



COUNTERFUTURES

Left thought & practice Aotearoa

Rediscovering Utopia

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PIP ADAM'S *I'M Working on a Building* (2013) proceeds backwards in narrative time, taking its reader from an opening, in the narrative discourse, in some dystopian near-future dismantled to 'countless alternate worlds and the very end of time' in globalised luxury building and vanity projects, and works backwards to our determinate past, the New Zealand of Rogernomics and the 1987 crash.¹ 'It was all gone in a year: the private school, the cars, the boat, the business': Adam works up to this disaster, the unravelling of a mother 'dressed up and

sunk into her shoulder-padded linen jacket² by way of indirections in dystopia. If the stories collected in *Everything We Hoped For* (2010), her bravura debut, mapped this dreary neoliberal present, its displays of wealth and conspicuousness ‘like someone’s set it up for me to hate’³, her novel re-orientes our attitude towards the present by forcing a representational confrontation with the concrete preconditions of the past. *I’m Working on a Building* proceeds backwards, through possible futures in globalised Chinas and Koreas to the world of Wainoni. The novel’s formal innovations and the complexity of its arrangement remind us of the difficulties, today, in thinking connections, so radical do the breaks between our time and the futures imagined in the past seem now. A generation on, Rogernomics and its successors remain the disconnection blocking Left accounting for the past, to say nothing of our current thinking and strategy. What might the Utopian tradition – with its maps of nowhere – offer by way of routes out?

The baffled and condescending response Adam’s experimental work received from local reviewers is one dispiriting measure of the salinity of New Zealand’s intellectual soil, and of the difficulty political aesthetics face in political paddocks over-irrigated with the ‘realisms’ of the present. This has by no means been a permanent situation: an *Auckland Star* review of Harry Holland’s socialist verse, *Red Roses on the Highways* (1924), began by remembering the older days of Parliament’s literary talent.⁴ Such an encounter is unthinkable today, and the political sphere joins with the literary in its hostility to ideas and Utopian imagination.⁵ I opened a post-election position paper in 2014 with a call for a ‘lucid registration of defeat’;⁶ events since then amplify this position. The

1 Pip Adam, *I’m Working on a Building*, Wellington 2013, p. 24.

2 *Ibid.*, 188.

3 Pip Adam, *Everything We Hoped For*, Wellington 2010, p. 125.

4 ‘Mr Holland’s Red Roses’, *Auckland Star*, 15 November 1924, p.18.

5 It is notable, as Ian Wedde has pointed out, that Pita Sharples, a distinguished and important poet before his parliamentary career, kept this part of his intellectual life separate – to the Pākehā world at least – from his political persona.

6 ‘Lessons to learn from bitter defeat’, *International Socialists*, <http://iso.org.nz/2014/09/22/lessons-to-learn-from-bitter-defeat/>, accessed 2 October 2015. The line is an acknowledgement of the influence of Perry Anderson,

Greens, with James Shaw's 'post-ideological' arrival, shed whatever remnants of association with the New Social Movements and extraparliamentary Left of the 1960s and 1970s that may still have lingered; the Mana movement, before its ascension into the realms of the fanciful in the spaceship of Kim Dotcom's science-farcical Internet Party, is no longer in the parliament, the last radical voice extinguished from official debates.⁷ The 'brighter future' is to look much like the present and, those much-remembered 'nine long years' to one side, it is to work without any real sense of the past.

National's current dominance, unchecked and extended across the best part of a decade now, is matched by the ongoing decline of left-wing thinking and organisation in this country. These are the Bad New Days we face, and they demand of us a thoroughgoing stock-take of the depleted Left arsenal. One thing is certain: repeated invocations of possibilities just around the corner, however comforting they may be psychologically, offer little useful for thinking about strategy. A certain spirit of pessimism – of what Terry Eagleton calls 'hope without optimism' – may instead be salutary.⁸ In that spirit, this essay traces, in schematic, doubtless inadequate form, a history of the Utopian impulse in New Zealand Left thinking so as to ask how it might fertilise new growth today.

