

## Reading Utopia in 2020

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If 2020 has demonstrated anything, it is that we are not all in it together. National responses to coronavirus have exacerbated existing disparities along lines of gender, profession, disability, and race, and where these pre-existing inequalities intersect. Beyond the pandemic itself, intensifying environmental disasters and ongoing racist state violence tell us that catastrophes are not equally experienced and the burden not equally shared. The present and the future seem to be increasingly ones of surveillance, borders, authoritarianism, and individualism. Dystopia feels apt, yet it is utopian literature, both historical and contemporary, which is most pressing. By envisioning a new world centred on the social, rather than one driven by technology, profit, and the nation-state, utopia can imagine a better future.

Finding another way of living in which all humans have an equitable and active stake requires a radical reimagining of society. As Ruth Levitas argues, utopian thinking, for example in speculative literature, is a valid method for building the future through new creative forms of knowledge. In *Utopia as Social Method*, Levitas outlines that utopian thinking requires a reengagement with how the past imagined the future through the “institutional design and delineation of the good society” of writing.<sup>1</sup> In the late eighteenth century, writers looked to America to imagine how new societies could develop and progress outside of European civilization. For example, in his *New Travels in the United States* (1792), J. P. Brissot considered post-Independence America an apt environment to plan “a society before it existed” and create “proper institutions for the forming of the morals, public and private.”<sup>2</sup> America itself could be the grounds for a perfect society, planned and

organised by intelligent, independent men.

In this short piece I suggest one example of an utopian text that for me resonates with the contemporary moment and that I ask other eighteenth-century scholars to visit. John Lithgow's anonymously published *Equality – A Political Romance* (1802) is the first utopian fiction written in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Set in the proto-socialist, proto-feminist and anti-individualist island of Lithconia, *Equality* offers readers a world without financial property, class hierarchy, gender inequality, or slavery. Lithconia is also a nation that prior to its anti-capitalist upheaval suffers a “plague which swept away 500,000 inhabitants” in its cities due to overcrowding.<sup>4</sup> Utopian texts with their narratives of radical change not only help us to understand today's headlines as part of a history of inequality but also ask us to imagine moving beyond them.

Untethered from explicit early national geographical and chronological referents, *Equality* imagines a radically different social, economic and political world from 1800s Philadelphia. Published serially in Deist magazine *The Temple of Reason* from May to July 1802, *Equality* is a found manuscript structured as a travel narrative and historical study. Exploring the seas around the fictive worlds of “Utopia, Brobdignag” and “Lilliput”, our narrator finds himself in Lithconia in order to take on fresh water (10). Asking if he can pay for provisions, an elder smiles at his simplicity and explains that Lithconia is a world without property or money. Instead, the narrator must work his way around the island for three months in order to receive shelter and food. Once labour can be exchanged the Lithconians claim this leads to “the beginning of barter, and barter produced money which was the root of all evil” (11). In the history of Lithconia the islanders provide, unchecked private property led to vast financial and social inequality.

Such was the progress of evil which arose out of the system of separate estates, that nine-tenths of mankind groaned under the most oppressive tyranny, labouring from morning till night for a poor and scanty diet, and hardly clothes to protect them from the inclemency of the seasons, while the other tenth enjoyed every luxury, and rioted in waste and profusion. (27)

Lithgow's historical narrative reflects the widening wealth gap in late eighteenth-century America, which received increasing criticism in early national radical writing. For example, a December 1800 article in *The Temple of Reason* calls for a revolution against "the tyrants of the earth" who extort labour and monopolise wealth through "speculation and oppression."<sup>5</sup> Pre-socialist Lithconia has become the United States in the twenty-first century, as the wealth gap expands from 90% to 99% and as people experience record unemployment and evictions while stock markets rise.

