Keeping the Black Flag Flying: Anarchy, utopia and the politics of nostalgia

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the neglected use of utopias and utopian thinking by the critical management community. I argue that utopianism provides a number of stimuli to both critical thinking and practice when considering the ‘good’ organisation. In particular I draw attention to the distinctive features of anarchist utopianism as being worthy of further attention. The paper begins with an account of the development of utopian thinking identifying a number of common strands running through the fabric of utopianism. It goes on to apply this framework, firstly to an analysis of the claims made for managerial utopias and then, by way of contrast, to anarchist utopias, where I argue that there are some potentially fruitful points of contact between anarchist and post-structuralist theory. William Morris’s ‘News from Nowhere’ is utilised as an example, within the analysis of anarchist utopias. Finally some conclusions are drawn regarding the possibilities for the development of utopian thinking within the critical management project.

Introduction

The good life and how we can achieve it, have been central concerns of philosophy and religion from ancient civilisations to modernity (or even post-modernity). Plato’s ‘Republic’ (1966), Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, Thomas More’s ‘Utopia’ (1951), Campanella's ‘La Citta del Sole’ (1962), or Thoreau’s ‘Walden’ (1983) are all classic examples, counterbalanced by cautionary dystopias such as Huxley’s ‘Brave New World’ (1932), Orwell’s ‘Nineteen Eighty-four’ (1954), Butler’s ironic ‘Erewhon’ (1932), or Golding’s ‘Lord of the Flies’ (1962).

This way of formulating possible answers to what the good life should be, by painting narrative pictures is the practice of utopia. This paper argues that the imaginary and creative construction of utopias can make a contribution to critical thinking about the implicit conception of the ‘good life’ within managerialist approaches to organisation. After all, a utopian vision of the organisation seems to underlie the ‘excellent’ company (Peters and Waterman 1982) or the ‘learning organisation’ [Senge, 1993 #211] and why should the Devil have all the best tunes? What counter-visions can critical management studies offer?

The Left has found utopian narratives of immense importance, in that articulation of the good life involves both implicit and explicit critique of prevailing social arrangements. (Mannheim 1936; Levitas 1990; Bloch 2000) This utopian current has not only been of critical value, but has provided models for practical (if usually inglorious) attempts at the communal realisation of utopia (Hardy 2000). Despite the reservations of Marx and Engels regarding the neglect of fundamental theoretical analysis within the utopian leanings of Proudhon and Saint-Simon, they too believed it had the important function of relativizing social reality (Engels 1098; Wheen 1999). In other words, it possesses the capacity to de-naturalise the dominant reality by imaginatively transcending what are seen as current material limitations, a trait it has in common with more socially aware science fiction (LeGuin 1974). Critical theory also makes use of utopia as critique (Benhabib 1986). Habermas’s ‘ideal communication community’ is not intended as a fully realisable goal, but rather a
counter-reality by which our existing ideologised communication may be evaluated (Habermas 1984).

Utopia/dystopia may also function critically in its imaginative extrapolation of current conceptions of the good into more fully developed social forms, thus exposing the dangers lurking in our desires. The technocratic, instrumental and rationalistic assumptions of much management theory can thus be held up to critical attention by a comparison with Brave New World or Nineteen Eighty-four (Wilmott 1993).

This paper discusses the potential of utopian thinking for the critique of managerial assumptions regarding implicit conceptions of the good life. In particular it explores a neglected strand of social and political theory – anarchist theory. Firstly, because anarchists have demonstrated an incurable fascination with attempts to both delineate and live out the good life (Woodcock 1963). Secondly, anarchism, with its total rejection of hierarchy and authority, has struggled with the problem of how communities may be organised and maintained without these usually ubiquitous features (Marshall 1993) (Kropotkin 1974). As such, anarchism can be claimed to be a powerful counter-discourse to the managerial vision of the good life – ordered by a benign hierarchy of authorities (Ward 1974; Ward 1991).

Anarchistic utopias are also distinctive in their defence of the priority of diversity, difference and voluntarism over collective norms and orthodoxies. This suggests potential linkages between post-structuralist thought and anarchistic conceptions of the good life. The fruitful cross-fertilisation of post-structuralist and anarchist thinking presents some intriguing possibilities (May 1994).

Another distinctive feature of anarchist utopias is the way that they are powerfully nostalgic, frequently displaying a longing for a past that never was, contrasting strongly with the technologically fetishistic narratives of progress associated both with recent political projects of the Right and the Left, and critiqued by postmodernist theory as demonstrating the inherently oppressive nature of grand narratives of progress. This nostalgic longing, far from being an enervating melancholy, has precipitated practical attempts to rediscover the mythic past in the present. Such attempts may be detected in Spartacus’ slave revolt, the Cathar communities and Albigensian Crusade, the Peasants’ Revolt and the Paris Commune or the environmental and anti-capitalist protests of our own day (Woodcock 1963; Marshall 1993).

