

Est.
1841

YORK
ST JOHN
UNIVERSITY

Stock, Adam and Ramírez-Blanco, Julia (2023) Response 1: Acting Up in Utopia. *Utopian Studies*, 34 (3). pp. 538-543.

Downloaded from: <https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/9394/>

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5325/utopianstudies.34.3.0538>

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. [Institutional Repositories Policy Statement](#)

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at
ray@yorks.ac.uk

Adam Stock

Julia Ramírez-Blanco

This joint response to the roundtable takes the form of a written dialogue, which takes as its basis longer conversations we have had via video link and instant messaging. The written dialogue seemed to us an especially appropriate form for this response as a form so interconnected with the traditions of utopian thinking from Plato onward, and one which moreover has much to do with its heuristics.

A: On my first read through the essays, two underpinning issues stood out to me as of common concern. The first is how they show disciplinary issues in utopian studies and the academy are both part of a contemporary dystopian structure of feeling. This in turn is embedded within the longer historical epoch which we may term the capitalist mode of production, or as Caroline Edwards puts it, “the modern period of capitalist accumulation”. We share an understanding that this is an epoch of great human and ecocidal destruction, as Heather Alberro most directly argues. Second, in addressing utopian studies and academia’s wider role in the reproduction of social, economic and geographical inequalities, the essays call for changes at a structural level. Eschewing mere wish fulfilment, the utopian heuristic allows for a series of practical suggestions – what Antonis Balasopoulos, citing Frank Ruda, terms “concretely confronted impossibility”.

J: I think what you say is a very important point, how all of the texts in one way or another interrogate the social role utopian studies themselves are playing in the current overlapping crises (ecological, capitalist, etc.), both thematically and in a more material sense, in terms

of who we are, how we get financed, who do we exclude or how we organize ourselves. In this sense, I think the question of organization appears in different ways: Antonis, particularly in his stressing the need for blueprints, I think could be interpreted too as arguing for the need for re-thinking political organization on a large scale. Which also takes us to Heather's attempt to bring together various problematics in a common utopian epistemology.

A: Yes and here I think there's a productive tension between the approaches of Antonis on the one hand and Heather (citing a chapter by Laurence Davis in support) on the other: Heather argues that "transgressive and grounded utopias" in the *here and now* "assert that just as important as the need to critique and resist further colonization of life by the state and corporate capitalism is the creation of counter-spaces within it wherein the "better" can be enacted". I see here some affinity with the piece by Laurence she quotes, in which he discusses what he terms *grounded utopias* as "those associated with the encouragement of greater imaginative awareness of neglected or suppressed possibilities for qualitatively better forms of living latent in the present" (136). The examples he gives are often linked to anarchist utopias, which are "Open, dynamic and organically linked to actual social practices" (134) such as Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. What Antonis does which is so interesting and provocative is to reassert precisely the value of prescriptive utopias in their "blueprint" form. I suspect this may be attributable to differing concepts of temporality which underpin their analyses: Heather and Laurence both argue for complex views of historical temporality informed by non-western perspectives (as indeed, with a different emphasis, does Caroline Edwards' work). Antonis's work troubles a linear view of time but his argument is perhaps easier to resolve in Marxian terms.

J: I think it actually might have to do with scale, too. And with the nature of planning and organizing. I think a part of our texts are engaging more with grassroots social movements (Heather and me, for example) and another part is trying to think on a different scale, or even on the level of institutions. For me, Antonis seems to hint at the question of the State, or at least to hint at not shying away from thinking on such large terms. I think the question of organization is present in the texts by Heather, me and Antonis, but I am not sure if I agree with Antonis's use of the term "blueprint utopias", which is a term very much linked to prescriptive abstract solutions. I understand the provocative power of the term though, we were both also talking about Jameson.

In a way I think your text is in the middle, Adam, because it kind of brought these two points of view together. How might researchers or even researcher-activists deal with the dystopian matters of academic financing? And I think your analysis is nuanced, and does not stereotype the nature of our contradictions.

A: One thing I think this discussion reveals about an area where utopian studies needs more research and researchers is critical geography. You indicate that the Histopia group moves beyond textual utopias and the link that you provide between the 15M social movement and the formation of an academic research group demonstrates the productive power of space - by which I mean concrete, urban empirical space, rather than simply textual space - for the development of both social forms and academic discourse. I can think of a couple of books besides your own (*Artistic Utopias of Revolt*) which have well-theorized concepts of empirical space in relation to utopia and deal with similar ideas: David Bell's superb

Rethinking Utopia (2017) is one, which I reviewed for *Utopian Studies*, and as Heather mentions Lisa Garforth's *Green Utopias* is another, from a more sociological perspective. The wide range of Phil Wegner's work deserves mention although, like me, he is primarily a literary scholar. From an architectural standpoint Nathaniel Coleman has a number of publications dealing with Lefebvre. But I think we specifically need more geographers to enable more grounded utopian thinking. I will add one caveat to this call: I am aware I am parochially limited in my reading by being more or less an English monoglot here.

