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UTBLICK



A MAGAZINE ABOUT FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES



UTOPIA

Dystopia



Utrikespolitiska
föreningen
Göteborg



Letter from the Editors



As the trees drop their leaves, days grow darker. Nature let go of its colours, turning into a greyscale sleep. In times like these, it's easy to see society in the same autumn mood. But the autumn landscapes also give birth to dreams of blossom and warmth. Utopias and dystopias are to be found everywhere: in political views, popular culture, philosophy and literature. This calls upon a few questions. In the autumn of politics, do we lack the dream of spring? Are we still able to think big? Or did we lose that ability in front of all the failed political ventures in history?

In this issue of Utblick, we address questions like these. Covering both utopias and dystopias, we try to define contemporary politics and lines of thinking. We offer you eight articles, ranging from topics like the history of utopia, to more concrete manifestations of dystopias and the current state of politics. This is also the first issue of Utblick with our new Editor-in-chief, Mikael Lassa, who joins Axel for the remainder of the semester. Mikael is doing a master in global studies and is currently particularly interested in trade policies and international politics.

As usual, the magazine is to be found in different campuses and libraries across town. It will also be available on our webpage. Lastly, we wish you a pleasant read and a particularly cold autumn!

Best regards

Mikael and Axel

<u>The theory of Utopia</u> <i>Malin Lampio</i>	4
<u>Utopin Islamiska Staten</u> <i>Hemrin Molla</i>	7
<u>Class, Colonialism and the Big Smoke</u> <i>Calum Turnbull</i>	10
<u>The Market Dream</u> <i>Axel Christoffersson</i>	14
<u>Does the future have a future?</u> <i>Egil Sturk</i>	18
<u>Dystopia liked your status</u> <i>Sarah Olsson Olofsson</i>	22
<u>Are we too many?</u> <i>Mikael Lassa</i>	24
<u>Dömda att leva i den värld som är nu?</u> <i>Anna Kuzmina & Ida Larsson</i>	26

“Through a fictional use of real life figures, places and events they both create imagined societies of perfect harmony to advocate for social change in line with their own beliefs and in support of their own social positions”

TEXT: Malin Lampio ILLUSTRATION: Hans Holbein/CC

The theory of Utopia

THE WORD UTOPIA is often defined as an ‘imagined’ or ‘indefinitely remote’ place where everything (especially social and political conditions) is perfect, ideal, and everyone is happy. But the definition is often accompanied by a mild skepticism where words such as ‘impractical’, ‘unattainable’, ‘naïve’ or ‘romantic’ describe the futuristic vision of a perfect society. Utopian visions are often seen as something detached from brute reality, like a dream or an air castle, impossible to reach no matter the means. Grand schemes for social and political reform are often subject to this kind of criticism, of being utopian, and the visions are reduced to some form of idealism or an unrealistic strive for perfection. So, despite the fact that utopia only means an imagined state of perfection, the word utopia(n) is often used in a slightly demeaning sense to describe the naïve and unattainable vision of professional daydreamers.

Utopia, which is a Greek wordplay of ‘ou-topos’ meaning no place, and ‘eu-topos’, meaning good place, has not always had this negative connotation. The term was originally coined by the English catholic martyr, lawyer, statesman and writer Thomas More in 1516 through his book *On the best state of a commonwealth and on the new island of Utopia*, more known as simply *Utopia*. The book is a contemporary critique of the current state of the unequal and money-driven European affairs, the reformation and the selective use of law, and at the same time an advocacy for humanism and social equality. These ideas are effectively presented by the fictional use of faraway, perfect, island called Utopia.

The term dates back to the 14th century, but the concept and idea of utopia is far older than Thomas More and his book. One famous example of the use of fantasy societies to discuss politics is that of Plato and his work *Laws* and *The Republic* written around 380 BC where he, through dialogues, discusses philosophy and political theory through the use of several imagined societies, among them the society of Kallipolis, ruled by a philosopher king, known from the *Republic*. This work is more explicitly philosophical and political, but the utopian character is evident. Thomas More was unquestionably inspired by the great philosopher and this is made clear not only by the use of a fantasy island, but also by the fact that *Utopia* is written in the same dialogue-style as most of Plato’s works. In the book *utopia*, More himself discusses the current state of Europe with the traveller Raphael, a name symbolising both the healing angel ‘Raphael’ and the ‘the speaker of nonsense’ which is the Greek meaning of the name. Through a fictional use of real life figures, places and events they both create imagined societies of perfect harmony to advocate for social change in line with their own beliefs and in support of their own social positions.

Utopia was nevertheless defined by More, and after the publication of his book a steady stream of utopian writers followed and together they established the utopian genre. This genre was very popular all the way up to the Enlightenment and it has remained a frequent dimension in political philosophy since then, partly because it provides a safe

“The dangers of utopian visions emerge when the utopia itself justifies the use of any means necessary to achieve the goal, and forgetting about process”

and compelling way to criticise power and pose alternatives, and partly because it is an effective way to argue in the favour of change. Utopia is present in most political ideologies and grand schemes from realism to idealism, from conservatism to liberalism, from Marxism to fascism, from nationalism to cosmopolitanism, to mention a few. The difference is that these political philosophical traditions do not pose imaginary and unreachable places, but rather distant places in time. They present a perfect future and theories of the means necessary to reach it and thus place the utopian visions within reach.

A vision of a perfect society and theories about the means necessary to reach it makes for a perfect recipe for world leaders and thus, utopia is a common feature in the political processes of ours. History is rich of evidence from political leaders trying to materialise utopian visions, from the Russian revolution of 1917, to Germany during the second world war, to today in the ‘make America great again’ rhetoric of Trump (Kotler & Johnson Huffington Post 2017). All of them have been somewhat guided by utopian visions and the alternative future that they pose, and perhaps it is these examples that have contributed to the bad reputation of utopias. However, utopias on their own are neither dangerous nor bad, and they can be an excellent catalyst for social change. The dangers of utopian visions emerge when the utopia itself justifies the use of any means necessary to achieve the goal, and forgetting about process. The remedy is democracy,

which is a shift in focus from goal to process, and a shift in focus from utopian destinations to utopian processes.