In the light of the possibilities outlined above the paper discusses the critical features of utopian thinking in general, and goes on to explore anarchistic utopias in particular. One such anarchist utopia, ‘News from Nowhere’ by William Morris (1986), is analysed in more detail in order to illustrate some characteristic features of utopian anarchist thought. Finally some conclusions are drawn regarding how anarchistic utopianism may help conceive of how ‘good’ organisations and communities may be unmanaged, constantly renegotiated, and exist solely to meet the needs of their members; providing a counter-attraction to the seductive technocratic paradise being marketed to us by late managerialism.
The Founding of Utopia
Before discussing the distinctive features of anarchist utopian thought, some account of the development of utopian thinking in general might be useful, particularly, as Marx rejected the utopian mentality in the 19th century, leaving anarchism as the sole inheritor of the utopian socialist tradition.

Kumar (1987) provides a very useful discussion of the nature and origins of utopian thought, beginning by making a distinction between utopianism and the practice of utopia proper. The distinction drawn rests on the difference between thinking and practice motivated by a longing for a better future, and the literary genre of creating fully realised ideal (or cautionary) narrative portraits of the desired future life, partly through the everyday existence of its inhabitants. Thus the reader is invited imaginatively participate in the life of this fictional community.

The inclusion of dystopian thinking within this definition may seem perverse. However, dystopianism may be considered as another expression of the same impulse as utopianism rather than being an opposing principle. The practice of dystopia is the expression of utopian longing in times which give little hope of its realisation. This is another way of saying that pessimism is hope deferred. Dystopian despair is still fuelled by the desire that things should be otherwise, even though the possibility that change could occur seems remote. This is in itself a call to arms, at the least to avoid the worst that could happen. Foucault (1977) is rarely accused of utopianism, but the Panopticon is hardly presented for our amusement or approval, rather there seems an admittedly ambivalent attempt to produce an ethical rejection of disciplinary power on the part of the reader, an attempt noted by (Griffiths 1995).

Kumar (1987) and Levitas (1990) argue that utopianism appears to be a universal urge, at least within the Judeo-Christian tradition. As Orwell wrote “It is the dream of a just society which seems to haunt the human imagination ineradicably and in all ages” (1944:274). Kumar traces the origins of this universal urge to explore the ‘good’ life through its imaginative reconstruction and identifies several fundamental strands of utopian thought developing from the ancient world. These are worth considering in some detail as they are still a significant influence on recent utopian thinking and appear to be an important influence on whether utopias become a stabilizing influence on a given social order or a transformative one.

The first strand is that of ‘Arcadia’, “a time and place of rustic simplicity and felicity” (Kumar 1987:3). Arcadian utopias are characterised by harmony between mankind and nature, and the innocence of human society uncorrupted by ‘civilization’. Part of this innocence is a natural restraint in the demands made upon Arcadia. Life is simple, uncomplicated and needs are kept as basic as possible as in Thoreau’s ‘Walden’ (1983). The most powerful of expression within the Western tradition is perhaps the Garden of Eden. More recently eco-utopias have stressed this strand and many anarchist conceptions of the good life also suggest that natural restraint and simplicity are ends that directly contribute to human happiness.

In direct contrast with Arcadia is Plato’s Republic where the city is proposed as the ideal society, a machine for living in where a hostile natural world is kept at bay. “The Hellenic ideal city represented human mastery over nature, the triumph or reason and artifice over the amoral and chaotic realm of nature. Hence the
importance, in the ideal city tradition of founders and framers of cities and constitutions, the philosopher-kings, the architect-planners.” (Kumar 1987:4)

It was the Spartan version of the ideal city state (authoritarian, ascetic, communistic) rather than the Athenian (democratic, tolerant, hedonistic) that became the dominant influence on later European utopias, via Plato’s Republic and its influence on Thomas More. One might see in this the origins of the managed organisation as the ideal social institution. There is an emphasis in city utopias on an authoritarian and regulated communal order which is founded by a mythical figure such as Solon of Athens or Lycurgus of Sparta. Moses the law-giver founds the principles on which the land of milk and honey is to be settled. As well as these founding charismatic entrepreneurial philosopher-kings, a subordinate aristocratic caste, trained and disciplined in the techniques of government, figure strongly in the direction of these utopias.

“The best society would be the society ruled by the best, those most fitted by training and temperament for the most difficult of all the arts, the art of government.” Plato’s Republic cited in (Kumar 1987:5)

The third strand of utopian thinking which originates in the classical world is that of ‘Cokaygne’, “a land of abundance, idleness and instant and unrestrained gratification….found in practically all folk cultures.” (Kumar 1987:7). Cokaygne has often been used ironically to parody Arcadia, but there is an important distinction between Arcadia and its assumption of scarcity requiring restraint in consumption and Cokaygne’s abundance where all needs and desires are can be satisfied.

