Perfection and possibility: utopia, democracy, and the smart city[*]

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Research on smart cities represents a large and diverse body of scholarship (Anthopoulos 2015). There is no universally accepted definition of the smart city in this literature, but the term is generally understood to represent "an 'interconnected, instrumented and intelligent' city" where "[t]he 'smartness' of a city seems related to its capability of providing infrastructures and services that improve the lives of its citizens" through the use of information and communication technologies (Grossi & Pianezzi 2017: 79). Interconnected networks of highly-advanced environmental sensors, extensive data collection, and computational algorithms aimed at increasing the efficiency of urban infrastructure and services all feature prominently in the smart city. The potential of the smart city to radically reshape the urban fabric has caused a number of commentators to discuss them in terms of utopia (Anthopoulus 2017; Calvillo et al. 2016; Datta 2015; Grossi & Pianezzi 2017; Townsend 2013; Vanolo 2016; Wiig 2015). However, these discussions of utopia are rarely sustained or complex. This deficiency may partly explain why smart city research often instrumentalizes normative questions about the kinds of cities we would want to live in (Kitchin 2019).

This paper engages utopian theory and utopian studies scholarship to better understand the nature of the smart city utopia. In particular, I am interested in what the smart city means for the relationship between utopia and democracy. My argument proceeds in two stages. Despite the importance of utopia to political theory and practice, political scientists also rarely make reference to the large body of scholarship in utopian studies (Sargent 1982).[†] I begin my paper by engaging leading scholars of utopia in combination with empirical research in social psychology to show how utopia imbues democracy with an aspirational character while also enhancing its epistemic and developmental qualities. I also demonstrate how utopianism requires conditions of general democratic equality in order to moderate its authoritarian tendencies.

Following this, I examine two studies that employ utopian frameworks to analyze an empirical smart city project in order to tease out the context and content of the smart city utopia. First, I respond to Grossi & Pianezzi's (2017) contention from observations of the smart city in Genoa, Italy that the smart city utopia embodies neoliberal ideology. Drawing on Mannheim (1936) and Ricoeur (1986), I argue that while neoliberal ideology forms the socio-historical conditions from which the smart city has emerged, the utopian aspiration of the smart city is distinct from this ideology. Second, I take a critical perspective on Calvillo et al.'s (2016) definition of the smart city utopia as an epistemological "test-bed" based on their findings from Songdo, South Korea. I argue that they are right to frame the smart city utopia according to the logic of an experiment, but their conclusions about the desirability of this utopia rest on questionable assumptions about the normative neutrality of technology. Taken together, these cases help us understand the risks the smart city utopia poses to the reciprocal relationship between democracy and utopia. Though I draw on these two empirical examples, my main intention is to bring a more rigorous theoretical understanding of utopia to both political theory and smart city scholarship and not to detail the features of "actually existing smart cities" (Shelton, Zook, & Wiig 2015).

Perfection and possibility

Democracy and utopia have a complicated relationship and our understanding of this relationship is further troubled by political theory's skepticism towards utopia. According to

[†] There are a few notable exceptions to this, most prominently Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future*.

Estlund (2014: 116), political theory suffers from "utopophobia" or "the unreasonable fear of utopianism." For some liberal theorists, like Popper, utopianism implies a commitment to perfectionist idealism that neglects value plurality and the limits of human knowledge (Popper 2002; Hayek 2001). While Marx and Engels valued the role Owen, Saint-Simon, and Fourier played in advancing criticism of bourgeois society, they believed that the "phantasies" of these utopian socialists served to distract from the material work of revolutionary struggle (Engels 1978; Sargent 2008). Leading later thinkers, including those who fall under the umbrella of "ideal theory," signal their skepticism of utopian idealism through the use of pragmatic language. Wallerstein (1998: 1) rejects utopianism ("dreams of heaven that could never exist on the earth") in favour of "utopistics" ("the sober, rational, and realistic evaluation of human social systems"). In *The Law of Peoples*, Rawls (1999: 6) "begin[s] and end[s] with the idea of a realistic utopia." Even Wright's (2010) *Envisioning Real Utopias*, hailed as a landmark return to utopia in social science (Levitas 2013), argues for "hard-nosed proposals for pragmatically improving our institutions" to avoid the sort of "vague utopian fantasies [that] may lead us astray" (Wright 2010: 5-6).

