RUTH PRINCE AND TOM NEUMARK

Introduction

Curious Utopias
Dreaming Big Again in the Twenty-first Century?

Abstract: This special issue focuses on a trend that appears to run counter to the recent fascination with scaled-down solutions to world problems. From the predictive powers of Big Data in Kenya to market-driven humanitarian attempts to tackle the world's ills, dreams of massive biometric identification in India and visions of health care 'for all', we are seeing a return to ostensibly, sometimes self-avowedly, 'utopian' imaginations and schemes of economic, political and societal transformation. These evoke a 'universal' scale, a politics of amelioration and ideas of social justice, routinely draw on a language of the collective, the public and the commons, while relying heavily on market logics and the privatisation of public goods. Such contradictory utopianism, and its inevitable failures, easily invites dismissal. Avoiding the comfort of this kind of critique, the contributors to this special issue draw on the idea of curiosity in its two senses. On the one hand, these utopias are themselves curious in the sense of being peculiar. Being reformative rather than radical, they seem to offer pared-down visions of social change, which remain within the status quo. On the other hand, a proper appreciation of their peculiarity requires curiosity. Grounded in ethnographic and historical research, the special issue explores the varied ambitions, relations and temporalities that inhabit new forms of utopianism, including their limitations and possibilities, hopes and failures, their engagements with policies and social movements, publics, markets and states, as well as the other political forms and social collectives that they support, subvert or ignite.

Keywords: capitalism, critique, experiment, failure, hope, state, the public good, utopia

It is often remarked that the 1980s and 1990s saw a seismic shift in human expectations where grand dreams and narratives disappeared or were discredited (e.g. Buck-Morss 2002; Thompson 2014; Alexievich 2017). The failure of large-scale economic and political projects of societal change, denounced as 'utopian', is invoked as an explanation for the recent fascination with scaled-down solutions to world problems. For example, small, mobile technical devices – along with scaled-down expectations regarding societal change and material transformation – are being promoted as financially and pragmatically feasible instruments of intervention in the field of social protection, global health and the response to climate change, often in place of public infrastructure (Redfield 2016; Collier et al 2018).

This special issue takes as a point of departure what we identify as a concurrent, apparently countervailing, trend: a return toward ambitious, even self-asserted utopian imaginations and schemes of economic, political and societal transformation. These interventions explicitly invoke a 'global' and 'universal' scale and are driven partly by frustration at the petty 'realism' of recent decades, as well as the urgency generated by economic, environmental and health crises. Examples include large-scale healthcare and welfare policies, such as the Universal Health Coverage agenda or experiments with Basic Income Grants, the rise of techno-utopian visions for societal transformation such as biometrics and Big Data, as well as 'leapfrogging' technologies such as mobile and off-grid banking, and the design of renewable energies that look beyond the fossil-fuel era.

These schemes routinely draw on a language of the collective, the public and the commons, and espouse values of solidarity, social justice and equity, which appear to challenge the neoliberal economic consensus as well as signal a return of state responsibility. Yet what is produced is anything but a return to older aspirations for state-centred, welfarist political-economic systems. Instead, what we see are interventions and experiments that continue to rely on market logics and promote the privatisation of formerly public goods, from public–private partnerships to the rise of social enterprises that pursue more than just shareholder value. Such projects often promise more than they achieve, fail and are regularly superseded by the next 'game-changing' idea. They may appear spectral or performative and, maybe most importantly, introduce further exclusions or inequalities. At the same time, they might – even if only as a by-product of their grandiose discourses – offer new visions (or a reformulation of older visions) of social justice, engendering and re-activating a politics of hope.