“Brueghal painted it in a picture which shows roofs made of cake, a roast pig running round with a knife in its side, a mountain of dumplings, and citizens lying back at their ease waiting for all the good things to drop into their mouths.” (Kumar 1987:9)

Most modern utopias including anarchistic ones are constructed from these three basic elements in various combinations, but before this is discussed further it is worthwhile introducing the dimensions of time and space into the consideration of the origins of utopian thought. The degree to which utopianism might be considered a force for change or for the maintenance of the status quo is bound up with these dimensions. Utopia may be positioned in the past as a Golden Age from which we have degenerated or, as in Eden, from which we have been cast out because of our folly. Alternatively, utopia may be positioned in the future, The Kingdom of Heaven or the fully communist society, both of which are dependant on various historical events preceding the final revelation. The third temporal alternative is that utopia may be realised or at least instigated in the here and now by political action or simply by the setting up of utopian communities. This is an important plane of cleavage between Marxist and anarchist thought, as communism can only come about at its appointed historical epoch, whereas for anarchists “an anarchist society, a society which organises itself without authority, is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow, buried under the weight of the state” (Ward 1973: 11). Mannheim (1936) points out that conservatism attempts to position Utopia firmly in the present, ‘you have never had it so good’. The status quo must be preserved as it is already the best of all possible worlds where history comes to an end (Fukuyama 1992).

The physical and temporal positioning of utopias also has a complex but profound effect on whether they produce quietism and passivity or protest and action. The
sense of nostaligic longing present in many utopias contradicts the common assumption that nostalgia arises from a sense of hopeless defeat and is an eviscerating reverie. Not least because as Mannheim (1936) asserts, the utopian mentality always threatens to ‘break the bonds of the existing order’.

Societies may be able to incorporate conceptions of completely contradictory and highly desirable ways of life without destabilisation as long as they are positioned outside of normal temporal and physical space. For example, medieval society could safely promote the idea of Paradise but only as long as it was outside of society, positioned in the future, beyond the grave. As soon as Paradise became something certain groups attempted to actually construct within that society, as did millenarian heretics such as the Cathars, then a violent and repressive response utilising the full military and ideological resources of Christendom was mobilised in the Albigensian Crusade.(Strayer 1971)

The same utopian conception positioned within rather than outside the social system took on entirely different implications for the maintenance of the status quo. This example also illustrates the potential for seemingly the most socially stabilizing of nostalgic utopian conceptions to be developed in a radical and transformative direction. For example, The Peasant’s Revolt, in the 14th Century, was at least partly inspired by a mythical lost Golden Age of ancient liberties guaranteed by the King. (Bennett 1987). The Revolt radicalised nostalgia for the paradise of Eden with the slogan “When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?” In this case the utopia was removed in time but was seen to be the normal state of current society with the actual conditions experienced being aberrant. This ability of utopianism to turn ‘official’ myths designed to maintain the status quo into myths that threaten the social order is often overlooked by those who characterise utopianism as a form of melancholic passivity. It also presents the possibility that the utopian pretensions of managerialism not only can be both used as critique within their own criteria but also re-framed as demand for the reality behind the sham (Parker 1998).

The nineteenth century saw some profound shifts in Utopian thinking. Firstly, with the Enlightenment’s emphasis on the individual, utopias have to be able to provide for the development and differentiation of individuality as well as a stable communal order. Advances in science and technology seem to promise abundance to satisfy a more extended and diverse set of human needs and desires, re-introducing an element of Cockaygne into utopian thought. More’s ‘Utopia’, written in the fifteenth century, was based on a static and limited conception of human needs, those it is possible to satisfy by six hours communal labour per day. In the nineteenth century, Rousseau believed that the purpose of utopia was to lead to the optimum state of human consciousness. (Kumar 1987; Marshall 1993). As the desires of differentiated individuals must now be satisfied, so to must utopia accommodate them by being open-ended and dynamic.

“Human nature was now seen to be in a process of constant and continuous formation and growth, as protean and changeable as human society itself. It had to be conceived as potentiality, as a striving for fulfilment in a mental and material world that had no limits.” (Kumar 1987: 47)

The second major shift was in re-positioning the Golden Age into the future. According to Marx, the historical process unfolds towards a communist utopia
through a series of stages of development. Thus utopia is still possibly distant in time but guaranteed by a scientifically determined process of historical materialism. (Mannheim 1936; Wheen 1999). However anarchist, as opposed to Marxist, conceptions of utopia display a more complex temporal character with an amalgam of past, present and future.

The high optimism of European revolutionaries in the mid-nineteenth Century, regarding the imminent collapse of the imperial and capitalist order, left little time for the reflective construction of fully realised fictional utopias, but by the end of the Century, the hope of imminent revolution was fading and the literary utopia begins to re-emerge. Thus literary utopias may provide a way of remembering and redefining emancipatory projects in those times least propitious to their realisation. The period spanning the first and second world wars and their aftermath, not surprisingly gave rise to more dystopias than otherwise, and the only seemingly historically realised utopias of the United States and the Soviet Union gave little encouragement for utopian thinking. The 1960’s counter culture gave rise to a new flowering of utopian experiments and thinking, with the anarchist tradition the clear inheritor of utopian practice, being seen as having more relevance to post-industrial radicalism than more traditional forms of Marxism. The growth in environmentalism and green political theory also re-introduced a note of the restrained, harmonious Arcadia as the various drawbacks of Cockaygnian hedonism made themselves felt.

Managerialist Utopias

Having outlined some general contextual discussion of utopian thinking, it might be interesting to explore one of the possibilities raised the analysis of the claims made by official management theory. Certainly, the argument that utopian longing is a constant feature of all societies would seem to be borne out by the strong appeal to such longings within management literature. However, in this case it is the business organisation which becomes the utopian community within which the individual achieves their full potential.

