Anthropological Theory

Dystopia is a Political Project

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What is the political work that dystopia does?

The contemporary politics of climate change—especially in places framed as "climate ground-zeros"—demands a recognition of and a reckoning with dystopia's politics. As authors of speculative fiction have long argued, dystopia is not a space, it is an idea that has political force in the world. Rather than understanding dystopias as material realities unfolding in the face of climate and environmental degradation, it is crucial to see them as they are: discourses with profound social and material effects. Rather than utopia's other, dystopia is *also* a total social fact that has come to play a central role in organizing our social and political systems.

As concepts that organize political possibility, the poles of utopia and dystopia appear to have reversed. Utopia—a word that translates literally as "nowhere"—framed (possible) liberation, providing a telos of enlightenment and modernity as an unfolding narrative of progress towards the ideal. Dystopia presents itself as the obverse. Long a cornerstone of modern and postmodern thought—totalitarian domination, ecological collapse, total war, etc. (Claeys 2016)–dystopia now seems to frame not only political imaginaries but also political possibilities. It apparently offers radically different visions of space and temporality. On the surface, dystopia forecloses the arc of time and progress, demanding a reckoning with the contradictions of linear narratives of growth (Livingston 2019), the consequences of the externalizations of cheap nature (Patel and Moore 2018), the racialized histories and presents of capital and colonialism (Hecht 2018; Pulido 2018; Yusoff 2018).

Time, dystopian narratives tell us, is growing short. What we can do with the time we have left is limited. Yet, dystopia is more than a manifestation of nihilism—the collapse of utopian possibility under the contradictions of progress. Dystopia swaps a new telos for an old. It projects new normative frames that structure the terrain of the possible. Often, these normative frames are eerily resonant. Consider development—a project that has, for much of the twentieth century, mobilized utopian ideals to advance profoundly political and economic ends and stabilize a geopolitical order (Cullather 2013; McMichael 2004). For much of the postwar period, development (often in the form of a poisoned chalice) held out the promise of better futures. Yet, as countless analyses have shown, this utopian vision was as much about structuring the world, organizing space and opportunity in the name of progress but at the service of capital and security. Development in an era of climate change, in contrast, substitutes progress for resilience and adaptation—the possibility of persistence in doomed environs. It frames certain spaces as dystopian and in need of urgent management but does so, once again, in the service of capital and security—licensing new forms of discipline, dispossession, and creative destruction. There are meaningful differences between utopia and dystopia, but, as ideas that organize the world, they also share marked similarities. They secure power by structuring possible aspirations, doing so in ways that reproduce an identical world order.

Dystopia is an abstraction that claims to be revealed in specific places, where its political power becomes manifested. Unlike related projections of apocalypse as a fictional future against which (often white) civilization must be defended (Gergan, Smith and Vasudevan 2020), dystopic imaginaries are projected onto racialized others in the present. Dystopia sorts between spaces that are said to reveal it and those that must be protected from it. There is a dialectical relation between this sorting process and what is produced through it. Thus, as an idea, dystopia exerts political force precisely by linking the imagined threat of an anticipated dystopia with specific material projects to govern that dystopia in some sites in the service of others. Dystopias are "uninhabitable" (Vickers 2022), "unviable" (Paprocki 2022), and "untamed" (Hosbey and Roane 2021), the people who inhabit them become the subjects of these projects seeking to govern such spaces with no futures. The idea of dystopia exerts power. Existing relations of power in the world also give it power.

Dredging to build a seawall in Mongla, southwestern Bangladesh, a paradigmatic site of the practice of climate dystopia as a political project. Credit: Jason Cons.

A prime example of this is Bangladesh. As many have observed, Bangladesh is the prototypical climate dystopia: a space regularly framed as a ground-zero of climate change and an aid lab (Hossain 2017) in which its global future effects can be anticipated, managed, experimented with through development interventions. It is thus a space in which different visions of inhabiting, producing, and contesting dystopia come into tension

with one another. The looming specter of rising seas inundating Bangladesh's low-lying coastal floodplains and displacing their inhabitants exerts political force as an idea even prior to this vision becoming a reality. As we have both argued, the identification of Bangladesh as a space of dystopian climate change enables the production of Bangladesh as a climate dystopia (Cons 2018; Paprocki 2021). In examining these negotiations, we see that dystopia is managed to serve the interests of capital and securitization elsewhere. Identifying such contested politics surrounding dystopia demonstrates that Bangladesh is not rendered a dystopia *by* and *for* all actors equally.

On the one hand, as Paprocki's work has shown, narratives of dystopia mobilize Bangladesh within imaginations of capitalist futures anew (Paprocki 2021). Narratives of progress and development that dominated the country during much of its postcolonial period framed Bangladesh as a country that might achieve a future of capital integration and growth. Today, dystopic visions of a climate changed future frame Bangladesh as space for accumulation at the expense of its (already discounted) future. This dystopia is thus politically mobilized as an opportunity for capital, foreclosing other possible aspirations. Farmers and agrarian laborers in the delta experience and also contest the political force of these dystopic imaginaries in ways that demonstrate the possibility of other possible futures.

On the other, as Cons has argued, the imagination of Bangladesh as a space of climate dystopia fuels anxieties around the displacement and forced migration of racialized bodies (Cons 2018). These imaginations prompt interventions that assume a dystopian future of footloose climate refugees whose presence destabilizes polities and threatens comfortable life in places elsewhere. Here, dystopia produces a landscape of climate chaos in need of small-scale technologies that might help resilient peasants to survive in untenable future environments and not migrate from them.

To understand dystopia as a political idea, rather than as an emergent space, demands that we think not of the inevitabilities of collapse, but of the political projects such imaginations enable. Our central concern in showing the articulation between utopia and dystopia is, thus, to prompt a conversation that moves beyond the logic of both. Such conversations are manifest in a range of emerging work that seeks to explore the otherwise of late liberal politics (Povinelli 2022), the politics of persisting in empire's remains (Middleton 2021), and maroon histories and black ecologies that think beyond parables of progress (Wilson 2024). For example, Kyle Powys Whyte argues that an indigenous reckoning with dystopian climate narratives involves both recognition of the colonial histories that have shaped present ecological conditions (histories that are fundamentally part of the same dystopic political project), while also refusing the finality that these projects imply (2018). A robust engagement with such crucial work is beyond the scope of this short essay. But by interrogating the political work that the idea of dystopia serves in Bangladesh and elsewhere, we can denaturalize its organizing logics and reject its attendant political forces. Doing so allows us to see the political possibilities of alternative visions contained within spaces that have been described as dystopic (Gergan et al. 2024). Interrupting ideas of dystopia provides "urgent evidence of another future where life is no longer made impossible" (Purifoy 2021,

832). Thinking with and past the utopia/dystopia binary thus reveals both their insidious political projects and a possible set of means to counter them.

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