

ISSN: 2514-0612

Journal homepage: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE>

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'The Oceans are Rising and So Are We': Exploring Utopian Discourses in the School Strike For Climate Movement

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Source: *Brief Encounters*, Vol. 4 No. 1 (March 2020), pp. 48–63.

URL: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE/article/view/217>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.217>

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# ‘The Oceans Are Rising and So Are We’: Exploring Utopian Discourses in the School Strike For Climate Movement

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Heather McKnight

This article offers some provisional analyses of the discourses presented by participants in the School Strike for Climate movement, which (since it began in 2018) has been organised variously under the banners Fridays for Future, Youth for Climate and School Strike 4 Climate.<sup>1</sup> This paper contends that the movement goes beyond just presenting a vision of an inescapable future, or a simple request for adults to listen to science.<sup>2</sup> Instead, their vision is constructive of a better world, as participants challenge the failures of politicians and arguably the adult public, demanding to play an active role in policymaking when it comes to the climate crisis. This movement is constructed upon a critical utopian discourse, expressed through complex temporalities, which define the role of resistance as anticipation. This article also considers how the anxiety in the School Strike movement creates a militant optimism, and how its narratives are demonstrative of an open-ended utopian process.

## Methodology

This inquiry into the utopian discourse of the School Strike movement is based on quotes from child activists (under 18 years old) in local and national English language news articles, broadcasts and School Strike websites. For brevity, it cites a few widely known and indicative quotes, as examples of the broader discourse, with a focus on Greta Thunberg, whose actions were the catalyst for the movement. This article performs an open form of critical discourse analysis using the framework of Ernst Bloch’s process-based utopian theory.<sup>3</sup>

In this theory, the utopian process is a critical engagement which allows us to realise the potential of a ‘better world’.<sup>4</sup> For a process to be utopian in a Blochian sense, it has to be an open process, reaching for a better world that must also be grounded in a critique of the now.<sup>5</sup> The utopian impulse grows from the ‘comprehended darkness of the lived moment’; this refers to the fact that we exist in our own blind spot, unable to understand the present until we move past it.<sup>6</sup> It also alludes to the present as a place of uncertainty, oppression and suffering.<sup>7</sup> In the case of this study, the ‘darkness of the lived moment’ is defined by the imminence of the climate crisis, the feeling of helplessness and inertia, and the lack of global action and political leadership.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ‘About’, *Fridays for Future* <<https://www.fridaysforfuture.org/about>> [accessed 9 July 2019]; ‘Home EN’, *Youth For Climate* <<https://youthforclimate.be/home-en/>> [accessed 9 July 2019]; ‘About’, *School Strike 4 Climate (Australia)* <<https://www.schoolstrike4climate.com/about>> [accessed 18 July 2019].

<sup>2</sup> Darrick Evensen, ‘The Rhetorical Limitations of the #FridaysForFuture Movement’, *Nature Climate Change*, 9.6 (2019), 428–430 <<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-019-0481-1>>.

<sup>3</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, ed. by Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), I.

<sup>4</sup> Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, I, x–xii.

<sup>5</sup> Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, I.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5; Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, I, pp. 122, 194, 198.

<sup>8</sup> Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, I; Bloch, *Spirit*.

The utopian process also has to have an element of possibility: it has to have within it an imagination of a new and better world.<sup>9</sup> In the School Strike movement, this is exemplified by the student protests themselves, and their calls for action on the crisis, for emergency environmental policies and for new political processes. This study aims to show that the School Strike movement communicates a politics of transformational perspectives which will contribute towards an educated hope.<sup>10</sup> In interrogating the discourse from a utopian perspective this article aims to present a partial vision of the ‘collective daydream’ of the movement: the actions, debates and ideas that, when expressed, may lead to constructive change.<sup>11</sup>

This article begins by considering utopian temporality in these discourses, placing forward-facing collective daydreams of climate justice in a fractured sense of ‘now’ for the students involved. Secondly, it looks at the critique this movement provides of not just the inaction and destruction of the climate, but of the system of capital more generally. This leads on to how such discourses of resistance also act on those of anticipation, of hopeful reaching towards a better world. This hopefulness is interrogated as being one of militant optimism that is grounded in anxiety and reaching towards a better but still unknowable world, rather than a blueprint of a pre-determined state. Finally, this article will consider the narratives of empowerment that these discourses contain, specifically those in the UK concerning youth democracy.

This research hopes to be a starting point for future, more detailed work. With it offering a preliminary analysis, it is not based on direct interviews or field-work, but instead examines quotes from English language publications. As a researcher outside of this movement and without carrying out detailed fieldwork, there are limits on my ability to understand the motivations of the young people quoted; nevertheless, I will be drawing on the recorded words of some of the movement’s most vocal activists, which facilitates preliminary analysis to identify utopian tropes.

I should also point out that there are ethical considerations to work involving children and young people; as such, no effort has been made to identify children quoted beyond those names already cleared as part of the original publication process. Some therefore remain anonymous.

Finally, I wish to note my privileged positionality as a white researcher in the UK, and want to recognise the criticism of the ‘whiteness of green’ politics in terms of both how the environmental resistance has been formulated and the colonial roots of the climate crisis. Within this criticism, whiteness is a socio-spatial process constituting particular bodies as possessing the normative power to enjoy social privilege.<sup>12</sup> Narratives of environmentalism have been criticised for reinforcing colonial privilege, reproducing colonial visions of a superior global north and an inferior south.<sup>13</sup> I am working on the assumption that those at the intersections of oppression on the grounds of race, gender and class are likely to be less visible, and this is vital work to prioritise moving forward. Being a preliminary piece of work, in this article I aim to identify some challenges with regards to issues of race and colonial assumptions and identify matters to be addressed in future.

