

Utopian Visions

David Boulton

One fine day back in 1999 the future editor of *Sofia* and the editor of its predecessor, *Sea of Faith Magazine*, were among several hundred utopians marching to St George's Hill, 'an affluent satellite of London, a wealthy community of stockbrokers studded with gated housing developments'. We were commemorating the 350th anniversary of Gerrard Winstanley's attempt to dispossess the Hill's landlords and return the land to the people. In his wonderfully engaging record of utopian dreams, *The Infinite City: Utopian Dreams on the Streets of London*, Niall Kishtainy, a distinguished historian of economic struggle, sees the contrast as 'emblematic of the rise of private space and of wealth inequality in and around many of the sites of London's past social dreamers'.

This is a book about London. Its sub-title, 'Utopian Dreams on the Streets of London', is more informative than its somewhat enigmatic main title. Kishtainy acknowledges the dominant historical depictions of the city – 'an infernal maze, a centre of wealth, power and empire, a maelstrom of protest and disorder'; but alongside all this he discerns 'another narrative of it as a place of utopian possibility and experiment'. And narratives matter, he says, because 'they define our sense of possibility in the present... Without stories that aid social dreaming, society becomes rigid and confined'. London may be thought of as 'a white-hot turbo of capitalism': but what else, he asks, 'exists within its complex mosaic that could provide ingredients for an alternative to this dominant image?' His answer: 'stories, with their sensory and psychological qualities, that move people's hearts and minds – and propel them into action'.

Kishtainy traces 'an imaginative lineage that connects in time a selection of London's utopian visionaries, from Thomas More in the sixteenth

century... to the activists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries'. Thomas More, of course, coined the word utopia, playing with two Greek words, one meaning 'good or happy place' and the other 'no place'. His story of a distant island where land and goods are held in common and gold is useful only for making chamber pots has puzzled readers for centuries. Is it a fable, a satire, a joke? None of these, says Kishtainy. It is 'both a mirror to and an inversion of his home town of London, reproducing its physical characteristics – the river, stone bridge and hills – while through its social critique seeking to undo its moral ones. It is a starting point for a lineage of an imagined London that later city visionaries will build on'.

This More is neither Bolt's sympathetic man for all seasons nor Mantel's fanatical opponent of Reformation. Kishtainy sees him as troubled by 'the strengthening forces of capitalism that were weakening the sinews of medieval society' and toying with imaginative alternatives. The last thing Henry VIII's future Lord Chancellor wanted was a proletarian revolution, but the fame of his fictional island led to unintended consequences. Marx, Engels and Lenin would hail him as a Communist hero. Jesuit missions in 17th century Latin America would create utopian experiments that excited Voltaire and helped inspire the French Revolution. (It seems these echoes of More's utopianism could still be heard in the 20th century. The democratic socialist President Allende of Chile, brutally deposed by General Pinochet in 1973, lived in Santiago's Calle Tomás Moro – Thomas More Street. Pinochet, on the other hand, was granted a safe house on St George's Hill by Margaret Thatcher).

But I digress. Kishtainy doesn't take us this far from London. Instead, he fast-forwards a century to the chaos and confusion of the 1640s Civil War, the execution of Charles Stuart and the establishment of an English Republic. What an opportunity for utopian dreamers! Gerrard Winstanley, born in Wigan but by the 1640s a

Merchant Taylor and freeman of London, has a vision where God, who he re-names ‘the light of Reason’, tells him to stop writing pamphlets and *do* something, ‘Thoughts run in me’, he writes, ‘that words and writings were all nothing, and must die, for action is the life of all, and if thou dost not act, thou dost nothing’.

So with a handful of Diggers he finds some wasteland near Walton where ‘I tooke my spade and went and broke the ground upon George-hill in Surrey, thereby declaring freedom to the Creation, and that the Earth must be set free from intanglements of Lords and Landlords, and that it shall become a common Treasury to all.’

