CHAPTER 8

The *Star Trek* Game Plan

How Radical Hope Defeats Dystopian Despair

On May 16, 1988, while I was still living with the Olsons, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* aired its season one finale. Starring Patrick Stewart, a former member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, as Captain Jean-Luc Picard, *The Next Generation* attempted to reboot the relentlessly optimistic 1960s *Star Trek* franchise in an era characterized by cynicism and late Cold War angst. Only about a month before our graduation, most of my high school classmates and I believed that we faced a doomed future, not so different from that imagined by the high school students of today. But instead of a catastrophic climate crisis, a violent coup d'état, or another pandemic, we feared nuclear war. At the tail end of the Reagan and Thatcher eras, the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics maintained weapons arsenals sufficient to destroy the earth and all life upon it multiple times over. Back then, hawkish Americans championed the idea of tactical first strikes, but those of us clearheaded enough to understand the science of nuclear winter accepted the nihilistic truth: humanity was toast if the superpowers started World War III.

The last episode of the first season of *The Next Generation*, "The Neutral Zone," finds the USS *Enterprise-D* on the edge of Federation space. They encounter a satellite with three cryogenically frozen humans from the twentieth century: Americans from the late 1980s. One is a musician, and one is a woman who is identified as a "homemaker,"

which the android, Data, assumes to be a profession related to "construction work." The third is a financier, Mr. Ralph Offenhouse, who believes that he has woken up three centuries after his death to enjoy the accumulated interest on his now ancient bank accounts. Played by the actor Peter Mark Richman, Offenhouse demands to see his lawyer so he can access his wealth. Picard impatiently tells Offenhouse: "A lot has changed in the last three hundred years. People are no longer obsessed with the accumulation of things. We've eliminated hunger, want, the need for possessions. We've grown out of our infancy."

Coming only one year after Gordon Gekko's era-defining "greed is good" speech in the 1987 movie *Wall Street*, "The Neutral Zone" thumbed its nose at the materialism and selfishness characterized by then popular television shows like *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Falcon Crest*, and *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. In an era saturated with extreme-wealth porn, *Star Trek* projected one of these so-called "masters of the universe" into a dollar-free future. At the end of the episode, Picard decides to return the three twentieth-century humans to their home planet of Earth. Ralph Offenhouse whines in dismay: "Then what will happen to us? There's no trace of my money. My office is gone. What will I do? How will I live?"

"This is the twenty-fourth century," Picard says. "Material needs no longer exist."

Offenhouse sighs. "Then what's the challenge?"

Picard looks annoyed. "The challenge, Mr. Offenhouse, is to improve yourself, to enrich yourself. Enjoy it."

This final bit of dialogue landed on me like an anvil. There I was, just turned eighteen, living in my English teacher's spare room, a confused refugee from a violent and now "broken" home, terrified of mutually assured destruction. Like the young Whoopi Goldberg seeing Uhura on the bridge of the original *Enterprise* and realizing that Black people would exist in the future, I remember considering for the first time that if there was a future, it could be profoundly different from the present. Unlike *Star Wars* in its galaxy far, far, away, or the *Wonder Woman* parallel universe filled with Greek gods and magic lassos of truth, *Star Trek* was *my world*, a world I believed to be stuck and im-

5P_Ghodsee_EverydayUtopia_37832.indd 232 1/31/23 12:23 PM

possible to change. Lost in my daydreams about Amazon islands and Jedi training planets, it never occurred to me that the status and glamour of being rich and successful in 1988 might not mean anything by the twenty-fourth century, just as things that mattered in 1688 no longer mattered in the late eighties. And if things could be completely different in the next three hundred years, then why not the next fifty? Or the next ten?

I marveled at the thought that we might one day live in a world where "hunger, want, [and] the need for possessions" had been overcome; that what would matter most was who we were as people and how we could improve ourselves. Rather than worrying too much about how we got there, *Star Trek*'s creators just presented the future as if it had already been accomplished, like the racially integrated crew of the original series. The denizens of the *Enterprise-D* used machines called replicators to synthesize food, drink, clothes, musical instruments, or whatever else they wanted. Scarcity faded into the past—a pesky old problem solved by the advent of a new technology. For men like Offenhouse, the accumulation of wealth was the point of life. But without scarcity, no one cared if one person had more than everyone else, because anybody could accumulate as much stuff as they wanted.