Such moves – towards small-scale technological fixes on the one hand and large-scale societal ambitions on the other – are not necessarily contradictory but rather intertwined. On the one hand, small-scale technologies designed to fix practical issues are combined with utopian ideas about their possibility, and they harbour scaled-up ambitions, for instance, of universality, in the sense of 'deployability without regard to context' (Collier et al 2018) or in the sense of reaching millions of people. Our special issue will explore how utopian ideas are entwined with a range of technologies, which work to reconfigure welfare and global health, urban life and household finances, as well as forms and experiences of citizenship. On the other hand, seemingly more ambitious ideas and schemes might take the form of a pragmatic accommodation to the status quo of, for example, investor- or philanthro-capitalism. What we see then is the combination of big, ambitious dreams asking questions that are frequently answered by smaller, achievable solutions, which remain with or extend the status quo. Whether it is the end of poverty through digital debt, universal health coverage through private investment or a safer shelter with electricity through better design, there is a return of thinking big again (in terms of desired political ends), which elevates small-scale, pragmatic, cost-effective technologies and techniques as the means to this end.

The Analytical Value of a Curious Utopia

Utopian thought appears in range of phenomena, from early socialist collectives such as the seventeenth-century Diggers to the socialist communities of the nineteenth century, inspired by thinkers like Charles Fourier, to the state-led high-modernist schemes (whether communist or social democratic) of the twentieth century, as well as religious movements and contemporary theatre and art experiments (Moore 1990; Scott 1999; Blanes et al 2016). While we recognise this diversity of utopianism that exists across time and space, our interest is in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century utopian thought that appears in specific domains of human and social improvement, such as in development, humanitarianism, global health, poverty alleviation, housing schemes, electricity infrastructures and citizenship.

The concept of utopia has commonly been used by opponents to denote the unreal and unachievable or the undesirability of specific schemes or ideas (for instance Scott 1999; Hayek 2001). In contrast, this special issue joins those who deploy utopia as an analytic for the exploration of visions of the good life, or as the 'expression of the desire for a better way of being or of living' (Levitas 2013: xii). Following them means setting aside the derogatory use of utopianism and instead exploiting the elasticity of the term, drawing inspiration also from the distinction Fredric Jameson (2005), inspired by Ernst Bloch's ideas of the not-yet, makes between utopia as a fully elaborate programme and 'utopian impulses', which may appear across many domains of everyday life and politics (see Levitas 2010). Expressed as designs, blueprints, policies, plans, projects or programmes, the interventions we analyse seek to create and act on particular futures. Taking place as experiments, in enclaves, 'squeezed into interstitial spaces' (Billaud and Cowan 2020: 9) or embedded in micro-interactions, they are not necessarily imagined, by the actors involved, as end points, and may not be fully worked out.

The title of this special issue, 'Curious Utopias', is taken from Göran Therborn's (2007) designation of Basic Income grant schemes as 'curious utopias of resignation'. Despite being dressed up as a utopian idea in which every adult citizen receives a regular cash payment, for Therborn such schemes merely acquiesce to the capitalist status quo and its retraction of the welfare state, rather than offering an avenue towards the fundamental restructuring of society and its political economy that, he argues, is required. This view draws on André Gorz's distinction between 'reformist reforms', which 'subordinate themselves to the need to preserve the functioning of the existing system' and 'revolutionary reform', which is '"determined not in terms of what can be, but what should be"' (Frase 2016 quoting Gorz 1967). The utopian objects we explore in this special issue might strike some readers as 'mere' reformist reforms, even if they are surrounded by voices that proclaim their radical and revolutionary potential. But among our interlocutors, the distinction is more blurred. Reforms are complex and dynamic, relying on both movement and stability, and are never simply reformist or revolutionary.

Should we not, as anthropologists and ethnographers, take seriously the aspirations of those who design, implement or participate in these schemes, who do not feel the same sense of resignation that a Marxian scholar might articulate, but rather express their hopeful potential? Might there be other things going on that are worth exploring?