These assertions are premised on a misunderstanding of the character of utopianism that can be resolved by turning to the growing body of scholarship in utopian studies. Utopias can manifest themselves in speculative fantasies or perfectionist blueprints, but these are only two of what Sargent (1994) shows to be the many "faces" of utopianism. More's (2002) *Utopia* (the work that coined the term) rejects the notion of social perfectionism in its use of irony and alterity as tools for political reflection. In this work, More contrasts sixteenth-century England with an imagined island society with starkly different (but still objectionable) social norms and political institutions. His purpose was not to propose a blueprint for serious social reform but rather to cause us to both critique our own world and to consider the possible consequences of social change (Harvey 2000; Sargent 1994; Sargisson 2007). The defining feature of *Utopia* as well as many other utopian writings is what Forst (2014: 188) calls "double normativity." "On one hand," Forst argues, "utopias contain a first level of normativity in that they offer a master key to open the door to a better, even the perfect world." This is done by proposing social reforms, such as the abolition of private property, that aim to pull out the roots from pressing social problems. Forst continues: "On the other hand, the second normative level of utopia is situated where reflection on the first level is conducted – that is, where the imperfect shines through the perfect, where utopia threatens to revert into dystopia."

Before explaining the ways in which utopia support democracy, it is first worthwhile to briefly sketch the key features of democracy as identified by Mill (2015). In *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill argues that the substance of good government is its ability to promote the common good. Democratic government, Mill argues, is best suited for this purpose because of its epistemic capacity to make good decisions and the positive effects it has on the development of citizen capacities. Arguing against the "pernicious misconception" (p. 209) of the good despot, Mill suggests that good despotism depends on not only a virtuous monarch but also an omniscient and omnipotent one, with not only perfect information but the ability to act on this information (or, at the very least, the ability to select public administrators capable of virtuous and informed action without being under constant supervision). Even if the epistemic deficiencies of enlightened despotism could be rectified, Mill asks us to consider further what sort of person would be formed under such a regime. Democracy has positive constitutive effects for the development of intellectual, practical, and moral capacities. This is because the development of these capacities depends on whether or not they can find practice in use. Democracy demands engagement in

public-oriented thought and action through the joint pursuit of collective self-governance. This helps us think about individuals beyond those we encounter in the course of our practical activities and encourages a public spiritedness in the pursuit of common goals. In turn, the positive effects democracy has on character help to reinforce its epistemic function (and hinder it when people are more passive and inward-looking). Mill writes: "Inactivity, unaspiringness, absence of desire, are a more fatal hindrance to improvement than any misdirection of energy; and are that through which alone, when existing in the mass, any very formidable misdirection by an energetic few becomes possible" (p. 221).

Utopia supports Mill's conception of democracy in three ways: by directing attention to the common good, by provoking critical thought, and by inducing positive citizenship behaviours. In the first instance, utopias present us with images of the good life that transcend our immediate social context and imbue democratic deliberation with an aspirational character. For leading utopian scholar Levitas (2013: 198), utopias present "a provisional hypothesis about how society might be." Utopias are "necessarily multiple" and together map "the horizon of future possibilities" (Levitas 2010: 540, 544). Instead of detailing visions of eternal perfection, utopias more often present socially contingent, self-reflective visions of social alternatives that help us critique existing society and achieve social progress. Such visions and aspirations are necessary for democracy's substantive purpose of making society better and help prevent it from becoming merely sterile procedure. Bregman (2016) shows that many of the social, political, and technological achievements that we now take for granted were once dismissed as unrealizable fantasies. Emancipation, progressive taxation, the minimum wage, working hour regulations, and universal suffrage are all consequence of people never giving up on dreams of a radically transformed world. Utopia, it can be said, is the imagination acting in concert with critical reason to examine society in relation to its unrealized potentials.

For the second and third ways that utopia supports democracy we can turn to recent empirical work in social psychology. Building on psychological theories of self-regulation, and particularly more recent developments in group-based self-regulation, Fernando et al. (2018) are the first to investigate the causal effects of utopian thinking on societal engagement. This work is particularly noteworthy because its hypotheses are premised on a commendable reading of the seminal figures in utopian theory. Fernando et al. conducted three complementary studies to test the hypothesis that utopian thinking causes individuals to engage in "*collective* self-regulation" by sparking a motivation to bring their existing society closer to their ideal in pursuit of more preferable outcomes. In particular, they were interested in what Levitas (2010) describes as the three primary functions of utopia: change, critique, and compensation (escapism).