I shall examine the claims of one particular expression of this strongly managerial utopian current, found in ‘The Fifth Discipline’ (Senge 1999). Senge recounts something of a conversion from seeing the public sector as the agent for the development of a progressive society to seeing the business organisation as the driving force, and in particular the emergence of the ‘learning organisation’, where “people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspirations is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together”. (1999: 3) The emergence of the learning organisation is seen as part of a natural historical process in the developed world where affluence for the ‘majority’ has brought about a rejection of an instrumental attitude to work. Instead we are all seeking to build organizations “that are more consistent with man’s higher aspirations” (1999: 5). Such aspirations appear to include righting social injustice (through the development of a broader sense of corporate responsibility).

As Senge is very reticent about these aspirations, one has to infer them from the means suggested by the book. The means are in fact the main subject matter as they are the eponymous five disciplines. An examination of them seems to imply that our highest aspirations involve the complete identification of our own selves with that of
work, and in this case the only ‘work’ that counts is that done in an organisation. Essentially, Senge appears to adopt the same idea of humanity’s highest aspiration as that proposed by Peters and Waterman; “to be a conforming member of a winning team and to be a star in his own right” (Peters and Waterman 1982: Introduction, xxiii). Senge claims that so powerful are his disciplines that the problem of the work/life balance is to be solved by the annihilation of the distinction. For example, ‘personal mastery’ will make us better parents and in turn better managers because “the real skills of leadership…are the skills of effective parenting.” (1999:310).

The various ‘disciplines’ all reinforce the centrality of this concept. The “discipline of personal mastery” (1999: 8) is explicitly linked to a complete commitment to one’s work. That of working with ‘mental models’ requires “turning the mirror inward” (1999: 9) in order to adjust ones attitudes and thoughts to conformity with the learning organisation. ‘Building a shared vision’ requires a collective understanding that fosters “genuine commitment and enrolment rather than compliance” (1999: 9).

Utilising a critical utopian analysis it appears that the means and ends have been fully integrated, but in this case the means of being a fully committed member of the organisation are also the aspirational end within which every individual will find fulfilment. For example, Senge suggests that the experience of being a member of a “great team” will “stand out as singular periods of life lived to the fullest. Some spend the rest of their lives looking for ways to recapture that spirit.” (1999: 13). We are, in fact, to be so intoxicated by the process of ‘doing’ work that its effects and purposes disappear entirely from view.

Of course, these techniques are to be the preserve of those fitted for government, and may only be entrusted to the rigorously trained few, those selected for Senge’s ‘leadership and mastery workshops’ aimed at those “in leadership positions of importance” (1999: 16).

So we have elements of a hierarchical Spartan city-state in the ideal business organisation, ruled over by a beneficent managerial elite. The individual finding total fulfilment in their allotted job. The conservatism of this utopia is startling. We have already arrived at the ideal community, all that is needed is to refine and extend it to the four corners of the Earth. Despite the rhetoric of change, development and learning, the static conception of the needs and desires of humanity is also striking. Work itself is not to be transformed but the individual will be, through learning ‘commitment’. Not only this, but all work is to be considered worthy of this total commitment whether it is that of managing or of flipping burgers, there is no ethical/aesthetic evaluation as in Morris, of what kinds of work are socially necessary or give opportunity for the exercise of artistry. When viewed as a utopia the managerial vision is revealed in all its insipid vulgarity and mean spiritedness and contrasts strongly with that of anarchist utopias, which I hope to make evident in the next section which explores the topography of anarchist conceptions of utopia.

Anarchism and Utopia
How then does anarchist thought relate to utopianism? The first point to note is that there is a wide variety of anarchist thinking from the extreme individualism of Stirner to the patriarchal anarchist communism of Proudhon. The following remarks attempt
to sketch out basic principles that most, but certainly not all, anarchists would generally accede to.

What then is anarchism other than badly misunderstood and a convenient term of abuse for left and right wing alike. A fairly typical and sympathetic definition of anarchism is that:

“All anarchists reject the legitimacy of external government and of the State, and condemn imposed political authority, hierarchy and domination. They seek to establish the condition of anarchy, that is to say, a decentralized and self-regulating society consisting of a federation of voluntary associations of free and equal individuals. The ultimate goal of anarchism is to create a free society which allows all human beings to realize their full potential.” (Marshall 1993:3).

Alternatively “a system of social thought, aiming at fundamental changes in the structure of society and particularly…at the replacement of the authoritarian state by some form of non-governmental cooperation between free individuals” (Woodcock 1963: page?). In other words, utopianism is at the centre of anarchism.