J: I'm thinking of people like David Harvey and his Marxist spatial analysis. I think this points back to the idea of *groundedness*, and in general with the reflection on where we are standing that I think is a common trait of all our contributions. And it's interesting that you mention space, real space, in relation to the decolonizing of our discipline, which is something we all agree on, but which seems to get delayed. And space is also a very concrete standpoint from which to think about climate catastrophe. "Truth is concrete" was a phrase written in big letters over Bertolt Brecht's desk in his exile (here he was quoting Lenin quoting Hegel quoting Augustine). I guess it is very much an historian's point of view, as well as a materialist's, but think I agree with it. And in this concreteness, to think of the space and the bodies that inhabit or pass through it.

A: Yes, and as Caroline reminds us, it's always a question of *whose* space and *whose* body - how is space and how are bodies racialized, gendered, classed and so on. When Caroline concludes that "[d]econstructing human exceptionalism is the project in which utopian studies and the scholarship on Black speculative futural imaginaries meet" she points along a direction where Humanities research (centered on and in the textual), can converge with

art practice and activist praxis. Although activism is not an explicit focus of her essay she demonstrates a point I tried to make in more abstract, Adornian terms about the relation of scholarship to practice: it enables thinking beyond and not just against existing social arrangements. Moreover, it is an essay grounded in a deeply felt and carefully articulated politics of solidarity.

J: I think her essay is based on listening and deep reading rather than preaching, and that kind of seems to evoke this idea of solidarity that you were emphasizing. This makes me think also of your text, and how it brings up the role of research as a radical praxis in and of itself, which we sometimes seem to forget.

Beyond that, I also like that you bring us to universities as concrete spaces, where precarity, privilege, nepotism, authoritarianism, discrimination and economic violence are exerted continuously.

This was also making me think of recent social struggles in academic spaces: in my university, as is now happening in many institutions, we recently had an *End Fossil* camp demanding a transversal module for all disciplines on climate crisis, and, more importantly, the end of fossil fuel companies subsidizing the university (there is a Repsol Professorship at the moment, as well as funding from Banco Santander). The camp has ended by being successful in the demand for the module content, but not, for the moment, on the funding.

There are similar initiatives in other colleges, and it reminds me of Liberate Tate, the activist movement that made the Tate Gallery renounce funding from BP Oil. They used performative strategies and were using the very aesthetics of contemporary art which is exhibited in Tate Modern, and staged spectacular actions in the Turbine Gallery. I'm excited that we could work on a similar level within our particular workspace.

A: Bringing up direct action in the Spanish/Catalan context reminds me of when I came to a Histopia conference in December 2016 at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. You told me how the campus was designed to make it difficult to erect barricades, so that police could close the whole facility off. It really shows how authoritarian approaches to architecture and space have changed: in the mid-twentieth century (post '68) authorities still felt the need to prevent successful militant dissent which occupied and transformed space. Contemporary neoliberal university campuses are quite different: the dystopian design no longer bothers itself with such scenarios. Instead, it creates spaces in which it is uncomfortable for groups to form and loiter. Such design channels people toward centrally bookable (and chargeable) rooms and chain coffee outlets. But as your example of the camp in Barcelona shows, activists are resourceful and direct action is always difficult to contain. In the UK can we see this in the ongoing wave of climate activism, which has recently involved actions in national art galleries (some of which have longstanding financial links to oil companies). Looking a little further back, at the height of the pandemic there were few legal boundaries on the state's ability to control, disperse and arrest people, and of course this was felt most harshly by negatively racialized people. At this moment we also saw unprecedented support for protests against police violence allied to the Black Lives Matter movement.

J: Yes, in this sense, Caroline's contribution branches out to recent activism and connects with some of the other papers. I guess in the end, all contributors are conscious of the overlapping crises that configure a dystopian context, and call for utopian responses. We are asking the famous *chto delat* (what to do) question. Activism from wherever our place

is, decolonizing thought and praxis, rethinking time and space... All are parts of our answers, understood as necessarily partial and multifaceted.