Kishtainy comments: ‘Because of their evident sense of practical purpose, the Diggers represent a watershed in our story. Unlike Thomas More before him, Winstanley intended his utopia to be real and tried to make it so.’ He failed, and today’s pile of wealth and privilege on the hill mocks his failure. But Winstanley lives on in his inspirational writings. ‘The fruits of his pen’, writes Kishtainy, are ‘powerful incantations that unchain the rebel passions, putting words to death and giving life to a new world of action’.

Fast-forwarding again, into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Kishtainy finds Thomas Spence castigating Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man* for failing to attack property rights. Spence re-writes ‘God Save the King’ as a communist anthem, invoking the Mosaic principle of the Jubilee, a fifty-year emancipation of slaves from their landlords and masters. In *The Rights of Infants* he conjures up a future where landlords are toast. ‘Behold their palaces, temples and towns, mouldering into dust, and affording shelter only to wild beasts; and their boasted, cultivated fields and garden, degenerated into a howling wilderness.’ Imprisoned on a charge of high treason, Spence could not be silenced, ‘his utopian call’, says Kishtainy, ‘ringing out from the very heart of London’s dark power, the rebuilt Newgate jail, which Fielding called a prototype of hell’. Defending himself at a later court appearance, he asked: ‘Are we never to expect a



Title Woodcut to *Utopia* by Thomas More

better state of things than the present? Must we be debarred from the pleasures of imagination also?’

Spence had many admirers and followers. Robert Wedderburn, a Jamaican slave descendant, outdid Wilberforce and the Quakers by calling for the emancipation of not only slaves in the colonies but also captive wage-slaves in the dark mills nearer home. John Goodwyn Barmby founded a Communist Propaganda Society, renamed the Communist Church – this when a young Karl Marx was just a badly-behaved university student. Anna Wheeler argued that only under a system of co-operation and common property would there be the possibility of true equality, seeking ‘a transformation of relations between men and women, setting out feminist utopias in which women would be released from the oppression of the old social order’.

Utopianism itself was moving on. Kishtainy notes that ‘Rapid economic change made relics of traditional utopian tales of perfect societies to be discovered on faraway islands... Something

different was needed in the frenetic nineteenth-century world that was full of new social tensions and dangerous, agitated cities... The old utopian image of the pristine shining city, closed off and for ever perfect, was now too simple a picture to animate the radical imagination.' Under the influence of the mainstream Enlightenment, 'Utopian thinking came to be concerned with the concrete principles and actions that would be needed in order for conscious efforts at social improvements to fall into step with history's march of progress'.

As Kishtainy whirls us on into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries it seems to me that the distinction between utopian transformation and radical social action begins to blur. Ada Salter, wife of the Quaker reformist Alfred Salter, looked to the day when 'The injustices of the ages, the misery of the oppressed class, the sorrows of the poor, the tyranny of wealth and rank, are swept away for ever'. But her way of making a better world was through party politics. In 1922 she was elected mayor of Bermondsey, the first woman

Labour mayor in the country. She removed the town hall union jack and flew the red flag, abolished royal ceremonies and replaced the established church prayers at the start of council meetings with Quaker silence. That was for starters. For main course, she swept away the slums where workers were 'not housed but warehoused' and built homes with toilets and gardens.

Perhaps this is where utopianism and social action meet and merge, to animate the radical imagination. Kishtainy concludes: 'Although we may seem to live in anti-utopian times, utopian dreaming is essential to a vibrant society that is truly conscious of its own desires. Without it we fall back on ideas dictated by the powerful about how we should live.' Imagine!

David Boulton's books include *Gerrard Winstanley and the Republic of Heaven*, Foreword by Michael Foot (Dales Historical Monographs, 1999).

The Infinite City: Utopian Dreams on the Streets of London by Niall Kishtainy is published by William Collins, (London 2023. 353 pages, £25).



'Comandante Dos' Dora María Téllez (front left) leads the FSLN guerrillas in the liberation of the city of León in the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979.

Archive photo.