

# A tale of two utopias

**Simon Hallsworth and Svetlana Stephenson**  
explore how urban renewal projects  
can criminalise those that do not fit the  
utopian dream.

*Khoteli kak luchshe, a poluchilos'  
kak vseгда*

'We wanted to do our best but it  
turned out as it usually does'.

Viktor Chernomyrdin, the ex-Russian  
Prime Minister

Every age has its utopians, and  
every age has its engineers.  
Utopians dream; engineers  
transform utopian dreams into hard  
reality. Utopian

dreams vary  
but their  
guiding  
principles  
remain the  
same. The  
future *will* be  
better than the  
past; the  
problems that  
bedevilled the  
past will be  
resolved. The  
future will be  
perfect. The  
trouble with  
utopias,  
however, is that  
far from

building a better world they often  
deliver a worse one. Part of the  
problem here is that while the  
utopian dream is sold on the basis  
that all will benefit, to build utopia  
you have to deal with those who  
stand in its way or who have no  
place in the envisioned future. These  
people become its casualties: the  
criminalised other, matter out of  
place, that which has no place and  
must be removed.

Here we will show how utopian  
dreams resolve themselves into  
projects that have criminalisation as  
their outcome. To do so, we will

compare urban renewal projects in  
two societies: Britain under Tony  
Blair; Russia under its communist  
rulers. These projects of urban  
renewal share common features.  
They aspire to renew the urban fabric  
by rebuilding it. Both projects are  
marketed on the promise of the  
better and more inclusive world they  
will deliver. But far from resolving  
the social problems associated with

excluded street  
populations,  
these still  
remain  
painfully  
present. Instead  
of rethinking  
the  
inadequacies  
of utopia, the  
problem of  
utopia  
becomes  
reconstructed  
instead as a  
problem of  
excluded  
populations  
who have no  
right to live

The global  
businessman will at  
last be free to enjoy  
his cappuccino without  
having to confront  
the unpleasant and  
distressing sight posed  
by those who will not  
fit in.

within it. In both cases the 'solution'  
is the same: coercive eviction from  
the Promised Land.

Imagine now that we are in the  
late twentieth century and New  
Labour under Tony Blair is in the  
ascendant. New Labour has high  
hopes. It wants to renew the  
declining de-industrialised fabric of  
its industrial cities and create a better  
and more inclusive city; a city fit for  
the 'cappuccino drinking' enterprise  
society it aspires to construct. Town  
planners and property speculators  
enthused by the dream work hard  
and key areas are identified for

development. Take King's Cross,  
traditionally an old working class  
area of London. At its centre lie two  
metropolitan train stations, King's  
Cross and St Pancras, key transit  
points into the capital. King's Cross is  
situated in the vicinity of large  
industrial wasteland, a brown field  
site which, together with the  
attractive but run down Victorian  
streets in the vicinity of the stations,  
constitutes an ideal area for  
redevelopment. Utopia will be built  
in what will become one of the most  
ambitious regeneration projects in  
the UK. But building utopia is not  
easy. Political forces oppose it asking  
'utopia for who and at what cost?'  
but they are weak, and such forces  
are soon vanquished. A more  
pressing problem presents itself.  
King's Cross is a poor working class  
area and rates of deprivation and  
poverty in the area are high. The area  
is also home to thriving sex and drug  
markets in the vicinity of its train  
station. The area is also home to a  
vagrant population of street beggars,  
rough sleepers and street drinkers.  
Many have mental health problems,  
and many are also drug users and  
alcoholics.

This vulnerable and excluded  
population does not resolve itself  
into an included minority as  
regeneration commences. It stands in  
the way of utopia, and so a war is  
declared against it. Begging is  
banned and becomes a criminal  
offence. ASBOs are mobilised against  
the local sex workers, predominantly  
white, working class, chaotic drug-  
using women. The ASBOs contain an  
array of categorical prohibitions.  
They ban the women from plying  
their trade. They ban them from the  
King's Cross area—for many, the area  
where they lived—and many ASBOs  
are indefinite. Breaches regularly  
occur because the women cannot  
understand or quite believe what has  
happened to them. For breach they  
are imprisoned. Dispersion orders  
are mobilised to drive out the  
population of rough sleepers and  
street drinkers. They have no place in  
utopia and are coercively removed.  
They find themselves displaced into  
side streets and are driven from  
these. They move into adjacent parks  
and are targeted there. Hostel places

are reduced while local parks and working class estates are 'target hardened' by being literally fenced in (see Young et al., 2007). Surveillance cameras are installed and under their gaze police officers and street wardens cleanse the streets of their 'problem populations'. Utopia will indeed be constructed in King's Cross. Café culture will arrive. The global businessman will at last be free to enjoy his cappuccino without having to confront the unpleasant and distressing sight posed by those who will not fit in. He is 'safe', because they have been removed from view. Reconstructed as social litter, they have been swept away.