By using the idea of curious utopias, our aim in this special issue is to cleave open a space that would be prematurely closed if we adopted a sensibility of resignation. Thus we seek to retain a sense of wonder, which, as Andrea Ballestero has argued, means 'pondering something, unsure of its ultimate significance, ambivalent about its actual implications, willing to take an unexpected direction but concerned about the possible implications of doing so' (2019: 32). This allows us, we believe, to better appreciate the peculiarity of these experimental and hybrid, big/small, ambitious/modest, radical/reformist, and public/private schemes and plans. It also moves us away from a fixed idea of utopia as a ready-packaged model of the perfect society, to instead explore the contingent, experimental forms in which ideas of future better worlds are investigated.

Thus, while we acknowledge the value and necessity of critique and seek to contribute to its generative power, we also argue that when we see utopian objects in our fieldsites, we should seek to hold them and ponder them, seeing them as a force in the world that includes inclinations of hope, that propel people forward and may be generative of multiple forms, ethical positions and practices, with varying outcomes (Venkatesan and Yarrow 2012; Redfield 2016; High and Smith 2019). We are interested not only in the aspirations and objectives propelling such schemes, nor merely in their measurable aimed-for outcomes, but in what else they may engender or set into motion. In particular, specific structures of feeling (Williams 1977) and affective landscapes of hope and optimism, disillusion and disappointment, desire and dread may surround these interventions and shape their futures (Berlant 2011). Our issue also builds on anthropological debates exploring not only hope as political object and social form (e.g. Miyazaki and Swedberg 2017; see Levitas 2010) but also the work of dreaming as a transformative force, and the conditions under which it gains traction, creating blueprints for a future (Gordin et al 2010; Geissler and Tousignant 2020).[2] Analyses of the 'cruel optimism' of contemporary consumption (Berlant 2011) and of the 'privatization of hope' (Thompson and Zizek 2014) offer further inspiration here, as although they underline how late capitalism configures and shapes our aspirations, they also discern forms of possibility and expectation that oppose or point beyond the neoliberal consensus (see Ferguson 2015).

Curious Utopias Under Neoliberal Capitalism Today

If, as we believe, the concept of a curious utopia is analytically productive, then empirically what sorts of dreams, schemes and ideas might be analysed using it?

In this special issue, we focus on forms of intervention and aspiration that appear increasingly dominant today in attempts to design, reform or reconfigure welfare and healthcare, poverty alleviation and humanitarianism, development and citizenship. We interrogate the visions and values attached to them, their spatial and temporal imaginaries, the relations they imagine between means and ends, and their geographical distributions. How are these utopias of late modernity different from earlier ones, including those of the mid-twentieth-century era of high modernity? We have already discussed the issue of scale. While acknowledging that there are continuities with the past, we identify four other arenas – the market, the public good, the relationship to failure, and the production and politics of knowledge – where current schemes differ (in substance or in scale) from past efforts to improve the human condition.

First, *the market* appears as much more central in contemporary efforts to create a 'social good' as does the place of profit and shareholder value. As Keith Hart (2010) has argued, for much of history, markets have been purposely kept marginal to societal institutions, and here we may include the social engineering of the previous centuries' utopian schemes. While past schemes to improve human lives may have furthered or fostered capitalist interests, the scaled-down solutions with far-reaching ambitions that we identify here explicitly rely on the market to provide answers to societal ills. In these schemes, economic efficiency and competition is accepted as the basis for promoting a 'social good' imagined as simultaneously making profits and addressing problems of poverty or lack of access to electricity, healthcare or financial credit (Cross and Street 2009). Accordingly, they often deploy a language of market innovation and experimentality alongside that of social justice. Interestingly, these market utopian schemes also signal a 'return' of the state as they enter into hybrid relations with it in order to produce, promote and distribute products. To be sure, neoliberal capitalism reimagined the role of the state as an active force in the production of responsibilised individuals expected to fend for themselves amid market relations, but what we witness emerging is a different and experimental terrain of state–market hybrids.[1] Such configurations are particularly explicit in Donovan and Park's article on digitally mediated financial 'inclusion' that purports to empower the poor in Kenya, and Rakopoulos' article on Cyprus' extension of citizenship to high-worth foreign individuals, and they are present in the state-led efforts to build health care and welfare schemes through public–private partnerships that are explored by Prince and Rao. Such examples would, of course, be unrecognisable to Marxian scholars such as Therborn as utopian. From a Marxian perspective, these schemes, plans and programmes are only ambitious in their efforts to expand and deepen the capitalistic world economy to new places and new populations. Despite a rhetoric of social justice, they remain firmly within the status quo, often exacerbating social-economic and geographical inequalities in their quest for market solutions. Yet Neumark's article on solar power and social enterprise in Tanzania