And with this abundance came freedom and relative sexual equality. No one worried about provisioning their kids, if they chose to have them at all. Although people fell in love, formed pairs, and raised children on the ship, the family was no longer the basic economic unit of society. It was a utopian vision in the extreme. It broke my brain. I realized that the most important elsewhere was the temporal one; if I could allow myself the freedom to believe in a different future, maybe I could reach out into the world that I wanted to live in and pull it a little bit closer to me.

This positive vision of the future has inspired fans across the globe for almost sixty years since the first episode aired in 1966, making *Star Trek* one of the most successful media franchises of all time, with a massive cultural impact. This is all the more remarkable given its inauspicious beginnings: the television network NBC decided to cancel the show after only two seasons. In an unprecedented, coordinated act of fandom activ-

5P_Ghodsee_EverydayUtopia_37832.indd 233 1/31/23 12:23 PM

ism, over one hundred and fifty thousand people wrote pleading letters and two hundred Caltech students marched to NBC's Burbank studios to demand the show's renewal. Shocked by the fans' commitment, NBC relented, and the original series continued for one more full season.[1] The popularity of the original seventy-nine episodes grew the *Star Trek* fan base for two decades, and by 1986, it earned the distinction as American television's most syndicated show.[2] In that year, Gene Roddenberry launched *The Next Generation*, which became an instant ratings success and was nominated for a prime-time Emmy Award for "Outstanding Drama Series" in its seventh and final season in 1994.

Star Trek's enduring appeal in part arises from its positive vision of the future, a vision increasingly rare in the landscape of popular culture. As of May 2022, the *Star Trek* canon consists of eight live-action television series, three animated series, and one series called *Short Treks*, as well as thirteen feature films. It would take approximately a month of nonstop, twenty-four-hour viewing to work your way through all seven-hundred-plus episodes in addition to the movies. Five of the current series are ongoing, with more series and films still in production.[3] American fans organized the first major *Star Trek* convention in 1972, and FedCon (Federation Convention), the largest annual *Star Trek* convention in Europe, began in 1992.[4] The longevity, diversity, and multigenerational dedication of *Star Trek* fans is unparalleled and continues to grow each year. In 2019, *The Guardian* reported on how *Star Trek* fans saved people's lives, including the story of one woman who escaped a violent boyfriend because her fellow aficionados crowdfunded a security deposit so she could get her own apartment. "More than 150 Trekkies rushed to my aid, many of them total strangers. I felt like I'd sent out a distress call and an armada of Starships had come to my rescue," she explained.[5]

Militant Optimism

The whole *Star Trek* franchise embodies the German philosopher Ernst Bloch's idea of "militant optimism," a social and psychological commitment to imagining a better world and striving to make

5P_Ghodsee_EverydayUtopia_37832.indd 234 1/31/23 12:23 PM

it real. Rather than thinking that historical processes lie beyond our control—that history happens *to us*—Bloch's three-volume rumination on the politics of hope proposes that people actively produce history every day through the collective actions of those living through it as an ever-contingent present. Although there will always be those who seek to convince us that there is no alternative to the current state of things, Bloch wants us to recognize that if we are all participating in the making of the world in which we live, then that world is malleable. We have the power to contest, challenge, and change history because all histories begin first in the current moment. You are reading these words in a temporal frame that we call the present, but by tomorrow this sentence will be in your past and on its way into the realm of what we call "history." As David Graeber and David Wengrow assert in their wonderfully contrarian tome, *The Dawn of Everything*, "We are all projects of collective self-creation," so how is it that we came "to be trapped in such tight conceptual shackles that we can no longer even imagine the possibility of reinventing ourselves?"[6]

