Rick Searle

The Cartography of the Future: Recovering Utopia for the 21st Century

"*A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias.***"**

— Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*

The above quote from Oscar Wilde expresses a sentiment largely alien to the early 21st century. We really don't believe in Utopias anymore, or, if we do, associate them with the kinds of political violence found in the ideological movements that haunted the first half of the 20th century, state communism and Nazism, especially.[1] The road to Utopia, one suspects, leads to its opposite, to dystopia, visions of which are now all the rage. [2]

Yet, we are as likely to ridicule Wilde's sentiment as we are to fear it. To characterize the views of someone as "utopian" is to call into question their very seriousness, to accuse them, in some sense, of being a fool. Utopians in this reading are either dangerous political fanatics or incurably naive, and perhaps in some cases even both. Wilde would look in vain to find Utopia on our maps.

In leaving Utopia unexplored we are abandoning a way of thinking with a very ancient pedigree. Human beings have been dreaming up perfect societies probably since we started living in cities, though, the Utopian idea was probably properly born only with Plato and his ideal societies as presented in works *The Laws,* and especially, of course, *The Republic.*

Imagining Utopia was one of the primary ways we have expanded our moral imagination. The Kallipolis of Plato's *Republic* did away with wars of imperial expansion, established laws of war, freed slaves and gave women an equal place in society.[3] In the golden age of literary Utopias, from the 16th through the 19th century, authors and social reformers used ideal societies imagined and attempted in the real world to push forward social and intellectual reform.[4] Thomas More's famous *Utopia* was a less than veiled critique of nascent capitalism, and the corruption and militarism of early modern Europe.[5] Francis Bacon helped spark the scientific revolution with his

[1] Pinker, Steven. *The blank slate: the modern denial of human nature*. New York: Viking, 2002.

[2] Miller, Laura. "Fresh Hell: What's behind the boom in dystopian fiction for young readers?." *The New Yorker* , June 14, 2010.

[3] Cornford, Francis Macdonald. *The Republic of Plato*. London: Oxford University Press, 1945.

[4] Schaer, Roland. *Utopia: the search for the ideal society in the western world*. New York: The New York Public Library :, 2000.

[5] Bénéton, Philippe, and Paul J. Archambault. *The kingdom suffereth violence: the Machiavelli/Erasmus/More correspondence and other unpublished documents*. South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2012.

New Atlantis seeing the purpose of the new science as a project of Christian charity, "the relief of man's estate". [6] Social reformers who used small utopian communities to test their ideas were a common feature of the 19th century. With some attempting to discover ways capitalism might be made humane, such as those created by Robert Owen, [7] while others were among the first to experiment with the abolition of chattel slavery, and gender equality. [8]

Whole reform movements were born out of the new Utopian science- fiction created in the later 19th century, especially Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*. Indeed, *Looking Backward* could be said to represent a turning point in the history of Utopia. Not only was his futuristic romance one of the first works of science-fiction, it had a huge effect on the public imagination. The third best selling work of fiction ever, *Looking Backward* sparked discussion clubs among the middle classes, actual Utopian communities, and was a source of inspiration for real world revolutionaries like Vladimir Lenin. [9]

Perhaps more importantly it was a version of Utopia that would be impossible without technological progress to support the reconfigured social world it imagined. In some ways Bellamy might be thought of as a transitional figure in the Utopian tradition, signaling its long-term move away from values expressed and supported by a re-imagined social organization and towards dependence on technology, a move that would turn Utopia into both ideology and science-fiction. We lost Utopia in its ancient sense once it came to be associated with a certain view of the future, a change in our relationship with time that came about because of the explosive growth of our knowledge and technological prowess.