Old Maps

Utopias proliferated in the century following the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, with Utopian drives and ideals percolating through colonial topsoil while the imaginative tractors and haymasters of the various Utopian schemes turned these over and drove them through political thought. These were by no means always leftist or revolutionary currents; Sir Julius Vogel's *Anno Domini 2000; or, Women's Destiny* (1889) did battle with Thomas Bracken's *Triumph of Women's Rights* (1893) and Edward Tregear's

'Renewals', *New Left Review* II/1, pp. 1-20.

7 On this see James Shaw, Speech to 2015 Green AGM, <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PA1505/S00600/james-shaw-speech-to-2015-green-agm.htm>, accessed 2 October 2015.

8 Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, New Haven 2015. See also Rosie Warren, 'Some Final Words on Pessimism', *Salvage* 2, 2015.

Hedged with Divinity (1895), immediate political question of suffrage in the 1890s playing out on future terrains and fears of women's roles.⁹ Colonial racial imagination oscillated between Utopias of 'noble savagery' – as in Alfred Domett's *Ranolf and Amohia* (1872), a poem of nearly five hundred pages chronicling a 'south sea day dream' – and anxieties over racial order mixing with fearful visions of class war, as with *Europa's Fate*, a 'history lesson in New Zealand' from the 1870s.¹⁰ A substantial, and justly forgotten, body of Pākehā settler literature dreams of New Zealand as what James Belich summarises as 'Better Britain', the land of hope and opportunity; Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), in its ambiguous combination of parodic and dystopian elements with the real drive of this material, stands as the only work properly to have taken root.¹¹ Those settler fantasies can be read as so many ideological wish-fulfilments, however, and are peripheral to the traditions this journal seeks to rediscover. The ideology of the 'passionless people', and its attendant critique in Pearson's excoriation of the 'fretful sleepers', came after this first phase, and was a product of the beginnings of the post-war boom, the settlement of Welfare State consensus, the elimination of radical organizational outlooks for a full two decades by the defeat of the Watersiders' Lockout. The land without ideas was a complaint of those born later. In the first century of Pākehā settlement Utopian visions grew alongside, and cross-fertilized, practical politics. Left-wing thinkers and campaigners, from the Socialist Church in 1890s Christchurch to the myriad sects and fragments that flowed into the Labour Party, kept up vigorous publication programmes. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1889), a hugely successful, and politically influential, American vision of post-capitalist consumer plenty, was put out in pirated Dunedin and Christchurch editions within twelve months of its original publication and would have an important intellectual influence in Labour Party circles

9 See Roger Robinson's edition of *Annon Domini 2000; or, Woman's Destiny*, Auckland 2000. Bracken's *Triumph* is held in the Alexander Turnbull Library.

10 Alfred Domett, *Ranolf and Amohia: a Dream of Two Lives*, London 1883; Anonymous, *Europa's Fate: or The Coming Struggle. A History Lesson in New Zealand, AD 2076*, London 1875.