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<sup>9</sup> Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, I.

<sup>10</sup> Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, I; Ernst Bloch, *Spirit*.

<sup>11</sup> Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, I, pp. 91–93.

<sup>12</sup> Sheelah McLean, ‘The Whiteness of Green: Racialization and Environmental Education’, *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe Canadien*, 57.3 (2013), 354–362 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12025>>.

<sup>13</sup> Kate Manzo, ‘Imaging Vulnerability: The Iconography of Climate Change’, *Area*, 42.1 (2010), 96–107 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.2009.00887.x>>.

## Collective Daydreams from a Fractured Present

The speed with which this movement has captured the world is striking. The inertia created through a lack of action can be read as the ‘darkness of the lived moment’; this is the current predicament. The School Strike movement progressed swiftly after August 2018, when 15-year-old Greta Thunberg held a solo protest outside the Swedish parliament. By February 2019, the UK-wide climate change strike saw thousands of schoolchildren and young people walk out of classes, angry at the failure of politicians to make progress in slowing the escalating ecological crisis. The movement has grown rapidly; it is now estimated that around 70,000 schoolchildren each week hold protests in 270 towns and cities worldwide.<sup>14</sup> On 15 March 2019, there were 1,693 protests registered across 106 countries, with an estimated 1.5 million students striking on one day.<sup>15</sup>

Here, the School Strike movement resonates with Micah White’s utopic predictions of the ‘fast future’ of activism, where ‘next-generation movements exploit differentials in time perception by moving ultrafast compared to the status quo.’<sup>16</sup> In resisting the inertia of the political situation, one action (that of Thunberg’s initial protest) has quickly turned into many (the actions of participating school students across the globe). What, in a utopian sense, must be considered a collective daydream of resistance to the climate crisis has materialised into concrete reality, into bodies on the streets and strikes across the world.<sup>17</sup> On 1 March 2019, 150 students from the global coordination group of the youth-led climate strike, including Thunberg, issued an open letter in *The Guardian*, saying:

We, the young, are deeply concerned about our future. [...] We are the voiceless future of humanity. We will no longer accept this injustice. [...] We finally need to treat the climate crisis as a crisis. It is the biggest threat in human history and we will not accept the world’s decision-makers’ inaction that threatens our entire civilisation. [...] United we will rise until we see climate justice. We demand the world’s decision-makers take responsibility and solve this crisis. You have failed us in the past. If you continue failing us in the future, we, the young people, will make change happen by ourselves.<sup>18</sup>

The utopian impulse emerges when hope creates action in a desperate situation.<sup>19</sup> Here, forward-facing daydreams emerge from something lacking in the leadership of the world that these young people have wanted to change. In a utopian sense daydreams are not just ‘escapist’ or a ‘substitution’, they also sustain people encouraging them not to look away from reality but into the possible future.<sup>20</sup> As Thunberg notes above, a daydream of climate justice, the progress that *could* be made, provides inspiration and drive for the utopian process.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Taylor, Sandra Laville, Amy Walker, Poppy Noor and Jon Henley, ‘School Pupils Call for Radical Climate Action in UK-Wide Strike’, *The Guardian*, 15 February 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/feb/15/uk-climate-change-strike-school-pupils-children-environment-protest>> [accessed 17 September 2019].

<sup>15</sup> Evensen, p. 428.

<sup>16</sup> Micah White, *The End of Protest: A New Playbook for Revolution* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2016), p. 188.

<sup>17</sup> Bloch, I, pp. 76, 146, 157.

<sup>18</sup> The global coordination group of the youth-led climate strike, ‘Climate Crisis and a Betrayed Generation’ (letter), *The Guardian*, 1 March 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/mar/01/youth-climate-change-strikers-open-letter-to-world-leaders>> [accessed 18 July 2019].

<sup>19</sup> Bloch, I, p. 46.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Politics of both engagement and disengagement take place in the movement; these pull on dual fronts. As Thunberg also stated:

Why should I be studying for a future that soon may be no more, when no one is doing anything to save that future? And what is the point of learning facts when the most important facts clearly mean nothing to our society?<sup>22</sup>

The above quotes are grounded in action – they have ‘started to move and we will not rest again’<sup>23</sup> – but also inertia, when she asks ‘what is the point in learning?’<sup>24</sup> Within these future narratives, there is not one coherent ‘now’ from which to reach; the present is fractured. Utopian theory recognises the fractured ‘now’ as a motivator for change. Bloch notes that contradiction with the overarching ideology, or ‘now’, is both contemporaneous and non-contemporaneous; both conflicts create potential for change and newness, a possibility for the utopian process to occur.<sup>25</sup> Those who are ‘out of time’ are non-contemporaneous, those acting upon their potential (i.e. striking and marching) are ‘in the moment’ and are contemporaneous.<sup>26</sup> The strike has emerged from the non-contemporaneity, the ‘darkness of the lived moment’.<sup>27</sup> The world leaders, commercial companies, and adults generally who have held power and been contemporaneous have been existing in a different ‘now’ from the young, one that is connected with a different and closer future that has not inspired action.