Thus, as Nicole Pohl writes in The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature (2010), the use of utopia may vary over time but “utopia springs from the same impulse as the myth or the eschatological desire for a better afterlife and thus yearns to realize a condition of happiness, wellbeing and social harmony” and “...while utopia’s form, function and content are historically variable, its defining characteristics remain constant: the desire to recognize, mobilize and transform” (Nicole Pohl 2010). Utopia can thus ultimately be described as the tension between imagination and experience, between yesterday and tomorrow and between end goals and process. ■

Further reading:

Nicole Pohl, 2010, *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*

Philip Kotler, 2017,
Trump as a Utopian thinker, Huffington Post

Utopin Islamiska Staten

“Det som för västvärlden målas upp som en skurkstat, hyser för IS anhängare ambitioner om att skapa en välfungerande islamisk samhällsordning”



“*Målet var att erövra ett territorium som sträcker sig från Irak och Bagdad till Israel, vilket återspeglar det Islamiska kalifat som återfanns under storhetstiden*”

TEXT: Hemrin Molla

DEN 17 DECEMBER 2010 kom startskottet för den Arabiska våren när en ung man i Tunisien tände eld på sig själv som en offentlig protestaktion mot nationens styrelse-skick. Aktionen fick stor spridning inom det geopolitiska området och inom världsmedia. I mars 2011 nådde protestaktionerna och den Arabiska våren Syrien med starka demonstrationer mot den sittande ledaren Bashar al-Assad.

I takt med att den arabiska våren svepte över Syrien fick den syriska befolkningen bevittna hur drömmen om demokrati gick förlorad. De fredliga protesterna övergick till ett urartat inbördeskrig, med intressenter som regeringsarméer, utländska rebellgrupper och extrema jihadister. Med krigsideologi inspirerad av Hobbess naturlagar gavs Islamiska Staten (IS) möjlighet att omstrukturera den karta över Mellanöstern som en gång ritats av fransmän och briter under första världskriget. Sommaren 2014 kontrollerade Islamiska staten ett område som enligt de själva betraktas som ett Islamiskt kalifat. Målet var att erövra ett territorium som sträcker sig från Irak och Bagdad till Israel, vilket återspeglar det Islamiska kalifat som återfanns under storhetstiden. Enligt anhängarna till Islamiska staten ses kalifatet som en idealstat och de väpnade konflikterna ligger till grund för att återerövra denna efter århundraden av förödmjukelser och rasism från de otrogna i väst. Islamiska staten säger sig syfta till att

upprätthålla en utopisk samhällsordning för världens alla sunnimuslimer och beskriver kalifatet som sunnimuslimernas idealstat, vilket föranleder en systematisk utrensning av anhängare tillhörande andra trossamfund än salafismen.

Löftesspridning om kalifatets återkomst framhålls i en tid som präglas av konflikter och destabilisering i Mellanöstern. Syrien står i brand, Irak står på gränsen till ännu en infiltrerad konflikt mellan olika folkgrupper inom nationsgränsen. Ett Egypten som styrs av militären och Israels konflikt med Gaza. Därav är det många sunnimuslimer i området som inte bedömer Islamiska statens etablering i regionen som ytterligare en konflikt. Istället betraktas organisationen som en löftesrik politisk enhet som stigit ur askan efter årtionden av krig och förödelse. Det som för västvärlden målas upp som en skurkstat, hyser för IS anhängare ambitioner om att skapa en välfungerande islamisk samhällsordning. På samma sätt som Israel betraktats som det förlovade landet för judar, ska det Islamiska kalifatet representera den perfekta nationen, vilket ger sunnimuslimer trygghet och rättvisa. Ambitioner om att förse de nödlidande med föda och att ta hand om de många hundra föräldralösa barn som finns i området. Utveckla hälso- och välfärdsprogram vilket ger möjlighet till att genomföra vaccinationsprogram och på så sätt stoppa spridning av livshotande sjukdomar.

Denna utopiska idealstat ska ses i paritet till Islamiska statens barbariska och sektaristiska diktatur, med ursprung från salafismen, som återspeglar den livsstil som återfanns under det första muslimska samfundet. Salafister bokstavstolkar och bedömer sedermera att en omtolkning av Koranen inte är möjlig. Således tillämpar Salafismen den gudomliga rätten som införskaffats av Allah och sharialagar bedöms vara den enda sanna och rätta vägen.

Trots den ultrakonservativa salafistiska framtoning har organisationen anammat den teknologiska utvecklingen, vilken även har kommit att spela en viktig roll för Islamiska statens rekryteringskampanjer. Sociala medier och Internet används för att synliggöra organisationen. Snygga och sofistikerade rekryterings- och propagandakampanjer som sprids över Internet har välkomnat krigare från hela världen. Enkelheten till att ansluta sig till Islamiska staten, samt organisationens

medvetenhet om att utlova belöning vid återerövrandet av kalifatet, ökar medlemsantal och popularitet bland vissa grupper av unga västerländska muslimer. Islamiska staten har, jämfört med andra extrema jihadistiska organisationer, tagit våldspropagandan till en ny nivå samtidigt som man genom internet själva kunnat kontrollera vilka barbariska handlingar som ska publiceras för omvärldens beskådan.

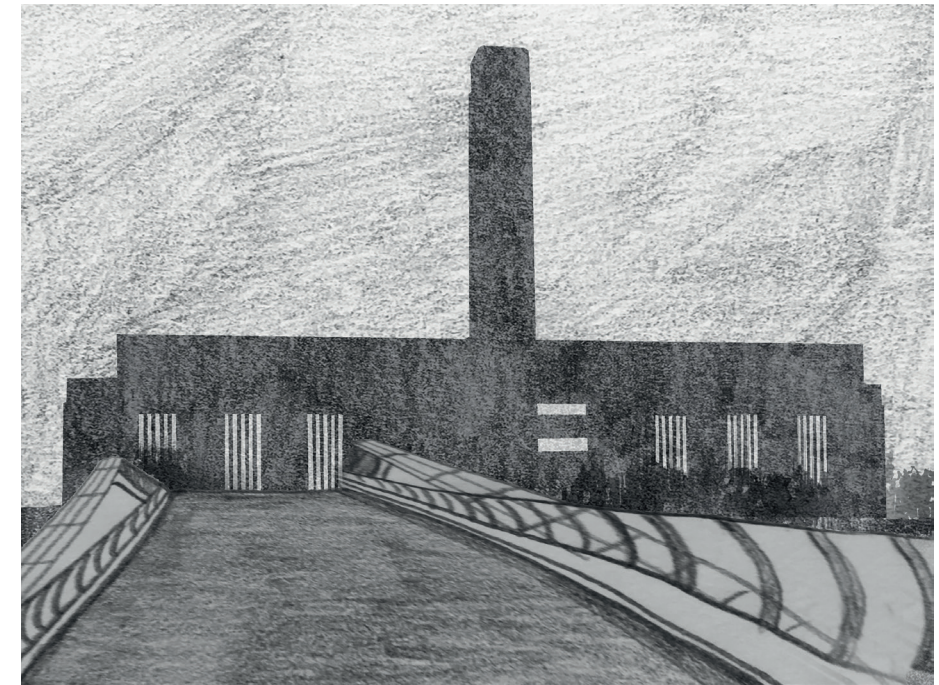
Det som länge såg ut att vara en svårstoppad organisation och som satt skräck i hela den västerländska samhällsordningen har i skrivande stund tappat kontrollen över viktiga områden inom regionen. Det innebär dock inte att Islamiska staten ser sig som besegrad. Kampen för dess idealstat fortsätter och nu sätts tillit till de ensamma västerländska sympatisörer som är villig att föra det rättfärdiga kriget vidare mot martyrskap. Det som var tänkt som statsbildning tar sig alltmör formen av en irrationell terrorgrupp. ■



