

Missing Utopias

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We looked to the past and saw nothing but progress. We looked to the future and saw nothing but decline. We were the ones who knew, but did not understand, who could conceive, but not imagine, full of information, but lacking insight, brimming with knowledge, but lacking experience. So we just kept forging ahead, unstopped by ourselves. – Roger Willemsen in 'Who We Were'

FUTURE AS DYSTOPIA INSTEAD OF UTOPIA

Crisis: a word that the generations born since the 1990s are all too familiar with. There was the financial crisis that became an economic crisis. The 'refugee crisis' that became a crisis of trust in government. And there's always been the climate crisis. In 2020, the Covid-19 crisis was added to the mix as well, whose consequences will primarily be borne by us, the young people of today. For whole generations, the future has become a dystopia rather than a utopia, completely devoid of any unifying dream.

'If we listened to each other with genuine interest, we'd realise that we all have ideas for a tomorrow. And we're the ones who will experience that tomorrow in its entirety. We don't want to spend this future struggling and feeling misunderstood, we want to shape it.'

In history, there are examples of utopias that became political realities. The European ideal was born out of two world wars that had all but destroyed an entire continent. Out of this ideal there grew a political union, whose crowning moment was the reunification of Germany. Today, the European Union is grappling with a credibility problem. Its constituent societies have run out of solutions to all the different crises. People feel like familiar certainties are crumbling. That the systems that were supposed to be so effective are no longer sustainable, are no longer able to counteract or avert problems, are failing.

Sociologist Hartmut Rosa compares the feeling of late modernity to walking up a down escalator. We walk without moving. Our goals are foiled by a world full of obstacles. At the same time, younger generations are defined by the principle of self-improvement. Maybe our answer to no longer having any cause or utopia to believe in has been to place ourselves at the centre of our lives. It's often been said that young people are conformist, apolitical, lacking in rebellious spirit. Perhaps the world we're growing up in has caused us to seek refuge in concepts that seem certain and secure. But reality paints a different picture. Recent years have shown that young people are political: it was young people who launched the Fridays for Future movement and Black Lives Matter demonstrations and it is young people who have kept them going. On the streets of Belarus, Poland, Argentina and Colombia you can see young women protesting for their rights and against sexism. They're united by an anger at a status quo that doesn't care about them and in which their future is being negotiated without them being given a place at the table.

DIVERGING NOTIONS OF EQUAL RIGHTS HAVE EMERGED

This flies in the face of a promise made by pluralist democracies: namely, that their citizens will have equal rights. Human beings are supposed to be equal before the law, to have the same rights. The market is supposed to level the playing field, while the government prevents social inequality. But down the years, the opposite has proven to be the case. Glass ceilings, injustices and discriminatory structures have become visible. On top of that, diverging notions of equal rights have emerged. We are privileged to have been born in a union that has exchanged border controls for freedom. Something we're incredibly fortunate to be able to enjoy, according to the generations who remember the wall that used to divide us. And so we've followed through on their logic. We recognise that it's a matter of chance which country we're born in and at what time, and believe that this privilege should be shared by protecting people from

war, disasters and human rights abuses. Yet some people are astonished when we criticise our asylum system. It's the logic they taught us but that they seem to think only applies to us, because we were born here.

UTOPIA NOW PLAYS SECOND FIDDLE TO HARD-NOSED REALISM

One constantly repeated narrative is that the world is our oyster, that it has never before offered so many opportunities, that each of us is the architect of our own fortune. For us, this promise lacks any substance. It began to ring hollow when we realised that what opportunities we have depends on our parents, our socialisation, how we look, where we were born.

The kids of the 1990s and 2000s have grown up or are getting there, but the adult world they've joined is one full of problems without solutions. And utopia now plays second fiddle to hard-nosed realism. Different spheres of society have their own goals, and it's impossible to create a utopia for this fast-paced, increasingly complex global world that unites people across borders, cultures, individuals, classes and different visions of tomorrow.

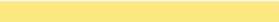
THERE IS A LACK OF NARRATIVES THAT SPEAK TO SOCIETY AS A WHOLE

So how can societies find their utopia? People need to listen to each other, and not just expect others to listen to them. But we've become disconnected from those who make decisions about our lives. We aren't being listened to, and most young people say politics doesn't work for them. This trend intensified during the pandemic. Politics seems detached from our needs and interests. If we continue to be ignored, we'll be powerless. And powerlessness breeds apathy. At the moment, the anger is healthy. It expresses a sense that things are out of kilter, that something needs to change. But it could develop into a feeling that we need to fight for our lives, as we ask ourselves what point there is placing hope in systems that don't care about us and a passive politics that only ever reacts to crises after they've already happened. So it's crucial to listen, to come up with solutions to the things people are angry about and to prevent disappointment from morphing into a complete loss of trust and an abandonment of basic democratic values. Young people need a politics that works for them and a society that creates utopias which are close enough to reality to become part of their futures

and yet big enough to create a unifying feeling across divides. We think that idealist values that give us meaning and purpose are important, but there's a lack of narratives that speak to society as a whole. We have an idea of this tomorrow, of these utopias, but it's as if we're talking into a void. In our society, it's a few loud voices that get heard, not the voices of the many. We're all aware of this dissonance and try to escape it. Try to cure or detox ourselves, to run away, to close ourselves off. To create a space where the only things we hear echoing back from the walls are ideas we're already familiar with, which gives us a sense of power and control. It's understandable but also dangerous.

WE ALL HAVE IDEAS FOR A TOMORROW

If we listened to each other with genuine interest, we'd realise that we all have ideas for a tomorrow. And we're the ones who will experience that tomorrow in its entirety. We don't want to spend this future struggling and feeling misunderstood, we want to shape it. We want a world that takes responsibility for the past and future, that conserves resources and distributes them fairly, that works to prevent crises rather than simply reacting to events after the fact. A world where governments may debate and disagree about what to do, but are committed to fundamental principles like the dignity of every single human being. We want a world that doesn't close its eyes to the negative effects of capitalism. A world in which everyone's voices are heard. A new utopia.



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