THE SPACES OF UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA: INTRODUCTION

by
Guy Baeten

This theme issue contains a selection of papers that were presented at a session on ‘The dialectics of utopia and dystopia’ at the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) annual conference at Queen’s University Belfast on 2nd to 6 January 2002. The papers explore the interplay between modern utopian and dystopian imaginations and projects, and the spaces and places in which this interplay unfolds. While utopia, both as a political project and a literary genre, has been particularly influential throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is generally agreed that the dystopian moment has come to dominate Western thinking about society during the latter half of the twentieth century, up until today. The calamities of nineteenth-century capitalism gave rise to powerful critiques and alternatives, from communism to social-democracy, but the implementation of socialist and social democratic ideals in postwar decades, in turn, created its own ‘degenerate utopias’. Today, the neo-liberal spaces of rapidly globalising ‘free market forces’ may be read as a form of ‘revanchist utopia’ that again generates new forms of social and environmental havoc. Harvey (2000, p. 195) believes that ‘[t]here is a time and place in the ceaseless human endeavour to change the world, when alternative visions, no matter how fantastic, provide the grist for shaping powerful political forces for change. I believe we are at precisely such a moment.’ Meanwhile, the dystopianisation of city and society is perpetuated through policies and plans, through movies and the media, but also through intellectual and academic work: Merrifield (2000) maintains that it is particularly ‘those on the Left’ who adore and admire urban life but at the same time abhor what they see, who need to ‘do the toughest thinking of all’ about how to come to terms with simultaneous utopianisation and dystopianisation of the city.

Where are utopia and dystopia in the twenty-first century and how can this spatial interplay historically be understood? Seven contributions try to conjure up partial answers from various economic, social, political and cultural angles. Guy Baeten, by way of introduction, outlines the historical interplay between utopian and dystopian thinking throughout the twentieth century and stresses the need for a renewed utopianism in critical urban research that has now fallen prey to political mediocrity, to the mainstreaming of research activities and to the (arguably unintentional but still decidedly uncomfortable) reproduction of dystopian images of the city. Gordon MacLeod and Kevin Ward demonstrate with a considerable eye in detail how the contemporary city is divided increasingly into a ‘patchwork of utopian and dystopian spaces’. A case study of the mixed city of Lod in Israel by Haim Yacobi unravels further the production of contested urban spaces and shows how conflicting ideals of identity, ethnicity and culture are negotiated through the destruction and reconstruction of the urban built environment. Two historical case studies analyse the dystopianisation of place through novels. Richard Phillips lays bare the subtleties of the power of dystopian imaginations of Sierra Leone, a colony that became known as the ‘White Man’s Grave’. Judy Greenway, drawing on nineteenth-century writings and utopian experiments by women, argues interestingly that the ‘inevitable failure of utopia’ is in itself the result of very specific, ideological representations of utopian life. Utopia was ‘no place for women’, a gendered anti-utopian notion that needs to be challenged. Ben Anderson, drawing on the work of Ernst Bloch, introduces and elaborates on the notion of an ‘immanent utopia’ that materialises in the everyday practice of listening to recorded music and the power it has to temporarily transform space. David Pinder, by way of conclusion, addresses some of the basic topics of this theme issue, looks at the future of utopia in urbanism and argues that there is a need to reconceptualise utopia to pave the way for a more open, dynamic and transformative utopianism.
GUY BAETEN

References