Class, Colonialism and the Big Smoke

TEXT: Calum Turnbull ILLUSTRATION: Filippa Andersson

THINK OF A DYSTOPIAN CITY. Not any particular one, just a vague generic one. What does it look like? Are the skies grey? Tall unkempt buildings? Does it seem like the future, with glass spires and metallic fluid designs? Or perhaps concrete monstrosities, repressive in their utilitarianism? The omnipresent poor living in the shadow of some technocratic aristocracy? Does it look like London? Just a little bit?



There is something ironic in the fact that London has such a fabled history as a dystopia. It was the city in which Thomas More, the venerated saint and writer of 'Utopia', was born. London has also, mistaken or otherwise, held onto an image of itself as an enlightened and progressive city; the centre of the civilised world, the richest and greatest, the City itself.

So many great liberators, enlightened thinkers, and benevolent leaders have their roots in London. So how could it be that we identify its eternally grey skies, architecture, and people with dystopias? What about London is so universally contemptible, despite all its appeal? And finally, can we actually say that London is a dystopia?

Much of this can be attributed to the writings of George Orwell. The London Orwell creates in '1984' provides the bleak landscape and totalitarian state that informs the popular imagination of dystopia. One cannot escape the influence of his work, and if the regular references to '1984' in modern political discourse are anything to go by, this isn't likely to change anytime soon.

However, Orwell's work was certainly not the first dystopian work, nor was it the first to be centred in London. Rather, '1984' is the endpoint of a long developing trend in dystopian literature; that is the horrifying societies of 'there' could somehow take root 'here'.

London as it was during the 19th and early 20th centuries was in the throws of exceptionalism. The capital of an empire which encompassed a full fifth of the world's population, its riches and power were equal to none. Yet, London was also a city of ambivalence. The richest city in the world had an underclass so large and unruly that the aristocracy increasingly ceded power in attempts of averting a possible revolution. The skies of London choked on the output of exploited labour, and sold to a global marketplace maintained by force of arms. Murderers roamed the streets uncaught, and various political groups discussed the overthrow of the city's elites. While the term utopia had been invented by a Londoner 300 years before, it was in the House of Commons that the term dystopia was first heard in 1868.

“What about London is so universally contemptible, despite all its appeal? And finally, can we actually say that London is a dystopia?”



Yet, as atrocious as the lives of many Londoners were, this period rarely saw speculative writings directed towards London itself. London may on occasion be mentioned in pessimistic fiction, but the principal setting was always somewhere far away. Dystopia was for the other, a place where different people suffered different problems. It was only in passing that the role of London in the world's miseries was mentioned.

Look at Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' for example. The horrors detailed in the book take place along the infamous Congo river, but the opening of the book presents another truth. "The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth" wrote Conrad in the first chapter, providing a glimpse into the City's moral bankruptcy.

Orwell would further develop this idea in his earlier writings. 'Burmese Days' details the life of a British colonial and the crisis of faith he suffers attempting to rationalise the concept of Empire. London at once provides a dream of home, but a return to a life built on the enslavement of others. The main

character jaded by the horrors of colonialism cannot bring himself to go back, nor live on as a European oppressor.

When these early works of dystopian fiction were not hinting at the immorality of London's global rule, they played with the logical progression of Victorian and Edwardian society. Thomas Huxley in 'Brave New World' created a futuristic London whose society had become so artificial that it had begun to lose its humanity. Similarly H. G. Wells in 'The Sleeper Awakes' explores the repercussions of the exploitation of labour and the entrenchment of aristocracy. Their London fitted with these highly technical societies, and would go on to inform works such as 'Metropolis', exploring how urban and scientific developments would affect humanity and class.

However, it was not until after WWII that we see the establishment of London's physical environment as the archetype of dystopian fiction. Battered by war, and heavily reliant on coal-fired power plants in the City's centre, London appeared a dilapidated ruin. The air became so bad that in 1952 a great smog encroached every open space and even indoors, eventually killing 4000 people. This