11 See John Lucas, 'New Zealand and Utopianism in the 19th Century' in Ross Bradshaw, ed., *Utopia*, Nottingham 2012.

all the way through until the 1930s.¹² Local militant newspapers, from the *Maoriland Worker* to the *New Zealand Worker*, reprinted international contributions to Utopian debates, as with the *New Zealand Worker*'s serialisation of Karl Kautsky's articles on 'The Position of *Utopia* in Socialist history', or the work of *The Crusader* in promoting 'Christ's Kingdom on Earth' by way of May Day struggle and militant Christian socialism.¹³ A survey of the reading habits, book lists, reading clubs and discussion circles of the various left movements and communities active before the First Labour Government reveals a working-class intellectual world bubbling over with Utopian programmes and febrile political imagination some considerable distance from the staid, conformist image we have inherited from the 'Ballad of Calvary Street' and elsewhere.¹⁴ Unemployed workers, the *Dominion* reported in 1923, favoured Darwin, Dickens, Wilde and More's *Utopia* during their visits to Birkenhead Public Library.¹⁵ The globalised mix of socialist theory wandering in the bags of itinerant agitators and arriving in boxes of pamphlets and papers ensured Utopian visions attached themselves to immediate perspectives: a Miss England spoke to the Wellington Social Democratic Party branch in 1916, and drew links between More's 'satire' and 'day-to-day problems' the branch confronted.¹⁶ The situation, in the early years of the twentieth century, rarely forced militants to choose, in Engels' phrase, between a socialism Utopian *or* scientific. What the records suggest, instead, was a Utopian energy or imagination *driving* class-struggle socialisms.

12 See Dougal McNeill, 'Reading Nowhere in Erewhon: Bellamy, Morris, and New Zealand', *Kōtare*, 2014, pp. 1–13.

13 See *New Zealand Worker*, 6 January 1926; *The Crusader*, 29 April 1921.

14 Here by all means see Rachel Barrowman's classic *A Popular Vision*, Wellington 1991, and Jared Davidson, *Sewing Freedom*, Edinburgh 2013.

15 *The Dominion*, 23 February 1923.

16 'Wellington SDP', *Maoriland Worker*, 28 June 1916.

Dry Years

What caused the erosion of these Utopian fertilizing layers, or their burying by alluvium from other political currents? Four reasons present themselves. The success of the Welfare State, and, in intimate relationship with it, the international post-war boom of global capitalism stands out, in the period 1935 – 1984, as Utopia’s first challenger. Whatever the later complaints of Baby Boomers over the stultifications of suburbia, the (relative) social peace and economic growth of the post-war period saw real, considerable, sustained improvements in the material life of the working class. These improvements were uneven, to be sure, racialized, and at the cost of a deadening social and political conformity, but they created a climate in which no Utopias healthily could grow.¹⁷ Secondly, classical Marxism has traditionally been hostile towards the Utopian impulse, with Engels assigning it to ‘the socialism of earlier days’ and the term itself being used as an epithet, as with Trotsky’s description of the idea of socialism in one country as a ‘reactionary utopian theory.’¹⁸ Revolutionary currents, therefore, already marginal, battered and bewildered intellectually in the dry 1950s, were ill-placed to offer any reckoning with the Utopian inheritance and, by the time of the New Left revival this inheritance had been all but forgotten. The papers of the extraparliamentary Left, from the Trotskyist *Socialist Action* to the Maoist Workers’ Communist League and its *Unity*, paid little attention to culture in general or Utopia in particular. Avant-garde and theoretical publications such as *Dispute* might berate their enclosure in the ‘great New Zealand sandwich’, but the Utopian impulse found little favour in their pages.¹⁹ Whatever the value of the New Left’s revival in other areas, this absence must be felt as a loss and a contribution to what Ernst Bloch, in another context and as part of his rich, maddening, meandering *Principle of Hope*, called the ‘undernourishment of revolutionary imagination.’²⁰ It involved – as Andrew Milner and

17 I draw here on Brian Roper, *Prosperity for All?*, Melbourne 2005.

18 Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, New York 1935, p. 52; Leon Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin*, New York 1974, p. 120.

19 See Dougal McNeill, ‘Notes on Dispute as a Journal of Poetics’, *Ka Mate Ka Ora*, 12, 2013, pp. 52–67.

20 Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Cambridge MA 1995, p. 622.

