Abstract. In his recent book, Mathias Thaler, professor of political theory at the University of Edinburgh, argues for the use of speculative literature, particularly dystopias, in political decision making. Through the analysis of the works of Jemisin, Robinson and Atwood, he contends that the climate crisis is coupled with a crisis of the imagination, and the analytical potential in utopia may not only help us to understand the situation, but also to devise ways to avert the danger of a climate catastrophe. As the current status quo cannot be maintained, dystopias, through an appropriate dosage of the feeling of danger, can help us avoid both an escapist way of wishful thinking and a catastrophist laissez-faire mindset. No Other Planet is an important book, through its interdisciplinary analyses it offers a thorough scrutiny of the seriousness of the global situation, while it also fuels moderate optimism – a full demise can be averted, but only with serious efforts.

Key Words. utopia, dystopia, climate, political theory, Jemisin, Robinson, Atwood

Mathias Thaler, professor of political theory at the University of Edinburgh, argues that utopian and dystopian literature has a role in understanding, and possibly averting the dangers that loom above humanity due to a massive climate change that we are all experiencing. After giving an interdisciplinary overview of contemporary utopian thinking, Thaler offers thorough analyses
of three trilogies by contemporary speculative writers (N. K. Jemisin, Kim Stanley Robinson and Margaret Atwood), focusing on their attitudes in dealing with the climate catastrophe.

Mathias Thaler is one of those (relatively few) political scientists who engage with imaginary literature. In his view, speculative fiction adds a dimension of personal emotions and imagination to the pure rationality of analytical sciences and “can expand social and political theory’s horizon of problematizations, and vice versa” (36). He publishes both in English and German and holds degrees in political science and philosophy that he partly gained in his homeland Austria, and partly in France and Scotland. In 2018 he published Naming Violence: A Critical Theory of Genocide, Torture, and Terrorism at Columbia University Press and he also edited a volume on political violence.

His current book fits into the scheme of rediscovering utopia (and dystopia) by social scientists after a long “utopian winter” in the twentieth century, when utopian thought was either considered dangerous (cf. Karl Popper, Thomas Molnar) or escapist and hence useless. While he does not ignore these criticisms, Thaler sets out to rehabilitate utopia’s analytical potential in the contemporary climate crisis, which, according to him, is coupled with a crisis of the imagination (32); he makes it clear that beyond the sense of reality one needs a sense of possibility to understand the world. This is due to the world’s contingency, in other words, that things could always be otherwise. This way an engagement with utopianism is not only possible, but it has become a necessity as “we do not have much chance of survival unless we take the task of figuring out better ways of being and living” (2). This general attitude of the book makes it very similar to another important volume published the same year, Utopianism for a Dying Planet by Gregory Claeys (Princeton UP). Otherwise, the two books are very different and hence complement each other well: while Claeys focuses on utopianism mainly in the history of social and political thought in a wide panorama from antiquity until today, Thaler examines recent utopian thought, and the focus of his analysis is on contemporary
dystopian and SF literature. The dystopian aspect of contemporary culture is of central relevance for his analysis when he discusses the utopian and dystopian aspects of speculative fiction. This genre has rather porous boundaries, and its engagement with utopianism (also in its dystopian form) enables speculative fiction to set “into motion a critical and transformative interrogation of the present” (51), rather than enhancing an escapist way of wishful thinking or a catastrophist laissez-faire mindset.

Thaler, similarly to Claeys in *Utopianism for a Dying Planet*, recognizes the rich varieties that the complex phenomena of utopianism produce, and infers that broad and general statements in this field are naturally misleading, but “utopian visions need to be scrutinized against the material and ideological background in which they are formulated” (29). However, he claims that “utopias are always concerned with the present moment” (10), and in the climate emergency it is no surprise that contemporary culture is replete with dystopian narratives, while utopianism as a prefigurative form of action is badly needed in social and political theory (and praxis), as the current status quo cannot be maintained for ecological reasons. Utopias and dystopias help us transcend our fixed positions and “teach us to perceive reality from surprising and illuminating angles” (43). Dystopias are particularly important if they urge action through “generating just the right level of despair – too much of it would hamper the audience, too little would banalize the threat” (44). A right balance needs to be struck between a debilitating catastrophist mindset and the wishful thinking of an extreme form of *ecomodernism* that emphasises technology’s ability to “elevate humanity beyond the current impasse” (46), investing an exaggerated level of hope in the Promethean function of technology. In the introduction a thorough analysis of important concepts is made. The concept of the *Anthropocene*, the idea that humanity has become a geological force, is discussed in parallel to the Gaia-hypothesis, the view of Planet Earth as an actor in her own right, a benign force – this hypothesis is particularly strong in the analysis of N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy.
Thaler essentially holds a functionalist view of literature - rather than exploring the aesthetic aspects of the texts, the analyses concentrate on what pedagogic impact they may have on readers, and on policy making. In the literary analyses Thaler employs a framework developed from Octavia Butler’s taxonomy of three competing types of speculative fiction, What-If, If-Only, and If-This-Goes-On narratives. What-If stories address the question of what would happen if humanity could exist in accordance with other forms of life (often envisaging planet Earth as a living being), while the If-This-Goes-On type of stories include dystopian narratives of humanity continuing its destructive existence, identifying the perils of the current situation and deconstructing a status quo view of the contemporary way of life of humanity. If-Only narratives are unambiguously utopian, enforcing the role of contingency in our understanding of reality, implying that it is possible to live differently. It is not suggested that all books will neatly fall into one of these patterns, but these categories serve as useful analytical devices.