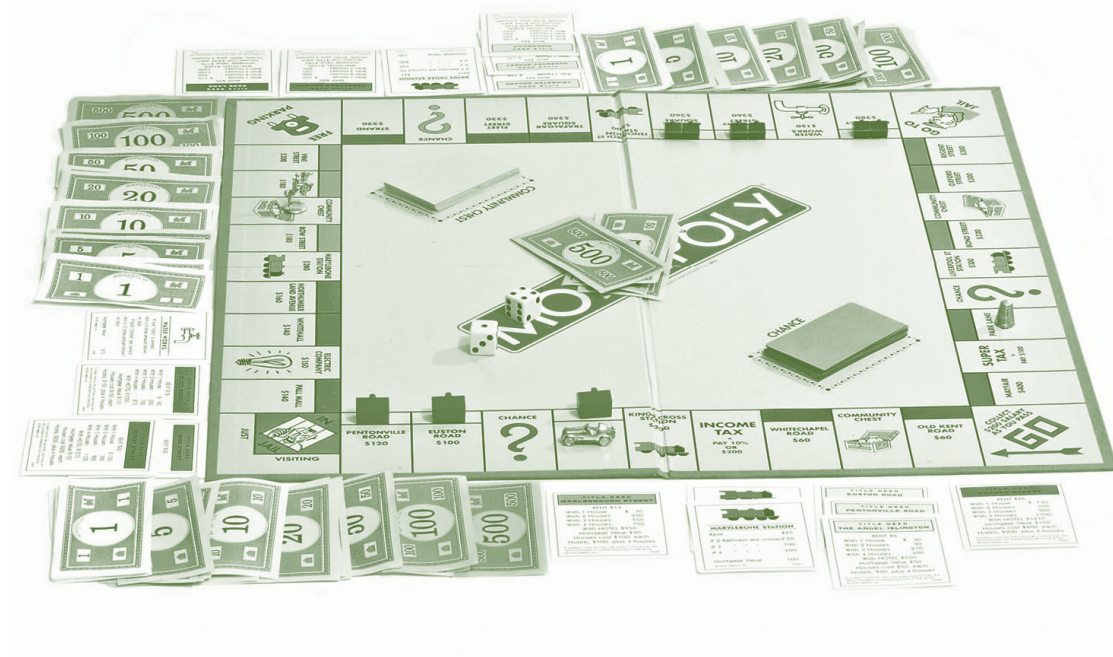
polluted and damaged landscape would go to form the foundation of the striking vistas in 'Blade Runner' and 'Mad Max', but there remained one important addition to come.

The period of reconstruction that followed the war led to the widescale construction of the ubiquitous early-socialist tower block. Brutalist concrete monoliths rising from the rows of townhouses and Victorian mansions would become a symbol of both progress and repression across the world. Designed to cheaply rehouse much of London's (mostly poorer) population that had lost their homes during the war, they entrenched class divides and neighbourhoods. These buildings would form the physical environment of Orwell's London in '1984', and one can scarcely imagine a totalitarian society without their domineering presence.

Yet, London in '1984' displayed an even scarier prospect for the once powerful city, one that had been touched on by Conrad and others from Victorian times; that London is not set apart from the world at large. The descent of the Iron Curtain and the sudden absence of some of Europe's greatest cities had unsettled the notion that Britannia 'never shall be slaves' in the British psyche.

The London of Airstrip One has ceased to be the centre of an Empire, but became a single colonial offshoot of a great and powerful nation. The reality of some far-off, opaque, and unaccountable power was no longer imposed upon the people of Burma, or the Empire, but upon the population of London. This is a truth that London, and Britain more widely, continues to wrestle with. That since the sun set on the British Empire, it too is like any other smaller player on the world stage. Fear of domination has driven itself to foolishly reassert its nationalism in Brexit, and a longing for history makes it forget the horrors of colonialism. Today the statues and monoliths of great tyrants, liberators, humanitarians, and racists stand above the city streets, but most would refute the claim that they live in a dystopia. After all, dystopia is for there, not for here. ■

The Market Dream



TEXT: Axel Christoffersson IMAGE: Horst Frank/CC

IN A COUNTRY not that far away, individuals reigned the land. Through a complicated web of relations, millions of people were organized into producing the goods of society, in just the proportions wanted by the people, in just the right amounts. There were no queues to apartments, no food shortages and a school that fit everyone. It was the Market Dream.

The picture might seem ridiculous. However, it is a picture that should not be underestimated. Ever since the 1980s, the liberal

dream of free markets has gained influence and is nowadays an important part of our culture. Free, authoritative individuals shaping a world that makes fair use of all the talent, all the knowledge that exist in society. An efficient and therefore righteous world.

Many great economics thinkers have devoted thousands of hours contemplating how to reach this state of efficiency. On the way, markets had to be defined and their prerequisites identified. One of the most fruitful insights gained in the process is that few

“There will usually be forces existing, other than governments, that stand in the way of maximum societal welfare”

markets can ever be both free and efficient – there will usually be forces existing, other than governments, that stand in the way of maximum societal welfare.

In economics, the efficient world is kept alive through the concept of “perfect competition”. Under these market conditions, competition is so tense that any firm who raises prices above market prices will lose all sales. On the other hand, the firm will be able to sell as much as it wants at prevailing market prices, meaning that it will expand output until production costs exceed the additional income of selling more units. Since consumer power in this case is maximized (e.g. tense competition), this will not only render a lot of output that turns into economic welfare, it also presses prices to a level where firm economic profits over business cycles are close to zero.

This does look a lot like a perfect world, at least from the efficiency point of view. Unfortunately, perfect competition seldom appears by itself. A number of conditions have to be met for a market to be perfectly competitive, the most important being perfect information and zero transaction costs.

To concretize, the role of these conditions for perfect competition can be pictured like this. Imagine that you are about to go shopping. If you would have had all available information on quality and supply of each shop, you would have visited the store offering the most value for money, or in other words, the most competitive one. Chances are though that you don’t and choose either with gut, or even worse, by habit – ending

up in a store that did not serve your needs as good as other possible ones. Or, imagine you were client of a large bank, possibly one that’s raising fees and you want to move your savings elsewhere. However, faced with the bureaucracy involved, you rethink your decision and stay. Transactions costs were too high.

If one or both of these conditions are not fulfilled, firms are in a position of power. Knowing some of their customers will not switch shop due to higher prices, or knowing that some uninformed customers will turn up even though the company lacks in quality, the firm might very well raise prices or frivol with quality. This does not only mean that consumers get less value for money, but it also creates opportunities for systematic profits filling up the deep pockets of capital owners (or pension savers).

In the language of economists, this phenomenon is called monopoly power. It is, along with theories regarding inequality and externalities (e.g. pollution, noise etc.), the most problematic implication of unregulated, hands-off capitalism. The ultimate monopoly is the wet dream of every true capitalist, where one single firm controls the entire market (have you played the game?). Just like perfect competition, this is a rare phenomenon, but counting for all big companies who have millions of followers on Instagram, “likes” on Facebook and, possibly, a respectable market share and loyal customers, the monopoly beast does not seem so cute. And it is growing uglier – in the global economy, size is king, and the king usually has some kind of monopoly power.

*“These inefficiencies arise not as a result of
a too widespread government action, but
because of excessively free markets”*

Leaving the issue of public goods and services (water supply, education, medical care and so on) undiscussed, one can conclude that even in sectors of the economy widely regarded as fit for free markets, these markets fail to provide consumers, the people, with maximum societal welfare.

