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Issue Editors' Notes
Introduction to the 2026 Spring Issue Including the Thematic Block *Utopia and Democracy*

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Utopias are often understood as ideal models of society belonging to the realm of the imagination that cannot be realized, or which, if realized, could have disastrous consequences. However, this colloquial usage does not coincide with the concept's scholarly usage, which has given rise to a whole field of transdisciplinary research over the last half-century. As Gregory Claeys states, utopia is a "timeless desire for human improvement . . . constant, ongoing conversation about humanity's potential. Far from being a marginal or eccentric idea, utopia . . . sums up humanity's highest aspirations" (*Utopianism for a Dying Planet* 13). Similarly, dystopias reflect on existing social problems of the present, often extrapolating or exaggerating the negative trends. The concept of utopia is relevant to literary studies, the history of political thought, and the social sciences, and equally significant to many artists and architects. These are merely some of the reasons why the theme of utopia drew together many scholars from various disciplines on July 3, 2024, to meet at the 24th annual conference of the Utopian Studies Society/Europe (USSE).

USSE is a European association of researchers from various fields who strive to deepen our understanding of utopia in the broadest sense. At utopian studies conferences, it is traditional for the organizers to name a focal topic to inspire the participants, though this is by no means intended to limit them. All high-quality proposals dealing with utopia or dystopia are accepted, though many scholars do tend to reflect on the main topic—this is also the case with the following papers. This time, the conference's main topic was *utopia and democracy*, primarily because it was organized by a research group funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, which has been investigating the relationship between democracy and utopianism. The 125 scholars, who came from five continents, met at Central European University's downtown building in Budapest, enjoying a venue that symbolically pointed to the highlighted theme of the conference, as the spaces of the building had often been empty for some time since the

university was forced to leave the country under circumstances that may be qualified as undemocratic.

The relationship between democracy and utopianism is by no means simple or straightforward. While present-day Western scholars generally assume that an ideal society is inevitably democratic (cf. Held 1998, Sargent 2021), in fact, democracy is often considered synonymous with good government (cf. Crick 2002). The history of utopianism, particularly before the Enlightenment (but also often afterwards), is filled with despotic founding fathers, "philosopher-kings, guardians, and experts of various kinds. Elite rule remains a *leitmotif* until we reach the age of democratic revolutions in the late eighteenth century" (Claeys, "Utopia and Democracy" 6, emphasis in original). Following the Enlightenment, democracy became a central theme in utopian literature and political thought, as well as in any serious discussion about political structures: "since the eighteenth century, democracy has presented itself to the modern individual as a promise of liberty, or more precisely, of autonomy" (Furet and Costopoulos 65). Utopias have served to articulate democratizing political demands and generate positive cultural change. Utopian literature has become a significant locus for social speculation, while dystopia has become more prevalent since the mid-twentieth century. Dystopias often express the need for civil liberties and democratic values in a negative way by depicting fictive societies that lack them.

The essays that you can read in this thematic block are the result of this conference. The guest editors, who all participated in the conference and were also involved in its organization, selected papers on topics that fit the journal's scope and may together demonstrate the variety in which utopianism shapes our understanding of democracy as far more than a legal or political system. Democracy cannot be reduced to the election process of the legislative and executive branches of political power every four years or so. Democracy primarily concerns the autonomy and solidarity of individuals and how they understand their own roles in society: in a passive role as victims of history or as active participants in decision-making processes. As Miguel Abensour argues, democracy is a "form of socialization" beyond being a form of political institution (32). Dystopian literature and film are particularly well-suited to reflecting on the shortcomings of societies in terms of these democratic social patterns from the individual's perspective.

The thematic block begins with Beatrix Balogh's essay, "New England's Puritan Utopia and Its Limits on Democracy," which examines

seventeenth-century New England Puritanism as a form of collective utopianism whose realization simultaneously generated and constrained democratic practices. Balogh argues that democracy arose not as a normative goal but as a contingent byproduct of a covenantal utopian project grounded in eschatological belief, moral reform, and the aspiration to restore sacred order on earth. Through close analysis of Puritan sermons, covenants, and political institutions, the study shows how participatory mechanisms such as elections and town meetings coexisted with exclusionary political membership, hierarchical authority, and the suppression of dissent—features intrinsic to utopias that demand unity, discipline, and doctrinal coherence. Liberty, in this framework, was conceived not as individual autonomy but as collective obedience to divine law, legitimizing illiberal practices in the name of necessity. As millennial expectations faded and historical pressures mounted, the utopian project loosened, allowing democratic forms to persist while shedding their theological foundations. The Puritan case thus illustrates a broader tension within utopian theory between collective purpose and democratic pluralism, while also explaining how a restrictive sacred experiment contributed, paradoxically, to the development of American democratic institutions.

