Funding Utopia: Utopian Studies and the discourse of academic excellence

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Introduction

As an academic field, there is in some important ways nothing special about utopian studies. Granted, our object of enquiry may look beyond the present toward what Ruth Levitas terms the Imaginary Reconstruction of Society, but we are still workers in what Darren Webb (2018) calls the "corporate-imperial" university.[1] Webb argues that within the university we can at best protect "bolt holes, breathing spaces, and places of refuge" which can function as "fleeting, transitory, small-scale experiences of utopian possibility."[2] As academics, our greater value to utopian politics therefore involves using our "knowledge and resources… in the service of a collaborative process of memory- and story-making, pulling together disparate inchoate dreams and yearnings in order to generate a utopian vision that can help inform, guide, and mobilize long-term collective action for systemic change."[3] Such work uses resources and the products of labour within the academy in the service of ends beyond and at times against it. In other words, utopianism within the academy is necessarily complicit in the academy's constitutive material relations, but it can also be oppositional in intellectual and – more importantly – activist senses to the academy's ideological form. In other words, whether or not a given project in the field of Utopian Studies is politically utopian does not depend on its material basis (i.e. how it is funded) so much as its *content*, in the senses of both the work that it does and the ways in which it captures and mobilises available resources. Hence it is possible to imagine both regressive *and* emancipatory research projects in our field that capture or co-opt additional resources, including both

internal and external funding. It is however a mark of emancipatory projects that they will use these resources to the ends Webb describes.

Implicit in Webb's argument is an acceptance that politically useful utopian work should be socially engaged beyond the confines of the university campus. However, engaging in utopian politics from within inegalitarian university structures (via what is institutionally termed "outreach" and "engagement" work) should be pursued with caution. Even researchers and educators acting in good faith can easily end up exploiting or causing damage to social movements, support groups and activists. Good allyship and effective support cannot be reduced to institutional mechanisms like ethics committee compliance or Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) initiatives, even when these go beyond "lip service" to become meaningful acts.[4] For projects involving external collaborators with a connection to the sort of "long-term, collective action" Webb describes, research design must walk a tightrope between being supportive of utopian politics beyond the university and responding to instrumental pressures within it.

Here I suggest as an academic field utopian studies is at least a *little* special as it mediates dialectically between theory and practice at one level while developing a conceptual framework of the dialectic between theory and practice at another. Within what Richter et al term the "the paradox of universities as colonizing and liberatory spaces for community engagement and activism"[5] the utopian method is well placed to ask questions about how we engage with the given conditions of the academy, including competitive research funding grants. I begin below with a discussion of the relationship of theory and academic work to the social with reference to utopian theory. I apply this to questions about our wider complicity within a discursive regime I term "academic excellence". I argue this regime is central to the

"prestige economy" upon which some of the structural inequalities of our sector are based. I conclude by suggesting that working within the constraints of the given while remaining orientated toward utopian politics in an ethical manner requires close attention to how we navigate the relationship between utopian theory and political practice.

Theory, praxis, practice

In the final chapter of his recent monograph *Becoming Utopian*, Tom Moylan forms a cogent argument about the praxis of utopian-oriented politics with reference to Saul Alinsky's community organizing and Paulo Friere's pedagogy of the oppressed.[6] The writings of both figures are grounded in, and theorise from, self-reflective analysis of their political experiences in community work. This echoes the substance of Webb's critique: we must recognise the limits and limitations of the academy and the knowledge it produces for social change (including even apparently radical fields like critical pedagogy and utopian theory). In Alinsky and Friere's work, academic reflection is drawn from social and political experiences rather than being theorised and then put into practice. The discipline of academic writing serves to give "disparate inchoate dreams and yearnings"[7] the structure necessary for wider communication. In recognising the limitations of academic work as Webb suggests, we can achieve a balance between engagement with the social and wary scepticism of institutional imperatives to produce "impactful research," a British term signifying research that engages with groups and institutions outside higher education to produce (ideally easily quantifiable) social or economic effects. Quantifiable "impact" has material consequences for institutions, who often end up as its ultimate economic beneficiaries thanks to funding-linked mechanisms like the REF (Research Excellence Framework, a multi-year national research audit exercise).