also explores how such schemes may engender demands for entitlements and forms of refusal and contestation.

Second, alongside these permutations in the relations between markets and the state, the *notion of a public good* itself has shifted (Bear and Mathur 2015). Whereas mid-twentieth-century schemes (wherever they were located on the political spectrum) strived towards a public good aimed at a national collective (as Noémi Tousignant's contribution examines), contemporary schemes are often selective and partial, as are the collectives or publics they target, imagine or seek to bring into being. Here they echo the shift in twenty-first-century global and public health imaginaries towards 'partial publics' (Geissler 2013; Prince and Marsland 2014; Langwick 2015; Kelly et al 2017; Geissler and Tousignant 2020; see also Hayden 2003). While state-led moves towards 'universal' access to healthcare 'for all citizens' seem to buck this trend (explored by Prince and by Rao in this issue), it is notable that even where interventions tout an ideal of universal access, reach or inclusion, beneficiaries are approached more as consumers whose desires should be expanded than as citizens with rights and entitlements. This shift is captured in the language, common to these schemes, of a 'social good' – a more nebulous term than a 'public good', with no clear relation to or responsibility for an inclusive collective, such as a national public, and often lacking even a definition of who the collective might be. Often, however, there is a deliberate comingling of these registers, imaginaries and values, which elides questions these developments raise about which actors can legitimately deliver public goods.

Third, these interventions share a particular *relationship to failure*, because they respond to a historical memory of past failure in a way that twentieth-century utopian projects did not – whether it is the failure of Soviet-style socialism or the failure of African states to deliver on the promises of post-independence development, or of large-scale international interventions like the green revolution and humanitarian aid. Indeed, the interventions and designs we explore here encompass an expectation of compromise and of failure. Imagined as forms of trying-out, 'lessons learned' and 'feedback loops', failure is often built into the design of these schemes, as is an openness to the experimental, uncertain and contingent. Failure is anticipated, even (e.g. in Silicon Valley culture) celebrated; it is often taken as partial (Birla 2016; Appadurai and Alexander 2019) and may be considered virtuous (Bemme 2019). As such, failure is not an end-point (Miyazaki and Riles 2004) but a 'turning-point' (Ssorin-Chaikov 2016; Musallam 2020), generating a capacity to act while legitimising such action. This perspective echoes anthropology's move from analysing how development failures reproduce power relations towards exploring the relativity of failure by following the diverse social and moral worlds in which development remains meaningful and thus also hopeful (Venkatesan and Yarrow 2012). Judgements of success and failure shift along with the intentions and ambitions of the actors involved (Appadurai 2016; Carroll et al 2017). Thus, what constitutes failure, for

whom and at what scale is an empirical question facing our interlocutors. The articles by Rao, Prince, Cross and Street, and Redfield address these issues, examining the terrain that lies between success and failure, how involved actors establish and negotiate such criteria, and which kinds of outcomes they consider generative.