Verity Burgmann have demonstrated in the Australian context – a misreading of local socialist history, in which Utopian currents and historical materialism had intertwined and cross-pollinated, and a missed imaginative-tactical opportunity, as the questions of *alternatives* to the Keynesian order were left to grow without the sustaining compost of past visions and dreams. I shall have more to say on the strategic consequences of this in a moment; for now it will suffice to gesture at the example of the Australasian Wobblies, deservedly regarded as a revolutionary and class-struggle body but teeming also, in their literary and journalistic output, with promises of the ‘epoch of rest’ and Antipodean Lands of Cockayne.²¹ It was left to the Women’s Liberation Movement, in its complex, fraught relationship with the wider Left, to return to older traditions of ‘localist internationalism’ and the local consumption and transformation of Utopias formulated overseas. The women’s movement, with its emphasis on subjectivity and transforming both structural oppression and interpersonal and intimate inequalities, produced the last great growth of Utopias in the twentieth century; Shulamith Firestone’s polemical *Dialectic of Sex* (1970), with its call for the elimination not just of ‘male *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself’ and the end of the division of labour by the ‘elimination of labour altogether (cybernetics)’ reads as part of the same genre as Marge Piercy’s avowedly fictional *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) or Ursula le Guin’s *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969).²² That these were international texts was of little consequence: one of Women’s Liberation’s many virtues was its scornful rejection of the masculinist creed of cultural nationalism, the pages of its journals being filled instead with critical conversation between texts produced in very different circumstances globally. Firestone, Piercy, Le Guin all found local audiences in a flourishing culture, through the 1970s, of reading- and consciousness-raising groups, and the feminist magazine *Broadsheet* (1972 – 1997) mixed poetry and fiction alongside reportage and political economy in a manner reminiscent of the *Maoriland Worker*. One classic of the local genre, Robin Hyde’s ambiguously utopian *Wednesday’s Children* (1937),

21 See here Andrew Milner, ‘Socialism, Utopian and Scientific?’, *Arena* 31, 2008, pp. 7–20; Verity Burgmann, ‘Refuting Marx and Engels: Australian Utopianism in the 1890s’, *Arena* 31, 2008, pp. 21–45; Verity Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism*, Cambridge 1995.

22 Shulamith Firestone, *Dialectic of Sex*, New York 1971, p.1.

a vision of just gender relations, had to wait for the permeation of Women's Liberation in the academy to find its fit audience in the late 1980s. But this, whatever feminism's other, more lasting cultural contributions was eccentric to the main lines of Left publishing and practice. The fields sown from 1890 – 1935 were left fallow through the long post-war period.

The third reason for Utopia's withering in the local story is more positive, and suggests productive diversions rather than simple imaginative impoverishment. This is of course the question of Māori land rights and the place of Māori demands for tino rangatiratanga as part of a wider left discourse. If 'The Rambler' could offer a socialist blueprint of New Zealand in 'One Hundred Years' Time' for *Tomorrow's* Depression-era readership without considering the place of Māori, no such complacency could be sustained by the era of the Land March and Nga Tamatoa.²³ The ambiguity in Thomas More's term – with the Greek word *eutopia* or 'good place' a homophone of *utopia* or 'no place' – was unsettled by the political dynamics of a white settler colony, a place where the question of where 'somewhere' is, and on whose terms it is to be described, named, possessed, and narrated take on a particular intensity. Janet Frame's late Utopian masterpiece *The Carpathians* (1988) plays with just this awareness, its metafictional working up of the 'legend of Maharawhenua or Memory Land with its town of Puamahara or Memory Flower' running state and Pākehā capitalist acquisitiveness and touristic drives against Māori communities, whose 'envied wealth is in their possession of time and in their being the only inhabitants for whom the legend has been a growth of love and not the sudden possession of a tale arranged to entice tourists and to make more money for Puamahara.'²⁴ Utopian, dystopian and science fiction traditions developed within Māori and Pasifika literary traditions, to be sure. Albert Wendt's dystopian *Black Rainbow* (1992) anticipates *The Hunger Games* with its narrative of the Tribunal, the President, the Hunters and the Hunted offering allegorical commentary on the bosses' offensive of the 1980s and

23 'The Rambler, 'In One Hundred Years' Time', *Tomorrow*, 1/2, 1934, pp. 16-17. The Communist Party, for all its cultural philistinism, was well out ahead on the question of racism. See Dougal McNeill, 'Māori and Communism in the 1930s': <http://iso.org.nz/2015/07/09/maori-and-communism-in-the-1930s/>, accessed 2 October 2015.