The stability of the world around us is a fiction we all accept so we can go about our daily lives. Let me give you an example. If I take a twenty-dollar bill out of my wallet right now, I can go to the store and buy a decent bottle of wine. But the bill is just a piece of paper, and my ability to buy that wine rests on a shared belief that this particular piece of paper stores value. If I tear a sheet out of my notebook and write the words "twenty dollars" on it, the shopkeeper will not accept it. If I go to the store with a twenty-euro bill or a twenty-dollar Canadian bill, the shopkeeper will also not accept it because I live in the United States. If inflation is rampant, the bottle of wine that costs twenty dollars today might cost sixty dollars tomorrow or even two hundred dollars by next week. Anyone who has lived in a country with runaway inflation will know exactly how useless paper money can become almost overnight. Germans in the 1930s paid for groceries with wheelbarrows full of currency, and my ex-in-laws in Bulgaria lost much of their life's savings in the hyperinflation that followed the sudden and unexpected collapse of communism in 1989. I know this and yet I still use paper money, and keep dollars in my bank account, because it is convenient and because that's what everyone expects of

me. Even at my local farmers market, barter is more or less off the table, as it is in most complex societies, until paper money becomes worthless, and people start burning it to keep warm.

In a similar way to how we collectively believe in paper money, many of us also embrace the fiction that the way we organize our private lives is the only way available to us. Even if we understand in the abstract about the pressures parents face, the strain that child-rearing places on romantic relationships, the high divorce rate, the prevalence of child abuse and intimate partner violence, and the very real possibilities of our own or our partner's long-term unemployment, disability, or death, we replicate the domestic form that makes us the most vulnerable to these problems because it is convenient and because that's what everyone expects of us. Just as our entire economy rests on the fiction of what economists call a fiat currency, it also rests on a particular notion of the family, one that is often viewed as either natural or divinely mandated, but which acts to uphold a specific set of social and economic relations. If you look, for instance, at the mission statement of the conservative Institute for Family Studies, it openly admits the potential economic repercussions of challenges to the nuclear family: "The fact that roughly one in two children in America grow up outside of an intact, married family constitutes one of the most significant threats to *America's future stability and prosperity*" (my emphasis).[7] And in early 2022, one of the institute's top research issues was precisely "the connection between strong marriages and a thriving economy."[8]

American conservatives recognize a fundamental threat to their way of life when they look around and see the declining marriage rate, the plummeting birth rate, the millennials refusing to saddle themselves with huge mortgages, as well as growing demands for what the cultural theorist Kate Soper has called "alternative hedonism," a new post-consumerist definition of pleasure that no longer rests on the acquisition of material goods. Worrying about the breakdown of the "intact, married family" may also reveal underlying fears about the potential end of American economic hegemony in the world. If the next generation refuses to embrace the values and aspirations required to maintain the social and economic system that underpins

5P_Ghodsee_EverydayUtopia_37832.indd 236 1/31/23 12:23 PM

this hegemony, the whole edifice can crack, which might actually improve the lives of many ordinary people. "It is not simply about the creation of worlds or ways of living that will better meet people's interests *as they currently are*," writes the political theorist Davina Cooper. "Utopia is also centrally concerned with those changing interests, desires, identifications, and forms of embodiment that happen as people . . . experience other ways of living."[9] If people stop believing in the rewards of finding partners, making babies, buying homes, and hoarding stuff, it is potentially as destabilizing as when people stop believing in the value of twenty-dollar bills.

In the chapters you've read in this book so far, I've explored a wide variety of utopian experiments about rearranging the private sphere, some of them deep in the past and some very much active in this thing we call the present. I know that many of you still have doubts, and that some of these ideas seem far-fetched and possibly unworkable given the state of the world today. Most of us can imagine universal childcare or dormitory living for grown-ups because in some sense they already exist. We grasp how they might work. It's harder to wrap our heads around sharing property in common or raising our children in non-nuclear families because these ways of being in the world feel unfamiliar and challenge some of our most basic assumptions about the correct way, or the "healthy" way, to organize our domestic lives. Sharing a washing machine in common with our neighbors might trigger thoughts of inconvenience before it inspires pride that one less appliance will end up in a landfill after its planned obsolescence. Raising our kids with more than one other parent might fuel fears that they won't need us as much before it fills us with confidence that our children will ultimately benefit from growing up basked in the affections of multiple caring adults.

