

Roundtable proposal for -

**Utopias, Futures and Temporalities:  
Critical Considerations for Social Change**  
An Interdisciplinary AHRC Symposium 19 & 20 May, 2015, Bristol Zoo, Bristol

***Temporalities / Communities / Sustainabilities:  
Frictions and Frissons in the making of Utopian Futures***

Proposed by

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Care for the Future – 'Environmental change and Sustainability'

*Future Pasts in an Apocalyptic Moment*

and

Owain Jones, Bath Spa University

Connected Communities

*Rethinking and Reconnecting Communities Through and With Water Issues*

In this Roundtable we bring together researchers associated with both Care for the Future and Connected Communities AHRC themes, to explore the work done by the key concepts of change, temporality, 'progress' and Utopia. We will draw attention to the plural 'temporalities', 'communities' and 'sustainabilities' that we find jostling with each other in our case studies and conceptual frames, opening a space in which to explore the frictions and frissons these pluralities generate.

We intend to table a series of succinct interventions (12-15mins) that distil some key questions and concepts we are working with: the interplay of temporalities in understandings of landscape and conservation in Namibia (Sullivan); conceptions of utopia and dystopia in the UK planning system's response to 'eco-village' developments (Katherine Jones); the impact of 'environmental crisis' on debates about inter-generational justice (Hannis); and radical incrementalism in the opening of utopias (Owain Jones). We hope these interventions will lead into an open and dynamic discussion regarding the productive use of these plural concepts in arts and humanities engagements with utopian horizons shaping social change.

***Notes guiding our interventions***

**Conservation utopias and temporalities of sustainability: notes from west Namibia**

Sian Sullivan, Bath Spa University

I reflect here on the range of temporalities at play in the particular context of the conservation and cultural landscapes of west Namibia, where I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork since 1992. These temporalities jostle productively with one another to shape particular policy choices, and to both enable and constrain possibilities for the future. Thus the universal(ising), homogenous, abstract time of capital and modernity – the time of generalised commodity exchanges, economic growth, progress and development that underscores contemporary market-based approaches to both conservation and development in the region – unfolds in productive tension with the particular situated, amodern social orders of temporality assumed by the 'lifeworlds' and practices of those with longstanding connections with this landscape (cf. Chakrabarty 2007). Here, rhythmic praise songs and dances (*lgeis*), as well as the ontological reality of ancestral agency in present times, entwine culture with ecology to generate particular sustainabilities that tend to be displaced by the linear-thinking of modern and market-

based conservation interventions. Conservation itself has been defined in temporal terms as ‘about *negotiating the transition from past to future in such a way as to secure the transfer of maximum significance*’ (Holland and Rawles 1996: 46, emphasis in original). ‘At the same time’, assumptions of an imagined prior and utopian time of ‘pristine wilderness’, untainted by human transformation and ‘degradation’, plays a part in clearing landscapes of the diverse temporalities known by the people who live there. The urgency of wilderness preservation measures is itself informed by a sense of apocalyptic time (Žižek 2009: 92) that engenders a productive *milieu* of crisis, catastrophe and scarcity requiring speedy expert and reconstitutive intervention. And then there are the multiplicitous temporalities of the other-than-human entities always present in localities (cf. Marder 2013). In a broad context where better attunement with nonhuman existences and dynamics seems appropriate, these also demand a reconsideration of temporal assumptions and sensitivities. These juxtapositions of temporality, sustainability and community open a space for discussion of the roles of power and difference in engendering frictions and frissons regarding whose pasts, whose memories, may become transferred forwards into the future in this context, and with what possible utopian and dystopian effects.

## References

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## Broadening conceptions of utopia and dystopia in relation to contemporary ‘alternative’ sustainable development

Katherine Jones, University of the West of England, Bristol

Intentional communities and similar sub-cultural or countercultural experiments have long been talked about as utopian (Kanter 1972; Coates 2001; Hardy 2000; Sargisson & Sargent 2004), yet work on such communities often overlooks the wider context in which they are set and the particular utopian and dystopian visions that are embedded in the minds and hearts of those living in the wider society around them. This paper, based on my PhD research with a contemporary eco-village called Lammas in Wales (active since 2009), explores how the concept of utopia can be used to analyze not only such experiments but also the context of the planning system with which they interact, and further, the imagined spaces of utopia and dystopia that compel futures-thinking from planners and neighbors, as well as the eco-villagers themselves. Utopian thinking is connected with the more recent concept of sustainable development which has been described as a utopian impulse (Hedrén & Linnér 2009; Harlow et al. 2013). Here, the interpretation and contestation of notions of sustainable development are explored as a political space in which multiple utopian and dystopian visions are invited to jostle alongside each other. The research takes the position that space is ‘produced’ through the combined dialectical processes of conceiving of space, perceiving space, and spatial practices (Lefebvre 1991). As such, the production of new spaces has much to do with utopian and dystopian ideas about past, present and future space. Utopia can be used both to mean ‘no place’, related perhaps to our notions that it is a dreamworld, and only exists in the imagination, or in the sense of ‘eutopia’, a good place (Levitas 2010). Space is produced through the interaction between dreamed spaces, ideal spaces of the imagination, and the action of creating space through building and spatial practice that produces any space. Notions of ‘good places’ play out throughout all these processes, whether explicitly acknowledged or not.