Such imperatives demonstrate why utopian scholars should tread carefully in acceding to institutional pressures to engage groups and partners outside academia. But Webb's and Moylan's work also highlights the importance of research and theory to the work of social movements. Along a parallel logic, Macdonald and Young quote Adorno's complaint to Max Horkheimer in 1956: "Theory is already practice. And practice presupposes theory. Today, everything is supposed to be practice and at the same time, there is no concept of practice."[8] Referring to Marx's famous dictum "philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point is to change it", for Macdonald and Young, "Adorno cautions against interpreting Marx's Feuerbach Theses as a statement of pure practice. Rather, he argues that Marx's call to action was one that theorized both theory and action, together, dialectically; without the dialectical pull of theory, pure activism equaled [sic] a lack of theory."[9] From this perspective too we must resist the instrumentalization of scholarship (including theory) as being of value only insofar as it has a clear, straightforward, and direct impact on the social. In Adornian terms such instrumentalization reifies scholarship and thus undermines its utopian potential, which is to enable thinking beyond as well as against existing social arrangements (what Moylan, paraphrasing Ernst Bloch, terms the "horizon" of utopian thinking).[10]

It is not only scholar-activists who can be valuable to social movements and activist practice, especially when scholarship is made open and accessible beyond the paywalls of academic presses and multinational journal publishers.[11] Research and scholarship activities already take place within and reflect the conditions of the social. The increasing reliance on precarious, part-time labour within the academy makes it ever harder to maintain a view of universities as "ivory towers" cut-off from the "real world." Both the student body and workers across the university, in academic *and* non-academic roles, face the same economic realities as everyone else. To be clear, there are often material privileges concretised in

scholarly work: it may be the product of years of study and thought, it too frequently requires institutional affiliation to access affordably, and it regularly relies on extracting expertise and knowledges from outside the academy. But the researcher is always-already a social and cultural being with a life outside the university.

Hungry like a wolf

It is important to remember this social situatedness because many academics view their work as intimately connected to their identity, especially in the Humanities. Significantly, the edited collection *How to Build a Life in the Humanities: Meditations on the Academic Work-Life Balance* (2015) includes chapters on "imposter phenomenon" (Natalie M Houston), "academic guilt" (Guiseppa Iacono Lobo) and "depression" (Greg Colón Semenza), the contents of which evidence these issues as all-too-common and easily recognizable.[12] Those who leave the profession can likewise encounter, as a former tenure-track scholar puts it elsewhere, long-term "feelings of inadequacy".[13] In a similar vein, the failure of a carefully crafted funding application can feel personal even when the odds are firmly stacked against it: in the UK, only a quarter to a fifth of grant applications to the largest academic project funding source, the government-backed UKRI (UK Research & Innovation, the umbrella group for research councils like the AHRC (Arts & Humanities Research Council) and ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council)) are successful.[14]

In addition to job security, a sense of personal worth can become wrapped up in the competitive process for researchers. This may be compounded by knowledge that from the moment funding is secured and well before the project officially begins, the work assumes institutional importance: the claim of funders to support and nurture "research excellence"[15]

means “excellence” is conferred upon the project prior to any research commencing, while financially, funded projects promise dependable future income for a fixed budgetary period. In his Foucauldian genealogy of “excellence”, Tobias Peter notes that in the EU, “the struggle for scientific and technological excellence can now be understood as a battle for dominance on the world market.”[16] “Excellence” and financial strength are closely intertwined.

“Excellence” is currency in the so-called “prestige economy” of higher education, a source of high standing and status equivalent to Pierre Bourdieu’s “cultural capital.”[17] In Paul Blackmore’s somewhat circular account, “something has prestige if enough people who are sufficiently connected to know one another’s views can all agree that it is prestigious. For that to happen, the thing must be relatively scarce”.[18] By this logic, scarcity helps make prestige desirable at both individual and institutional level. Scarcity ties prestige, excellence, and economic profitability tightly together.[19] The good neoliberal researcher *straddles the line*, ceaselessly active as a grant writer, always on the prowl for pots of cash to wolfishly hunt. Winning grant money becomes an end in itself, independent of the value of the research, whose excellence is already assumed.