The time is now the 1930s, and we are in Moscow. This is the 'model' communist city. In its new factories and scientific institutes, spacious parks, and squares, Soviet workers are learning how to be true communist men and women. These will be well rounded, physically and mentally healthy, constructors of the new world. But there are other people who spoil the picture. These are not the Kulaks, or political 'enemies of the people'. The powerful NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs – aka the Soviet secret police) has seen to these. Also painfully apparent are the down and outs, the displaced, the unemployed and the unemployable. They do not fit and they have no justifiable presence here. In Erdman's play 'The Suicide' (Erdman, 1928), an unemployed everyman pleads with the state on behalf of millions of people like him: 'Give us the right to whisper. You'll be so busy constructing the new life that you'll never even hear us'. The impatient authorities will concede no such rights. People are forced into compulsory labour, placed under the supervision of workers' collectives, or find themselves re-educated. But these human casualties of the Russian revolution remain stubbornly present. A policy shift occurs. By the early 1930s, all 'unproductive and unattached' elements pulled from the streets are sent to the gulag. These policies continue after the war.

After Stalin's death, Khrushchev begins regime liberalisation. He

expects great enthusiasm and collective effort from the masses, who, no longer encumbered by fear, will build a truly communist society. But yet again the masses let the party down. Alcoholism, absenteeism, 'non-labour incomes' (employment in the shadow economy), homelessness—the old problems remain. Instead of looking at their causes, the party develops policies designed to penalise the victims and remove them from sight. Some may strike the reader as familiar. New legislation is passed criminalising 'anti-social behaviour'; community-level initiatives are launched to ensure public participation in the state's campaigns against those who 'bring shame' on the Soviet way of life. Residents are encouraged to report people involved in 'vagrancy, begging and other parasitic ways of life' to the police. Communal courts are established where residents of state housing can apply for eviction orders directed at those who are seen as troublemakers. Posters appear on the streets naming and shaming alcoholics, idlers, women with loose morals, and those involved in 'rowdy behaviour'. Police support teams, made up of public volunteers, monitor public order on the streets. Vagrants and beggars, after receiving three warnings, are criminally prosecuted. These policies will be continued and further intensified by Gorbachev. History repeats itself.

Two utopian projects in two societies that appear so different. Yet the similarities are profound. Urban renewal under 'cappuccino capitalism' and Soviet socialism, spot the difference if you can. But this poses the question as to why? One answer might be that authoritarianism comes easily to both regimes, so why should we be surprised when they revert to type. But maybe there is an inevitable structure to the way utopian projects unfold anyway; a dialectical movement that repeats itself irrespective of time and place. If we were to liken it to a play, it would be a tragedy with three acts:

- Act 1: (thesis) Dawn of a New Day. The sun is shining.

Committed to progress utopians, influenced by visionaries, produce the blueprints for a better tomorrow. Everyone they claim will benefit because utopia is an inclusive space. Engineers ensure that blueprints become bricks and mortar and a new order is established. Like the ant that moves the rubber tree plant, everyone has 'high hopes'.

- Act 2: (antithesis) Daylight fades and Shadows Appear. The utopian project requires herculean effort and a consistency of will. Unfortunately, it also has to be built in the face of enemies that oppose it. Wreckers subvert progress; reactionary elements remain committed to a past that has no future in the future. Worst of all, the very problems the utopian project sought to resolve persist stubbornly into the present. The vision appears tarnished. Resentment takes hold. Strong measures become necessary.
- Act 3: (synthesis) Night closes in and the nightmares begin. Utopia must be built but to realise the dream those who stand in its way must be liquidated. The mask of benevolence falls away and utopia reveals its dystopian face. But the policeman was always waiting in the shadows anyway. Utopias are built with the best of intentions but what begins as a dream translates into a nightmare. Repression begins and the weakest suffer.

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## References

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