Anarchists regard a lack of authority and hierarchy as a natural state of affairs for human society and as having been the lived experience for most people most of the time in the commonest form of human institution - the small community. Despite the obvious drawbacks of traditional communities “they show that the Hobbesian nightmare of universal war in a ‘state of nature’ is a myth. A society without hierarchy in the form of rulers and leaders is not a utopian dream but an integral part of collective human experience. Anarchists wish to combine the ancient patterns of co-operation and mutual aid of these organic societies with a modern sense of individuality and personal autonomy.” (Marshall 1993:13)

Despite the fact that anarchism as a distinctive political philosophy traces its history back to William Godwin’s ‘Enquiry Concerning Political Justice’ (Marshall 1986), it emerges as distinct from other forms of radicalism and particularly Marxism in the 19th Century. Indeed, this separation was accelerated by the expulsion of Bakunin and fellow anarchists from the 1st International at the instigation of Marx (Woodcock 1963; Marshall 1993; Wheen 1999). Despite this, anarchism does share a significant common inheritance with Marxist Socialism, in particular its belief in the perfectibility of human society and the rejection of the oppression, inequality and suffering caused by Capitalism.

I am arguing that anarchism is worth the serious consideration of critical organisational thinkers for a number of reasons. Firstly anarchism may be regarded as something of a submerged discourse within radical intellectual currents. It is perhaps not surprising that Capitalist Governments have been hostile to it, but anarchist movements have also been savagely suppressed by Marxist political parties. Orwell’s [1986 #311] account of the elimination of the anarchist militia ‘POUM’ in the Spanish Civil War provides an example of what was a wholesale suppression of anarchism by the Soviet Union. Politically incorporated left-wing parties and Trade Unions have also been hostile, not least because of the fundamental difference on the issue of representation. This hostility from both wings of the political establishment raises the question of what anarchism threatens to provoke such a reaction. The vehemence with which it is dismissed suggests that there is something worth considering.
Secondly, anarchism is the failed movement that refuses to lie down and accept the fact. There has been a convergence with anarchist thinking on the part of the activist Left following on from the disillusionment with the aftermath of the Russian and Chinese Revolutions. This resilience of anarchism, as it flourishes in the post-modern era is worth examination. Thirdly, anarchist thinking and forms of organisation increasingly seem to provide the motive force to a number of diverse but dynamic protest movements and other forms of resistance to late Capitalism. From the activities of the Situationists in 1968 to the current anti-capitalist protests, or political movements such as the Zapatistas, a resurgent anarchist sensibility is evident. (Marshall 1993; Klein 2000).

Finally, anarchism deserves to receive more serious academic attention as a political and social philosophy. It has a number of distinctive features that attracted the scorn and ridicule of ‘scientific’ socialism. However, these very features, following the perceived failures of the ‘scientific’ route seem to make it worth reconsideration, particularly as anarchism appears to provide a more fruitful approach to linking radical ethical and political projects to post-structuralist theory. (May 1994; Call 1999)

What are then the main features of anarchist thought that give rise to the above? To start with the obvious, anarchists reject the State and ascribe many of the ills of humanity to this institution.

“To be governed is to be watched over, inspected, spied on, directed, legislated, regimented, closed in, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, assessed, evaluated, censored, commanded; all by creatures that have neither the right, nor wisdom, nor virtue…To be governed means that at every move, operation or transaction one is noted, registered, entered in a census, taxed, stamped, priced, assessed, patented, licensed, authorized, recommended, admonished, prevented, reformed, set right, corrected. Government means to be subjected to tribute, trained, ransomed, exploited, monopolized, extorted, pressured, mystified, robbed; all in the name of public utility and the general good. Then at the first sign of resistance or word of complaint, one is repressed, fined, despised, vexed, pursued, hustled, beaten up, garrotted, imprisoned, shot, machine-gunned, judged, sentenced, deported, sacrificed, sold, betrayed, and to cap it all, ridiculed, mocked, outraged, and dishonoured. That is government, that is its justice and morality.” (Proudhon, 1851 cited in Marshall, 1993: 20)

This rejection of the State is far from being a naïve ascription of all evil to a single source, at its root lies a more subtle and wholesale rejection of the notion of representation (May 1994). Godwin originated the idea that no individual can legitimately represent another. This includes any idea of a universal consent given to a body of laws or rules on the basis of election or taxation. This principle was also at the heart of the dispute between Bakunin and Marx, the idea of even a temporary ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ was anathema to the anarchists. The claim that a vanguard party would better know the ‘true’ interests of the working-class than they did themselves was regarded as a direct route to new forms of tyranny and oppression. (Marshall 1993)

Equally significantly the rejection of representation extends to the level of the micro-political. Kropotkin wrote that “we refuse to assume a right which moralists have
always taken upon themselves of mutilating the individual in the name of some ideal” (Kropotkin, 1970 cited in May 1994: 48). To provide people with images of who they are, or who they should be, is to damage their ability to decide this for themselves. (May 1994).

Likewise the rejection of the principle of hierarchy in anarchism goes beyond the obvious and extends into looking beyond a top-down, centralised understanding of the operation of power and recognises the need to “widen the field of politics” (May 1994: 50). “The picture of power and struggle that emerges in the anarchist perspective is one of intersecting networks of power rather than of hierarchy” (Ward 1973: 26). Thus resistance should occur at multiple sites in diverse ways for local results, rather than seeking to sever the head of the body politic and replace it with another. “There is no final struggle, only a series of partisan struggles on a variety of fronts.” (Ward 1973: 26).