In 2020 we are living in world before 1802 utopian Lithconia. As a result of coronavirus, unequal social relationships to the economy have increased along lines of gender, profession, and health. Without full sick or quarantine pay, employers demand unwell, potentially infectious and vulnerable chronically ill workers to return to work, impacting groups from lower socio-economic and disproportionately ethnic minority backgrounds. Without state support, women have taken on the burden of caring responsibilities for children and the sick, while expected to continue working at the same level.<sup>6</sup> The far-off Lithconia remedies capitalist catastrophe, offering readers a new model of social and economic relations. *Equality* counters exploitative capitalism with an ethics of care, where social support from birth to death is provided by the state, including maternity and sick leave (15). A common theme in utopian fiction, people live in shared houses "occupied by nine or ten persons, whom love or friendship has drawn together" and children

are raised by the state (14). Society is structured through belonging and participation rather than ownership.

*Equality* fundamentally disrupts Lockean property rights that guarantee freedom to accumulate wealth for the liberal subject. Lithgow refuses to make labour exchangeable as “no man is permitted to do another’s work”—labour cannot be compelled but it also cannot be willingly traded (11). The individual freedom to own labour and property is remodelled as the communal body’s collective ownership. The narrator reflects “no such word as *mine* and *thine* are ever heard”; Lithconians see themselves as one group rather than individuals (16). Almost everyone works, but for only four hours a day. The nation’s “lands are in common” and after the citizen has laboured “the remainder of his time is his own” (10). Farmers distribute “every necessary for the consumption of a family” twice a week and clothing is provided once a year (12). There are no class divisions in Lithconia and “poverty and riches, as may be easily conceived, are words not to be found in the language” (17). With material needs met through the state and private property removed, *Equality* presents a world in which no one’s survival is dependent on working beyond their capacity, no one hoards toilet paper.

Utopias intensify what we already do as scholars of historical literature – looking back to look forward, thinking outside the contextual frame to draw comparisons between older texts and the contemporary moment. A companion to contemporary “up lit” that narrates uplifting personal stories of kindness between loved ones or strangers, utopian fiction offers structural change where that care is not a remarkable plot point but part of society’s design.<sup>7</sup> Today, mutual aid groups take up some of the functions of the collective in Lithconia – providing shelter and food, sharing resources, caring for the sick – functions that should not be an emergency stopgap during a pandemic but an everyday practice to “prefigur[e] the world in which you want to live”.<sup>8</sup> *Equality* proposes an alternate 1802 that in many respects is far more advanced than 2020, leading today’s reader and scholar to ask

when and how this improvement can occur. In our classrooms, reading groups, and scholarship, eighteenth-century utopian texts are a jumping off point to consider utopian thinking for our present moment: universal basic income, free health, social and child care, the four-day week. Reading utopian writing provides a blueprint of the future – it is up to readers to bridge the gap between the present and the future yet to pass, whether that future is written three centuries ago or today.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Social Method* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), xvii.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques-Pierre Brissot, *New Travels in the United States of America*, trans. Joel Barlow (Dublin: W. Corbet, 1792), 35.

<sup>3</sup> I assign authorship to Lithgow as he claims it himself in an 1804 letter to Thomas Jefferson. Lithgow to Thomas Jefferson, December 24, 1804, The Thomas Jefferson Papers at the Library of Congress, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-0888>.

<sup>4</sup> John Lithgow, *Equality-A Political Romance*, ed. Duncan Faherty and Ed White, Just Teach One, 2017, 11–12, <http://jto.common-place.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/01/Equality-JTO-Format.pdf>. Hereafter all references to this edition will appear in parenthesis.

<sup>5</sup> “Man, the Author and Artificer of the Most Part of His Own Evils and Misfortunes,” *The Temple of Reason*, December 6, 1800.

<sup>6</sup> Chabeli Carrazana, “Coronavirus Pandemic Creates America’s First Female Recession amid Child Care, Unemployment Woes,” *USA Today*, August 5, 2020, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/08/03/coronavirus-pandemic-sets-women-back-amid-unemployment-child-care-crisis/5573123002/>.

<sup>7</sup> Danuta Kean, “Up Lit: The New Book Trend with Kindness at Its Core,” *The Guardian*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2017/aug/02/up-lit-the-new-book-trend-with-kindness-at-its-core>.

<sup>8</sup> Mariame Kaba, quoted in Jia Tolentino, “What Mutual Aid Can Do During a Pandemic,” *The Atlantic*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/05/18/what-mutual-aid-can-do-during-a-pandemic>.