Human beings are unique in our awareness of our extension across time. It is language that gives human beings a capacity neither other animals nor machines possess- to be aware of the present as a continuum of the past and the future.[10] The past is essential to our existence and sense of ourselves and yet remains stubbornly outside of our control. It is only towards the future that our freedom has real meaning. [11]

It is perhaps difficult for us to realize the idea that the future will be fundamentally different from the past is a relatively recent realization, though, as with seemingly everything else the ancient Greeks had hints of this. Empires might rise and fall and the end of the world would someday come,[12] but for the majority of human beings day-to-day living would remain mind numbingly the same. What would break this cycle was the industrial revolution, which not only radically transformed human

[6] McKnight, Stephen A.. *The religious foundations of Francis Bacon's thought*. Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2006.

[7] Schaer, Roland. *Utopia: the search for the ideal society in the western world*. New York: The New York Public Library :, 2000

[8] Clark, Christopher. *Letters from an American utopia: the Stetson family and the Northampton Association, 1843-1847*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004.

[9] Tarnoff , Ben. "Magical Thinking ." *Lapham's Quarterly*, September 23, 2011. See also Friedrich Engels *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* Engles, Friedrich. "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific ." Project Gutenberg . http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/39257 (accessed April 15, 2014).

[10] Pagel, Mark D. *Wired for culture: the natural history of human cooperation*. London: Allen Lane, 2012.

[11] Smolin, Lee. *Time reborn: from the crisis of physics to the future of the universe*. London: Allen Lane, 2013.

[12] Augustine/ Dods, Marcus. *The city of God*. Modern Library ed. New York: Modern Library, 1993

life, but promised, through unrelenting technological advancement, to continuously transform the world out into a now infinite future.[13]

Both science-fiction and the ideological movements that came to supplant older versions of Utopia in the 19th and 20th centuries all grasped this new sense of the future and linked themselves to some notion of forward development, to progress, where the later stage in history was more advanced than the one that preceded it. Darwin's discovery of evolution itself seemed to give scientific justification for the theories of historical development espoused by the newly born science-fiction, and ideological movements.

Yet, in thinking this progress was somehow the inevitable consequence of historical or natural laws, we in some sense surrendered our own control over it. It is almost as if the minute we discovered that the future could be different from the past we latched onto a way in which our freedom over deciding what this future would look like could be minimized. Perhaps this was because the new technological change grew out of the success of the deterministic worldview of the physical sciences. The ultimate ambition of this deterministic philosophy was never better stated than by Pierre Simon Laplace:

We may regard the present state of the universe as the effect of its past and the cause of its future. An intellect which at a certain moment would know all forces that set nature in motion, and all positions of all items of which nature is composed, if this intellect were also vast enough to submit these data to analysis, it would embrace in a single formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the tiniest atom; for such an intellect nothing would be uncertain and the future just like the past would be present before its eyes. [14]

The idea of Utopia would henceforth rise or fall with the technological and corresponding historical determinism that the success of the physical science had aroused. It proved to be the case that a great deal of violence needs to be done to human beings and society in order to make them fit into the kinds deterministic reductions of the world that were inspired by Classical Mechanics, and linked to technological progress, a tragedy we came to associate with the Utopian imagination itself.

Karl Popper was essentially right- the Utopias sought by the totalitarian movements, Nazism and Stalinism, were dangerous precisely because they treated human beings like Newtonian billiard balls or machines covered in flesh. [15] Where he was wrong was in projecting backwards into the whole history of Utopian thought the seeds of 20th century totalitarianism. Many remain mesmerized by this conflated history and continue to see in utopianism the threat of violence and tyranny. [16]

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[13] Morris, Ian. *Why the West rules-- for now: the patterns of history, and what they reveal about the future.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.

[14] 1827, Laplace Pierre Simon Marqui. *Philosophical essay on probabilities.* S.l, Hardpress Ltd, 2013.p. 4

[15] Popper, Karl R. *The open society and its enemies,* [5th ed. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966.

[16] Levin, Mark R. *Ameritopia: the unmaking of America.* New York: Threshold Editions, 2012.