Elites & the circulation of prestige

The prestige economy has material effects. Prestige, like capital, tends to accumulate in a limited set of hands. In Peter’s words, “the meritocratic argument of elite education for permanent competition ignores the lack of equal points of departure for those within this competitive environment.”[20] Already wealthy institutions with a strong history of funding success have inbuilt advantage over less well-endowed institutions when it comes to

mobilising the discourse of excellence. If for education access, as John Holmwood argues, "the 'neutrality' of neoliberal higher education… is a mirage" in relation to both class and race and ethnicity,[21] then for research too assessments about who and what work is excellent help reproduce an elite that looks much like it always has. As Bhopal, Brown, and Jackson argue drawing on Morley (2014), the "prestige economy" of research funding contributes to the under-representation of black and minority ethnicity women in positions of academic seniority.[22] In Peter's words, "since everyone should be excellent but not everyone can be excellent, narratives on excellence do not dispense with the illusion of equal chances (Bourdieu) but rather renew them".[23] This can be seen in the British Academy's recent announcement of a pilot in which the awarding of its Leverhulme Small Grants scheme (up to £10,000) will be randomised so any project which reaches the "fundable" threshold will have an equal chance of success.[24] I want to stress that the pilot is a welcome step. However, it still implicitly assumes applicants compete on an equal field and relies on existing parameters for what "fundable" means. Similarly, as a current member of the AHRC Peer Review College who has been involved in shortlisting for new college members I know first-hand the council has foregrounded diversity improvements in recent years and looked to improve college research expertise on issues relating to structural inequality and discrimination. Unconscious bias is taken seriously and highlighted at the start of each panel review board meeting where applications are ranked. Recently, the AHRC launched a modest £1.25m call for partnership collaborations with indigenous researchers.[25] However, pursuit of the hierarchical value of "research excellence" remains the overarching mission of UKRI and many other funders. Improvements to access and EDI initiatives are ultimately constrained by funders' positions within a much larger prestige economy.

There is a dilemma for scholars interested in utopianism who apply for research funding as they work through the dialectic of openness and closure, the *not-yet* and an *apparently* insurmountable *is*. On one side, when used in the service of what Levitas, following Miguel Abensour, terms the "education of desire"[26] research funding can (temporarily) mitigate academic precarity, provide Webb's "breathing space" for critical thinking, and support and legitimate the community work of grassroots organizers in the face of bureaucratic hurdles. Such support might take the form of the provision of space or material resources for activities, while in terms of legitimation, participation in a project can demonstrate to a landlord or local authority both that an organization is a going concern capable of attracting funding and that (*pace* the prestige economy) funders of a certain scope and calibre consider that organization worth investment.

As a self-reflexive hermeneutic method (which "reveals the desire that the world be otherwise within social theory itself")[27] utopian thinking can help ensure projects are ethically aligned with the wellbeing of communities first and foremost, rather than the reputation and prestige of the awarded institution. For example, one paper presented at the Utopian Studies Society conference in Brighton discussed (in passing) the inadequacy of the framework for research provided by their institutional ethics committee to ensuring the wellbeing of vulnerable people with whom the researcher was working, in relation to specific intimate and personal issues. Mobilising utopian theory, the researcher was able to develop and justify an approach that went beyond the level of "ethics compliance" to provide better interpersonal care by attending to the values and vulnerabilities of those with whom the researcher was working. For the researcher preparing for this work, considering "exploratory projections of alternative values"[28] ~~allowed them to make~~ led to more ethical, utopian oriented decisions.

Notwithstanding the ethical potential of utopianism, playing the funding game necessarily involves accepting its terms and promoting the discourse of excellence and the prestige economy of the academy. On the other side of the application dilemma, as potentially prestigious income streams funded projects are ripe for recuperation by institutional powers, and there is always a risk with socially engaged or activist forms of research that a manager somewhere – either at university or funder level – will see an opportunity ~~for the institution~~ to "commodify and profit from, whilst hollowing out the impetus of," any social movement, to quote Nadena Doharty et al.[29] This is the closure by which the discourses of "excellence" and "prestige" bracket off academic work as the preserve of elite interests, contributing to the reproduction of the status quo.