There is a tension between different experiences of the lived now and who can act in the moment through the school strikes; voices will be missing from this discourse. This has a particular relationship with race and bodies in protest, specifically who is free to protest. Not everyone has the ability or right to protest in the same way, being restricted in different countries by statute, cultural norms, or discriminatory practices; this, in turn, impacts on agency and power relations.<sup>28</sup> These different situations create differential contemporaneities through limiting action that can be taken in the ‘now’, and this fractured present of discriminatory local and global factors means that not all school children who want to strike can or will.

There are fears around police involvement with protests; it is known that institutional racism within police forces has led to disproportionate violence and arrests for black students. We frequently see structural inequalities and intersectional oppressions within society replicated within spaces and voices of resistance.<sup>29</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this article to establish its extent, this undoubtedly impacts participation in action and surrounding discourse.

<sup>22</sup> FridaysForFuture, ‘Greta Thunberg Speech to UN Secretary General António Guterres’, *YouTube*, 3 December 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hq489387cg4>> [accessed 18 July 2019].

<sup>23</sup> The global coordination group of the youth-led climate strike, ‘Climate Crisis and a Betrayed Generation’ (letter), *The Guardian*, 1 March 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/mar/01/youth-climate-change-strikers-open-letter-to-world-leaders>> [accessed 18 July 2019].

<sup>24</sup> FridaysForFuture, ‘Greta Thunberg Speech to UN Secretary General António Guterres’, *YouTube*, 3 December 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hq489387cg4>> [accessed 18 July 2019].

<sup>25</sup> Susan McManus, ‘Fabricating the Future: Becoming Bloch’s Utopians’, *Utopian Studies*, 14.2 (2003), 1–22 (p. 2) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20718998>>; Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 1st ed. (Breinigsville, PA: Polity, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> Bloch, *Heritage*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, *Decolonising the University* (London: Pluto Press, 2018); White, *The End of Protest*; Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, ‘Sensing Dispossession: Women and Gender Studies between Institutional Racism and Migration Control Policies in the Neoliberal University’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 54 (2016), 167–177 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2015.06.013>>.

<sup>29</sup> Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, ‘Sensing Dispossession’.

What is clear is that the young peoples' voices that are represented in this movement have particular strength due to their existence beyond our own possible temporality. Their potential to outlive us reaches into different futurity; but there is also a vulnerability as there may be little to live for or by. These statements from school-student activists demonstrate how the discourses of the movement relate to a future that is both imaginable and at the same time also dangerously impossible and fragile, where the typical capitalist structures that would provide them with a future have dissolved.

### **A Criticism of the 'Now'**

The School Strike movement can be read as a criticism of capitalism more generally; it critiques the capitalist processes that have led to the climate crisis. But the action that the young people are taking goes beyond this. Young people lay claim to both feeling voiceless while also being the hope for the future.<sup>30</sup> Here we may wish to consider what future these students are risking, which is linked with removing themselves from the overarching systems of becoming commodified products themselves. First, they are giving up time that should be spent in a system where their progress is measured, and where they are at risk of being consigned to a different future should they fail a test. Current narratives of the accumulation of cultural capital see school as a way to access college qualifications and university degrees, with a focus on building cultural capital and employment in the job market.<sup>31</sup> By striking from school they make an open declaration that they are risking, and to some extent rejecting, their futures as defined by capitalism. They are not necessarily directly criticising this element of the capitalist system by disengaging from it, but they are underscoring the pointlessness of striving for it if it will only exist in a dying world.

School students are disengaged with the expectations of them in the present, their schoolwork and regular attendance. Sara Ahmed notes in *The Promise of Happiness* that revolutionary consciousness involves 'feeling at odds with the world, or feeling that the world is odd': it consists of a process of estrangement from 'the world of good habits and manners, which promises your comfort in return for obedience and good will.'<sup>32</sup> For students in the School Strike movement, resisting the expected norms of school attendance ('the good habits and manners') and raging against the system in protest demonstrates how they are at odds with the capitalist system that created, and continues to perpetuate, the climate crisis.<sup>33</sup> We see above that the students' critique here is not just about getting adults to listen to science, but about more significant cultural and political concerns. In acting, and in speaking out, many young people have moved into contemporaneity through the School Strike movement.

However, they are also not in charge; they take this stage on Friday afternoons, at strikes and online, but also sit compliant on the outside of this, unable to affect the action they need themselves. The participants in the movement move between having agency on some days and not on others. This is not indicative of a simple process of taking control; it instead represents a complex non-linearity of time, not a single narrative of progress but a multifaceted and ever-moving struggle where they move in and out of their sense of empowerment. What also should be highlighted here is what is to be learnt through participation in direct action itself. In engaging in the marches and protests, through criticising the government and recognising how it is disenfranchised, this generation of activists is becoming more informed about the processes, making it informed political agents for the future. Here, spaces of action

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<sup>30</sup> Bloch, *Heritage*, 114

<sup>31</sup> Peter John and Joëlle Fanghanel, *Dimensions of Marketisation in Higher Education* (London: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 169.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

operate as sites of Giroux's critical pedagogy, one that tries to resist modes of cultural reproduction in the aforementioned capitalist system.<sup>34</sup> The learning spaces of protests and marches facilitate an opening up to new ideas, a reduction of hierarchy in learning, and the creation of community.