Magdalena Modrzejewska, in her essay "Josiah Warren's Utopia of Individual Sovereignty," recontextualizes Josiah Warren as a distinctive figure within nineteenth-century American utopianism, arguing that his thought constitutes an experimental, anti-statist utopia grounded in the principle of absolute individual sovereignty. Rejecting both communal ownership and political authority, Warren articulated a utopian vision in which social order arises from voluntary association, equitable exchange, and the inalienable autonomy of individuals over their persons, labor, and time. The essay traces the emergence of this vision from Warren's disillusionment with Owenite communalism to his development of individual sovereignty as a utopian anthropology and voluntary order as an alternative to law and governance. Central to this project were Warren's practical experiments, most notably the Time Stores and equitable commerce, which functioned as utopian laboratories testing the possibility of non-coercive economic coordination. While these experiments exemplify the radical coherence of Warren's utopian wager, the essay also highlights their structural limits, particularly regarding scale, economic sustainability, conflict resolution, and social vulnerability. Warren's utopia thus emerges as both a powerful critique of coercive social arrangements and an idealized

projection that exposes the enduring tension between individual freedom and the demands of social coordination.

Building on this theme of utopian experimentation, Katarzyna Pisarska turns to a very different nineteenth-century context, examining Robert Ellis Dudgeon's *Colymbia* (1873). While Modrzejewska emphasizes practical, anti-statist experiments in American utopianism, Pisarska's study highlights the imaginative and scientific dimensions of utopia in late-Victorian literature, tracing how evolutionary thought, satire, and imperial ideology shape Dudgeon's underwater society. As Pisarska demonstrates, Colymbia's utopia is deeply imbricated with Darwinian ideas of natural selection, adaptation, and the survival of the fittest, which inform not only its biological organization, but also its social and political hierarchies. Scientific progress, particularly the technologically mediated adaptation to underwater life, enables Colymbia's claims to evolutionary superiority and reflects a proto-ecological awareness of human-environment interactions. The article analyzes the novel's satire of contemporary British mores, including education, parenthood, and social hierarchy, and explores its engagement with racial and imperial ideologies. Pisarska shows how Colymbia's citizens, descendants of Britons, embody the Victorian aspiration for physical, intellectual, and moral perfection, while also exposing the ethical ambiguities of biopolitical rationality. By situating the novel within the broader context of nineteenth-century utopian literature, science fiction, and evolutionary discourse, Pisarska argues that Dudgeon's work both reflects and interrogates contemporary scientific and social thought. The article highlights *Colymbia* as a neglected but significant contribution to utopian fiction, illustrating the complex intersections of science, satire, and imperial ideology in Dudgeon's imaginative vision.

Harry Hall, in his essay ""The (Difficult) Arts of Enjoying Life': Democratic Aesthetics in the Late Nineteenth-Century Utopian Literature of William Morris," examines William Morris's utopian writings as attempts to theorize a specifically democratic utopian aesthetics grounded in sensual experience, artistic production, and everyday life. Focusing primarily on Morris's key utopian fiction, *News from Nowhere*, as well as various other lectures and writings, Hall argues that Morris rejected technocratic and statist models of utopia in favor of a speculative vision in which pleasure in labor and aesthetic practice functions as both the means and the end of social transformation. Against dystopian critiques that oppose utopian order to democratic freedom, the essay shows how Morris reconceptualized art as a ritualized, sacramental activity through which individual subjectivity and

collective life are mutually constituted. Central to this vision is the collapse of the division between aesthetic production and consumption, whereby beauty becomes the visible trace of non-alienated labor and democratic agency. While acknowledging enduring critiques of Morris's sensualism and its potential exclusions, the study situates his work as a historically significant alternative within utopian theory—one that reimagines democracy not as institutional design but as an ongoing aesthetic and ethical practice.