Yet, it would be incorrect to think that the distortions of determinism applied to human society have been limited to the totalitarian movements of the last century. The physicist Lee Smolin has pointed out that the problem with contemporary free market economics isn't that it relies too much on quantitative models, but that its quantitative models built around concepts such as "market equilibrium" are based on a simplified version of science where the future was considered determined rather than open. By thinking the future is determined Smolin thinks we have surrendered our freedom in regards to it. [17]

In yet another case of influence, both fundamentalists and the narrow minded intolerant brand of new atheism they have inspired, spring from the same determinist minded source. [18]

Still, no social version of determinism is more important than technological determinism. Almost all other forms of determinism find their roots in the idea of advancing science and technology, and both remain the primary drivers of change in our world. Getting the question of technological evolution right will likely mean getting the future right.

Technological determinism can run both ways, but I will confront the stronger side of the argument. The case that technological evolution is leading to positive rather than negative outcomes is simply a better one than the reverse. Take any social measure you like such as longevity, child mortality, height, per capita income, or level of societal violence, including war, and life is incomparably better after the industrial revolution than before. [19]

The positive argument also has some pretty strong social forces behind it. Technological advancement is supported by rising groups, from the increasingly economically prominent technology companies who have overthrown or are challenging older rust and paper belt elites across perhaps all major economic sectors, [20] to the push for technological advancement from the world's rival militaries. [21]

Unlike most other forms of determinism that flowered in the 19th century and 20th centuries, progressive technological determinism continues to have legs. A technorati semi-royalty such as the co-founder of *Wired Magazine*, Kevin Kelly, persists in making sincere and solid arguments, not only that there is a progressive direction to technological advancement, but will go so far as to suggest technology itself "wants" such an outcome. [22] Kelly is in good company, with other popular thinkers such as the founder of the X-prize, Peter Diamandis [23] along with other entrepreneurs and thinkers

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[17] Smolin, Lee. *Time reborn: from the crisis of physics to the future of the universe.* London: Allen Lane, 2013.

[18] Armstrong, Karen. *The case for God.* New York: Knopf, 2009.

[19] Ridley, Matt. *The rational optimist: how prosperity evolves.* New York: Harper, 2010. Diamandis, Peter H., and Steven Kotler. *Abundance: the future is better than you think.* New York: Free Press, 2012. Kelly, Kevin. *What technology wants.* New York: Viking, 2010.

[20] Searle, Rick. "Silicon Secessionists." Utopia or Dystopia. http://utopiaordystopia.com/2014/01/12/silicon-secessionists/ (accessed April 15, 2014).

[21] Coker, Christopher. *Warrior geeks: how 21st-century technology is changing the way we fight and think about war.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

[22] Kelly, Kevin. *What technology wants.* New York: Viking, 2010.

[23] Diamandis, Peter H., and Steven Kotler. *Abundance: the future is better than you think*

cranking out wildly popular books, the most famous of which is Ray Kurzweil, now Director of Engineering at Google, whose intellectual nuance consists of admitting that technological progress could lead us either to individual immortality or the destruction of our species.[24]

The application of technology as the primary way to address our social problems has risen in tandem with a decline in our faith in political processes, in the ability of policy makers to effectively guide modernity. "Technological solutionism" as Evgeny Morozov calls it, is based the assumption that the majority of problems in human society are a matter of engineering, and has replaced politics as the default mode we use to address social ills. [25]

The problem with the view that technological evolution has overall been incredibly positive for mankind is not that it is false. It is that the historical window it uses is far too narrow, and that such a view does not take into account the extremely contingent nature of our history so far. Properly speaking, technological civilization is only a little over two centuries old. Even if one shoves the window open to encompass the entire period starting with the creation of agricultural societies the period in which human beings lived in "technological" societies would make up a mere 5-10% of the history of our species. [26] Wherever we look in the heavens, ours remains the one and only test case of whether a technological civilization can survive over the long haul, and the long haul measured in millions or billions of years is very long indeed. [27]