Fernando et al. (2018) examined the effects of utopian thinking on participant responses to four metrics measuring societal satisfaction (adapted from Diener et al. 1985); perceptions of the fairness, legitimacy, and justifiability of the prevailing social system (Kay & Jost 2003); desires to discuss social change and to take direct action, including by donating money and volunteering; and escapist fantasies (adapted from Aldwin & Revenson 1987). Across three separate studies, Fernando et al. found that participants who had a positive attitude towards utopia or who were primed to imagine their ideal society to contrast it with existing society expressed lower levels of satisfaction with existing society, lower perceptions of the legitimacy of the existing social order, and greater intentions to change society.

Considering these findings in relation to Mill's substantive conception of democracy reveals that utopia helps democracy not only by directing our attention to the good life but by also enhancing the *quality* of democratic deliberation and citizenship. They demonstrate that thinking

about one's ideal society in relation to existing reality makes people more likely to challenge the legitimacy of their existing social order and open previously internalized justifications to critique. This enhances the epistemic function of democracy by making people more active social critics and aiding in the production of better social institutions and public policies. This function of utopia is particularly important given the path-dependent nature of many social choices. It is impossible to foresee all the consequences of our actions, but the apparent intractability of issues such as climate change and urban sprawl have demonstrated the dangers of committing to forms of infrastructure and social and economic relationships without a critical eye to the future. Levitas (2010) specifically emphasizes the unique importance of utopia for comprehending the ontological ramifications of social change. "Utopia," Levitas writes, "creates a space in which the reader is addressed not just cognitively, but experientially, and enjoined to consider and feel what it would be like not just to live differently, but to want differently" (pp. 540-4). Fernando et al. (2018) also found that utopian thinking made their participants more willing to engage in "citizenship behaviors," such as volunteering, donating, discussing, or taking other forms of action towards social change. This supports the developmental aspect of democracy identified by Mill by encouraging public spiritedness and the development of "active" human capacities. Utopia, it may be said, makes for good laws and good citizens.

These positive functions of utopia depend on people being active producers (not just passive recipients) of social utopias, which is in turn contingent on a number of background conditions, including sufficiently developed critical thinking skills and imaginative capacities, a recognition of value plurality, and a social environment free from physical or ideological domination. The presence of these conditions protects utopianism from its more dangerous tendencies; when they are lacking, it becomes more difficult to critique existing social structures, imagine alternative possibilities, and resist those who seek to unilaterally impose their specific vision of the good society. "The strong point that Popper makes," writes Sargent (1982: 570), "is not about utopias but about the fact that some people are willing to impose their beliefs on others." Reason and the human imagination have universalizing and authoritarian tendencies. The history of perfectionist utopianism, Mumford (1965: 278) argues, reveals how under certain circumstances "the abstract intelligence" can be "a coercive instrument: an arrogant fragment of the full human personality, determined to make the world over in its own oversimplified terms, willfully rejecting interests and values incompatible with its own assumptions, and thereby depriving itself of any of the cooperative and generative functions of life."

Plato's perfectionist idealism is an instructive example. The *Kallipolis* of Plato's (2006) *Republic*, considered Western political thought's first utopia, contains many features we might find objectionable, including slavery, class oppression, and the legitimation of mass murder. Beyond this troubling content are objectionable assumptions about the nature of human knowledge and the possibility of perfection. For Plato, reason can help us discern eternal truths about the perfect form of justice, the soul, and the city. This means that it should be possible, at least in principle, to determine the shape of an eternally just city. The perfect nature of this city then justifies the coercive imposition of this vision. One of the most pernicious element of his ideal city is "the myth of the metals," which deceives the citizens of the *Kallipolis* into believing that their social position is determined by the quality of the "metal" in their soul. This "noble lie" radically hinders the possibility of critique and future alterity. From this, we can conclude that utopia and democracy have a mutually dependent relationship: while utopia plays an important role in sustaining substantive democracy, conditions of general democratic equality are themselves

essential to protect utopianism from its worst tendencies. It is within this context that I will now consider the smart city.

