-place) and the *affirmation* (the good place) that Kathi Weeks (2011) dubs utopia's precisely "performative dimensions": where negation produces estrangement, affirmation produces hope (204–7; cf. Bell 2017, 170). Hence, utopia is simultaneously performed against one reality so as to affirm another; no idealistic bliss devoid of conflict, it gets its very sense from its opposition to a reality that denies it—even if the latter were another utopia gone stale or dystopian. In Gary Wilder's (2022) "concrete utopianism," for example, various abolition movements (of slavery, prisons, police, collective debt, or fossil fuels) all "presuppose a world that does not yet exist even as they may help to propel into existence just such a world" (9).

Then again, all such utopian openings are often negated as soon as they arise—not in the aforementioned sense of turning hegemonic over time but through fierce opposition. In the Global North alone, such anti-utopian negation even seems to come in regular cycles: first, after the fall of the Soviet empire in 1989, there is a new upsurge of anarchist thought with the alter-

globalization or Global Justice Movement—and then 9/11 happens and the global police takes over. After the 2008 economical crash and the harsh austerity measures that follow, a new wave of popular movements arises, from the Arab Spring, Occupy, and the Spanish Indignados to the halting of oil pipes at Standing Rock—and then Donald Trump takes power. From the very next day with its worldwide Women's Marches, millions who had never protested in their lives begin to mobilize, climaxing in movements like Extinction Rebellion, the Yellow Vests, and a renewed Black Lives Matter—but then many of these are halted by the 2020 coronavirus.

Here, let these impressionistic examples suggest utopia's relation to 'reality'; if we accept Graeber's provocation, cited earlier, the latter will look utterly different whether we assume imagination or violence as its ultimate performative principle. From the perspective of the imagination, and for any utopian project of change anyway, the relevant level of reality might simply be the pragmatic one where things happen—hence various 'processual' utopians will define *society*, from an anarchist background, as "a mode of relating rather than an essential and rational entity" (Firth 2012, 23), or *world*, phenomenologically, as "a social and ethical matrix through which particular ways of being, knowing, making, and relating are inherited and cultivated" (Wilder 2022, 65). When it comes to the kind of 'reality' for which 'there are no alternatives,' however, it can be argued that the focus is precisely *not* on change but on keeping things the same, and that often enough, this happens through some form of overt or covert violence.

More often than not, then, utopian projects like those cited above will not be thwarted by their 'utopianism,' but are ferociously opposed by the powers that be—as primitive, barbaric, irrational, or romantic ("useless people feeling important"). To propose a bold argument, just as performative utopias only become 'real' to the extent that they are actually performed, so they also become *unreal* only to the extent that they are denied, forbidden, or foreclosed. As Graeber (2011) had it, hopelessness too "needs to be produced," and for that there is "a vast bureaucratic apparatus," global and decades in the making, "that renders any thought of changing the world seem an idle fantasy" (31–2).

Negation and affirmation: making 'utopian' vs making time and space for utopia
Hence, if utopia is often defined as a 'no-place' (More) that is 'not yet' (Ernst Bloch [1955–9] 1995), then perhaps the 'reality' that defines it as such—as impossible and unreal—could be addressed through all the routines that drain the time, space, and energy from any alternative doings—that actively *make* them impossible under prevailing conditions? Rather than an ontological position, this is an entirely pragmatic statement that might, however, have productive consequences for the performance of more utopian realities—as a first step, recognizing its proper arena as that which fills people's lives, and occupies disproportionate swathes of their time, energy, thoughts, and environments. Often enough, this set of situations equals some hegemonic utopia that has sufficiently managed to institutionalize its own routines and practices, often in the very scenography of its performers' everyday lives—such that even those who no longer buy into its promises have become anaesthetized from perceiving much in the way of alternatives, either.

In the performative interplay of norm and repetition, as I have suggested, absolute ontological distinctions between utopia and reality could even be downplayed for a more plural view of overlapping utopias at different stages of their performance, some of them more open and living, the majority already closed and positively deadly—and these are the ones that are forcibly kept on life support, under whatever crisis provides the pretext (9/11, 2008, Covid, Trump). If this constitutes the habitual performance of *negating utopia*, a first step of *utopian negation* is simply to acknowledge the impossibility of what we are urged to accept as 'real,' natural, and even beneficial, and how it has us so strained as to divert us from the fact that it is not really performing for us.