There is also the matter of our sheer luck. The story of progress looked very different at the height of the Cold War when it seemed like we might very likely blow ourselves up. In that era an insightful piece of fiction that dealt with our quest for knowledge, Walter M. Miller, Jrs' 1959 *A canticle for Leibowitz* presented the history of human knowledge and technology not as progressive, but as an endless cycle of self-destruction and rebirth. [28]

We should not assume that avoiding armageddon was a pre-determined thing, for we came very close to it more than once. [29] Still, despite it brilliance, *A canticle for Leibowitz* was as deterministic as the view of any technophile, it was just a determinism leading in the opposite direction. The lesson of our survival during the nuclear madness of the Cold War wasn't that we were fated to survive, but that there was no determined outcome that we would destroy ourselves either.

With the decline in the risk of nuclear war a new progressive technological narrative was able to come into view. This new version centered on the liberating potential of computers and communications networks and was created in no small

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[24] "Ray Kurzweil Explains the Coming Singularity | Ray Kurzweil | Big Think." Big Think. http://bigthink.com/videos/ray-kurzweil-explains-the-coming-singularity (accessed April 15, 2014).

[25] Morozov, Evgeny. *To save everything, click here: the folly of technological solutionism.*

[26] Greene, Joshua David. *Moral tribes: emotion, reason, and the gap between us and them.* New York: Penguin Books, 2014.

[27] Billings, Lee. *Five billion years of solitude: the search for life among the stars* S.l. New York: Penguin Books, 2014.

[28] Miller, Walter M.. *A canticle for Leibowitz.* Bantam trade pbk. ed. New York: Bantam Books, 1997.

[29] Coker, Christopher. *Warrior geeks: how 21st-century technology is changing the way we fight and think about war.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

measure by the refugees from failed Utopias, communes of disillusioned postwar youth, who wanted to "get back to the land" and instead discovered a new found appreciation for the power of technology. [30]

It is this version of progressive technological determinism that has recently come under increased scrutiny. The charge here is that there might be reasons to be uncertain as to the continuation of technological advancement over the longue durée, beyond the obvious one of self-destruction, and that a laissez-faire attitude to technological development, as with anything else, is as likely to bring outcomes we would not upon reflection want as ones we hope for.

We may tend to assume that our technological advancement will go on forever as long as a global catastrophe does not occur. Yet the silence of a universe fertile for life might give us other reasons for pause. [31] As Lee Billings has pointed out, a non-catastrophic inference from the fact that the effects of other advanced civilizations have not been observed is that we are much closer to some technological peak than we think. The kinds of exponential growth we experienced since the industrial revolution might be a short lived period and a historical aberration. [32]

Some have questioned whether the very pace of technological takeoff that helped give rise to middle class society hasn't begun to slow now that the "low hanging fruit" of industrialization have been picked.[33] The future which we imagined with the optimistic certainty seen in the gleaming technological visions of the middle of the 20th century has become increasingly opaque. We have chosen less to reach outward deep into space and time in civilization transforming projects than to turn our gaze inward to measure and monitor ourselves. [34]

Perhaps, Laplace's demon wasn't, as it was thought, killed by advances in scientific understanding towards entropy, irreversibility, emergent properties, chaos or complexity, [35]but reappeared as efforts at the omniscience of "big data" and the rule of algorithms. Rather than using our increased computational prowess and improved artificial intelligence to build a human future extending outward before us in time and space we have used it to enable a society of mass surveillance that seeks Laplacian omniscience by sucking in and compiling all the minutiae of the present, [36] the world's fastest supercomputers used, not to solve the problems of our long term survivability, but to slice time into such small sections they are not even perceivable by human

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[30] Turner, Fred. *From counterculture to cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the rise of digital utopianism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

[31] Sasselov, Dimitar D. *The life of super-Earths: how the hunt for alien worlds and artificial cells will revolutionize life on our planet*. New York: Basic Books, 2012.

