Call for Papers for EWIS 2023, Amsterdam

Utopia and International Relations: Prospects and Problems

Conveners: Dr Daniel R. McCarthy (University of Melbourne) and Dr Matthew Fluck (University of Westminster)

International politics seems especially inhospitable to utopia. Sustained attention to the political dynamics of fear, tragedy, and conflict have characterized our discipline. Dreams of peace and justice seem to break upon the rocks of sovereignty and the borders of political community. While the idea of utopianism has played a central role in IR's disciplinary self-understanding, it has been the fool to a pragmatic king. The apocryphal 'Realist-Idealist' debate of the 1920s and 1930s supposedly laid to rest whatever utopian impulses IR may have countenanced. These were cast as merely instructive errors to avoid on the road to sound international political thinking. Our current historical moment – defined by increasing despair at climate crisis and by the re-emergent spectre of nuclear conflict – appears to confirm the legitimacy of this anti-utopian attitude.

This anti-utopianism obscures, however, the complexity of utopia's role in shaping international relations and international thought. Recent research points to the significance of utopian visions – progressive and reactionary – in the formation of the modern international: racist utopias of the 'Anglosphere'; the 'last utopia' of human rights; postcolonial 'worldmaking'; and 'technocratic utopias'. A significant body of revisionist work on Realism has pointed to the importance of Realist visions of global reform.

At a conceptual level, challenging the realism-utopianism dichotomy still promises new insights, especially for critical theory. To study utopia is to consider the parameters of possibility, processes of change, and the limits of political imagination. IR has rarely engaged with the field of Utopian Studies, but conceptual issues prominent in the latter are, potentially, of the utmost significance for the discipline. For example, utopian literature – especially science fiction – explores questions to do with totality, closure, change, and difference.

Further possibilities are apparent if we turn away from utopian planning to Ernst Bloch's idea of a wider 'utopian impulse', the marks of which are scattered across our culture everywhere from daydreams to the practice of science. What people hope for and imagine when confronted with apparently overwhelming social structures, and the manifestations of these hopes, are of central importance for our understanding of international relations.

While the study of utopia is rich with possibilities, then, it remains relatively unexplored and fragmented in IR. This workshop aims to bring together scholars studying different aspects of utopia and using diverse theoretical approaches, providing an opportunity for focused reflection on the connection between utopia and the international. We invite paper proposals covering any aspect of utopia and IR. Possible topics include:

- Utopianism and peace
- Utopia and climate crisis
- Fictional utopias or dystopias
- The ideological function of utopianism and anti-utopianism
- Anti-colonial utopias
- Reactionary utopias and far-right social movements
- Utopia in critical international theory
- Dystopia and humility in IR
- Realism and utopia