However, there is still an issue of disengagement from school work; for those who do strike, it involves disproportionate risk for those already at intersections of oppression in terms of race, class and gender. We may be likely see this represented in future grades if students are disengaged from classes. In the future will there be disparities in the impact on different marginalised groups due to their disengagement with school? Will these replicate and extend the existing inequalities around race, gender, economic situation, health, visa or refugee status, caring or family responsibilities and other defining features too numerous to mention? Such factors are much deserving of interrogation in future research.

In terms of learning within the movement, a critique of race, oppression and colonialism is very present; 16-year-old Nadia Nazar, founder of the Zero Hour campaign group notes that:

We really focus on how different people are impacted differently according to their identity, and how systems of oppression like racism, patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism and ableism, how they've all played a role in how magnified climate change has become. Our world is becoming more divided with climate change.<sup>35</sup>

They do not merely focus on accepting science but also on much broader issues. Aspects of the movement echo ongoing criticisms of the 'whiteness of green' which the Green 2.0 executive director Whitney Tome notes 'silences the very people who often feel the greatest impact of a warming planet, even though activists of colour could make or break success for this work.'<sup>36</sup> Participants understand that those most privileged are the most likely to be able to claim and exercise these rights to protest even within the School Strike movement. This is an international issue, and the free capitalist west is both the location for much of this resistance and the cause of the crisis, a process critiqued by several UK students' unions campaigns as CO2lonialisation.<sup>37</sup> This is represented in their engagement with both the young people in their institutions and in their outreach programmes to schools.<sup>38</sup>

The resistance to the environmental crisis in the School Strike movement is bound up with resisting the other forms of oppression that young people experience and are aware of, specifically those interlinked issues of capitalism and colonialism. It has become a forum for discussion and critique on many different aspects that young people wish to see changed in the world.

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<sup>34</sup> Henry A. Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy*, Critical Pedagogy Today (New York, NY: Continuum International), pp. 5–6.

<sup>35</sup> Steve Salter and Clementine de Pressigny, 'Why Are Thousands of Students Striking from School?', *I-D*, 11 February 2019 <[https://i-d.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/kzdz7y/youth-strike-for-climate-change-greta-thunberg](https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/kzdz7y/youth-strike-for-climate-change-greta-thunberg)> [accessed 18 July 2019].

<sup>36</sup> Nikhil Swaminathan, 'The Unsustainable Whiteness of Green', *Grist*, 20 June 2017 <<https://grist.org/feature/the-unsustainable-whiteness-of-green/>> [accessed 13 March 2020].

<sup>37</sup> 'Sustainability', *SOAS Students' Union* <<https://soasunion.org/yourunion/sustainability/>> [accessed 27 May 2019]; 'Our Zero Waste Shop Opens @ Sheffield Students' Union', *Sheffield Students' Union* <<https://su.sheffield.ac.uk/articles/our-zero-waste-shop-opens>> [accessed 26 May 2019]; 'Why Climate Change Is a Racist Issue @ Sustainability', *National Union of Students* <<https://sustainability.nus.org.uk/divest-invest/articles/why-climate-change-is-a-racist-issue>> [accessed 18 July 2019].

<sup>38</sup> 'Sustainability', *SOAS Students' Union* <<https://soasunion.org/yourunion/sustainability/>> [accessed 27 May 2019]; SOAS Students' Union, 'Climate Change Is a Racist Issue' (event), *Facebook*, 15 January 2019 <<https://www.facebook.com/events/388530428583461/>> [accessed 18 July 2019]; 'Why Climate Change Is a Racist Issue @ Sustainability', *National Union of Students* <<https://sustainability.nus.org.uk/divest-invest/articles/why-climate-change-is-a-racist-issue>> [accessed 18 July 2019].



## Resistance as Anticipation

The statements of resistance made by school students on strike may seem negative on the surface; however, the very fact that they are speaking out means that they feel there is the possibility that change can happen. The School Strike movement website in Australia asserts that:

We are temporarily sacrificing our educations to save our futures from dangerous climate change.<sup>39</sup>

A student protester quoted at a Brighton march stated:

We are young people, we shouldn't have to think about this. This is about fighting for our future. Climate change is the biggest threat that humanity faces. This march is about spreading awareness and grabbing people's attention to alert them to what's happening.<sup>40</sup>

The critique of the now from those involved in the school strikes demonstrates anticipation of a better world. The statements they make show their anticipation of a future of action on the climate crisis, and that a fundamental assumption is contained within them that change is possible. In reference to a 'temporary sacrifice' and 'fighting for our future', the statements contain within them an underlying assumption that positive change is an objective possibility, given the right conditions. The utopian horizons they present are the anticipations of something better and, at the same time, the driving force that changes the material world into a different future.

By stating that it is not too late to act, the discourse of resistance becomes an anticipatory act. It is forward-reaching and aiming to create something new, as opposed to merely withstanding or resisting what is there.<sup>41</sup> Here instead we can see the School Strike movement is not only a by-product of power where young people are pushed to the point of uprising because there is no alternative; it is also something which (when strategically codified) makes change possible as they come with practical suggestions and demands about how the future should be sustained.<sup>42</sup> The strikes contribute to a transformative politics where marches, assemblies, and banner-making sessions are critical spaces of engagement. As Davina Cooper notes in *Everyday Utopias*, the creation of a utopian space is a method of engagement with a *potential* future.<sup>43</sup>

These anticipatory horizons do not present a fixed totality; they should be seen to operate, as Moylan notes, 'at a level of provocative utopian tropes rather than categorical imperatives that order all which come before them'.<sup>44</sup> This is not a 'blueprints' approach to Utopia. Instead, these strikes act as utopian spaces of potentiality, providing a platform from which to criticise the world. Within the School Strike movement, Thunberg has framed this possibility as 'cathedral thinking', stating:

<sup>39</sup> 'About', *School Strike 4 Climate (Australia)* <<https://www.schoolstrike4climate.com/about>> [accessed 18 July 2019].