Gabriella Vöő's article reads Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999) as an "after-utopian" narrative that rethinks utopia as a mode of democratic practice rather than a realizable ideal. Drawing on Étienne Balibar's notion of "after-utopia" and Miguel Abensour's work on open and insurgent utopias, Vöő argues that Silko reclaims the utopian impulse in the aftermath of modern emancipatory projects undone by US colonial violence, Indigenous dispossession, and ecological devastation. Vöő shows how the novel's central trope of the journey revises the classical utopian voyage associated with Thomas More. Rather than guiding the reader toward an ideal social order, the movements of Indigo, a young Indigenous girl forcibly separated from her community, expose the coercive foundations of modern utopian enclosures, including missionary education, scientific extraction, and philanthropic reform. As Vöő demonstrates, the gardens Indigo encounters function as cognitive maps of competing political imaginaries. Elite Euro-American gardens—ranging from aesthetic landscapes to experimental and philanthropic cultivation projects—embody failed blueprint utopias grounded in control, improvement, and ownership. Against these enclosed spaces, Vöő reads the gardening practices of the Sand Lizard people, rooted in care, reciprocity, and multispecies relations as articulations of an after-utopian imaginary that refuses restoration or perfection.

While Vöő foregrounds the journey as a path toward democratic imagination emerging from colonial and ecological ruin, the following contribution turns to a postmodern journey through surreal, commodified landscapes, tracing the impossibility of achieving utopian resolution, stability, or solace in a consumption-driven world. In her article titled "When Simulacrum Reigns Supreme: Andrei Codrescu's *Wakefield* and the Utopia of Living Authentically," Maria Barbu analyses *Wakefield* (2004), a novel by the Romanian-born American writer and poet Andrei Codrescu (b. 1946). In the novel, the eponymous protagonist, having made a Faustian pact with the devil to discover his authentic self, travels across a surreal

America and observes the decline of culture in a consumer society. Barbu points out that Wakefield criticizes some extreme manifestations of global capitalism that have emerged despite democracy being the cornerstone of both the American Constitution and the American way of life. However, the pursuit of authenticity proves to be a utopian endeavor in a consumption-driven society. Barbu employs Baudrillard's concept of simulacra and Corin Braga's notion of anarchetype in her survey of this text which offers a dispersed postmodern viewpoint that destabilizes structural patterns. The journey cannot be called successful: even when traces of authenticity are encountered along the way, solace cannot be found in a world where everything is available.

In the context of South-Asian women-authored utopian and dystopian fiction, Barnita Bagchi writes about Sri Lankan-Australian writer Shankari Chandran's 2017 novel, *The Barrier*. The analysis focuses on the political use of pandemics and the way in which the division between East and West establishes a dystopian global order in the thriller-like plot of the novel. Chandran (b. 1974), who is also a human rights lawyer, emphasizes the interconnectedness of all forms of existence and articulates hope for decolonization. A full decolonization must also involve utopian and dystopian writing, which is why the article fits into the current trend of broadening the scope of utopian studies to include non-mainstream fiction: "decolonial knowledge questions the dominance of Eurocentric forms of knowledge." Bagchi highlights the relevance of the Bhagavad Gita, a sacred text of Hindu religion, in representing faith as a generative human capacity and offering hope for global unity among all life forms.

In a complementary manner, in his article "Imaginaries of Planetary Futures: *The Expanse* and Democracy-to-Come", David Levente Palatinus examines the TV show *The Expanse* as a paradigm for understanding contemporary utopianism in the Anthropocene, emphasizing the entanglement of democracy, crisis, and posthuman futures. Similarly to the way in which Bagchi reads *The Barrier*'s pandemic-driven global dystopia as a critique of Eurocentric power, Palatinus looks at science fiction as a speculative laboratory, which exposes the consequences of colonialism, displacement, and inequity on a planetary scale. Palatinus emphasizes how the series' interplanetary politics—the tensions among Earth, Mars, and the Belt—dramatize systemic inequalities, colonial rivalries, and displacement in ways that mirror contemporary global anxieties. Through a detailed analysis, Palatinus shows how *The Expanse* situates crisis not as an interruption of politics, but as its defining condition. These narrative dynamics render

democracy not as a stable or self-evident achievement, but as a contested, negotiated, and contingent practice. In doing so, a central strand of his argument invokes Derrida's concept of "democracy-to-come," which Derrida articulates as an open-ended normative promise that structures political imagination without ever becoming a fully realized institutional form. For Palatinus, *The Expanse* refuses simplistic binaries of optimism (utopia) and pessimism (dystopia) by illustrating how democratic life and collective agency emerge through continuous negotiation across difference, crisis, and systemic instability.