24 Janet Frame, *The Carpathians*, London 1988, p.11, p.14.

the realities of racial and class oppression in neoliberal Auckland. Patricia Grace and Alice Tawhai both draw on science fiction tropes in their short fiction, as did Ralph Hotere in the visual arts. But the question of land, of ownership, of the meaning of mana whenua all take on a significance for Left thinking from the 1970s that makes Utopian projection hesitant and self-effacing.

Fragments of Labour

The most obvious reason for Utopia's marginality is, however, still all around us. The bosses' offensive inaugurated in 1984 with the Fourth Labour Government, escalated by the National government's Employment Contracts Act (1991) and then continued, refined and made sustainable under Helen Clark (1999 – 2008) and John Key (2008 – present) decomposed and disarticulated the organisational structures necessary for the kind of social dreaming Utopia requires. A whole structure of feeling was destroyed in the process, and the kinds of assumptions that could be made by a socialist journalist or theorist in 1964 or 1984 – to do with a certain union density, with a shared political vocabulary, outlook and assumption around employment patterns and housing models as much as strategic position – were unthinkable by 1994. Union membership more than halved in the thirteen years between 1985 – 1998, and unions were almost completely wiped out in agriculture and forestry.²⁵ The social world in which Kinleith, Kawerau and Waipa might be the centres of industrial organisation and social challenge – as covered in Vanguard Films' superb documentary *Wildcat* (1981) – has, by the 1990s, been replaced by one where the old terms of debate – from unionism and socialism all the way through to class itself – struggle to find a contemporary recognition or register.

The effects of this shift damaged both the political imagination and the political institutions in which Utopia finds ground. The institutional damage is clearest; where once Wellington's Cuba Street might have had a range of paper sellers and campaigners on any given Friday night, the newspapers,

²⁵ Parliamentary Research Paper, *Trade Unions: Number and Membership Trends*, Wellington 2000.

magazines and physical sites of Left ideas are now virtually absent from daily public life. The organised labour movement carried with it and housed myriad movements and presences, in offices, photocopiers, and practical contributions (to say nothing of shared social networks and solidarities) that gave life and substance to this Left culture. It is now all but gone from Aotearoa; the ‘academicisation’ of Left ideas (of which this journal itself is both symptom and attempted cure) is a sign of this damage as much as it is any accommodation with the existing order. There is nothing to be ashamed of in a tactical retreat to the so-called Ivory Tower; but it should not either be a source of any particular pride. Much more devastating, however unavoidable, has been, alongside this, attendant conservatizing trends in Left thinking. The accommodation of the Greens to neoliberal capitalism is one sign, as is the ongoing desiccation of Labour’s by now no more than nominal social democratic vision; the extra-parliamentary Left faces a similar threat through the very immensity of its tasks. What union mobilisations there have been over the last thirty years have virtually all been defensive and with conservative goals in mind. Struggles to preserve the status quo, in the face of an innovating and aggressive new model of capitalism, force themselves on working-class movements in defensive situations. Whatever their tactical justifications, however, the effect of this on the Utopian organs is suffocating. How to imagine new ways of living when the best of the present is under threat? A particular social vision from the era of the Welfare State – expressed in the separated gardens and stand-alone units of well-made state houses, and in the regular hours and work patterns of full-time, permanent employment – stand in, through this process, for the class imagination itself. What chance for the good new days when even the bad old ones are under threat? From housing to benefits, from employment law to reproductive rights: this has been the horizon of Left activity and thinking through neoliberalism. The effects of ‘three decades of nearly unbroken political defeats for every force that once fought against the established order’ has been, Perry Anderson argues, ‘intellectually, and imaginatively... a remorseless closure of space.’²⁶ Activists and intellectuals in Aotearoa joined in, through the dreary 1990s, a drift in Anglophone Left politics globally,