On a societal level, what are the consequences of these rather common monopoly-like market actors? The more obvious are the ones already mentioned, namely less production or of lower quality, and higher prices in conjunction with higher profits of (mostly large) companies. There is also an ongoing debate regarding the impact of monopolies on the distribution of wealth, i.e. inequality. Some economists suspect that the growing profits of large, multinational businesses that contribute to the increase of inequality observed mainly in the U.S but also, to a lesser extent, in other developed countries, is driven by a growth in monopoly power. With inequality being one of the most critical questions of our time, the potential increase in monopoly power poses a threat to the legitimacy of democracy and the belief in the meritocratic organization of society.

This might sound horrific, but the picture needs some nuances. Even though firms possess some monopoly power, they are not immune to consumer opinion. In turn, this means that even markets with few actors or loyal customers can be rather efficient, and certainly more efficient than the likes of most planned economies. However, in the face of the “Market Dream”, this drop in welfare and the issue of inequality might strike

a devastating blow. Even more so, because these inefficiencies arise not as a result of a too widespread government action, but because of excessively free markets. With either cautious competition laws to prevent otherwise rational mergers and acquisitions intended to create a dominant market position, or taxation systems that do not favor big businesses, the problems associated with monopolies might decline.

To wrap things up, this means that the liberal dream of markets saving humankind from all kinds of worldly misery will most likely not come true. Built into the dynamics of free markets are forces like (but not limited to) monopoly power, limiting the abilities of free markets to serve the interests of society. Importantly though, this should not be used as an argument against free individuals with the right to make decisions of their own, but rather act as a reminder that a fundamentalistic belief in free markets is quite fruitless from a societal point of view. Time to wake up? ■



The delegation of UF Gothenburg at the International Model United Nations conference in Leuven (Belgium), March 2016.

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Does the future have a future?

TEXT: Egil Sturk ILLUSTRATION: Linn Posse

A RECURRENT THEME in the intellectual history of mankind seems to be the idea that on some level of existence, an ideal world exists – a Utopia. We are endowed with the unique capacity to imagine a world that does not exist, and when we compare this world to ours, our current predicament seems imperfect. The last century was inarguably the heyday of utopianism, the myths of revolution and the ability of humanity to improve the world. Yet, it was also a century of bloodshed; enabling the true believer to commit genocide with a smile, convinced that history would absolve him. For many,

these projects ended in disappointment, disillusion and cynicism. The collapse of communism left the left in an apathetic, resigned and pessimistic mood, confined to resistance and protest, to reaction rather than action. Political utopianism has retreated from the barricades to the basements.

A central proposition in Hegel's philosophy of history was that history progresses in a dialectical fashion, a conflict between opposing forces struggling to negate each other. Shortly following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was proclaimed that we have reached the

end of history. That capitalism and liberal democracy have prevailed in the struggle against Gog and Magog, and now remain the only viable political model for the world. It was believed that the universalisation of this model would realize Kant's dream of a "perpetual peace", the end of conflict, and instilled hope of a linear trajectory towards ever greater progress, reason and freedom. This vision has collapsed in recent years, perhaps as early as 2001, definitely by 2008. As much as this model has accomplished, it now seems to be crumbling, with many of its promises left unfulfilled. The self-confidence it originally displayed derailed into hubris.

Now history, we are told, lacks direction. The future will just be a succession of events repeating themselves, without ever progressing. An endless continuation of the present, rather than something radically different. What remains truly alive is the "last man" of the eponymous book by Fukuyama. Contrary to numerous liberal journalists and academics, he did not see the victory of liberal democracy as a necessarily good thing,

but rather lamented the death of ideological struggles, and said that "the end of history" will be a very sad time. A time lacking comprehensive metanarratives providing moral and political guidance. The fiery passions furnished by ideology were replaced with "the icy water of egotistical calculation" and politics was reduced to the solution of technical problems. Entailing the dissolution of political imagination, innovation, and idealism.

One reason for this might be "neoliberal individualization". Even the desire to improve the world seems to be increasingly confused with self-improvement. The mantra "change comes from within" encapsulates the attitude placing the self at center of the stage. This is evident from the proliferation of self-help gurus, coaches, pop-psychology books, self-improvement courses, lifestyle activism, identity politics, and the popularity of mindfulness. The change that is sought seems to be achieving a peace of mind, happiness, but this happiness is nothing but passive acceptance. It's an attitude which acknowledges dissatisfaction, but responds

to the anguished cry of the people with: Yes, you are in pain, and you have reasons for being upset; but the cause of your pain lies not in your stars, but within yourselves. Once you've accepted your limitations, you will finally learn to love yourself. The consequence of this attitude is the pacification of the dissatisfied, directing the resentment experienced by them back upon themselves, and internalizing guilt for failing to live up to these ideals; self-discipline, self-surveillance, self-mastery. This is the religion of the last men; they look upon a star, with no desire to pursue it, they merely blink.

“The future will just be a succession of events repeating themselves, without ever progressing”

Flip the coin of individualization and the polar opposite of this trend appears. An attitude characterized by endless frantic activity, with self-realization as the highest virtue. What matters is who and what you want to be. Messages telling us to “Be who you are”, “Find Yourself”, “Fulfill your dreams” are omnipresent in our culture. The imperative to be “authentic” is endemic to this, to constantly choose among an endless list of identities, lifestyles, products and relationships. You can create and inhabit your own personalized universe, because you deserve it! This is a hollow self, void of essence. Just a bundle of impressions and desires, dissolving, only to be replaced by new ones. Satisfaction is never achieved, due to the limitless nature of manufactured desire. We nonetheless strive even harder to be our genuine selves, to realize our highest desires; chasing the dragon, striving for the next fix.

Yet the more we strive to be ourselves, the lonelier we get; the more we express ourselves, the emptier we become. In the end, we consume ourselves, becoming exhausted and filled with angst and guilt. Rather than the deep rest the former model strived for, these ideals create depressed individuals.

When so much effort is spent on self-perfection, we lose grip of the world surrounding us. The self is the last resort of disembedded, disempowered, and isolated individuals, living in a world that is seemingly unintelligible and disordered. One of the few things remaining in this world, which one is still able to affect, is, in this perspective, oneself. This increasing privatization of political and social life entails a massive withdrawal from organized political participation. The death of the master narratives is replaced by millions of causes. In order to revive Utopia, we need to transcend ourselves.

One of the causes for this reduction of political life to individual consumer choices, identity, lifestyle, security and comfort, might lie in the way we experience social reality.