Fourth, haunted by the failure of past schemes, many of the interventions we identify articulate a particular *politics of knowledge and relation to evidence and evaluation*, as they must shore up investment, hedge futures, engineer evidence of efficacy and impact, and produce metrics. Conceived of as experiments, they often appear to be designed as pragmatic solutions to the question, 'what works?', explicitly skirting the ambiguous terrain of ideology and politics, which has so often created unwanted results. Yet they also hinge pragmatic politics in new ways to ideological ambitions and rhetoric. Contributions to this special issue examine how planned interventions, projects and designs approach the relationship between means and ends, the claims they make for knowledge produced, the role of the social, and the scale at which it is made meaningful.

The production of specific knowledge about the social has long been valued, whether for the design of colonial welfare programmes or for market research. Late-colonial and postcolonial interventions often took the forms of a test or pilot, conducted within a specific location or territorial enclave, in which knowledge generated was then projected – along the 'vectoral' pathways of anticipated development (Tousignant, this issue) – towards the larger scales of national or colonial planning, territory and population (Scott 1999; Bonneuil 2000; Tilley 2011). Recent decades have seen a shift in these relationships along both temporal and spatial scales. For example, in the fields of global health and development, the production of post-facto, self-validating knowledge (most often described as 'lessons learned' and 'best practice') increasingly leverages the deployment of these interventions across the globe (Nguyen 2009, 2015; Rottenburg 2009). Instead of evidence of efficacy permitting intervention, as in high modernist knowledge politics, now 'the urgency of intervention drives the need for self-validating evidence' (Nguyen 2015: 72). These trends have intensified and morphed into new forms (Adams 2016; Kelly and McGoey 2018), such as randomised control trials, the apparent gold standard of evidence (Wintrup 2021). Today digital platforms capture users' behaviours and preferences in novel and complex ways, feeding them into algorithms that are used to anticipate and design future markets. These data are constantly produced, evaluated and looped back into the system. Such processes should not be seen as illustrating a 'universalising' and abstracting logic, distanced from specific locations and the spatial imaginaries of political citizenship. As Donovan and Park's article shows, they are intrinsically related to specific, and intimate, social networks (see also Zuboff 2019). Moreover, the growing presence of state-led national digital biometric identification schemes across the world is also pointing to the reformulation of the socio-political landscape that we are only just beginning to grasp (Brecken-

ridge 2014). Taken together, these forms of evidence point to changing relationships between circumscribed experiments and the broader spaces, projects and collectives their results are meant to represent, inform and benefit.

Geographies of the Curious Utopias

Why are so many of the curious utopias we identify designed for or implemented in the Global South, and particularly in Africa and India? While the rapid extension of telecommunication and digital infrastructures would seem to confirm the observation that experimental networks are eclipsing the significance of place and locality (Kelly 2015), these shifts are also privileging particular sites and regions for testing and innovation. Although the Global North is not exempt from these developments, India and Africa are regions that are emerging as particularly intensive sites of experimentation with state–market hybrids and associated schemes of social improvement, poverty alleviation, healthcare and welfare, and digital innovation (McGoey 2014; Rao and Nair 2019; Muinde 2020; Neumark and Prince 2021; Neumark forthcoming). The articles collected here follow these developments (although they certainly also reflect our own academic and linguistic networks).

In Africa, and elsewhere in the postcolonial world, including India, post-independence projects in the age of high modernity (e.g. dams and roads, hospitals, clinics and schools) embodied collective progress and national development. They were designed for a newly independent citizenry and national public, and materialised (albeit incompletely) on a large scale. From the 1980s, however, and particularly in Africa, ambitions were downscaled, shrinking again to focus on specific enclaves (Ferguson 2005) or limited to specific populations on the basis of humanitarian need or disease status (Prince and Marsland 2014). Meanwhile, neoliberal intervention encouraged the privatisation and outsourcing of state responsibility to diverse sets of actors and organisations. Africa has long been a site for knowledge production and 'experimental governmentality' (Bonneuil 2000; Rottenburg 2009; Nguyen 2009; Tilley 2011; Breckenridge 2014; Geissler 2015). India offers a contrast, with its strong state apparatus. Yet in both regions states are experimenting with public–private partnerships that, often driven by venture capital investors, fuse development, welfare, financial capitalism and digital technology. Moreover, in both continents we are seeing attempts to produce new infrastructural futures that, on the one hand, respond to a legacy of slow progress made by high modernist grid-like infrastructures and, on the other hand, piggy back on the rapid global expansion of mobile telecommunication networks (Cross and Neumark 2021). As donor funding for development and global health continues to decrease (and Covid-19 adds further shocks), these configurations, along with the language of investor capitalism, are becoming

