

Curious Utopias: large and small blueprints for human society

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The failure of large-scale projects, denounced as 'utopian', is often invoked as explanation for the recent fascination with small-scale, miniature and scaled down solutions to world problems. For example, small, mobile, digital and technical devices – along with scaled-down expectations regarding societal change – are being promoted as financially and pragmatically feasible instruments of intervention in the field of development, social protection, global health and the response to climate change, often as a way of dealing with a lack of public infrastructure

At the same time, we are witnessing seemingly paradoxical moves in the opposite direction, towards ambitious, even self-asserted utopian imaginations of societal transformation that explicitly invoke intervention on a 'global' and 'universal' scale and which, in turn, are partly driven by frustration at the petty 'realism' of recent decades. New forms of welfare and social protection – such as Universal Health Coverage and Universal Basic Income – have societal and global ambitions regarding coverage and scale, even while what they actually offer in terms of welfare or healthcare is extremely limited.

While evoking different scales and visions of social change, these moves are only seemingly contradictory and may indeed be intertwined. They are driven by a form of techno-utopia, sharing a faith in the capacity of technological innovation to address the planet's problems. Although they often draw upon a language of the collective, the public and the commons, they also promote market logics and the privatization of formerly public goods. They often promise more than they achieve, pertain to the spectral or performative, and introduce further exclusions or inequalities. At the same time they offer new visions (or a return to older visions) of social justice, engendering and re-activating a politics of hope. Critics characterize them as "curious utopias of resignation", pointing out that they offer a language of hope while remaining firmly within the limitations of the status quo. Meanwhile activists argue that these aspirations contain a utopian impulse with transformative potential, which might point beyond/evoke hope beyond their intended limits.

This workshop will bring together anthropologists and historians to interrogate the apparent contradictions within these developments. What visions of society, politics and economy do these moves in (seemingly) opposite directions share? Which actors and institutions are driving these interventions, and what are their agendas? How do current attempts to shape societal futures relate to past aspirations and visions? What potential do these aspirations have, if any, to connect with or generate a wider transformative politics of hope, in Bloch's sense? We will attend to large and small utopias, 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 (inadvertently?) support, subvert or ignite.

Setting aside its derogatory use, we exploit the elasticity of the term 'utopia', drawing inspiration from the distinction Fredric Jameson makes between utopia as a fully elaborate programme and "utopian impulses", which may appear across many domains of everyday life and politics (and which may also entail closures and exclusions); from Ernst Bloch's ideas about concrete utopia as lying in the unfinished process of material reality and its relation to the not-yet become; as well as from recent work inspired by Bloch concerning the "privatization of hope" (Thompson 2013).

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<https://www.med.uio.no/helsam/english/research/projects/universal-health-coverage-africa/>