As has been mentioned, politics now is largely concerned with pragmatic administration of the status quo and crisis management rather than the struggle between visions of how the good society should be constituted. We seem so preoccupied with the present that the future is continually delayed. There is little room for dreams in this mode of politics, only immediate decisions and short-term “technical solutions” devised by experts. Collective demands are labelled as unjustified senses of entitlement. The rhetoric of crisis is exploited to instill a sense of anxiety and uncertainty, to justify encroachments on civil liberties and the enactment of austerity policies. A reduction of social life to the private sphere, to its bare essentials: survival, security, self-preservation – a state of exception. The suspension of ordinary rules and routines in times of

“It’s a condition which requires obedience; the fear of descending into “the state of nature” makes us willing to defer to power, and deters us from taking risks”

crisis makes us crave authority. It’s a condition which requires obedience; the fear of descending into “the state of nature” makes us willing to defer to power, and deters us from taking risks.

Unfortunately, this state of perpetual crisis also appeals to reactionary eschatologists, convincing them that we live in the end times: From ultra-orthodox Haredi Jews in Israel, to evangelical Christians in the US, and radical Islamist groups. All seeing death as necessary for the world’s rebirth, a return to the origin, all wanting to catalyze this event.

We now seem to have entered an apocalyptic mood: surrounded by catastrophes, disorder, shock and perpetual crisis, the end is near, yet it never quite arrives. Suspended in purgatory, neither in heaven nor hell. Barraged by crisis upon crisis, and a vague ubiquitous threat looming over our heads. The world could end in endless ways, and there’s something perverse in our current obsession with the apocalypse.

It would be a mistake to dismiss these extremists as a homogenous group of nihilists, believing in nothing but annihilation and war. There is more to it, a genuine desire for meaning in life, transcendence, starting anew; the thrill of adventure furnished by romantic fantasies, enthusiasm and perverted idealism. Strict obedience providing freedom from the uncertainty instilled by the imperative to choose. They are not merely victims to the powers that be, swept forward by the tides of history; they are actively trying to create it.

Societies creating conditions that breed frustrated individuals who feel alienated, disengaged from their communities, disposable and with no reasonable hope for an alternative future are at risk of being taken advantage of by recruiters of fanatic causes. The appeal to moderation and self-restraint will do little to decrease the sympathy for these causes.

To conclude, a society lacking unifying progressive visions that can allocate the desires and hopes of the people will be susceptible to the appeal of demagogues, promising change and preaching hate and fear. We need something to kickstart the heart of our world once more, a revival of the future. ■



Dystopia liked your status

TEXT: Sarah Olsson Olofsson

EXTREME HEADLINES and preambles are showing up on our screens on a daily basis, meanwhile they are telling the members of the digital society the world is falling apart. We could be in a meeting, waiting for the bus to go to work, or just casually out for a walk and at the same time get updated on what is going on in another continent. This is a digital revolution going on right here and right now; it is the beginning of something big and fascinating that is changing the mindset of people all over the world.

Every day new profiles are created on social platforms, which means new possibilities to communicate. Coombs and Holladay (2014) affirm it is difficult to explain how big social media actually is, since it is constantly

growing bigger. This revolution makes it possible to publish, comment and share content that is opening doors, creating new places to explore, and anyone can reach you at any time with just a click.

News media also have active accounts on social platforms, which means that they have the possibility to create and upload content to spread news to their active and inactive readers. If you are an active reader you the article will reach you by visiting a specific news media or searching for it in your feed, which means you are taking the decision to read it or not, compared to the non-active reader, who will most likely get to know about the article by seeing it in the feed because a friend of theirs shared it in

“This is a digital revolution going on right here and right now; it is the beginning of something big and fascinating that is changing the mindset of people all over the world”



their own social media feed. By using specific aggressive words which aim at controlling readers, they will, most likely, draw attention and reach the readers through the constant buzz in our messy feeds.

However, I think about it as “Breaking News” and “Flash”-updates are built up as a competition where you, as the reader, give your attention to the ones with the most extreme headlines, the ones affecting you on an emotional level. Therefore, it is a strategic move made by the journalists who are creating the biggest clickbaits, consequently possibly increasing our thoughts of a tragic future where dystopias are visiting our Facebook profiles and liking our statuses. In this case, news media relationships between journalists and readers are creating a bond on a personal level because of the feelings this causes, which means that news

media almost becomes a family member, a friend or another familiar person.

Once Waldo Emerson said “You speak so loudly I cannot hear what you say”. I guess that it is possible to implement this quote in this situation, where the actors are taking part in a competition in which everyone wants to make the loudest noise to get to the center of attention.

Every news media outlet has its own specific vision and goal. But they all have something in common: the goal of spreading information. Who is winning this competition? The news media getting the most attention with the dystopias they construct through their extreme headlines and preambles? Or is it the ones believing that facts are more important than clicks? The question keeps growing inside of me. ■



Are we too many?

On the silent threat of overpopulation

TEXT: Mikael Lassa IMAGE: Lars Curfs/CC

TOGETHER WITH environmental degradation, the exponential and uncontrolled rise in the world's population is widely considered to be one of the main problems our planet is going to face in the coming decades. Yet, the issue rarely surfaces in mainstream political debates, and countermeasures taken to date might not be sufficient to limit its harmful potential to a meaningful extent.

The silent threat of overpopulation lurks behind the worsening of global warming and of our planet's decaying climate health. Running at a sustained pace, it is increasing pollution, deforestation and the loss of ecosystems. The stress on the Earth's limited resources leads to desertification and starvation of more and more people, while the increased risk of new pandemics silently reminds us of the urgency of this problem. Speculations include increased conflicts and violence over resources, with stricter laws and perhaps even full-scale wars as a

consequence. While not all of this is a direct and straightforward consequence of overpopulation, the latter is often considered an important part of the causes, as many of these events are strictly interconnected. Natural resources are limited, and likely cannot sustain an unlimited population surge. The constant, and increasingly rapid growth in world population might be the fastest route to a dystopian future of worsened climate change impact and depleted resources, a future that might not be so distant.