more prominent in delivering goods and services (Al Dahdah 2019; Bärnreuther 2020). Unlike earlier projects of development and technology transfer (Hecht 2011), the direction of travel is not linear. Hubs of expertise are cultivated in Nairobi and Bangalore, while knowledge flows, although never evenly, from South to South, from South to North as well as from North to South.

Contributions

The eight articles in this special issue, written by anthropologists and historians, explore the curious utopias of humanitarian design and entrepreneurship, solar power and agricultural development, universal health coverage and social protection schemes, financial inclusion, digital technologies and biometrics, and golden passport citizenship.

We have grouped the articles into three sections, the first focusing on utopia's temporal and spatial scales, the second ethnographically exploring the inevitable failures of utopianism, and the third analysing the imbrication of the market in contemporary utopian schemes.

Scales of Success

The first section takes as its central analytic the scales of utopia. The two articles in this section, which deal respectively with a twenty-first-century and a mid-twentieth-century utopian scheme, can be read in comparative terms.

Peter Redfield takes as his focus the humanitarian, and market-dependent, solar-powered 'iShack' designed for those living in informal settlements in South Africa. He shows how this shack raises uncomfortable questions about what should be done in the wake of the failure of and retreat from high modernist infrastructural aspirations. These questions include what the future of infrastructure should look like, and the consequences of choosing minimalist incremental upgrades over endeavours that strive for more ambitious housing developments. Yet he also points to the utopian aspirations embedded in alternative energy solutions that could orientate us towards more sustainable futures.

While Redfield focuses mostly on temporal scales, it is spatial scales that concern Noémi Tousignant. In her historical contribution she takes us back to a newly independent Senegal and to Niakhar, an area that has served as an important demographic, medical and agricultural research site, initially for French social scientists, since the 1960s. While today's global health surveillance sites produce decontextualised evidence of efficacy and effectiveness that feed into metrics and policies of global health disassociated from national spaces and projects, the French scientists were working with a different vector of development, orientated to the priorities of the new nation-state.

Implementing and Imagining Failure

Our next set of articles are joined together by an interest in the implementation and imagination of failure in utopian schemes and approach the myriad failures that pervade such schemes as ethnographic objects.

Ruth Prince explores an ambitious state-led experiment in Kenya to offer free healthcare to all citizens. Although they anticipated that the experiment would fail, bureaucrats tasked with implementing it managed to maintain a purposive, forward momentum as they sought to deliver what they considered to be a public good. Describing how a mood of doubt and critique as well as hope shaped such endeavours, Prince explores not only the ambitions of these schemes but also the relations and engagements, compromises and detachments that they set in motion. Utopian schemes are ethnographically interesting not only for what they fail to do, she argues, but also for the dispositions, such as hopefulness, that they might succeed in generating.

Exploring policy experiments in India, Ursula Rao's article turns to a similarly ambitious, large-scale, digitally-driven national health insurance programme, asking how this scheme continues to exist despite heavy criticism of its many well-documented failures. To find an answer, she argues, we must look at the ways in which the scheme's implementers are persistently reforming this scheme through trial and error, with failure never an endpoint but a motivation for action. Her interlocutors' hopefulness emerges not from a successfully completed programme but from the continuous process of recursive adjustment, tinkering and reform.