[32] Billings, Lee. *Five billion years of solitude: the search for life among the stars* S.l. New York: Penguin Books, 2014.

[33] Cowen, Tyler. *The great stagnation: how America ate all the low-hanging fruit of modern history, got sick, and will (eventually) feel better*. New York: Dutton, 2011.

[34] Rushkoff, Douglas. *Present shock: when everything happens now.* : Penguin Books, 2013. See also: Billings, Lee. *Five billion years of solitude: the search for life among the stars* S.l.: Penguin Books, 2014

[35] Ulanowicz, Robert E.. *Growth and development: ecosystems phenomenology*. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1986.

[36] Bamford, James. "The NSA is Building The World's Biggest Spy Center: Watch what you say." *Wired Magazine* , March 15, 2012.

beings. [37]

There are also growing doubts over whether technological advancement by itself continues to serve as the foundation for middle class society. Technological development and general prosperity have seemed to have become de-linked, and the budding revolution in artificial intelligence and robotics threatens to pressure what is left of this linkage between improved technology and the support of middle class societies to the breaking point. [38]

Most importantly, many are asking fundamental questions about not so much what it means to be human *as what we want being human to mean* in light of emerging technologies. These fundamental questions regarding things such as what the role of memory is to our sense of meaning,[39] or privacy,[40] or work,[41], or relationships,[42] or even war,[43] are being asked not only because technology is moving intimately closer to our humanity, but because we really do have choices regarding how this particular phase of technological evolution will unfold in a way we have not before. It is not the mind-blowing technological powers we continue to produce that count so much as whether we use them to create and support the kind of societies we want. [44]

In some very real sense we may have more room for choice in regards to technology which prior ages have lacked. Industrialization may have been effectively irresistible once it started to gain momentum. Almost overnight in historical terms an enormous number of human beings were pulled off the bottom rung of Maslow's hierarchy of needs where they had struggled since the beginning of history. The best option really was to barrel down on the premise even though technology appeared to be leading to some quite frightening outcomes. Given our already high state of development this need not continue to be the case. [45]

All this, by a very circuitous route brings me back to the topic of Utopia. Utopia in its ancient sense disappeared when technological evolution lead us to think that history had a direction, when we needed to and could rely on the advance of our technological powers to free us from the grip of necessity. We are now at a stage where the outcome of simply letting the evolution of technology continue without our shaping it to better answer our challenges and fit our values is no longer viable.

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[37] Patterson, Scott. *The quants: how a small band of math wizards took over Wall St. and nearly destroyed it.* New York: Crown, 2010. See also: Lewis, Michael. *Flash boys: a Wall Street revolt.* : W.W. Norton and Company Inc, 2014.

[38] Lanier, Jaron. *Who owns the future?* New York: Simon and Schuster , 2013.

[39] Garber, Megan. "This Email Will Self-Destruct After You Read It'." The Atlantic. http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/04/this-email-will-self-destruct-after-you-read-it/360470/ (accessed April 15, 2014).

[40] Scharr , Jill . "Vienna Teng Sings about Surveillance in 'Hymn of Acxiom'." Tom's Guide: Tech For Real Life. http://www.tomsguide.com/us/vienna-teng-hymn-of-acxiom,news-17663.html (accessed April 15, 2014).

[41] Lanier, Jaron. *Who owns the future?* New York: Simon and Schuster , 2013

[42] *Her.* Directed by Spike Jonze. S.l.: Warner Home Entertainment, 2014.

[43] Coker, Christopher. *Warrior geeks: how 21st-century technology is changing the way we fight and think about war.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

[44] This, of course, is the reverse of Kevin Kelly's focus on what technology wants.

[45] Searle, Rick. "Privacy Strikes Back, Dave Eggers' The Circle and a Response to David Brin." Utopia or Dystopia. http://utopiaordystopia.com/2014/03/09/privacy-strikes-back-dave-eggers-the-circle-and-a-response-to-david-brin/ (accessed April 15, 2014).