<sup>40</sup> Katherine Hay, 'Brighton Pupils Skip School Again for Climate Change March', *The Argus*, 22 June 2019 <<https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/17723577.brighton-pupils-skip-school-again-for-climate-change-march/>> [accessed 2 July 2019].

<sup>41</sup> Sammy Adelman and Abdul Paliwala, 'Law's Infamy: Critical Perspectives of Law in Development', in *Law as Resistance: Modernism, Imperialism, Legalism*, ed. by Peter Fitzpatrick (Burlington, Vt: Routledge, 2008), 41–66.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

<sup>43</sup> Davina Cooper, *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 3–4.

<sup>44</sup> Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moylan, *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch* (London and New York, NY: Verso, 1997), p. 114.



It is still not too late to act. It will take a far-reaching vision, it will take courage, it will take fierce, fierce determination to act now, to lay the foundations where we may not know all the details about how to shape the ceiling... In other words, it will take cathedral thinking. I ask you to please wake up and make changes required possible.<sup>45</sup>

Thunberg's idea of 'cathedral thinking' refers to the fact that we need not know what the ceiling looks like before we start building the walls. We need a way to consider the future and act, without knowing what it might become. Here hope is a critical process, but also a present disruption, a resource of the discontinuous, and the anticipatory consciousness.<sup>46</sup> There is a utopian horizon of action against climate change, but this will change as we move towards it.

Here the discourse takes an open utopian form, which is defined by indeterminacy in both unknowable consequences and content. Choices have been made and a direction of travel has been set; there is not a specific knowledge of what the endpoint is and what our actions to slow the climate crisis may lead to, or a full plan of what the response will be. By taking an open form, and not closing down to one way of doing things, there is not only the option to act more quickly, but space is made for what McManus would describe as the 'creative epistemology of the possible'.<sup>47</sup> It demonstrates a will to change for the better, and to adapt on that journey as needed; this 'cathedral thinking' reaches ever into utopian possibility. It is a philosophy that is focussed on something other than a reproduction of the present; an epistemology that is 'both utopian and deconstructive'.<sup>48</sup> The unclosed nature of the imagining opens up a space for politics of change that are ethically advantageous.<sup>49</sup> In a world when things are changing fast, and uncertainty is high, action needs to be taken now. This action needs to be open to shifts in the process so as not to get stuck in inaction once more; the critique must be continual. The 'cathedral thinking' of Thunberg demonstrates that we do not need all the answers to start this action. Here 'cathedral thinking' is not a 'blueprints' approach to Utopia but instead a partial green print from which we can envision a utopian horizon, and start action fast rather than waiting for a grand plan to solve all the ills of the climate crisis.<sup>50</sup>

## Anxiety – The House is On Fire

Within the narrative of it being 'not too late to act', it is worth recognising that there is also the danger of erasing those for whom it is already too late. Thunberg notes '[c]limate change is already happening. People did die, are dying and will die because of it.'<sup>51</sup> There are droughts and resource shortages in northern Africa and the Middle East which have contributed to refugee crises and rising sea levels have already forced island populations to relocate, alongside unseasonal wildfires in Australia, to mention but

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<sup>45</sup> Gráinne Ní Aodha, 'Greta Thunberg Tells EU It Needs "Cathedral-Thinking" on Climate Change', [TheJournal.ie](https://www.thejournal.ie/greta-thunberg-eu-4594404-Apr2019/), 17 April 2019 <<https://www.thejournal.ie/greta-thunberg-eu-4594404-Apr2019/>> [accessed 2 July 2019].

<sup>46</sup> Bloch, I, p. 53.

<sup>47</sup> McManus.

<sup>48</sup> McManus, pp. 2–3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

<sup>50</sup> Cooper, *Everyday Utopias*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>51</sup> The global coordination group of the youth-led climate strike, 'Climate Crisis and a Betrayed Generation' (letter), *The Guardian*, 1 March 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/mar/01/youth-climate-change-strikers-open-letter-to-world-leaders>> [accessed 18 July 2019].

a few issues.<sup>52</sup> There have been significant consequences for the most vulnerable twenty countries who have faced an average of more than 50,000 deaths per year since 2010 due to the current crisis and this is expected to increase exponentially.<sup>53</sup> While this sounds terrifying, Muñoz notes how both hope and fear can be regarded as affective structures with anticipatory potential.<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, despite the above, the horizons drawn by this movement hope for something better and aim to prevent a worse future, to slow the destruction. Muñoz notes how in such situations ‘[w]e need hope to counter a climate of hopelessness that immobilises us both on the level of thought and transformative behaviours.’<sup>55</sup> Here, school strikes counter the climate of hopelessness, and movements such as Zero Hour have developed alongside the School Strike one; they specifically address the root systems of oppression, like colonialism, as causing the climate crisis, and seek intersectional solutions.<sup>56</sup> Much of the discourse does recognise the global inequalities and the suffering already underway as an apocalyptic warning. There is not a jubilation to this, and Thunberg has also spoken to politicians about how they ‘did not act in time’; in the same speech she also notes:

People always tell me and the other millions of school strikers that we should be proud of ourselves for what we have accomplished. But the only thing that we need to look at is the emission curve. And I’m sorry, but it’s still rising.<sup>57</sup>

Bloch notes that ‘concrete’ utopian thinking is reached through experience, resistance and failure. This is the anxiety within this movement: the fear that it will fail and is failing as indicated by the rising emissions curve.<sup>58</sup> The anticipation of this movement grows from this critique and anxiety, and as such is not an easy process, and involves the risks of action and inaction for those striking. These students will experience the material realities of climate change in a way that those politicians currently in charge, and adults presently enfranchised, will not. A student protester in Brighton locates the fear from which their actions originate:

In just over a decade, humans will have done irreversible damage to the planet. I fear how much our children and grandchildren will be affected by this.<sup>59</sup>

Their ethics grow from the edge of anxiety. Thunberg’s story begins when she was thrown into depression and rendered speechless by her future.<sup>60</sup> Anxiety plays a key part in Bloch’s anticipatory

<sup>52</sup> Ann V. Sanson, Judith Van Hoorn, and Susie E. L. Burke, ‘Responding to the Impacts of the Climate Crisis on Children and Youth’, *Child Development Perspectives*, 13.4 (2019), 201–217 (p. 202). <<https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12342>>; Dorothy Grace Guerrero, ‘The Limits of Capitalist Solutions to the Climate Crisis’, in *The Climate Crisis: South African and Global Democratic Eco-Socialist Alternatives*, ed. by Vishwas Satgar (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2018), 30–46 (p. 37). <<https://doi.org/10.18772/22018020541>>.

<sup>53</sup> Vishwas Satgar, ‘The Climate Crisis and Systemic Alternatives’, in *The Climate Crisis: South African and Global Democratic Eco-Socialist Alternatives*, ed. by Vishwas Satgar (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2018), 1–28 (p. 3).

<sup>54</sup> Muñoz, Jose Estaban, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, ‘Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue’, *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 19.2 (2009), 275–283 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/07407700903064946>>.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Who We Are’, *Zero Hour* <<http://thisiszerohour.org/who-we-are/>> [accessed 23 February 2020].

<sup>57</sup> Greta Thunberg, ‘“You Did Not Act in Time”: Greta Thunberg’s Full Speech to MPs’, *The Guardian*, 23 April 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/23/greta-thunberg-full-speech-to-mps-you-did-not-act-in-time>> [accessed 23 February 2020].

<sup>58</sup> Bloch, I, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> Katherine Hay, ‘Brighton Pupils Skip School Again for Climate Change March’, *The Argus*, 22 June 2019 <<https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/17723577.brighton-pupils-skip-school-again-for-climate-change-march/>> [accessed 2 July 2019].

<sup>60</sup> ‘About’, *Fridays for Future* <<https://www.fridaysforfuture.org/about/>> [accessed 9 July 2019].

consciousness, a necessary inner conflict that maintains the concrete against the abstract. We see this anxiety expressed in the banners and chants of the school students which outline a striving against apathy, and fear for survival. As Zola, aged 11 from New York, notes:

I feel both empowered and scared. It is awesome that we have come this far and that kids have taken notice of our world's faults but it's frightening that we have to. If adults had taken action before it escalated to this point, we would have had a lot more time to help piece Earth back together.<sup>61</sup>

Sara Ahmed notes an intimacy between anxiety and hope, as hope involves something that might and might not happen; we see this in the above statement where Zola is both 'empowered and scared'.<sup>62</sup> The theory of 'pre-appearance', or anticipation, begins with an understanding of the 'darkness of the lived moment', of alienation and exploitation, fear of the crisis at hand. Recognising this, Muñoz notes that it is clear that '[h]ope is a risk. But if the point is to change the world we must risk hope.'<sup>63</sup> The students striking are not rendered inert by their fear, or by the lack of action by politicians; in their statements and actions, they indeed risk hope.

Ahmed notes that hopeful anxiety is thus translated into an anxious hope.<sup>64</sup> This movement is driven and underpinned by this anxious hope and student strikers speak of being motivated by fear. Thunberg notably highlighted this through her speech to the European Parliament's environment committee. Here she became visibly upset describing how humans were causing 'climate economical breakdown', such as deforestation, air pollution, the extinction of animals and the acidification of oceans. Accusing world leaders of being too relaxed in tackling the climate crisis, she said that she wants leaders to panic, evoking an image of a house on fire. 'A great number of politicians have told me that panic never leads to anything good, but when your house is on fire, then that does require some level of panic.'<sup>65</sup>

Assumptions of a guaranteed a future for humanity can lead to complacency and undermine the utopian function. Statements above from Thunberg and the other young activists leave little doubt on this matter, demonstrating their concern over the lack of panic. This dual driving of uncertainty of success alongside the anticipation of a better future creates space for what Bloch labels 'militant optimism'. Here this militant optimism becomes the optimistic process, to be achieved and decided through the work happening in and of the moment.<sup>66</sup> In conflict with the static, it is militantly optimistic and founded and grounded in action in the material world.

