**Feminising (Digital) Utopias**

**Introduction**

In his astute analysis of utopianism on social media sites, Rob Kozinets illustrates how the utopian flame is being continually rekindled through social media discourse critiquing capitalism. For Kozinets, this represents a type of consumer activism and he skilfully argues that, in certain instances, social media can act as a profanating counterbalance to the institution of capitalism. To make his argument he explores three Youtube sites dedicated to utopian projects – Walt Disney’s EPCOT plans, Jacque Fresco’s Venus Project and Elon Musk’s Silicon Valley vision of the future - where consumers debate the validity of alternative political and economic systems. Kozinets introduces the idea of a transgressive type of play whereby consumers can discuss and envisage other ways of being in the world that move beyond capitalist utopias (the metopias and wetopias of existing consumer culture scholarship that he categorizes). Social media sites, therefore, have the potential to open up a space for the public airing of dialectical imaginings between capitalism and its alternatives.

Kozinets emphazises utopia’s power as a method (Suvin, 1990), a heuristic device that critiques the present through conceiving new ideas and futures. In this respect, play is important as a source of creativity as it frees the participant from the strictures of real life to “play with utopia”. He identifies a particular type of play, ilinx, as being especially utopian because this variation of play creates a temporary disruption of perception, a play that is almost hallucinogenic. Accordingly, imaginative speculation around better future worlds can be like take a psychedelic drug, Kozinets argues, and the utopian discourse on Youtube can even be conceived of as a form of entertainment consumption.

While agreeing with Kozinets’s overall rationale in revealing the potential for social media to facilitate utopian play, we are also reminded that it is based on (mostly white male) individuals questioning capitalist structures and imagining alternative futures from the comfort of physical spaces (e.g. their homes, workplaces or thirdplaces) that are selectively connected to digital ones (e.g. youtube sites). Rather inevitably, this leads to a focus on a discursive model of profanation and indeed, consumer subjectivity (cf. Mansfield, 2000). There is less on the relations between different genders (and social identities more broadly), bodies and the places that they inhabit. Yet, these are key ingredients to any project of social and political transformation, utopian or otherwise. As Levitas (2017) puts it, a more “holistic version of the utopian mode treats social arrangements, means of livelihood, ways of life, and their accompanying ethics as an indivisible system” (p.6). Accordingly, we propose a complementary perspective that *feminises* Kozinets’s model of utopia through foregrounding praxis over discourse, care and interdependence over autonomy, and symmetrical participation over charismatic leadership.

Our attempt to feminise Kozinets’s model of utopia follows an increasingly influential tradition of socio-political imagination (Gibson-Graham and Cameron 2003; Gibson-Graham 2006) that acknowledges, and aims at transforming, a series of social relations that co-exist with capitalist markets yet are often rendered invisible and are ultimately devalued. For instance, most household activity is unpaid (e.g. from cooking and cleaning to looking after a family member who is ill, helping children with homework etc) despite being essential for human survival let alone human flourishing. Likewise, much (and in some parts of the world, most) economic activity takes place outside capitalist markets, for instance, through gifting, bartering and sharing economies. Such activities largely fall into what Gibson-Graham (2006) describe as the “feminine” side of life, based as they are on mutuality, respect and emotional attentiveness. Importantly, feminine here does not refer to the activities of men versus women, although it is mostly women that dominate the realm of care work and domesticity, the so-called social reproduction as opposed to production (e.g. Federici, 2012). Rather it refers to a different kind of (care) ethic, one that points, among others, towards genuinely horizontal and equal social relations, cooperation rather than competition, attentiveness to the voices of those that are less loud or dominant, the production of commons (Kouki, 2019). Importantly, this perspective explicitly questions what Kozinets describes as “the hidden institutional superstructures that create and sustain consumer culture phenomena” by pointing not only how such superstructures ascribe differential value to certain domains of consumption versus production but also how they rely on the production of patriarchal and competitive individualist (consumer) subjects for their survival.