26 Perry Anderson, ‘The River of Time’, *New Left Review* II/26, 2004, p.71.

as erstwhile revolutionaries jettisoned 60s dreams with their flares as part of an old wardrobe, committed intellectuals sought new accommodations (Immanuel Wallerstein: ‘the last thing we really need is still more utopian visions’)²⁷, and reformist parties learned how to govern without delivering reforms. Those positive campaigns that have been successful – from MMP in 1996 to equal marriage rights more recently – proved, in their determination to be presented within the confines of the current’s system’s logic, the barrenness of these fields for Utopia.

Between Things Ended and Things Begun

Perhaps. And yet, as Anderson remarks, if periods of defeat enclose imaginative space, the upheavals of revolutionary periods and surges in struggle are equally unpromising for Utopias, their readers being too busy plucking the living flower to sketch out its future bush. Utopias sprout, Anderson suggests, ‘in the calm before the storm, when institutional arrangements appear unchangeable, but minds have been set free by some still unseen tectonic shifts to reinvent the world.’²⁸ The very bleakness and aridity of Key’s ‘brighter future’ may prompt Utopian thinking, driven as we are, in China Miéville’s phrase, towards ‘a Benjaminian/Beckettian attempt to fail better and better at thinking an unthinkable’ future and form of social organisation.²⁹ The uneasy years following the defeat of the 1890 maritime struggle, or the desperate period after 1913’s setbacks, rather than the heady months following the Bolshevik revolution, were when Utopia reappeared on New Zealand maps. Frank Freeman, making sense of the bitter disappointment of the 1913 strikes, drew explicitly on Utopian example:

The ending of *News from Nowhere* always brings a touch of sadness to me as I read. That touch was changed to a staggering blow as I passed out of the crowd. Our boys were being forced back

27 Immanuel Wallerstein, *Utopistics*, New York 1998, p. 1. Wallerstein’s comments, appropriately enough, were first delivered as part of the Douglas Robb lectures in Auckland.

28 ‘The River of Time’, p. 67.

29 China Miéville, Afterword, to Mark Bould and China Miéville, eds, *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*, London 2009, p. 248.

into the Hell of Capitalism in order to be better prepared to hasten its extinction. That procession will live in the lives of everyone who took part in it. It was the greatest and grandest thing seen in Wellington during that heroic nine weeks' struggle.³⁰

This encounter, in its evocation of living memory, indicates a problem suitable for Utopian diagnostic intervention: the starvation and malnourishment of left memory. Neoliberalism's three-decade triumph, and the closure of imaginative space that brings, acts on the individual political metabolism and political body; we, who grew up through the Fourth Labour Government and beyond, have no *affective* register for Left politics, no set of memories of industrial victories and political advances with which to sustain new experiments. It is possible, today, as in my own case, to have close to two decades' experience in active socialism without the memory of direct, personal connection in a sustained strike. Utopia acts in this situation not as a comforting fantasy, the criticism its supposedly hard-headed political opponents level, but rather as a spur to thought capable of confronting this very strategic problem. What is crippling, Fredric Jameson suggests:

Is not the presence of an enemy but rather the universal belief, not only that this tendency is irreversible, but that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio-economic system is conceivable, let alone practically available. The Utopians not only offer to conceive of such alternate systems; Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet.³¹

30 *Maoriland Worker*, 7 January 1914.

31 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, London 2005, p. xii. I pass over in this essay the whole vexed question of the inward-looking or 'processual' Utopia, aimed at a frankly idealist project of personal transformation, as outside the realm of Left strategic reflection and really a variation of the anti-utopian accommodation to the existing system. But see Ruth Levitas, 'Being in Utopia', *Hedgehog Review*, Spring 2008.