Conditions of the given and politically utopian research

Utopian Studies is as representative of the hierarchical shape of the academy as any other cross-disciplinary field, both at the individual level where researchers are finely graded by career stage and precarity, and at the institutional and national level. For example, in the global North and in wealthier institutions Utopian Studies researchers continue to benefit from colonial legacies. This includes access to institutional wealth and archival materials, access to paywalled research, and travel and networking opportunities from which citizens of the global South are largely excluded by ever harsher and more violent border regimes. Many Utopian Studies scholars also teach in disciplines such as Literature, History and Philosophy whose histories have been deeply embedded in colonial projects.[30] Indeed, the historical canon of western utopian literature is itself part of this colonial history.[31] Like any other field, Utopian Studies can and should develop critical approaches to its own history, its objects of

study and its role in reproducing canonical structures that fail to represent the full global history of utopian thinking. Moreover, as Caroline Edwards suggests in this issue of *Utopian Studies*, we should also be thinking long and hard about the relatively low levels of diversity among researchers in the field.

Where Utopian Studies has an advantage over many other fields engaging in questions around inequalities, decolonisation, and complicity in the neoliberal academy is that the utopian method provides a means for interrogating the relationship between its own theory and the practice of its research within the structures of the inegalitarian academy. In Levitas's words, "utopian theory… specifically addresses utopia's double face as projection into the future of current dilemmas and potential future offering a critical perspective on the present."[32] As I have suggested, utopian studies scholarship can be self-reflexively critical of its engagements with the social present, and simultaneously oriented toward future social relations. To do so effectively and in an ethical fashion requires the researcher to consider their own situatedness vis-à-vis both the academic sector and the wider social totality. This means considering the psychological effects of working within a deeply hierarchical sector, our own relationship to the prestige economy of Higher Education, and our motivations whenever we apply for additional resources.[33]

When research funding operates on a model defined by scarcity requiring luck, skill, and insider knowledge to navigate, it can be tempting to treat the elusive and mysterious goal of "academic excellence" as a high-stakes, winner-takes-all game. The aim is to secure one's employment against threats of precarity and to gain in status and prestige. External funding is a coveted ladder on this playboard.[34] In pursuit of the goal, players are encouraged to mobilise any and all advantages they may already have (for example, institutional knowledge

and resources, past grant successes, mentorship by an emeritus/more senior "star", existing relationships with cultural institutions and community groups and so on). On a field characterised by its inequalities, outcomes are never likely to be just or meritocratic, and what passes for "excellence" is strongly correlative though not determinate to how any given piece of work can complement existing structures of knowledge production. Meanwhile, the long-term effects of engagement activities for partners outside the academy becomes important to neoliberal higher education institutions primarily as "impact" that can be narrativized as evidence to secure further future funds.

Whether one is a recipient of a major grant or does research work only in unfunded hours, including in evenings and at weekends, our publications and other research outputs serve to reproduce the academy in its current form. If we are complicit in the unequal structures of funding when we apply or peer review applications, we are complicit when we publish or teach too. But the neoliberal academy is no marketplace of perfect efficiency or factory of slick operation. Indeed, it often seems to thrive on pointless forms, excessive bureaucracy, and hidden esoteric rules. Hence, as Webb reminds us, where we have access to institutional resources we can look to create "bolt holes and breathing spaces" from which to engage in utopian politics. External and internal funding alike can be mobilised to such ends. What ultimately matters is whether a project seeks by its actions and not just its rationale to encourage, develop and enable utopian alternatives to the given social conditions in which we work, within, beyond, or against the academy.

