THEME 03

A return to utopian thinking

IDEALISM **POLITICS** **HOPE FOR THE FUTURE**

Grand narratives have been met with post-modern skepticism and outright resistance as they presumably distort our realist political judgement. As a consequence, most attempts to envision desirable futures without a realistic plan have been discarded as utopian thinking. However, in the last decade we've seen that pragmatic utopian thinking has gained considerable popularity in different domains. Here we have a closer look at the motivation for the changing opinion on the use of utopias.

Our observations

- A considerable number of books have been published that directly or indirectly refer to a potential future vision in which the social, economic, technological and environmental crises of our times are solvable, such as Post Capitalism, Jäger, Hirten, Kritiker: Eine Utopie für die digitale Gesellschaft, Utopia for realists, Inventing the future: Postcapitalism and a world without work and Saving Capitalism: for the many, not the few.

- In our notes on deep transitions (e.g. Deep Transitions, The bigger picture economy,) we can also discern traces of utopian thinking where socio-technological developments are interpreted as having directionality towards a world with more sustainable forms of consumption and organization.

- Recent works such as The Stack, The Singularity is Near, The Fourth Industrial Revolution and Homo Deus make use of utopias to illustrate the dynamics of technological change and explore its structure and its possibilities.

- Our note on metamodernism describes a trend in our zeitgeist in which we increasingly long for grand narratives while intellectually being bound by post-modernism. As a result, we can see that current generations are in part defined by the continuous oscillation between modernism and post-modernism. Pragmatic idealism and informed naivety are typical attitudes within metamodernism.

- The last 20 years have seen a considerable influx of (social) science-fiction content that refers to grand narratives in which both technological utopias and dystopias take center stage (e.g The Matrix, Marvel movies, Transcendence, The Hunger Games, Her, Star Trek, Tomorrowland, Interstellar, Bladerunner 2049). The popularity of the sci-fi genre can also be seen as a sign that society is seeking an orientation point with regards to dilemmas created by technological developments. In addition, movies like Black Panther show that sci-fi can also serve as a utopian thinking vehicle for social issues.

- Tech companies flirt with utopias by both explicitly and implicitly referring to promises of realizing better futures. Especially from a valuation standpoint, the power of promises (and breaking these promises) gains considerable interest. Similarly, in the last few years, we've seen that companies outside of the tech realm are also putting more emphasis on brand purpose.

Connecting the dots

Jean-Francois Lyotard famously noted that after the Cold War, metanarratives lost their great hero, their great dangers, their great voyages and their great goal. Consequently, attempts that have been made in that direction have been discarded as utopian thinking. Ever since, utopian thinking has generally been met with either reluctance, as it presumably is not able to provide any guidance, or with resistance, as it runs the risk of becoming a deterministic blueprint for social change.

However, with impending systemic risks caused by climate change, populism, unhinged consumerism and digital disruption, some believe that the purely realist approach has run its course. Moreover, in the works of Rutger Bregman and Richard David Precht, it is pointed out that the realist approach has caused left-wing politics to refrain from long-term idealistic visions, resulting in a vacuum in which neo-liberalism was able to develop its more pragmatic approach. In response, they claim, there is a growing need for pragmatic utopian thinking.

The general attitude within this pragmatic utopian movement is that grand narratives and utopian thinking should not be used as a blueprint for society, but instead should be perceived as tentative orientation points for our decision-making and as a source of hope. According to Benjamin McKean, by allowing ourselves to think of elusive futures, we open ourselves up to envisioning more possibilities. It helps us to step out of "entrenched forms of legitimation" in which "our insistence on seeing things as they are can easily curdle into an insistence that things are as they must be". Interestingly, there is an overlap with speculative design and scenario thinking, in which future scenarios are not necessarily used to predict and dictate our future, but instead provide us with mental models that help us orient and think more ingeniously. However, the realist (and metamodernist) in us should remain vigilant regarding the potential of these utopias becoming blueprints. It would not be the first time that independent thought was clouded by our romantic hearts.

Implications

- Political parties could increasingly make use of utopia-driven campaigns in order to resonate with citizens that seek a tentative orientation point, amidst all social and political complexity. Especially left-wing parties could try to adopt this approach in order to release themselves from the current political quagmire.

- Brands that are able to believably package their product/service with a utopian purpose but also substantiate their purpose with proof points could become strong players. Especially within the context of meaningful consumption, brands could have an example function.