We need something like the idea of Utopia for this shaping. We need it as both a prototype and moral template where many of the problems we currently face are resolved. For, none of the current institutions we possess are likely to up to the demographic, environmental or social challenges we face. Our political and economic institutions are in some cases *centuries* old. Yet, public caution when it comes to radical change has a great deal of wisdom in it. We don't know what solutions will work and what they will look like in the real world, or if the cure will end up being worse than the disease. Indeed, the very non-deterministic, non-linear nature of human affairs ensures that *we cannot know* the answers to these questions beforehand.

What we need is ways to test our ideas and examples of solutions that people can actually see then applying what has been shown to work to their own society. Almost all of these experiments will *fail.* Yet their failure is almost the point. Small scale utopian experiments can take the risks of radically innovating while the larger society can use these innovations to engage in what Popper called "piecemeal social engineering" [46] a much less risky endeavor.

Utopians in the 19th century tried this and there are stirrings that some would like to try it again. Today, the right has latched onto this need for social innovation. [47] The problem here is that their utopian experiments represent a pretty narrow ideological spectrum. For us to gain much of anything from utopian experimentation we will need such experiments to be much broader.

In some ways we already have such experimentation as a consequence of our fractured political world, but we also need more radical experiments. As in natural ecosystems, we could benefit from more even greater diversity in how technology is used and modernity expressed, diversity that would not only give us wide expression for what being human means, but offer us resilience should technological civilization face some existential crisis. [48]

On the purely intellectual level, an image of the perfect society provides us with a moral compass and a tool of comparison to judge the flaws of our own society. In trying to answer fundamental questions about our societies we can become aware of the flaws of our own social systems, conscious of what it is we need to fix or reform. Without some idea of our intended destination we become the plaything of events and risk drifting into shoals we might have otherwise avoided.

The most famous utopian of them all, Thomas More, understood this. His Utopia was in no sense meant as a blueprint for a perfect society, but a means to clarify the

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[46] Popper, Karl R. *The open society and its enemies,* [5th ed. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966.

[47] Thiel , Peter. "The Education of a Libertarian." Cato Unbound. http://www.cato-unbound.org/2009/04/13/peter-thiel/education-libertarian (accessed April 16, 2014). See also Paul Romer: New cities. More Choices.Better rules.." Charter Cities. http://urbanizationproject.org/blog/charter-cities (accessed April 16, 2014).

[48] For the role of diversity in system resilience see: Norberg, Jon. "Diversity and Resilience of Social-Ecological Systems" coauthored by Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom In *Complexity theory for a sustainable future.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. In terms of the Utopian Tradition see Walzer, Richard. *Al-Farabi on the perfect state: Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī's Mabādi' ārā' ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila : a revised text with introduction, translation, and commentary.* Oxford [Oxfordshire: Clarendon Press ;, 1985.

flaws in his own.[49] We need to recover our sense of comfort and ease thinking in Utopian terms and rediscover the usefulness of imagining outcomes that are likely unreachable. The "perfect is the enemy of the good" only when our image of the perfect prevents the good from being pursued.

No human society will ever truly be a Utopia, but, as Oscar Wilde knew, the Utopian imagination has continually expanded our moral horizon. Recovering it might help restore our sense of being creatures embedded in *time* where our agency is directed in the present towards a future whose shape in not yet determined. The future is neither completely ours to shape nor something we are subject to without room for maneuver. For, continuing to think that our world cannot be made to better conform to our ideals is one of the surest ways to insure that what lies in our future is the farthest thing from Utopia. And so, if I were to answer the question that inspired this essay "how should humanity steer the future" directly, I would say that the question has no definitive and final answer but begins with the rediscovery that it is us with our hands behind the wheel.

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[49] Bénéton, Philippe, and Paul J. Archambault. *The kingdom suffereth violence: the Machiavelli/Erasmus/More correspondence and other unpublished documents.* South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2012.