Anarchist thinkers have also taken a distinctive position on means and ends. Whereas for Marx the means of the dictatorship of the proletariat was justified by the end of full communism, anarchists have been much more distrustful of the oppressive potential of using power in this way. In fact anarchists tend not to make a distinction between ends and means. Thus means are always ‘ends in the making’. (Ward 1973; Marshall 1993). Thus, whilst the typical anarchist tactics of community experiments, civil disobedience, protest, passive resistance etc frequently appear not to achieve an ultimate end, they are nevertheless in themselves anarchic and are a challenge to dominant ways of thinking. They are a way of nurturing the submerged anarchist society that is always there under the surface.

Without leadership, hierarchy and representation, how can anarchists organise beyond small groups? The answer has usually been federalism. “Federation…is an agreement by which one or several communes, one or several groups of communes or states, find themselves by mutual and equal agreements for one or several determinate aims.” (Proudhon, 1863 cited in Edwards, 1970). The distinctive feature of federalism is that diverse types of community voluntarily combine where necessary into a federation and may select delegates to attend on their behalf. However all authority remains within the community which is in no way bound to the decisions of the federation but can leave it at anytime. In Kropotkin’s words federations would be “an interwoven network, composed of an infinite variety of groups and federations of all sizes and degrees, local, regional, national and international—temporary or more or less permanent— for all possible purposes” (Marshall 1993: 326). The other basic unit of organisation is the commune. Kropotkin, Bakunin, Tolstoy, Ghandi all drew inspiration from peasant or craftsmen’s communes as already possessing many of the features of anarchist communes linked to others by loose federations. For example, Kropotkin writes admiringly of the peasant ‘obshchina’ as a utopian model. (Kropotkin 1873) However, Kropotkin develops this idea further, so that the commune is no longer a geographically bounded traditional ascriptive community but “a generic name, a synonym for the grouping of equals, knowing neither frontiers nor walls. The social commune will soon cease to be a clearly defined whole. Each group of the commune will necessarily be drawn towards other similar groups in other communes; it will be grouped and federated with them by links as solid as those which attach it to its fellow citizens, and will constitute a commune of interests whose
members are scattered in a thousand towns and villages.” Kropotkin cited in (Marshall 1993: 326)

The overriding principles of these communities are voluntarism and diversity. Membership is not exclusive and individuals may leave and seek membership of alternative ways of living and constructing their individuality through different forms of community. Arcadia, Cockayne and the Ideal City may all be present and flourishing in an anarchist utopia. It is no coincidence that feminists often display an affinity for anarchist ideas both because of a shared recognition that power is more than simply a question of economics and class (patriarchy is both more than these questions and different to them) and because of the potential for the recognition of diverse ways of living with and relating to each other. It was Emma Goldman, who gave anarchism an explicitly feminist analysis who stressed that the personal is the political as early as the 1940s and in addition feminist communitarians also draw on anarchist utopianism for example see (Brown 1991) or (Friedman 1992).

Finally anarchism has struggled more openly than most utopian mentalities with the problem of regulation of behaviour. In a society where no individual can be bound by rules, how does one deal with individuals whose choices result in harm to others or whose behaviour limits the choices that others can make? Anarchists tend to assume that with the distorting effects of the Law and inequality removed there will be much less cause of such behaviour, but recognise that conflict and unruly passions are a in eradicable element of the human condition. However prescriptive or institutionalised means of deterring or punishing violence, abuse, and other forms of anti-social behaviour are seen to make the effects of such behaviour more damaging than doing nothing.

Despite this various ways of dealing with problems have been suggested, including ‘leaving alone’, community juries, ejection from the community, or the influence of community norms and disapproval. The problems with all of these are all frequently discussed within anarchist debates and perhaps, appropriately, these suggested solutions are never presented as a final answer. Nevertheless what may from one perspective seem a fatal flaw, a failure to produce a coherent system of ethics, can also be perceived as a vindication of the anarchist principle. If social practices never become institutionalised then they are always debatable, provisional and can be renegotiated. The ideal anarchist community is a dynamic one, where groups and individuals can extend the realm of freedom to include the determination of needs and desires within consensual social relations. The next section critically analyses one such conception of an ideal anarchist community.

An Anarchist Utopia: Going Nowhere
William Morris’s ‘News from Nowhere’ was first published in 1887, according to the author as a way of imaginatively resolving debates within the circle of the ‘Socialist League’. I would be reluctant to suggest that Morris identified himself as an anarchist, something he himself denied. Nevertheless Morris both knew and liked Kropotkin, had regular contact with anarchists through the Socialist league and in his seeking inspiration for the ideal community in the medieval peasant and artisan’s communes shows a strong affinity for anarchist thinking rather than Marx’s ‘scientific’ socialism. Because of this anarchists have often taken Morris to be one of
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their own and News from Nowhere is frequently discussed as an archetypal anarchist utopia. (Woodcock 1963; Marshall 1993)

The book is probably best read alongside Morris’s ‘A Dream of John Ball’ which describes how the author finds himself in a Kentish medieval village on the eve of the peasants’ march to London to demand an end of villainage. Morris’s rejection of the nineteenth century notion of progress is reflected in his unfavourable comparison of the oppressed but relatively free and wholesome life of the fourteenth century medieval peasant with that of the industrial worker, particularly through his aesthetic preference for medieval craftsmanship over the vulgar perfectionism of mass produced factory goods. A similar narrative device is used in ‘Nowhere’ where the narrator finds himself transported into a utopian future. He awakes in his bed but soon realises that all has changed about him. Morris attempts to describe his new world in its social relations, the natural and constructed environment and the effects of the new social arrangements on the identity, character, and physical appearance of its inhabitants. It has to be said that his delineation of character and attempts at dialogue grate in their mawkishness, and despite his obvious intention of describing equality between the sexes, his female characters are treated in a patronising and patriarchal fashion. However, in other respects, his vision of the new world is one of the few pieces of utopian writing to display a high degree of artistic merit. There are also some good jokes such as the defunct Houses of Parliament being used by the new society as a dung store.