In such a disposition, the moment of utopian affirmation—of the no-place that is not-yet—could then be framed as *making the space* and *taking the time* to make it happen. In other words, to begin performing what is made impossible to perform, in one's default 'reality,' is to refrain from postponing one's hopes and desires to some future 'utopia' (to make it more real in the present), while also refraining, as much as one can, from the counter-utopian pursuits that habitually devoid our lives of both space and time for anything 'more.' In contrast to Butler's notion of 'repeating differently' (subversively but still within the oppressive norm) this begins to specify a highly open practice of *doing something else*, at least to the extent that this something is not foreclosed by an overt threat of violence, but remains partially a function of one's own doing.

I do see the social privilege inherent in even thinking one could afford to think this—and yet, the idea that one just couldn't is *that* 'reality' speaking, again, which insists that there is no alternative, and dubs those that exist as mere utopias, or plain dystopias. Granted, real seeds of utopia do exist that themselves, under current arrangements anyway, take the form of time-consuming labour, and so are utterly dependent on those arrangements remaining in place (I am thinking of various kinds of paid and unpaid carework). Generally, though, much of the 'doings' that fill the minutes, hours, and days of our everyday lives are not only quite unnecessary but counterproductive to any aspirations of doing anything meaningful: filling forms, meeting deadlines, constantly worrying about it all and then some, sitting in traffic lights, sitting in traffic lights—this is how normative 'realities' are kept in place by the inertia of performative repetition.

The social dimension: on the 'verbs' of common sense and social performance
An important caveat: like the performative 'doing' of the previous section was rather defined as an ongoing *way of doing* than a matter of constant striving, I am not claiming that this utopian doing of 'something else' is for singular individuals to just go and do in some singular present (for most, just quitting wage labour, say, is not an option). Particularly, it will take time, organization, and preferential focus—you don't want to re-fill and hence exhaust your life by fighting every battle at once. Admitting the plurality of oppressions that most people are constantly bearing, the Debt Collective (2020), in the US, is a good for example, prioritizing the abolition of debt for the simple reason that it currently eats most of many people's resources for even dreaming of anything more. Should people achieve relief on this front (and the Debt Collective have attained a lot, over years of unionizing), there would immediately be more space to breathe.

In terms of dreams and promises, this case actually opens out to a whole field of performative utopias. In a perverted inversion, financial debt is imposed on people to enable their utopian hopes, but in many cases it turns out locking up their minds, brains, and hands often for the rest of their lives—all the while backed up by the twisted common sense that morality lies with the creditor, the debtor being forever suspect until all interests are met. While paying one's bills is a commonsense practice upholding the performative norm that one's current life is one's future selves' to pay for (with interest!), refusing to do so is immediately more utopian in the sense of 'not allowed,' and risks a series of increasingly violent sanctions unless doing so is somehow organized (cf. Butler's 'compulsory' gender performances and the 'ostracism' of the queer…).

In this double exposure of utopia and the 'realities' that deny it, one might even go as far as to argue, in a more aesthetic register, that utopia "is to life what poetry is to language … it shows that life is unique and that anything could be done with it" (Viren 2023, 56). While the author of that statement is talking about the rejection of wage labour, and would emphatically *not* identify as any sort of utopian, I do think the displacement fits a performative definition of utopia very precisely: a failed aspect of social reality is negated, by affirming something it categorically denies as impossible.

Again, my imagination here is clearly limited by my sheer privilege—white, male, and still relatively secure in my highly capitalistic society—but let us let that suffice, for the sake of the argument. In such societies, most of their affluent citizens will be *driving* to *work* to *earn* the money to *buy* what they *consume* and then need to *replace*; on a geological time scale quite invisible to their 'intentions,' the exponential repetition of such carbon-intensive practices can even be read as slow environmental violence (Nixon 2011).[1] While the effects of such violence will first be visited somewhere far away—on peoples the normative economic utopia might term 'externalities' then 'disposables'—the point of breaking it down to a list of such common-sense verbs is that however imposed the system may be on its performers, it remains theirs to perform, indeed it depends on their doing its deeds, as evinced by the abounding restrictions to strikes and protests that the defenders of fascist reality begin enacting once in power.