A thorough criticism of the ecomodernist view is given in chapter four. A particular strength of this inquiry is its presentation of the optimism of ecomodernism with reference to the Enlightenment project’s concept of progress, a fundamental myth of Western modernity that led to the chimera of infinite growth. Such problems are dealt with in detail during the analysis of Kim Stanley Robinson’s Science in the Capital trilogy as a dream of a “good anthropocene”, while a bleaker vision, essentially exemplifying an If-This-Goes-On plotline is scrutinized through another trilogy, Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam. The analysis of Robinson’s trilogy is introduced by a thorough account of the relationship of the writer’s attitude toward science fiction and the history of utopianism – utopia here appears more as a process than a static end state. The detailed analysis of Robinson’s trilogy includes the scrutiny of the relationship between populism and technocracy and the ways in which party democracies
may prove to be inadequate in the face of an emergency, while the books present a somewhat naïve account of representative democracy.

The chief function of *If-This-Goes-On* plotlines is to offer a nightmare to readers who live in a dream without taking care of the perils of climate emergency (quite in opposition to Martin Luther King’s attitude, who offered a dream to people who were living in a nightmare). This is particularly important as the “newly formed understanding of planetary breakdown has gone hand in hand with the normalization of ecological crisis” breeding either lazy inaction or nervous fatalism (229), while accepting the seriousness of the situation could (and should) be the first step in forming a new way of life. This process necessarily dismantles the notion of progress and should exceed “boosting the sustainability credentials of profit-oriented corporations” (240). Yet the dystopian perspective also has a potential of breeding fatalism. Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy is presented as a form of cautionary pedagogy blending eutopian and dystopian motifs; the analysis here relies on Atwood’s own term of *ustopia*, and emphasizes the utopian aspect of Atwood’s work, even (or especially) in a post-apocalyptic mode.

As I have already stated earlier, Mathias Thaler is a political scientist who puts speculative literature in the focus of his research. In as much as I strongly support his interdisciplinary endeavor and maintain that he does his best to pull various fields together, his approach has a few drawbacks. Probably the least important of these (though after a while somewhat irritating, at least for a literary scholar), is the recurring apologetical tone for dealing with literature – one can only hope that such arguments will become unnecessary as soon as many social scientists understand the importance of speculative fiction. Another, slightly more serious issue is that the analyses hardly ever treat literature as literature. For Thaler, literature has a function: cautionary pedagogy or the education of desire. There are very few pieces of literary criticism, and even fewer of literary theory in the otherwise rich bibliography. It is clear
that aesthetic concerns are marginal here, yet the content-based research could benefit from engaging with questions of literary theory, particularly the problematic relationship of fiction and empirical reality, an issue that Thaler touches upon, but the application of the ideas of Ruth Ronen (particularly *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*) and Lubomir Dolezel (*Heterocosmica*) could make the argument even sounder. While some narratological aspects occasionally appear, especially in the analysis of Atwood’s trilogy, the study runs into simplifications when the relationship between author and text is considered direct and unproblematic.

Despite its few shortcomings, *No Other Planet* is an important book, as it gives a thorough scrutiny of the seriousness of the global situation while it also fuels moderate optimism – full demise can be averted, but only with serious efforts: “*in the right dosage* dystopias leave space for the cultivation of a radical sort of hope […] that banishes the shadow of defeatism” (85, emphasis in original). It is an important virtue of this rich book that it aims at establishing an interdisciplinary dialogue between literary studies and social sciences, placing literature, and generally imagination at the same level with the rationality of social and political analysis. The book gives a thorough review of debates around utopianism in the 21st century and it also raises attention to the severity of the climate emergency. Thaler reminds us that our planet has reached a *Sollbruchstelle* – a breaking point or a fault line (281). Without intervention humanity has no future on this planet, yet using Robert Musil’s words, we may become Possibilists (Möglichkeitsmenschen), who are driven by a “conscious utopianism that does not shrink from reality but sees it as a project, something yet to be invented” (293).

**Works Cited**

Thaler, Mathias (2022). *No Other Planet: Utopian Visions for a Climate-Changed World*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

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