Human population has been growing exponentially in the past few decades, reaching the amount of 7 billion people by 2011, and currently counting around 7.5 billion inhabitants. Figures of the growth in the past are impressive: it is estimated that the world reached one billion inhabitants in the early 19th century, meaning that it only took little more than two centuries to add another

“A more attentive and empowering strategy might limit harmful consequences”

six billion to the count. Human overpopulation is, according to several experts, one of the main problems our planet will be facing in the next few decades, with some projections foreseeing a world population peaking at 10 billion people by the year 2050. Although predictions vary in this regard, the impact of such a growth would be disastrous for the world's limited food and energy resources. Even though fertility rates seem to have decreased in the last few decades in many parts of the world, symptoms of overpopulation can already be seen throughout the continents: according to the theory of the Earth's ecological footprint, we are already consuming far more resources than what our planet can sustain. Which is not unrelated to the record-high pollution in world's metropolises and to the steady advance of deserts, causing famines in several regions.

Such concerns are not new. Predictions of population crises leading to a depletion of natural resources occurred throughout history, the most notable and influential being the one by Thomas Malthus in the 19th century. While there are several contrasting views on the topic, and different predictions come to often very divergent conclusions in the figures of population growth, in most of the world evidence seems to point towards a worrying trend. If it is true that population growth has slowed down in many countries, it is not clear that this is enough to curb the global trend significantly in the short term. The decrease in growth might come too late. However, it needs to be taken into account that, when a society reaches a certain degree of technological advance, a balancing can take place, implicating a more stable population change in the long term. This is to say that perhaps the expected

catastrophic outcomes might be somewhat mitigated, although predictions are obviously not easy to make.

Finding solutions to the problem is not an easy task. Controlling birth rates is an intricate matter, with little consensus on how to tackle the issue. Steps, however, are being taken in terms of focus on family planning and promotion of birth control methods, both at a global and at country levels. While history reminds us of several infamous cases of authorities trying to curb birth rates, a more attentive and empowering strategy might limit harmful consequences to a certain extent. In particular, aiming at sponsoring education and women's rights throughout the world can improve the situation in the long term, as well as people's living conditions. However, other sides of the problem might also be considered. For instance, think of the world's waste problem: if on the one hand there is a lot of consumption leading to unnecessary waste in some countries, the opposite is true of other regions. This, alongside with all the unnecessary stress deriving from overconsumption, takes a heavy toll on the world's already scarce resources.

It is not news that, without concrete efforts, overpopulation may pose a risk of a real dystopian world materializing. However, the threat needs to be put into perspective with the stabilization of birth rates, as mentioned above. Since predictions tend to contradict each other, the matter should be considered carefully before making any strong claim. The point of this brief piece is that we ultimately do not know whether and to what extent our planet can sustain our increasing population. But a degree of wariness would be advised. ■

Dömnda att leva i den värld som är nu?

TEXT: Anna Kuzmina & Ida Larsson

SCIENCE FICTION ÄR en genre fylld med oändliga möjligheter. En genre där nya världar, samhällsordningar och typer av teknologi möter humor och uråldriga teman och där fantasin bokstavligen sätter gränserna. Men på sistone har sci-fi blivit obekvämt likt vår samtid. I filmer som Interstellar och Her skildras händelserna i en framtid där samhället till stor del ändå är väldigt likt vårt egna, liksom i serierna The Expanse och Westworld. I samtida sci-fi består framtiden av cool teknik, men då som ett tillägg till ett samhälle som i princip är som vårt egna. Tekniken är inte längre ett sätt att beskriva en del av framtiden där människan och samhället har utvecklats tillsammans med den, utan är det enda i framtiden som egentligen är nytt. Genren verkar helt enkelt ha slut på framtidsvisioner. Samma problem kan åter-ses inom den svenska politiken där det inför

valet 2018 knappast har diskuterats framtidsvisioner. Den offentliga debatten har präglats av diskussioner om vem som kan regera med vem, hur Alliansens tänker sig att de ska regera utan Sverigedemokraterna och vad Stefan Löfven egentligen visste om IT-skandalen på Transportstyrelsen. Framtiden står inte högt i kurs i det politiska samtalet, utan är, liksom den är i sci-fi, den värld som vi lever i nu. Men hur kom vi hit, och vart tog visionerna vägen?

Vissa menar att dagens fantasilösa samhälls-tillstånd beror på vår timing. Perioden under efterkrigstiden kan delvis ses som ett framtidsvisionernas krig där två olika scenarion, kommunism och kapitalism, ställdes mot varandra. Vissa menar att vår tid istället präglas av att komma efter denna period av stora framtidsvisioner. Detta har gjort att vi



ILLUSTRATION: Linn Posse

*“Kanske definieras vår tid inte av att
befinna sig efter de stora framtidsvisionerna,
utan istället innan något helt nytt”*

nu befinner oss i en situation där vi inte kan tänka oss någon annan framtid än en fortsättning på vårt nuvarande samhälle. Den ideologiska striden under kalla kriget möjliggjorde många av de progressiva framsteg som gjordes under den perioden runtom i västvärlden, i kraft av att vara ett löfte om en annan – bättre – värld, genom att inspirera till hopp om en annan framtid. Sovjetunionens blotta existens fungerade under många år som ett exempel på att den världen kan vara möjlig och gav människor ett alternativ att bygga sina idéer kring.

När Sovjetunionen upplöstes var det många som såg sitt livs politiska övertygelse försvinna eller segra. De flesta inom vänstern tog avstånd från, eller tonade ner, sitt arv och sina politiska idéer och inom högern utropades historiens slut och liberalismens (och i

förlängning kapitalismens) seger. Att vi idag inte kan föreställa oss en annan framtid kan därför förklaras genom avsaknaden av ett reellt alternativ till dagens system och insikten om att det enda andra försöket inte blev det man hade hoppats på. Likväl innebar kalla krigets slut att tron på sitt egna system inte längre behövde tvingas på medborgarna och att propagandan därför avtog. Idag befinner vi oss därför i en situation där samhällets utformning ses som ett naturtillstånd snarare än ett resultat av ett politiskt projekt. Det politiska uppdraget består därför inte i att formulera en vision om ett annat samhälle utan att förvalta det befintliga.