## Discourses of Empowerment

In this concluding section, I want to briefly address how, alongside this emotive wake up call for the planet, there has been a call for the evaluation of how democratic inadequacy has helped to uphold and reproduce inequalities that have laid the groundwork for the climate change crisis; and this is expressed across a breadth of this movement in various statements:

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<sup>61</sup> Rachel Obordo and others, "'I Feel Empowered and Scared': Pupils Speak Before Climate Strike', *The Guardian*, 23 May 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/23/i-feel-empowered-and-scared-pupils-speak-before-climate-strike>> [accessed 18 July 2019].

<sup>62</sup> Ahmed, p. 183.

<sup>63</sup> Duggan and Muñoz.

<sup>64</sup> Ahmed, p. 183.

<sup>65</sup> Aodha.

<sup>66</sup> Bloch, I, p. 119

...young people aren't apathetic, we're passionate, articulate and we're ready to continue demonstrating the need for urgent and radical climate action.<sup>67</sup>

Young people make up more than half of the global population. Our generation grew up with the climate crisis and we will have to deal with it for the rest of our lives. Despite that fact, most of us are not included in the local and global decision-making process.<sup>68</sup>

These statements are powerful, and aim to elevate the voices of school strikers demanding respect; it is worth noting the efforts to undermine the self-written narratives of the movement. For example, the media can place strike in inverted commas and refer in headlines to the movement as merely 'children skipping school' and politicians also criticise the time taken out of school as inappropriate or irresponsible.<sup>69</sup> The efforts to undermine Thunberg herself have been extensive, Donald Trump tweeted '[s]o ridiculous. Greta must work on her Anger Management problem, then go to a good old fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill!' and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro called her a 'brat'.<sup>70</sup> It is hardly surprising that Thunberg criticises world leaders for 'behaving like children' concerning the climate crisis.<sup>71</sup> It is worth considering that, if they had more of a voice, young people might have been able to prevent the capitalist destruction that we see around us today, through being able to have a vision that does not reduce the world to an ethically void economics. This movement has an ulterior horizon which aims to build the agency and recognition of the voices of children so they can set goals for these world leaders in the form that they must follow and be accountable to, to be taken seriously.

Crucial to this debate is the lack of voting rights for young people, even at the age of 16 or 17, when in England one pays taxes, can get married, have a child and join the army, but cannot vote. The way people come into contact with politics in their formative years is crucially essential for the future of our democracy.<sup>72</sup> The School Strike movement heralds the need for a political voice and platform for a currently disenfranchised youth, unable to vote or participate meaningfully in policymaking, yet who are politically aware and articulate. In the UK, the Student Strike movement has four demands:

SAVE THE FUTURE – The Government declare a climate emergency and implement a Green New Deal to achieve Climate Justice.

TEACH THE FUTURE – The national curriculum is reformed to address the ecological crisis as an educational priority.

TELL THE FUTURE – The Government communicate the severity of the ecological crisis and the necessity to act now to the general public.

<sup>67</sup> Anna, aged 17, from the UK, quoted in "There Is No Planet B", *University of Sussex Blog* <<https://study-online.sussex.ac.uk/news-and-events/there-is-no-planet-b-1/>> [accessed 9 July 2019].

<sup>68</sup> Global coordination group of the youth-led climate strike, 'Climate Crisis and a Betrayed Generation' (letter), *The Guardian*, 1 March 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/mar/01/youth-climate-change-strikers-open-letter-to-world-leaders>> [accessed 18 July 2019].

<sup>69</sup> 'Schoolchildren "Strike" over Climate Change', *BBC News Online*, 15 February 2019 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-47250424>> [accessed 2 July 2019]; Katherine Hay, 'Brighton Pupils Skip School Again for Climate Change March', *The Argus*, 22 June 2019 <<https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/17723577.brighton-pupils-skip-school-again-for-climate-change-march/>> [accessed 2 July 2019].

<sup>70</sup> Agence France-Presse, 'Greta Thunberg Hits Back at Donald Trump Tweet Telling Her to "Chill"', *The Telegraph*, 12 December 2019 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/12/12/greta-thunberg-claps-back-president-trumps-tweet-telling-chill/>> [accessed 23 February 2020].

<sup>71</sup> 'About', *Fridays for Future* <<https://www.fridaysforfuture.org/about>> [accessed 9 July 2019].

<sup>72</sup> Jennifer Rankin, 'Forget Brexit and Focus on Climate Change, Greta Thunberg Tells EU', *The Guardian*, 16 April 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/16/greta-thunberg-urges-eu-leaders-wake-up-climate-change-school-strike-movement>> [accessed 1 July 2019].

EMPOWER THE FUTURE – The Government recognise that young people have the biggest stake in our future, by incorporating youth views into policy making and bringing the voting age down to 16.<sup>73</sup>

Here, what insights are possible are restricted by the nature of this historical moment; however, the young people involved have set goals, problems to solve, tasks which transcend our time. The desire to resist involves future anticipation. Even if the future consequence is not fully known, it originates from a desire to change the world for the better, and we can begin to see the future of what this anticipated world could be. What has happened in the School Strike movement is that young people are demonstrating their evolving capacity for political understanding and action, to support an argument for increased empowerment and enfranchisement. They are claiming their rights. As noted in the open letter to *The Guardian* in March 2019 by those involved in the school strikes:

We demand the world’s decision-makers take responsibility and solve this crisis. You have failed us in the past. If you continue failing us in the future, we, the young people, will make change happen by ourselves. The youth of this world has started to move and we will not rest again.<sup>74</sup>

When the school children say the ‘oceans are rising and so are we’, there must be a recognition that some of the structures for this utopian move are within the system.<sup>75</sup> There are laws on human rights that may already understand this logic, and open-ended conventions that reach beyond their implementation, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and supporting local legislation.