To be sure, both ecological collapse and authoritarian oppression will lead to dystopian outcomes. Where catastrophe hits and reality breaks altogether, there is a very practical sense in which new utopias need to be instantly improvised through whatever networks of mutual aid there may be. Against the assumed breakout of Hobbesian anarchy (a familiar storyline designed to keep people apart), authors like Rebecca Solnit (2016) have documented time and again how crisis situations rather bring people together, emboldening them to re-engage their more cooperative, altruistic, indeed *utopian* selves that lie latent and denied in the 'real' world. Before such extreme circumstances, though, even the smaller cracks in routine do provide real opportunities for early rehearsal. Through such slow erosion, as many dissidents and anarchists have always argued, the 'other world' people might hope for would already be at least partially in place, when the current order collapses—be it under stronger opposition or its own impossibility. Again, this 'world' means a transformation of everyday life, less in its material basis than in its relationality, its norms and its acts, and the common sense that holds it all together.

Inhabiting the paradoxes of utopian time and space

In the end, we are left with the kinds of tensions and paradoxes emphasized at the end of the previous section: doing and done, intention and outcome, imagination and violence, disaster and daily life, individual and collective, the personal and the planetary. By way of no conclusion (there are none to performative utopias…), let me finally only suggest that a properly 'utopian' perspective on all such paradoxes—utopian both in the sense of aspirational and often actually impossible—would be to entertain both extremes simultaneously: a kind of double vision that entails both an attentive presence (to what is or has been) and an ongoing rehearsal (of what may yet become), and which, at both ends, boils down to making space, taking time, and scaling perception.

Zooming in, this means the kind of negation or estrangement suggested earlier, or any attempts at even temporarily extending our 'aesthetically deprived' attention spans—at becoming once more sensitized to the specificity of a situation, at "breaking duration … to see each moment as distinct, as full of possibilities" (Holloway 2010, 236). Hence one might also consider performative utopia as a theoretical practice of perceiving otherwise: if the 'natural' has become such by our stopping to notice it, then one way of learning to dwell over it again is to start perceiving it as unnatural, or indeed utopian. This also allows a sense of performance as presence to the world—as paying attention rather than taking for granted; as "astonishment in quotidian things" (Muñoz [2009] 2019, 5); as an exercise in non-alienation that may be hard to sustain, in the long term, but that may also provide the sense of a crack in reality, of standing slightly beside while still fully within.

Even though human action tends to be limited to human perspectives, I would argue that its horizons need not be: if we conceive our reality as one of ethical interconnection, and feel it being threatened by a world of compulsory individualism and alienation—perhaps even telling us to "reject the evidence of [our] eyes and ears" (Orwell [1949] 2001, 76)—then the first response could be to try and better ground oneself in whatever avenues of interconnection one's immediate world affords (senses, memories, communities, histories).

Zooming out, a utopian outlook includes the cultivation of a slow imagination of how change happens: much like the devastations of global heating will not be in the news as acts of slow violence, so also the cracks of utopia will be made hard to perceive. Against the mechanistic view of instant change—or direct performativity—that soon sinks activists in "bitterness, cynicism, defeatism, knowingness" (Solnit 2016, 60), the call is to recognize our nouns as *slow verbs* that only look permanent the longer they last; to cherish traditions and legacies of change in a form of "temporal solidarity" (Wilder 2022, 120); and also to reach out toward others, beyond the blinders of our mundane preoccupations—to relate across difference, often incommensurable difference.

Indeed, when Burkette (2018) defines utopia as a verb, he suggests mutual aid as its "process," and a sense of "ending," from the small or personal to the apocalyptic, as its condition; assuming that privileged actors are the most powerful to effect real change, but also *structurally primed to reinforce the status quo whatever their motive*, they are "required 'to dystopia' from their default perspectives" (Burkette 2022, 10–14). While this is a tall call in a world where whole identities seem

to depend on the secured intake of meat and gas, the very idea of reaching across is also a strong argument for the instant 'scalability' of performative utopias; rather than their being isolated flights of fancy with no roots in 'real' life, they may take root wherever people intuit a reality larger than habit and custom. As Henri Lefebvre ([1968] 2024) once put it, *"we are all Utopians*, so soon as we wish for something different and stop playing the part of the faithful performer" (77).

Notes

1 Slow violence is Rob Nixon's term (2011); the adverse environmental effects of work and money have been discussed by Andreas Malm (2016) and Alf Hornborg (2019), respectively.

Works Cited

Allen, Jennifer L. 2022. *Sustainable Utopias: The Art and Politics of Hope in Germany.* Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674276208.

Austin, J. L. (1955) 1962. *How to Do Things With Words.* Edited by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà. Oxford University Press.

Bell, David M. 2017. *Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315709697.

Bloch, Ernst. (195 5–9) 1995. *The Principle of Hope.* MIT Press.