[1] Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstruction of Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Darren Webb, 'Bolt-Holes and Breathing Spaces in the System: On Forms of Academic Resistance (or, Can the University Be a Site of Utopian Possibility?)', *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 40, no. 2 (15 March 2018): 96, https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2018.1442081.
[2] Webb, 'Bolt-Holes and Breathing Spaces in the System', 99.
[3] Webb, 109.
[4] Sara Ahmed's critique of "diversity work" at universities is pertinent here: "the use of diversity as an official description *can be* a way of maintaining rather than transforming existing organizational values. When diversity becomes a routine description, what is reproduced can be the routine of this description. Statements like 'we are diverse' or 'we embrace diversity' might simply be what organizations say because that is what organizations are saying. We might call this the 'lip service' model of diversity." Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 57–58.
[5] Jennifer Richter et al., 'Tempered Radicalism and Intersectionality: Scholar-activism in the Neoliberal University', *Journal of Social Issues* 76, no. 4 (December 2020): 1014, https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12401.
[6] Tom Moylan, *Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 181–203, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/yorksj/detail.action?docID=6376133.
[7] Darren Webb, 'Bolt-Holes and Breathing Spaces in the System: On Forms of Academic Resistance (or, Can the University Be a Site of Utopian Possibility?)', *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 40, no. 2 (2018): 109, https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2018.1442081.
[8] Bradley J. Macdonald and Katherine E. Young, 'Adorno and Marcuse at the Barricades?: Critical Theory, Scholar-Activism, and the Neoliberal University', *New Political Science* 40, no. 3 (3 July 2018): 531, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2018.1489092.
[9] Macdonald and Young, 532.
[10] Moylan, *Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation*, 4, 21.
[11] There is an irony that the Utopian Studies Journal is itself behind a PSU Press/Project Muse/JSTOR paywall. The Society for Utopian Studies uses money it generates from this journal to fund activities including the competitive Nicole LaRose travel grants for early career scholars to attend its conferences. The question of the equity of this trade-off is beyond the bounds of the current discussion. On academic writing and "civic education" beyond the classroom, see Henry A. Giroux, *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 40.
[12] Gregory M. Colón Semenza and Garrett A. Sullivan, eds., *How to Build a Life in the Humanities: Meditations on the Academic Work-Life Balance* (New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
[13] Kimberly A. Eversman, in Richter et al., 'Tempered Radicalism and Intersectionality', 1021.
[14] Simon Baker, 'UKRI Success Rates Fall as Grant Applications Ramp Up', *Times Higher Education (THE)*, 28 July 2021, https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/ukri-success-rates-fall-grant-applications-ramp.
[15] 'How Research England Supports Research Excellence', UKRI, accessed 15 September 2022, https://www.ukri.org/about-us/research-england/research-excellence/.
[16] Tobias Peter, 'Excellence: On the Geneological Reconstruction of a Rationality', in *Universities and the Production of Elites: Discourses, Policies, and Strategies of Excellence and Stratification in Higher Education*, ed. Roland Bloch et al. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 41.
[17] See Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson, trans. Richard Nice (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–58.
[18] Paul Blackmore, *Prestige in Academic Life: Excellence and Exclusion* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2016), 4.
[19] Blackmore makes a rather bleak psychological assertion that prestige is "hard-wired into every individual and is an enduring feature of organisational life" (181), but he does not connect this to any psychoanalytic model of desire.
[20] Peter, 'Excellence', 47.
[21] John Holmwood, 'Race and the Neoliberal University: Lessons from the Public University', in *Decolonising the University*, ed. Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial, and Kerem Nişancıoğlu (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 44.
[22] Kalwant Bhopal, Hazel Brown, and June Jackson, 'Should I Stay or Should I Go? BME Academics and the Decision to Leave UK Higher Education', in *Dismantling Race in Higher Education*, ed. Jason Arday and Heidi Safia Mirza (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 127, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60261-5_7.
[23] Peter, 'Excellence', 47.
[24] 'BA/Leverhulme Small Research Grants', The British Academy, accessed 16 September 2022, https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/funding/ba-leverhulme-small-research-grants/.

[25] 'Research Partnerships with Indigenous Researchers', UKRI, 24 June 2022, https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/research-partnerships-with-indigenous-researchers/.
[26] Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, 4–5.
[27] Levitas, 104.
[28] Levitas, 113.
[29] Nadena Doharty, Manuel Madriaga, and Remi Joseph-Salisbury, 'The University Went to "Decolonise" and All They Brought Back Was Lousy Diversity Double-Speak! Critical Race Counter-Stories from Faculty of Colour in "Decolonial" Times', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53, no. 3 (23 February 2021): 238, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1769601.
[30] See for example Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Penguin) 2003; Gurminder K Bhambra, 'Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues', *Postcolonial Studies* 17, no. 2 (3 April 2014): 115–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2014.966414; Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Rafael Vizcaíno, Jasmine Wallace and Jeong Eun Annabel We, "Decolonising Philosophy" in *Decolonising the University*, pp. 64-90
[31] see Bill Ashcroft, 'The Ambiguous Necessity of Utopia: Post-Colonial Literatures and the Persistence of Hope.', *Social Alternatives* 28, no. 3 (2009): 8–14.
[32] Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, 130.
[33] Discussing my experience as a reviewer of grant applications for the AHRC above also functions as a marker of prestige of course. I am as complicit in the prestige economy as any other academic university worker.
[34] It is possible to continue playing "academic excellence" without ever securing funding, albeit that it puts one always at a disadvantage