**Praxis over discourse**

Feminist utopian thought makes a distinction between utopian form and function. Utopian form refers to the detailed specification of a perfect society (much like Walt Disney’s EPCOT Plans or the Venus Project). In contrast utopian function is less concerned about the actual content and workings of a perfect society and more focussed on utopia’s transformative potential in critiquing the present through envisioning (and oftentimes practising) an alternative future (or futures). Whereas a definition of utopia that relies on form (and, hence, content) tends to be evaluative and normative (Levitas, 1990) – we see this clearly in some of the competitive and often combative discussions that Kozinets illustrates – a definition based on utopian function is more open-ended, encouraging negotiation and participation. We see the latter also emerging in Kozinets’ study and, indeed, his overall point is that the digital environment can facilitate a ‘play with utopia’ that certainly sets in motion a utopian process of critique. Yet, crucially, utopian function from a feminist perspective attempts to open up a new conceptual space where, according to Sargisson (1996, p. 228), “utopia performs a creative function that displaces that of a perfect society.” In doing so this perspective embraces difference in all its many guises (gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, ability and so forth). Seeing utopia both as a process and a negotiation of difference, a feminist utopian vision is more ambiguous in recognition of utopia’s complex nature to human reality and the many dynamics that need negotiation at a social level. It does not seek visionary type solutions (one-size-fits-all) as do Disney, Fresco and Musk in their utopian plans. As Mead (1957) so rightly points out one man or women’s utopia can so easily be someone else’s dystopia.

Feminist utopians foreground experimentation and embodied practice as equally important, if not more so, than discursive imaginings. This is particularly so because historically – especially with Cartesian dualistic modes of thought – the category of woman has been associated with the body and that of man with the mind. Feminist utopias challenge conceptualisations of the ideal subject as one that values reason and logic over emotion and passion and engage in what Gibson-Graham (2006, p. 127) describes as “a process of producing something beyond discursively enabled shifts in identity, something that takes into account the sensational and gravitational experience of embodiment.” Thus feminist utopias emphasise praxis – the process of enacting or realising a theory – a praxis that underlines the body and the motor and neural interactions this implies between self and world (Gibson-Graham, 2006). From this perspective utopia takes on more broadly defined boundaries to be traced in many activist projects such as nuclear disarmament, Greenpeace and Occupy movements, as well as the many attempts at alternative trading systems (gifting, sharing etc).

The emphasis on praxis also brings us to another type of utopian play that supports feminist perspectives on utopia – Louis Marin’s notion of spatial play – a play that is based on the play of difference and one that is quite distinct from the escapist type of play that Kozinets identifies as *ilinx*. For Marin utopia is a space of neutrality that suspends the logic of antithesis and where contradictions are allowed to play against each other rather than being resolved as in normative views of utopia. Using the term “utopics’ to denote this spatial play, Marin used the work play to indicate the interplay between tensions, as in the way two taut ropes play against each other. These ongoing tensions facilitate creative experimentation, giving utopian spaces their radical and heterotopian potential. Hetherington (1997) argues that heterotopias are sites of utopian praxis where we witness engagements with difference taking place that prompt the emergence of new social orderings (see, for example, the alternative ethical consumer behaviours identified in Chatzidakis, Maclaran and Bradshaw, 2012).

**Care and Interdependence over autonomy**

Although caring duties are explicitly discussed in various utopian writings, from Thomas More to Charles Fourier (Tronto, 2013), *consumer* utopias, even in what Kozinets acknowledges as their wetopian version, tend to be salient about care needs and interdependency. What if such needs, and with them, all the activities from which capitalist benefits but does not directly extract (economic) value from, were to put centre-stage in consumer utopian thinking? This would directly address Kozinets’ critique of current wetopianism and metopianism, not least because, as Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser (2019) have recently put it, capitalism has historically relied on institutional superstructures that separate “the making of people from the making of profit” (p.21); in other words, the realm of production from so-called “social reproduction”. For instance, Fraser and Gordon (1994) illustrate how within the US, “independency-dependency” are categories that have been genealogically constructed through ideologies of class, race and gender. Whereas the white male heterosexual breadwinner has been the ideal “independent person”, the black single mother has been the ultimate icon of dependency, the “quintessential welfare dependent” (p.232). Thus, the fact that archetypal breadwinners have historically been reliant on women’s labour to care for their home and raise their children does not seem to register as a form of “dependency”. Their labour lacks recognition because it is outside the sphere of paid economic activity and/or increasingly, within the sphere of *devalued* economic activity; including the outsourcing of care to low-paid, precarious (and often racialised migrant) workers or the gig economy (see e.g. www.care.com).