Taken together, these contributions demonstrate that the relationship between utopia and democracy is neither stable nor univocal, but historically contingent, conceptually fraught, and persistently shaped by moments of crisis. Across periods, genres, and geopolitical contexts, utopia emerges less as a blueprint for ideal order than as a critical mode through which societies negotiate questions of authority, autonomy, inclusion, and collective life. From early modern religious experiments and nineteenth-century utopian laboratories to postcolonial, postmodern, and planetary imaginaries, the essays gathered here reveal how democratic aspirations are repeatedly articulated under conditions of constraint, be they economic coercion, imperial expansion, ecological devastation, or systemic inequality.

A recurring insight across this thematic block is that democracy cannot be reduced to institutional arrangements or formal political rights alone. Rather, it appears as a social, ethical, and aesthetic practice that unfolds through everyday life, labor, artistic production, spatial organization, and affective relations. Utopian and dystopian narratives, in this sense, function as privileged sites for testing the promises and limits of democratic imagination. They expose how ideals of freedom and participation may coexist with exclusion, hierarchy, and coercion, while also sustaining demands for autonomy, solidarity, and justice that exceed existing political forms.

The thematic block is followed by two essays, which very productively complete the mosaic of interpretations on utopia and democracy. György Fogarasi's study delivers a minute reading on Heidegger's essays about technology as well as Wordsworth's late sonnets and letters in an attempt of conceptualizing "an 'anecological' notion of both nature and technology." In focusing on these texts' "subtle revision of a widespread instrumental and anthropological notion," in which natural forces as well as human activity are understood by Heidegger and Wordsworth as a "standing-reserve," Fogarasi convincingly demonstrates

that these authors are early critics of capitalism and among the first thinkers who clearly articulated questions related to what we now call the Anthropocene. This analysis, then, closely links to the last paper in the thematic block: Palatinus's discussion of *The Expanse* as an example of Anthropocene television. The essay that follows provides a bridge to the review section: a review essay by F. M. Ortiz-Delgado, who offers a detailed critique of Victor Davis Hanson's *The Dying Citizen: How Progressive Elites, Tribalism, and Globalization Are Destroying the Idea of America*, presenting this work—which also links to the thematic block due to its discussion of the democratic ideal of America—as polemical and debatable.

In the closing section, we present four intriguing reviews, the first two of which concern drama: David Palmer's insightful commentary on Ciarán Leinster's *Postmodernism in Arthur Miller's Long-Late Period*, followed by former *HJEAS* editor Lenke Németh's extensive analytical presentation of a collection of studies, titled *María Irene Fornés in Context*, which was edited by Brian Eugenio Herrera and Anne García-Romero. The third text is Éva Urbán's assessment on the anthology of studies, *Global Indigenous Horror*, "a prime example of the decolonization of academia," edited by Naomi Simone Borwein. The issue is brought to a close with a review that links to Hungary in various ways: Ian M. Clark's writing of Hungarian scholar Zsolt Bojti's *Queer Reading Practices and Sexology in* Fin-de-Siècle *Literature: Wilde, Stenbock, Prime-Stevenson*, a work which places emphasis on the strong relationship between *hungarophilia* and *homophilia*.

We truly hope that the content of this issue will contribute to seeing and seeking possible ways to envision and then shape a more positive future. By foregrounding diverse traditions, media, and epistemologies—including non-Western, decolonial, feminist, ecological, and posthuman perspectives—this journal issue reflects the ongoing expansion of utopian studies beyond its canonical boundaries. The essays collectively suggest that utopian thinking remains indispensable not because it offers solutions, but because it sustains critical reflection on how societies imagine living together amid uncertainty, inequality, and irreversible change. In this sense, utopia persists not as a promise of perfection, but as a democratic practice of questioning, one that keeps open the space for political imagination, responsibility, and hope in times of crisis.

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