The plot, such as it is, consists of the narrator’s befriending some citizens of Nowhere in the communal house he wakes up in. He is taken by his new friends to visit ‘Old Hammond’ who is both something of a historian and old enough to personally remember the transition to the new society in the twentieth century. The journey into London enables Morris to describe how the ugliness of industrial civilization has been cleared away both from the physical city and from the appearance and behaviour of its inhabitants. Morris’s aesthetic sense enables him to make a proto-environmentalist critique of the destructiveness of industrialisation.

The conversation between the narrator and Hammond is a device to describe the revolutionary events which have lead to the new society, which follows broadly Marxist lines. After this conversation, the narrator is taken by his friends up the course of the Thames on a ‘hay-making’ holiday. This is once more a device which enables Morris to describe his beloved upper Thames as far as his own house above Oxford, Kelmscott. It also enables him to describe the life of the country, having already described the life of the city, through a series of conversations, incidents and observations which occur as part of the journey. Finally, having reached journey’s end, the narrator finds himself transported back in the squalor and degradation of the 19th Century, which seem all the more appalling and unnecessary by comparison with the world he has been forced to leave.

It is an act of vandalism to treat the story as a source of anarchist social theory, particularly as part of the point of utopian writing is for the reader to engage and imaginatively participate in the everyday life of an artistic creation. As such Morris’s lovingly described buildings, clothes, scenery, and work are themselves a seduction to accept the possible reality of Nowhere and to regard the contemporary scene as irrational, temporary and insubstantial. Readers need to immerse themselves in the
original before the following observations will seem much more than trite and banal. This is in itself an indication of the limitations of academic writing in exploring alternative realities. Nevertheless, doomed though it is, I shall plough on regardless.

Morris partly uses Nowhere to describe an ideal future state, but he also uses this future state as a vantage point for evaluating 19th Century industrial Britain. His own assumptions about society frequently cause confusion in Nowhere, as, for example, when he tries to pay for services and goods offered freely to him. His stock objections to the absence of laws, punishment, compulsory education, extrinsic motivation for work, a division of labour, the absence of money, etc simply appear ridiculous to the inhabitants of Nowhere. He rather finds himself eventually embarrassed into reticence about the nonsensical arrangements of his own time. What would appear as serious constraints to a free, harmonious and fulfilled existence simply disappear within this new reality.

In terms of the earlier typology of utopias, Morris manages to incorporates elements of all three strands and to position Nowhere out of a realistic sense of temporal sequence by combining idealised features of medieval society with those of a future world. One of the striking features of this relativization of the ‘reality’ of the capitalist order is the way in which the Nowherians regard the Middle Ages as more relevant, admirable and closer to them than Victorian Britain. Woodcock (1963) remarks that Nowhere creates a sense in the reader that they have “passed into a continuum where ordinary time relationships have ceased: The Middle Ages are in fact more real to the inhabitants of Nowhere than the chronologically much nearer nineteenth century. The idea of progress as a necessary good has vanished, and all happens, not in the harsh white light of perfection, which Morris denies, but in the mellow stillness of a long summer afternoon.”

The inhabitants of Nowhere find their fulfilment in the simple acts of everyday life, functional and creative work have fused so that the building of houses, or boats, the making of clothing or simple household objects enable the expression of artistry and individuality and are freely exchanged. Nowhere is then a very beautiful place where natural landscapes, buildings, agriculture and the inhabitants mutually adorn each other. Property is not so much held in common as is completely defunct.

Most machinery has been abandoned as being a source of destruction of pleasurable

and beautiful work. However, Nowhere is technologically sophisticated where it needs to be. Automated barges carrying heavy goods ply the canals, powered by a system the narrator is not knowledgeable enough to understand. Manual labour is looked on as a communal holiday or a chance to engage in pleasurable physical skills and exercise. Although there is very little crime (none given the complete absence of laws), impulsive violence does sometimes still break out, usually as a result of the complexities of human relationships. One conversation the narrator becomes involved centres on how a community is to deal with a killing resulting from a fight caused by romantic jealousy. The solution seems to be that the killer, full of remorse, will be provided with solitude at his own request. The main concern of his friends is the welfare of the killer and the third member of the triangle, there are no thoughts of vengeance or of punishment.
Nevertheless there are dangers in this Heaven on Earth. There are grumblers who look with nostalgia on the industrial age without an awareness of its accompanying evils. The study of history is dying out with so many more pleasurable activities and some of the narrator’s older conversationalists worry that old evils may return as a result. There is also a worry that eventually work will run out, but the remedy for this appears to be that the fusion of work as artistry makes work itself as inexhaustible as the human imagination. Even this ‘fear’ serves to invert our usual reaction to work as something irksome to be avoided. These fears also strengthen the sense that this new society is a dynamic one and still developing, along with the individuals who occupy it.