Utopias by their definition are either a "good place" or a "no place," and what matters most is taking the journey and considering the kinds of changes that might make our domestic lives less isolated, more flexible, and more ecologically sustainable: things like universal childcare, cooperative living, ethical education for self-reliance and critical thinking, shared property, and family expansionism. I'm not

saying it's easy to change these things, but the path to change lies in the continued struggle. As the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano once explained: "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 walking."[10]

If you've made it this far in the book, and you still disagree with everything I've explored in these pages, that's okay. You don't have to be convinced of anything, but I do hope you will take a moment to reflect on the sources of your resistance.

Hope as a Cognitive Capacity

According to Ernst Bloch, the value of utopian thinking lies in its ability to inspire hope in both of its related but distinct forms: hope as a cognitive capacity and hope as an emotional state. In terms of the architecture of our minds, hope is to the future what memory is to the past. If you have a good memory, you have the ability to remember specific details of events that occurred long ago. You may never forget a face; or you can recall the full melody of a song after hearing just the first few notes. Memory is also the ability to root your sense of self and identity in past events, to create a narrative about who you are based on what you have experienced. Memory as a cognitive capacity can be useful when it helps you to study for an important exam or allows you to savor a cherished experience.

Hope, on the other hand, is the mental ability to imagine the future; to project forward a perception of what might come to pass and to orient yourself to those contingent possibilities. From a psychological perspective, C. R. Snyder, one of the leading psychologists who did research in this area, proposed that "hope is defined as the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways."[11] Put more simply, people who are good at hoping are those who can set clear goals, can ponder multiple ways of attaining those goals, and muster the willpower to pursue

5P_Ghodsee_EverydayUtopia_37832.indd 238 1/31/23 12:23 PM

them in the face of obstacles or the specter of disappointment. We all know people who refuse to try something new because they fear failure.

Psychologists believe that this type of hope as a cognitive capacity can be learned over time, and studies reveal that "hope training" can combat depression, anxiety, and stress.[12] Most hope therapy originates from C. R. Snyder's work and includes a variety of mental exercises such as hope mapping, guided daydreaming, hope journaling, and other techniques that allow people to clearly visualize specific goals (both great and small), to consider potential obstacles (both internal and external), and then unleash their imaginations to conjure up multiple pathways to how those obstacles might be overcome, not so different from the blue sky thinking that scientists do when faced with an intractable problem.

One specific technique, which goes by the fancy name "mental contrasting with implementation intentions" (MCII) strengthens our cognitive capacity to pursue goals by forcing us to make specific plans about how we will deal with roadblocks. While these techniques are often used in clinical settings at the individual level, there is no reason they cannot be adapted to deal with larger social problems, or even challenge entire social and economic systems.[13] Hope differs from optimism because the latter is just a belief that everything will work out well, whereas hope is an active thought process that affirms our ability to influence the future course our lives or societies will take. You might think of it as chess strategy for life: having multiple countermoves already planned for each of your opponent's potential moves.

I am hoping right now that I will finish this book, and that people will read it when I'm done. I can imagine this book being published over a year from now, partially because I have published books before, and partially because I understand how the book publishing process works. Still, this book is not writing itself. I must haul my butt out of bed every day and sit in front of my computer for hours on end to write these words. I could be watching the first season of *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* or going for a walk or sitting outside drinking Pinot Gris. I could call a friend or take a nap or read a novel. But I write knowing full well that after all this work my editor might hate

it, or that readers will hate it, or that even I might hate it at some later point. Hope is not just about me writing because I can clearly imagine a day when this book will be done, it is also about writing against the gnawing doubts that I am wasting my time and making a clear plan to resist the things I know that will distract me from writing.