Alice Street and Jamie Cross also explore experiences of failure in their study of humanitarian entrepreneurs working in the fields of medical diagnostics and electricity provision. They focus on how these actors build maximalist aspirations into minimalist technologies and the challenges they face in scaling-up ostensibly small-scale technologies to larger populations through the market. Foregrounding the biographies of the entrepreneurs, they argue, like Rao and Prince, that ethnographers should attend to actors' attitudes to and experiences of failed attempts at achieving such scale, and to failure as a lived reality.

Utopias and the Market

The importance of market-centred political economies in contemporary utopian schemes and ambitions, while a theme running through many of the contributions, is a central concern in the final collections of articles. Kevin Donovan and Emma Park explore a Silicon Valley-inspired technocapitalist endeavour to tackle world poverty by offering mobile phone-based financial services, particularly loans, to the 'unbanked'. They show how new digital financial providers in Kenya are generating profit not by encountering populations as a collection of generic, individual consumers with needs, but as comprised of relational persons whose intimate and personal networks offer a potential source of financial value.

Tom Neumark explores socially conscious, market-driven efforts to scale-up off-grid solar in Tanzania. Inspired by the mobile phone that obviated the requirement for landline infrastructures, these endeavours seek to offer universal, clean and renewable electricity to citizens by 'leapfrogging' the mains grid. Such a 'big' vision to create new energy and infrastructural futures depends for them on producing a form of individual self-reliance in Tanzanian's populace. But, as Neumark shows, this purported self-reliance off the grid is underpinned by and illuminating of grid-like forms. Not only are citizens brought into increasingly digitalised financial grids, but these also clash with users' kinship-based forms of ownership and obligation.

In the final article, Theodoros Rakopoulos considers the market permutations that are reshaping utopias of global citizenship and cosmopolitanism. He explores Cyprus' 'golden passport programme', which allows high-net-worth foreigners to become citizens by investing, notably in real estate, in the country. The scheme extends offshore financial capitalism, entrenching economic inequality and creating apparent enclaves of safety. Despite its connection to utopian ideas of a borderless citizenship, the scheme depends on and solidifies other boundaries, such as those of class and wealth.

Conclusion

The curious utopias we explore could easily be dismissed as forms of resignation to a neoliberal status quo that persists in consolidating and expanding forms of inequality and violence. Yet it is precisely resignation that post-industrial capitalism and its actors often aims to produce (Benson and Kirsch 2010). Responding to this conundrum, the contributors to this special issue follow their interlocutors, who offer both critique and curiosity, and who may take a variety of positions, remaining open to possibility, being critical of compromise or taking a pragmatic approach. Authors attend to the question of what these schemes, and the aspirations attached to them, open up – as well as what they limit or foreclose. They explore the limitations and possibilities of these schemes, their engagements with policies, publics, markets and states, as well as the other political forms and social collectives that they support, subvert or ignite. In doing so, they ask: Which actors and institutions are driving these interventions, and what are their agendas? What visions of society, politics and economy do moves in (seemingly) opposite scalar directions share? How do current attempts to shape societal futures relate to past aspirations? What potential do these aspirations have, if any, to connect with or generate a wider transformative politics of hope, or even to produce debate, critique and resistance? What do actors make of the apparent contradictions within current imaginations and interventions? And finally, what happens to these visions, and the ethical and political commitments that drive them, when these projects fail, and how do actors involved act

on their failure? By asking such questions we may develop a better understanding of today's curiously utopian thought, where reformist rather than revolutionary impulses characterise the acceptable and imaginable horizon of possibility for sociopolitical change.

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Note

1. Historians argue against too clear-cut distinctions between the present and the past. When John Manton reminds us that 'the reach of the state always relied on the arms of missionaries, adventurers and capitalists' he cautions us against reading a too simplistic story of state failure and market success (2015: 96). Not only do state actors and civil servants form a persistent bedrock overseeing development interventions (Prince this issue),

state institutions and actors negotiate opportunities arising from public–private partnerships to pursue visions of a public good and forms of civic commitment (Gerrets 2015).

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