The utopia(s) of the smart city

Despite the frequent reference to utopia in the smart city literature, sustained engagement with the concept or with scholarship in utopian studies is rare. This means that the understanding of what the smart city means as an aspiration for the future of urban life is troublingly weak. In the following section, I analyze two case studies of smart city projects from the standpoint of utopian theory. I have selected these two case studies because they both employ detailed utopian perspectives unusual for the literature. Both cases shine light on different aspects of the smart city utopia, but critical analysis reveals each of their interpretations of utopia to be flawed in different ways. Afterwards, I bring these two cases together to sketch an image of the smart city utopia and its implications for the relationship between utopia and democracy.

Grossi & Pianezzi (2017) examine the Genoa smart city in relation to utopia and ideology. Drawing on Bloch (1995) and Ricoeur (1986), they argue that the smart city utopia should be understood as an embodiment of neoliberal ideology. This description of the smart city as a neoliberal project appears frequently throughout the literature but is not always framed in explicitly utopian terms (Jazeel 2015; Hollands 2008; Peck 2013). Grossi & Pianezzi unmask how "utopia" is used rhetorically to evoke the symbolic power of the term in order to present the smart city as a revolutionary and emancipatory project. The mission of the Genoa Smart City Association (made up primarily of business interests) is "to rethink the concept of the city, pursuing the concept of a concrete utopia in an urban space at human scale" (as cited in Grossi & Pianezzi 2017: 82). Local newspapers have also adopted this rhetoric of utopia: "welcome to the city of Utopia...in Florence, city of the digital Renaissance" and "the notion of smart city has been attractive as a concrete utopia" (p. 80). In reality, they argue, smart city projects are products of and represent the neoliberal ideology of competition, deregulation, and privatization. For example, the way in which smart city projects are concerned with the economic logic of efficiency and managerial solutions to social and political problems can be seen in how the Genoa smart city approaches landslides and floods. Instead of addressing the root cause of aggressive urbanization, this project aims to alleviate the consequences of natural disasters by providing advance warning information to citizens (and ultimately distracting from more ambitious possibilities).

Grossi & Pianezzi demonstrate very clearly the distortion between smart city rhetoric and practice as well as the effects of contemporary neoliberalism in the Genoa, Italy smart city However, their argument that the smart city utopia is only neoliberal ideology conflates the two terms. Utopia and ideology are commonly understood as two mutually exclusive concepts. Though both of their dichotomies suffer from some epistemological and ontological problems, Mannheim (1936) and Ricoeur (1986) offer the two most rigorous accounts available of the relationship between utopia and ideology (Sargent 2008). Mannheim argues that ideologies are distorted representations of an existing historical-social order that support its continued reproduction. In contrast, utopias are the ideals that let us overcome our impulses and direct our ability to shape history. Ricoeur understands utopia and ideology similarly. For him, ideologies could be distortive but, more importantly, are a group's way of legitimizing a particular social order and in that legitimizing process these ideologies form part of their group identity. These ideologies may be falsifications but they are also "true" for the members of that group. Utopia for Ricoeur lays the

seeds for alternate forms of social possibility and power, in part by allowing us to step outside our social position and look critically upon our own society. The key distinction between ideology and utopia for both theorists is that while ideologies are oriented towards the past for the purpose of justifying and sustaining the status quo, utopias are oriented towards the future in the pursuit of transforming the world in their own image (Sargent 2008). This is important because the smart city cannot be then simultaneously ideological and utopian. The evidence in Grossi & Pianezzi's work suggests that they view the smart city more in terms of ideology than utopia. Referencing Bloch (1995), they argue that the smart city is an "abstract utopia, a sterile and decontextualized narrative that preserves existing relations of power, rather than challenging them" (p. 84) in opposition to Bloch's "concrete utopia" which represents transformative possibility.[‡] Yet, at other points Grossi & Pianezzi comment about how the "smart city utopia transforms the 'political subjectivities of citizens'" (p. 84, citing Vanolo 2016), indicating that there is forward-looking utopian content to the smart city and that it is therefore not ideological.