A radical reappraisal of care and interdependency is therefore necessary if we are to acknowledge that “…without joining the spaces of the domestic/private and the public we are only thinking about half of a good life” (Rai, 2018, p.9). A key challenge here is that notions of vulnerability and dependence are, rather more profoundly, disavowed at the level of individual (consumer) subjectivity, espousing instead a model of market-mediated autonomy and freedom. Feminised readings foreground the multiplicity of needs that we all have and the multiple institutions and contractual arrangements that help us meet them, both in private and public realms (Tronto, 2013). The counterproposed model of autonomy is decidedly relational, encouraging us “…to understand that the best way of responding to oppression’s restrictive influence on an individual’s ability to act autonomously is to change the oppressive conditions of her life, not to try to make her better adapt to (or simply to manage to “overcome”) those conditions privately” (McLeod and Sherwin, 2000, p. 260). In line with Murtola’s (2010) lotus eaters, this renders any form of commoditised utopias, particularly consumer metopias, fundamentally inadequate. Their underpinning model of consumer choice is blinded to the hegemonic influence of powerful marketplace actors, let alone the non-market institutions that are essential in addressing care needs from cradle to grave (e.g. Segal 2017). In addition, marketised utopias have proved limited in their capacity to allocate caring responsibilities equally and to consider caring externalities (e.g. the social cost of neglected children; Tronto, 2013).

**Symmetrical relationships over charismatic leadership**

Crucially, feminised utopias would also be suspicious of any charismatic, talented or hard-working leaders such as Kozinets’ Fresco, Musk or Disney. This is because understandings of worthiness and charisma are often underpinned by a meritocratic narrative that accounts for different levels of (economic) success and deservedness. The underlying ethic is a meritocratic one (Littler, 2018), assuming that those needy or dependent on others, have not worked hard enough and do not deserve any better. Thus, the “rich feel full of merit” as Cooley (cited in McNamee and Miller, 2004, p.21) argues. Instead of such individualised “work ethic” that is blinded to less well-paid and culturally misrecognised jobs (see above discussion), Tronto (2013) foregrounds a “care ethic”, one that requires “a broader understanding of the place and nature of working for income” (p.88). For instance, most wealth nowadays is not accrued through “hard work” but through taking advantage of fluctuations in capital (Harvey, 2007). Understandings of deservedness and charisma would need to go hand in hand with readings of intersectionality and a deeper appreciation of the structural conditions that differentially value different forms of work and consumption.

Ultimately, feminised utopias would question the very nature of social relations and the potential power asymmetries underlining them. As various scholars have illustrated (e.g. Rai, 2018), this would also have direct implications with regards to the model(s) of leadership and participation that are most amenable to a good life. In fact, given that leadership inevitably comes with power, most feminised versions counterpropose horizontality and symmetry in the relationships of those who coalesce around similar forms of (utopian) politics. A key imperative is the design of methods and decision-making processes that maximise the possibilities of such symmetrical participation. For instance, by looking away from those who commonly speak or represent others, and giving the floor to those who tend to remain salient, and thus invisible; or by questioning habits and rituals that normalise competitiveness, hierarchies and divisions as opposed to equality and inclusivity (Kouki, 2019). Thus, a key characteristic of feminised consumer wetopias would be their explicit emphasis on intersections of privilege and power, as well as processes that ensure equal representation and participation.

**Feminising Online Utopias**

The utopian possibilities of the internet have long been of interest to feminist theorists (e.g. Haraway, 1991; Plant, 1997), especially in relation to how digital technologies can open up spaces for those who are currently under-represented. Yet initial hope for online spaces that are free from discrimination (i.e. Plant, 1997), has largely evaporated with recognition of the masculine biases inherent in the creation of technology (Cockburn, 1985) as well as the harsh realities of trolling, cyberstalking and revenge porn ([Clark-Parsons](http://mediacommons.org/user/18313), 2018). To be sure, feminised perspectives would not a priori dismiss the capacity of online activism to bring about social change and indeed pave the way for acts of consumer profanation. Beyond such *outcomes*, however, feminised perspectives would also focus on *processes,* and the hidden infrastructures that perpetuate specific hierarchies of value and power, in online and offline worlds alike. More recently various feminist scholars have called for rethinking the design of web infrastructure and tools to counter such embedded disadvantages to certain demographic groups.