How many sparks, these last fifteen years, have seemed instead the first light of a new dawn! We were wrong, it is clear now, to see in the Utopias of the turn of the century – Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000) as much as Albert's *Parecon* (2003) or Klein's *No Logo* (1999) – anything much more than warm-up exercises to stretch the imaginative limbs. The old, all-too-dreary questions – of state and state power, imperialism, political economy – would reassert themselves a year to the day after Nandor Tanczos and Sue Bradford took part in the Utopian effervescence of anti-capitalism at Melbourne's World Economic Forum on September 11, 2000. Whatever the convulsions elsewhere, from the experience of SYRIZA in Greece to the more recent success of Jeremy Corbyn in Britain's Labour or the nascent student movement SEALDs in Japan, the political scene in Aotearoa remains notable for its stability and immobility. Jameson's evocation of the need for a 'representational meditation on radical difference' reminds us, in this context, of the sustaining role Utopias can play. The challenge we face is not only to keep visions alive, but also to keep the machinery of vision, the organs of sight – both clear-seeing and far-seeing – active and operable. Utopia plays its role in the *renewal* of historical materialism, not in the articulation of alternative ways of organising: 'insights gleaned from dreamworlds and intuitions,' as Susan Watkins puts it, 'may be precious, but a politics led by them would be heading for disaster.'³² The Utopian vocation is elsewhere.

Corbyn's trajectory, unclear at the time of writing, travels across commentary like sparks from a comet of its own, and exposes the brittle state of contemporary political life, and how long and slow the death of old institutions and reformist frames will be. Utopia, with its emphasis on the absolute otherness and unthinkable difference of potential future worlds – from the 'higher capacities' of Perkins Gilman's *Herland* to the 'epoch of rest' in *News from Nowhere* – trains us to anticipate and imagine breaks, disconnections and discontinuity in productive relation.³³

32 Susan Watkins, 'Presentism?', *New Left Review*, II/74, 2012, p. 102. Her article, a response to T. J. Clark's 'For a Left With No Future' in the same issue, offers many insights relevant to our local dilemmas.

33 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*, London 1979, p. 106; William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, London 1994.

‘Watch therefore’, Matthew (24: 42) reports Christ telling his followers, ‘for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.’ Historical materialism, in the industrial realm, offers more precise timetabling, but something of the same stance is required in the realm of the imagination, where a ‘wise passiveness’ and an active waiting opens the mind to unseen possibilities. What might fertilize the Utopian fields again?

An astonishing recent intervention offers one surprising possibility. Steve Barr, Hone Kouka and Casey Whelan offer, in *Born to Dance* (2015, dir. Tammy Davis), a joyous affirmation of the place of Utopia in contemporary political imagination. Tu Kaea, a talented dancer from South Auckland with a crew of loyal friends and collaborators, is offered the chance to trial for K-Crew, a commercially and critically successful dance crew based on the North Shore. Tu’s home life offers only restrictions and the miseries of alienated labour; his friend Benjy (Stan Walker) is drawn into drug dealing – and eventual entrapment and persecution by the state – and hopelessness; the summer’s dancing stands in, initially, as a kind of farewell performance before working-class life eliminates the young people’s dreams. K-Crew offer fame, the dream of unalienated labour, romance, pleasure, but all at the cost of personal betrayal, renunciation of community ties and a willed de-classing of Tu as a dancer and individual. He must move out of his class, not up with it, as the old saying used to go. Will he choose personal success or collective loyalty? This dilemma, so familiar and so much a part of a particular generic script, is given a social intensity and the power to offer cognitive maps of contemporary social relations as Tu’s physical journeys across Auckland – and thus across the New Zealand social formation more generally – map his personal dreams over wider class location and conflict. The dance at the heart of the film’s emotional achievement (its choreographer, Parris Goebel, is an artist of astounding versatility, innovation, and aggression) runs in parallel to, and as a generic competitor with, its realist family and community drama. Hip hop dance appears, in *Born to Dance*, as the possibility of pure play, bodily movement and liberation against factory-labour constriction; collective expression and unity over atomised competition; it is the realm of freedom wrested from the kingdom of necessity. Dance *is* Utopia, at the very same time as it records and captures, in a way no other New Zealand work has managed in decades, the realities