Calvillo et al. (2016) examine the case of Songdo, South Korea. Located one hour's drive from Seoul and built on land reclaimed from the ocean, Songdo has been referred to as "the experimental prototype community of tomorrow" (p. 147). The city's design is premised on technological ubiquity: every wall is a potential screen with sensors and communications technology ever-present. The explicit purpose of this new model of urban development is to turn data into a resource for both capital extraction and to inform future infrastructure decisions. "Songdo," they write, "is thus, a parody of the fantastical perpetual motion machine of the nineteenth century: a system that theoretically continues to produce wealth-without-end" (pp. 150-1). The consequences of this project and other similarly ambitious smart cities are likely to be both massive and imperceptible. They will be massive in the sense that they will have enormous impacts on all aspects of society, but imperceptible in the sense that its operations will largely go unseen and many of the changes naturalized without thought.

The utopian vision underpinning the vision of Songdo is that of the "test-bed epistemology" (Calvillo et al. 2016: 156). This test-bed utopia looks similar to but does not precisely reflect the logic of a scientific experiment. It does not propose discrete hypotheses to be tested but rather operates without any particular objective or endpoint: "it is an experiment that cannot end, because every limit becomes a new challenge, a new frontier to develop toward an every-extendable horizon" (p. 157). The future of this vision is "blurry" but this blurriness is accompanied by de-centralized open-endedness. In light of massive technological change, politics and normativity "need to be rethought in terms of probabilities, densities, distributions and performances" (p. 160). Calvillo et al. (2016) suggest that this may result in a radical transformation of urban subjectivity away from the ontology of the individual liberal subject towards something more akin to the "insect colony" where the behaviours of a vast multitude of agents, human and non-human, are all linked into circuits of capital and technology.

The casualness with which Calvillo et al. (2016) suggest that politics and norms can be replaced by technology and probabilities is demonstrative of how smart city discourse frequently instrumentalizes normative questions (Kitchin 2019) and further emphasizes the need for this literature to engage more rigorously with utopia. However, Calvillo et al.'s explanation of the experimental nature of the smart city utopia more accurately reflects its character than does

[‡] This description of the smart city as an "abstract utopia" also incorrectly portrays Bloch's (1995) distinction between abstract and concrete utopia. For Bloch, abstract utopia represents "wishful thinking," a definition that does not appear to be congruent with Grossi & Pianezzi's (2017) characterization of the smart city (Levitas 1990).

neoliberal ideology. For the smart city, privatization, deregulation, small government, and economic efficiency are all incidental; its objective is rather the pursuit of a more general kind of efficiency in human behaviour through observation of and experimental intervention in urban life. The smart city breaks up the individual subject of traditional liberalism into data points that are then integrated into larger flows of information to be manipulated and used in the pursuit of social objectives. From this point of view, it is irrelevant whether a smart city exists in a perfectly neoliberal political economy dominated by large private corporations or is controlled by an authoritarian government—in both cases, the operational logic of this utopian vision remains the same.

In contrast, neoliberal ideology should be understood as the context from which the smart city utopia has emerged. This is significant because the ideological substance of our society affects who is best positioned to advance utopian visions for the future as well as our ability to critique and present alternatives to those utopias. Neoliberal ideology is characterized by competition, deregulation, privatization, and managerialism (Harvey 2005). This context means that not only are citizens increasingly subject to the "technocratic visions and trials" (Calvillo et al. 2016: 165) of large corporations, but resources and education have been targeted towards practical organizational questions rather than normative ones. These factors in addition to power asymmetries, increasing private (non-transparent) decision-making, and a general lack of knowledge about how smart city technology works makes it difficult for citizens to critique the smart city utopia or present alternatives under contemporary neoliberalism (Grossi & Pianezzi 2017; Hollands 2008).