What is the significance of Morris’s vision for a discussion of the place of utopia in any radical approach to organisation? Morris combines both high Victorian Romanticism with Marxist theory and manages to create a utopia for anarchists, at times lurching into cloying sentimentality. There seems to be both an attempt to strengthen the desire for a new order, but also to educate that desire with an aesthetic and social sensibility, partly in response to what he saw as Bellamy’s vulgarised ‘Cockney Paradise’ of Looking Backwards (Kumar 1987; Levitas 1990). In doing this Nowhere tries to stimulate action in the here and now that will lead to this desirable state rather than a new tyranny. However, Morris is concerned in anarchistic fashion that the action that is taken leads to the sort of ends that can truly result in the good life. For Morris this means the full development of the aesthetic capability.

By imaginatively transcending the limitations of his own time Morris tries to demonstrate that the seemingly unarguable objections to the practicality of such a political project are simply the result of thinking limited by current rather than possible social conditions. There is, of course, a danger that such a ‘dream’ invites a retreat from dealing with current problems into quietism, a passive longing for a far off future beyond our reach. This danger Morris tries to head off with his dialogue with ‘Old Hammond’ historically linking the new with the old through the political action required to transform society.

The main point is that such a utopia makes order and organisation working to fulfil the needs and desires of individuals, without hierarchy and authority seem ‘real’. Whether the form it takes in Nowhere is one we find seductive is not the point, although the rediscovery of Morris by the Green Movement implies that this is not simply a Victorian literary museum piece. If power and knowledge are inextricably interwoven, so that thinking and practices are also intersecting threads on a web then flights of imagination may both stimulate counter-knowledges and counter-praxis. The challenge is to write new utopias that will aid this project in our own times, for Nowhere as with all Utopias is written as a response to its own times, and new expressions of utopia are needed for every generation.

Some Conclusions
As critical management and organisation theorists we inhabit a world which is imbued with a sense of the defeat of radicalism. There seem to be few indications of a turn in the tide of a triumphant managerial capitalism, and there are few political projects to which intellectuals can lend support without serious misgivings. The response of many areas of academic discourse has been that of another utopian institution, the
monasteries in the dark ages. We have retreated into closed orders where we generate arcane theory and use our comfortable positions to point out the theoretical shortcomings of the more risky efforts of others to bring about change, but more positively we also preserve a mode of thinking and critique which has all but disappeared from more public spaces.

Utopianism is a challenge to this comfortable intellectual quietism. It enables the most remote possibility to be considered as an experienced reality through the power of narrative. When combined with anarchism it enables a resurgent political philosophy and praxis to be considered as a way of thinking about organisation. Anarchists have struggled both practically and theoretically to construct a way of thinking about organisation that does not rely on either bureaucratic authority or on the hidden hand of cultural self-disciplinary control. Our conceptions of the ‘good’ organisation are no longer restricted by the ‘possible’ organisation and to envisage the utopian organisation makes it seem more possible. However, to take utopianism seriously removes the defence of ‘realism’ from us. We cannot refuse the question ‘Well what would you replace it with?’ Anarchists have sometimes blamed the refusal of Marxism to answer this question for the failure of communist revolutions. Without any clear sense of where such revolutions were headed, it is argued, it was inevitable that they would revert to existing models of authoritarian organisation.

The serious consideration of counter-realities is also a powerful technique of critique in its own right. By rendering current reality as both undesirable and absurd attempts to bring about change are stimulated and are likely to be more sustained and to expand the existing spheres of autonomy and authenticity. As anarchists insist on the integration of ends and means then practice, including the production of knowledge is also an end in itself.

Anarchist utopianism, because of its affinity with areas of post-structuralist thought, may also offer a more fruitful rapprochement of ethics, practice and theory than existing debates between post-structuralists and critical theorists. Post-structuralism can provide the theoretical case for a non-essentialist anarchist philosophy whilst anarchism can provide a compatible form of praxis. Because of this possibility anarchist theory deserves much more serious consideration by critical organisation scholars. Even though we are supposedly far too sophisticated to swallow nineteenth century Marxism whole, as an infallible orthodoxy, yet we still seem to retain an unreflective contempt for utopian and anarchist thinking.

Finally utopianism provides an escape from the sometimes stultifying cul-de-sac of academic writing, it invites the use of imagination, emotion, wit and artistry in our writing and frees us from the medieval practice of needing to endlessly quote the authority of acknowledged ‘masters’ before we dare to state an opinion. It is a genre capable of integrating an aesthetic sensibility with an invitation to judge the validity of what we say from the viewpoint of experience. As a final utopian flourish, an engagement with utopianism with its invitation to both create and make use of entirely different narrative genres in our work, may enable us to bridge the divide that has opened up between ethical theory and praxis.
Bibliography


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