It is worth noting that the dominant discourse in the UK School Strike movement should not be the assumed discourse of empowerment for all participants. Improved democracy alone is not sufficient for dealing with the crisis at hand. Eve Darian-Smith notes in *Decolonising Utopia* that there is a need to move away from a Eurocentric model of utopian thinking where ‘utopias do not assume singular ethical or moral visions that are applicable to everyone.’<sup>76</sup> For example, human rights laws mentioned above also come under substantial critique from a colonial perspective.<sup>77</sup>

The school strikes operate in many different countries where the school children may have different demands and suggestions for steps to be taken to solve the crisis. As everyday utopias, they function as a multitude of anticipatory spaces in which the participants struggle against a dominant regime.<sup>78</sup> These open up possibility and transformation in widely differing societies.<sup>79</sup> There are multitudinous solutions in different parts of the world, where utopian imaginings and collective daydreams do not apply to everyone in the same way. Digging into such diversity is food for thought for future research.

<sup>73</sup> ‘Demands’, *UK Student Climate Network* <<https://ukscn.org/demands>> [accessed 9 July 2019].

<sup>74</sup> Jennifer Rankin, ‘Forget Brexit and Focus on Climate Change, Greta Thunberg Tells EU’, *The Guardian*, 16 April 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/16/greta-thunberg-urges-eu-leaders-wake-up-climate-change-school-strike-movement>> [accessed 1 July 2019].

<sup>75</sup> ‘Schoolchildren “Strike” over Climate Change’, *BBC News Online*, 15 February 2019 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-47250424>> [accessed 2 July 2019]; Katherine Hay, ‘Brighton Pupils Skip School Again for Climate Change March’, *The Argus*, 22 June 2019 <<https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/17723577.brighton-pupils-skip-school-again-for-climate-change-march/>> [accessed 2 July 2019].

<sup>76</sup> Eve Darian-Smith, ‘Decolonising Utopia’, *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, 22.2 (2016), 167–83 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1323238X.2016.11910947>>.

<sup>77</sup> Darian-Smith; Ratna Kapur, *Gender, Alterity and Human Rights: Freedom in a Fishbowl* (Northampton, Mass.: Edward Elgar, 2018).

<sup>78</sup> Cooper, p. 2.

<sup>79</sup> Cooper, pp. 2–3.

## Conclusion

The discourse from the school strike is not just about the anxiety and fear generated by the crisis and felt by the children; it contains within it a militant optimism for a better future. The Student Strike movement has been criticised because it ‘incorrectly assumes that science itself can tell us what action humans should take.’<sup>80</sup> Arguably the movement has instead proven to be self-reflexive and grounded in a bigger discourse on politics, oppression and futurity. It is clear that alongside action on the climate, participants believe that they have another responsibility to resolve the underlying issues that have led to the crisis. They believe that adults must no longer leave young people to be ‘the voiceless future of humanity’, but give them voting rights on their future, and develop platforms and modes of policy engagement for young citizens, specifically ones that account for and tackle intersectional oppressions of race, class and gender in their modes of operation.<sup>81</sup> In an interview on Sky News, Thunberg stated of today’s politicians:

If they don’t act now, then in the future they will be seen as some of the greatest villains in human history and we will not judge them easy... they can still change that<sup>82</sup>

There is a strong and radical message here, and it is for the adults, the politicians, the heads of corporations. In a critical utopian move, the children are taking ownership of the future historical narrative of the present, while still holding open the door for politicians to act. Their demands, while militant and carefully targeting the egos of politicians by threatening to compromise their legacy, are still cradled in the language of possibility. Perhaps this democratic move will not happen soon enough. In their letter to *The Guardian* school strikers stated: ‘If you continue failing us in the future, we, the young people, will make change happen by ourselves. The youth of this world has started to move and we will not rest again.’<sup>83</sup> This is a severe warning, and a threat against inaction. For participants, if the world does nothing, then they will rise up and take this possible future for themselves, and they will not be accepting excuses from those who have failed to act.

The additional utopian horizon here is one of greater democracy, with the hope it will bring with it a greater sense of social responsibility for future generations, so that we might survive. Movements such as the School Strike one have broken through the consciousness of society. They are creating change, already making young people not just the leaders of tomorrow, but also of today.

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80 Evensen, p. 428.

81 The global coordination group of the youth-led climate strike, ‘Climate Crisis and a Betrayed Generation’ (letter), *The Guardian*, 1 March 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/mar/01/youth-climate-change-strikers-open-letter-to-world-leaders>> [accessed 18 July 2019].

82 Hannah Thomas-Peters and David Mercer, ‘UK Carbon Emissions Target “Doing More Harm than Good”, Teen Climate Activist Greta Thunberg Tells Sky News’, *Sky News*, 20 July 2019 <<https://news.sky.com/story/uk-carbon-emissions-target-doing-more-harm-than-good-teen-climate-activist-greta-thunberg-tells-sky-news-11764916>> [accessed 18 July 2019].

83 The global coordination group of the youth-led climate strike, ‘Climate Crisis and a Betrayed Generation’ (letter), *The Guardian*, 1 March 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/mar/01/youth-climate-change-strikers-open-letter-to-world-leaders>> [accessed 18 July 2019].



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