Utopia, democracy, and the smart city

This paper has formed that the smart city utopia should be understood according to the logic of experimental test-bed epistemology formed under conditions of neoliberal ideology. There are a number of very practical reasons why we should be concerned about an aspiration to the "non-normative" experimental utopia of the smart city, including concerns about surveillance and privacy that are familiar themes in the smart city literature (Galdon-Clavell 2013; Kitchin 2014). The more serious risks of the smart city, however, concern the relationship between utopia and democracy. The utopia of test-bed epistemology as formed under contemporary neoliberalism inverts democratic episteme by making human beings the objects of knowledge and experimentation rather than its producing agents. This utopia seeks to transform political questions into technical ones by removing conscious normativity from urban governance and replacing it with the disguised normativity of algorithmic efficiency. Under these circumstances, normativity never completely disappears but it does harden. The perception that it is possible to avoid normative considerations in practical affairs through algorithmic neutrality requires an even deeper "faith in man's secular salvation" than Polanyi (1957: 135) suggested was necessary to sustain the utopia of the self-regulating market. Human beings are involved in the design of algorithms and can continue to affect them during their operation, ensuring that filtering processes continue to be shaped by individual personality and cognitive biases (Bozdag 2013). For example, a study of medical image analysis revealed the presence of significant value-judgments underlying the preferences of software designers for prioritizing the avoidance of false-positives or false-negatives (Kraemer, van Overveld, & Peterson 2011). Eliminating the possibility of normative evaluation means that whatever set of normative principles are selected to guide the logic of the

test-bed's filtering processes become eternal. This is the "noble lie" of the algorithm: the myth that there is a singularly perfect, efficient, and eternal way to organize society that transcends the irresolvable complexities of normative disagreement.

This transformative inversion of the conscious subject into an experimental object has more serious implications for the character of the democratic citizen. One of utopias most powerful functions is reshape how we experience and act in the world. Utopia allows us to break free from the constraints of existing ideologies and imagine what it would be like to live differently, and by acting on these imaginings, it is possible to bring utopias into reality (Levitas 2010). In the aspirations to realize the smart city utopia of test-bed epistemology we aspire to transform ourselves from human agents into objects of experimental manipulation. It is this very act of imagining ourselves as, and in the process brining us closer to becoming, perfectly rational and predictable objects that unleashes the full power of the smart city by allowing it to efficiently arrange human affairs without the interference of the sometimes irrationality and unpredictability of autonomous, desire-driven human agency.

This ontological transformation would destory the judging and deliberating citizen that is necessary for democracy to function. Further, by undermining both democratic character and democratic episteme, the smart city utopia threatens to produce a personality type less able to imagine utopian alternatives and more prepared to receive totalizing visions. In *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno et al. (1950) develop the F-scale ("fascist-scale"), a personality test designed to measure individual character traits that make one predisposed to supporting authoritarian forms of governance. Although many aspects of the book have been subject to criticism (Christie & Jahoda 1954; Stewart & Hoult 1959), the F-scale has made a lasting contribution to academic scholarship (Smith 1997). The traits Adorno et al. identify as being significantly correlated with a disposition to support authoritarian include: a belief in the maintenance of the status quo through the submission to external control; an opposition to imagination; and a belief in fate and in rigid categories; and a perception of the world as dangerous. Technological modes of governance demand categorization, oppose imagination, resist change, and seek the destruction of unpredictability and spontaneity. It should perhaps not be that surprising that one mode of governance that is conducive to an uncritical and submissive political psychology makes one predisposed to another mode with similar psychological requirements. In "Utopia, the City and the Machine," Mumford (1965) predicted that technology would have a totalizing influence on society. The more technology becomes integrated into society, the more human society becomes a subject of management and control rather than a realm for autonomous action. Much like the factory disciplined society for the purposes of production, Mumford worried that technology threatens a new and more pervasive kind of discipline that will allow for the realization of Platonic utopianism. In the final instance, by substituting judgment for deference, the test-bed utopia can become forever unchallenged ideology.

The conclusions of this paper are dim for the future of urban life. However, they only reflect a prediction about our future if the smart city utopia of test-bed epistemology came into being. This is not the only possibility for social life under conditions of increased technological penetration. Other futures are possible. The question "is a better smart city possible?" is the wrong one to ask. Rather we should reflect upon what we want the world to look like and the role technology should play in that vision. We need therefore to engage the smart city utopian within a broader framework of utopian visions of alterity with an engaged and informed citizenry. Small practical steps are a good start, such as increasing the level of technological literacy and making smart city projects more transparent. Even better are applications of technology that encourage people to imagine

alternative possibilities and allow citizens to participate as co-creators of their future. One example is the “Block by Block Foundation,” a collaboration between Mojang, Microsoft, and UN-Habitat, that uses Mojang’s videogame Minecraft to engage residents of developing countries in the design of local public projects. Whatever interventions we pursue, they must centre human agents as the conscious producers of their future and not as passive recipients.

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