Bowditch, Rachel, and Pegge Vissicaro, eds. 2017. *Performing Utopia.* Seagull Books.

Burkette, Jay. 2018. "Utopia as a Verb; Mutual Aid as its Process." Unpublished. https://www.academia.edu/38118925/Utopia_as_a_Verb_Mutual_Aid_as_its_Process.

Burkette, Jerry W. 2022. "Utopian Hope vs. Merely-Political Combat: Directionality for the Kingdom of God." PhD diss., Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. http://hdl.handle.net/10919/108130.

Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40 (4): 519–31. https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893.

Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 2010. "Performative Agency." *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3 (2): 147–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2010.494117.

Debt Collective. 2020. *Can't Pay, Won't Pay: The Case for Economic Disobedience and Debt Abolition*. Haymarket Books.

Dolan, Jill. 2005. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.119520.

Eskelinen, Teppo, ed. 2020. *The Revival of Political Imagination: Utopias as Methodology*. Zed Books. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350225633.

Firth, Rhiannon. 2012. *Utopian Politics: Citizenship and Practice.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203155455.

Graeber, David. 2001. *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. Palgrave. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780312299064.

Graeber, David. 2011. *Revolutions in Reverse: Essays on Politics, Violence, Art, and Imagination*. Minor Compositions.

Gunderson, Ryan. 2021. *Hothouse Utopia: Dialectics Facing Unsavable Futures*. Zero Books.

Haiven, Max. 2014. *Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power: Capitalism, Creativity and the Commons*. Zed Books. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350219410.

Holloway, John. 2010. *Crack Capitalism.* Pluto Press.

Holloway, John. 2019. *We Are the Crisis of Capital: A John Holloway Reader*. PM Press.

Hornborg, Alf. 2019. *Nature, Society, and Justice in the Anthropocene: Unravelling the Money-Energy-Technology Complex*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108554985.

Lakkala, Keijo. 2021. "Utopia as Counter-Logical Social Practice." PhD diss., University of Jyväskylä. http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-8921-7.

Lefebvre, Henri. (1968) 2024. *Everyday Life in the Modern World.* Translated by Sacha Rabinovitch. Routledge.

Levitas, Ruth. (1990) 2010. *The Concept of Utopia.* Peter Lang. https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-0353-0010-9.

Malm, Andreas. 2016. *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*. Verso.

Muñoz, José Esteban. (2009) 2019. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* 10th Anniversary Edition. New York University Press.

Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor.* Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061194.

Orwell, George. (1949) 2001. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Project Gutenberg of Australia eBook. https://dn790002.ca.archive.org/0/items/NineteenEightyFour-Novel-GeorgeOrwell/orwell1984.pdf.

Paavolainen, Teemu. 2023. "On the 'Doing' of 'Something': A Theoretical Defence of 'Performative Protest'." *Performance Research* 27 (3–4): 38–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2022.2155394.

Schechner, Richard. (2002) 2013. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. Routledge.

Shepherd, Simon. 2016. *The Cambridge Introduction to Performance Theory.* Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139600194.

Solnit, Rebecca. 2016. *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. Haymarket Books.

Taylor, Astra. 2019. *Democracy May Not Exist, but We'll Miss It When It's Gone*. Verso.

Viren, Eetu. 2023. *Esseitä*. Tutkijaliitto.

Weeks, Kathi. 2011. *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822394723.

Wilder, Gary. 2022. *Concrete Utopianism: The Politics of Temporality and Solidarity*. Fordham University Press. https://doi.org/10.5422/fordham/9780823299881.001.0001.

Wright, Erik Olin. 2010. *Envisioning Real Utopias*. Verso.

Biography

Teemu Paavolainen is a research fellow in the Boundaries of Performing research group, Tampere University, where he also gained his PhD in Theatre Studies in 2011. He is the author of two books with Palgrave Macmillan, *Theatricality and Performativity: Writings on Texture From Plato's Cave to Urban Activism* (2018, Performance Philosophy series) and *Theatre/Ecology/Cognition: Theorizing Performer-Object Interaction in Grotowski, Kantor, and Meyerhold* (2012). He has published e.g. in *Performance Research*, *Performance Philosophy*, and *Nordic Theatre Studies*, and in the edited volumes *Cognitive Humanities* (2016) and *The Routledge Companion to Vsevolod Meyerhold* (2022). His current work is enabled by a generous grant from the Finnish Cultural Foundation (2024–8).