In doing so, they question the whole value chain of digital production and consumption, from the mining required to manufacture parts, through digital use and consumption of electricity, to disposal (including e.g. the dumping of electronic waste to global South Countries). As Faith (2018) argues, the feminised digital economies could be “an important mode through which we can talk about these cycles in the global economy, and another way to look at the power relations embedded in technology use”. Intersectionality would emerge as a key notion, according to which hierarchies of race, class, age and gender would have to be constantly interrogated, from digital production to representation of different voices in online platforms such as youtube.

So first, in relation to digital production, feminised perspectives foreground the notion of “digital commons”, not least because “historically and in our time, women have depended more than men on access to communal resources, and have been most committed to their defence” (Federici 2012: 143). The same applies, of course, for digital commons. Feminist principles applied to the Internet also challenge the masculinised nature of spaces and processes that control Internet governance. Central to feminist approval of digital commons is the idea of collaborative production around peers (P2P) with collectively owned and managed platforms - “platform co-operativism”- as a counter proposal to capitalist innovations such as Facebook, Youtube, Uber and AirBnB. Although the latter models use collaborative discourse (wetopian) they also exclude the user community that creates them from any say in their governance, particularly in relation to the distribution of value generated. For example, Fairbnb, an ethical home sharing site directly challenges AirBnB’s business model with the aim of returning half the commissions charged to the local community for sustainable projects. The platform is co-owned and co-governed by those who work in it, use it or are impacted by its use. Through its communal business model, Fairbnb is trying to rectify the damage currently being caused by AirBnb to local housing supplies and, in turn, to local communities. Similarly, Loomio – a free software web application emerging from the Occupy Movement - facilitates collaborative decision-making processes in more inclusive and non-hierarchical ways. Designed to give everyone a voice online, all users can initiate discussions and put up proposals for discussion.

Second, in relation to digital consumption, feminist perspectives emphasise the creation of safe online spaces to counter the growth of online harassment and its concomitant reinforcement of existing (offline) power imbalances (see, for example, Jane 2014). Many closed feminist groups flourish on facebook where members are assured safety to express their views and visions for the future without fear of mockery or denigration. Additionally, with its privacy settings that limit access or allow a blogger to remain invisible, the blogosphere can function as a “networked counterpublic” (Clark-Parsons, 2018) for many young women, engendering collective action such as Slutwalk, an international social movement that protests against sexual violence and works to change attitudes around blaming victims.

Overall, then, such feminist online spaces provide sites of utopian praxis that offer new ways of organizing and relating that enable “solidarities across borders for both political and cultural work” (Desai, 2008, p. 91). Of most significance, however, are the linkages these online spaces facilitate between virtual and place-based politics and their capacity to initiate changes in power relations that work towards a more equal society at both local and global levels.

**Conclusion**

*"Utopia is on the horizon. I move two steps closer; it moves two steps further away. I walk another ten steps and the horizon runs ten steps further away. As much as I may walk, I'll never reach it. So what's the point of utopia? The point is this: to keep moving forward…” (Eduardo Galeano).*

As Kozinets aptly illustrates, consumer utopias remain a method, not an end destination. It would thus be naïve to dismiss clicktivism on the basis that it requires little effort or that it may prove inconsequential. Utopian thinking and doing is primarily about experimentation, entertaining alternatives and cultivating subject positions that are non-normative, counter-hegemonic, creative. By feminising Kozinets’ approach, we have tried to move critique and experimentation a few further steps forward: we counterpropose the notion of utopian praxis over discourse, the value of dependency over (consumerist) ideals of autonomy and independency, and social relations based on symmetric participation versus worshiping leaders (however charismatic). Akin to Kozinets, we are of course aware that such feminised utopias could have a series of unintended consequences and it is impossible a priori, to ascertain their emancipatory potential. Yet, as transformative (and feminist) consumer researchers, we have to keep moving forward.

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