## References

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## **Crisis, Utopia, and Future Generations**

Mike Hannis, Bath Spa University

We present-day humans owe it to future generations not to compromise their chances of living a good life – of flourishing. But if living a good life requires the freedom to choose that life for oneself, we cannot know now what future people will choose. How then can we know what ‘state of the world’ our duty to them requires us to bequeath? The default option has been simply to assume that we owe them – at least – the possibility of leading lives comparable to ours. Confident societies have historically gone beyond this, expecting future lives ‘like ours, but better’, and framing the imperative to keep up the pace of ‘progress’ as a duty to future people. Dogmatic neutrality between conceptions of the good life compromises the possibility of ecological sustainability, and thereby imperils the flourishing of future humans (Hannis 2005). But so too, perhaps, does the eschatological temporality of ‘environmental crisis’. If ‘lives like ours’ are already unsustainable, even the default option of aiming to leave the possibility of similar lives open to future people appears not only unrealistic but incoherent. We thus find ourselves, however unwillingly, in the position of having instead to *imagine* what it might mean for future people to lead flourishing lives in a context very different from our own. This opens up opportunities for (re)imagining the flourishing of present-day human beings in ways that recognise and celebrate our ecological embeddedness rather than seeking to transcend it through endless economic growth. Is this a utopian project (Sargisson 2013)? Perhaps. But it is not a new one, and as Alasdair MacIntyre (1999) observes: “trying to live by Utopian standards is not Utopian, although it does involve a rejection of the economic goals of advanced capitalism.”

## **References**

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## **Radical incrementalism in the opening of utopias**

Owain Jones, Bath Spa University

..something I've realised recently - my own discipline, anthropology and other social sciences like sociology, largely see culture as a vehicle of the past, of heritage, memory, tradition, customs. Culture is occasionally seen as important for the present but almost never as far as the future is concerned - the result is, *the future has been handed over to economics and other quantitative and*

*predictive sciences*. I wanted to signal that the future is also highly variable. People have different visions, images and narratives of the future. Today, in cities like Mumbai, there's a lot of debate about heritage - but you won't see the language of conservation applied to what people want ahead. That's a huge oversight. (Appadurai, 2013, online, emphasis added)

What is required in response to this challenge is radical, experimental incrementalism - a proliferation of possible but unknown utopias through an understanding of the temporalities of action within dystopia. This approach to some extent rests on Whitford's (1991) reading on Irigaray (and others) in the chapter "Feminism and Utopia". 'Utopia is a process' (Baruch 1984). It is not 'any one place or time, but the capacity to see afresh - an enlarged, even transformed vision...a vital utopia requires change and interaction with alien forces; otherwise it becomes a barren and useless idea' (Khanna 1984). We are never sure, can't possibly imagine, where we are going - the future is open. But what we do know is that we need to move away from where we are now. But of course move away in terms of time - not place (for now we seem space-bound in city, nation state, planet etc). Clearly utopia is a temporal proposition/location. So... incrementalism because of the facts of; politics, always starting from somewhere (a situation), and mistrust of grand, ideological, technocratic ambitions; radical in the judgement of just how urgent is the need to move from the here-now, and how far and fast we have to travel (in time). The future might be thousands of years hence - or it could also be tomorrow.

Radical incrementalism is the basic temporal dimension - or trajectory - embedded in pragmatist notions of philosophy, enquiry and action. Pragmatism calls for on-going experimentalism and creativity in thought and action and a parallel - integrated, process of reflection, re-evaluation, and adjustment. There is no end goal - no truth in terms of final state of being (utopia) or knowledge of that being. Rather an assumption of life as always a striving - provisional, makeshift - a sort of shanty utopia. Utopia is a politics of openness and change. It stands in stark opposition to the pernicious economic-theologic ideologies which currently, and conflictually, seek to grip the world in vice like grips of stasis.

## References

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