of racialized class oppression and loss. The film's conclusion (too satisfying to spoil with description here) asserts the viability of collective identity and collective struggle over individualist accommodation and solution: if *that* message may seem, in this current climate, too easy a narrative resolution, its place at the end of a film devoted to finding, in dance, the *demand* for Utopia, the sense of an impulse and drive for collectivity keeping itself alive and reappearing in unexpected places, prompts its viewers in turn to think on how such resolutions, in our own lives, might be achieved.

The desire for that resolution, and the strategic questions it places before us, pushes us beyond Utopia and back to the problems of the day. One suggestion I have advanced here is that we work currently in something like a holding pattern; the old routine, with its meetings, organisations to keep functioning, magazines to sell and protests to convene, remains vital for any future novelty. The Left needs to keep going before anything else; continuity of ideas, of experience, of resilience and resistance, is far easier to break than to build. But continuity can in turn become sterility, and Utopias appear before us, in these in-between times, to challenge just that deadening. Banal and bathetic as the idea of a holding pattern may seem, this 'holding fast to a vision of the past' is, after all, Walter Benjamin argued, the only way historical materialism can keep historical memory alive in moments of danger.³⁴ Political curatorship of this kind always carries with it elements of risk, as we do not know yet what will be a precious inheritance and what will turn out to be so much junk and scrap. One continuity stands out across the last century: at each moment class struggle has been deemed, in the academy and elsewhere, an outdated, reductionist and superseded form of social change or analytical anchoring, its actuality – in industrial struggle if not seminar-room reflection – has up-ended the debate.

We might distinguish, in conclusion, with Jameson, between the Utopian programme and the 'obscure yet omnipresent Utopian impulse' or demand.³⁵ The Utopian programme is, in the

34 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940) in *Illuminations*, London 1970. See also Neil Davidson, *Holding Fast to an Image of the Past*, Chicago 2014.

35 Jameson, *Archeologies of the Future*, p. 3.

old-fashioned sense, unrealizable and bad dreaming, whether as the delusions of Green market environmentalism or the putterings out of Labour's Third Way. These compensations deserve our scorn. The impulse, however, that sense the world *must* be different, that better lives are somewhere other than our own, can nourish political activity and reflection. Better yet, the Utopian demand – that claim which, in its simplicity and reasonableness, exposes the inadequacy of a system predicated on its impossibility – has a clarifying power all of its own. Why must there be those without work? Why not open the borders? Why not decide no one shall go hungry? This tradition is not an alternative to active intervention and reasoned anger, but its supplement. The *Maoriland Worker*, reporting a speech by John Macmillan Brown at Canterbury University on socialism in the early 1920s, noted the wealthy professor's call for working people to abandon the systemic alternatives of socialism in favour of the plan to 'find your Utopia in your home, love your family and love your country, and you will come to love all mankind.' The rhetoric is familiar today, and the *Maoriland Worker's* response offers, in its combination of clarity, anger and Utopian ambition, a register we might yet rediscover:

A very dreadful house shortage prevails, [and] this is a painful fact all the same. If he lived in Tory Street, Wellington, or in Auckland slums with two or three families under the same roof, and paid in rent two days' wages from his scanty earnings, he would be the first to dismiss advice to establish Utopia there as so much silly, sentimental maundering. But in a mansion on the Cashmere Hills, Utopia is not so difficult of realisation.³⁶

36 'Brown's Sentimentalism', *Maoriland Worker*, 23 May 1923.

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