En annan möjlig förklaring till vår tids brist på visioner är den välfärds kapitalism som har präglat västvärlden sedan efterkrigstiden. Arbetarklassens kamp för sociala skyddsnät

och ett värdigare liv fann sitt utlopp i välfärdsstaten och att solidariskt redistribuera inkomster och jämna ut möjligheter. Men i takt med att den materiella standarden höjdes för det stora flertalet verkar också den arbetarklassidentitet som var fröet till förändring mattas av. Trots att de flesta håller med om att vi fortfarande i allra högsta grad lever i ett klassamhälle så identifierar sig allt färre med sin sociala klass. I individualismens tidevarv består vårt identitetsbygge i högre grad av våra personliga intressen och upplevda egenskaper, och vårt engagemang riktar sig mot enskilda hjärtefrågor snarare än är sprungna ur ideologi eller klassposition. Frågan är om det är möjligt att formulera visioner när det kollektiva "viet" eroderat. Det är kanske inte politiskt görbart att skapa bred uppslutning för en idé när människans tillhörigheter och intressen är så fragmentariska och i ständig omstöpning.

I takt med världens gradvisa internationalisering har vi dessutom trätt in i en era karakteriserad av sammanflätade ödesgemenskaper, vilket leder till att nationalstaters problem allt mer vävs samman. Globala epidemier, finansiella flöden och miljöhot låter sig inte begränsas av territoriella gränsdragningar, och vi medborgare kan inte längre räkna med att nationalstaten skyddar oss mot de hot som världen bär i sitt sköte. Vår tid verkar därför kännetecknas av en diffus oro, riktat mot ett ansiktslöst hot. Kanske hanterar vi denna generella framtidsångest som människor hanterar ångest i allmänhet: vi försöker helt enkelt att tränga bort den, varpå nuet och dåtiden tillåts breda ut sig på framtidens bekostnad. Populärkulturen verkar bekräfta denna dystra framtidsbild – som samhällsliga litmustest har kulturen en möjlighet att säga oss en hel del om sakens tillstånd. En tendens i den senaste tidens mest populära verk är just berättelsen om världen efter kollapsen. Ett av de tydligaste exemplen på detta är filmen *Interstellar*, där handlingen utspelar sig i en tid där långtgående klimatförändringar leder filmens hjälte

till att försöka rädda mänskligheten genom att skapa ett nytt samhälle, långt bort från jorden. Budskapet är tydligt: planeten är utom räddning, allt vi kan hoppas på är en salig plats, någon helt annanstans.

Vi verkar alltså leva i en tid som präglas av att tidsmässigt komma efter en period av stora framtidsvisioner, vars uppgång och fall skapat en ovisshet kring vad nästa steg skulle kunna vara. Det är även en tid som präglas av bristen på kollektiva identiteter, vilket gör att det inte finns något "vi" att formulera en vision för. Samtidigt är framtiden behängd med stora risker som är svåra att kontrollera eller planera för. Så, är vi dömda att leva i världen som den är? Karl Marx hävdade att det är just när människan genomgår en process för att omskapa sig själva och sin självförståelse som hon blickar tillbaka snarare än framåt. Kanske är vår oförmåga att skapa framtidsvisioner en konsekvens av att vi just nu försöker förstå vilka vi är, i efterdyningarna av modernitetens allomfattande narrativ. Kanske definieras vår tid inte av att befinna sig efter de stora framtidsvisionerna, utan istället innan något helt nytt. ■

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föreningen
Göteborg

CONTRIBUTORS



Axel Christoffersson
Editor-in-chief
Legally responsible publisher
axel.christoffersson@utblick.org



Mikael Lassa
Editor-in-chief
mikael.lassa@utblick.org



Malin Lampio
Writer
malin.lampio@utblick.org



Calum Turnbull
Writer
calum.turnbull@utblick.org



Hemrin Molla
Writer
hemrin.molla@utblick.org



Egil Sturk
Writer
egil.sturk@utblick.org



Sarah Olsson Olofsson
Writer
sarah.olsson.olofsson@utblick.org



Anna Kuzmina
Writer
anna.kuzmina@utblick.org



Ida Larsson
Writer
ida.larsson@utblick.org



Brea Pluta
Proof reader for English articles
brea.pluta@utblick.org



Filippa Andersson
Illustrator
filippa.andersson@utblick.org



Linn Posse
Graphic Designer & illustrator
linnposse@gmail.com

COLOPHON

Legally responsible publisher
Axel Christoffersson

Editors-in-Chief
Mikael Lassa
Axel Christoffersson

Writers
Anna Lindvall
Mina Ghassaban Kjellén
Mikael Lassa
Malin Lampio
Arash Bolouri
Viktor Warg
Anna Gavrilova
Egil Sturk
Selma Aalachi
Fredrik Dellby
Ida Larsson
Sarah Olsson Olofsson
Calum Turnbull
Hemrin Molla
Thomas Kräuchi
Axel Christoffersson
Anna Kuzmina
Liza Rousselle
Mikael Hemlin
Kayly Quinn Graña
Adis Hasic

Proof reading
Axel Christoffersson
Mikael Lassa
Brea Pluta

Graphic designer
Linn Posse

Illustrators
Filippa Andersson
Linn Posse

Web-editor
Mikael Hemlin

Printing house
Trydells

Radio Utblick
Fatima Sow
Ruben Dieleman
Rebecka Mårtenson
Clara Lowenberg
Léa Vassal
Gustav Staub Nyqvist

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The Society of International Affairs Gothenburg is a non-governmental organization with the ambition to spread knowledge and spark discussion about foreign policy issues. We organize lectures and trips, host movie screenings and publish the magazine Utblick. A one-year membership is 50 sek and everyone can join.



Letter from the President



What is utopia? On a definitive level, the answer is rather straight forward – a perfect, but unachievable state of society. On a substantive level, the answer is a bit more complicated. For one thing, the concept of utopia is inherently subjective; a utopian society could be libertarian or communist, conservative or bohemian, depending on who's asked. Also, as the ruthless regimes in the Soviet Union, Venezuela and North Korea clearly demonstrate, a utopian theory might be a nightmare in practise, simply because the utopian ideals that those states were founded upon are incompatible with human motivations.

Furthermore, utopia is an eternally wide subject. Debates on how to organize society are often ideologically contingent, which means that the topic of this issue of Utblick encompasses pretty much the entire field of the social sciences.

On a different note, the Society of International Affairs in Gothenburg has many interesting events coming up. Among other things, we will once again have the honour of hosting H.E. Ambassador David Cairns for an update on the British Government's views on the progression of the Brexit negotiations. Also, in addition to our frequent movie screenings, lectures, Model UN-simulations etc., we've started to arrange quiz nights once a month.

Keep an eye open and enjoy the read!

Mikael Hemlin

President, The Society of International Affairs in Gothenburg