This brings us to hope as an emotional state that exists on a spectrum from hopefulness to hopelessness. For Ernst Bloch, the opposites of hope are fear and anxiety. Hope as a cognitive capacity relies on my ability to limit the influence of these two powerful negative emotions. How many people in unhappy relationships stay because they are afraid of being alone? The fear of not meeting someone else overrides the possibility of meeting someone who might make them happier. Similarly, hopes for changing the world for the better get clobbered by fears of potentially making it worse.

If utopian visions exist to inspire this more emotional sense of hope, then dystopian worlds prey on our fears and anxieties, forcing us to stay in our unhappy relationship with the present. Similarly, if utopianism stimulates our cognitive capacities to imagine living in a different and better future and helps us find the will to effect the social changes necessary to realize that future, then dystopianism constantly reminds us of the failed social experiments of the past, especially those that have gone tragically and horribly wrong. By forcing us to look back rather than forward, by privileging memory over hope, the ubiquity of dystopian thinking browbeats us into accepting the status quo.

In this final chapter, I want to think through the value of utopianism as a project of "militant optimism," and to challenge the "capitalist realism," to borrow a term from the late cultural theorist Mark Fisher, that has permeated mainstream Western culture for much of the last century. Capitalist realism refers to a particular cultural mindset that convinces us that there are no workable alternatives to the way things are today. It finds its most powerful expression in the ubiquity of dystopian films, books, and television shows that bombard us with the message that any deviation from our current way of doing things will inevitably make us worse off. Davina Cooper has also reflected on this tension: "Utopia conventionally depends on stimulating

5P_Ghodsee_EverydayUtopia_37832.indd 240 1/31/23 12:23 PM

desire and hope in order to inspire and motivate change. Dystopias, by contrast, aim to stimulate action in order to resist or halt what is feared to be emerging. Dystopic narratives assume change, that the world is not a static or stable place but moving toward, indeed in some cases already enacting, its own ruin."[14] But dystopian thinking can also weaponize the general zeitgeist of despair to immobilize us. It nips our nascent social dreams in the bud by convincing us that working toward a better future will destroy the imperfect but familiar present. And the most effective visions of dystopia prey on our deepest fears of being alone and unloved.

The Political Bludgeons of Dystopia

The most popular and enduring dystopian novels of the twentieth century often describe worlds where a desire for more equality and social harmony has eradicated romantic love and the nuclear family. Consider the influence of Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel, *Brave New World*. This famous work regularly appears on curated lists of the "100 Greatest Novels of All Time," and in 1999, the readers of the American publishing house Modern Library ranked it fifth of the "100 Best English-Language Novels of the 20th Century."[15] In the United States, a HarperCollins teacher's guide suggests that *Brave New World* is appropriate for students in grades nine and ten (for fourteen- to fifteen-year-olds) and advises that teachers should use the novel as an "anchor text" for units that explore the theme of "the individual vs. society."[16] The internet overflows with high school lesson plans and discussion questions that highlight the book's portrayal of a utopia gone wrong and the many negative outcomes "that stem from an attempt to cultivate a perfect society."[17] Originally written to poke fun at the utopian fiction of the British author H. G. Wells, the influence of Huxley's novel has far exceeded that of the original books it parodied.

Long before the feminist Shulamith Firestone called on women to seize the "means of reproduction" and produce babies via ectogenesis, Huxley imagined a world where human beings are manufactured

in test tubes and bottle-conditioned to accept their designated roles in society. The novel begins with the director of the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre giving a tour of the facility to a group of newly arrived students. Huxley accomplishes his initial dystopian world-building by describing the processes through which his future society has finally abolished the traditional family. New technologies have decoupled sexuality from reproduction. Seventy percent of females are decanted from their bottles as "freemartins," or infertile women, to uphold the lauded ideal that "civilization is sterilization."[18] For the 30 percent of non-freemartin females, natural reproduction is considered backward and disgusting. Fertile women are paid the equivalent of six months' salary to have their ovaries surgically removed and handed over to the hatchery.

The industrial manufacture of people is purported to bring Huxley's imagined society "out of the realm of mere slavish imitation of nature into the much more interesting world of human invention."[19] In the year 2540, no one has a family, since they are all raised collectively in dormitories, and the words "mother" and "father" are reduced to obscenities, with the latter being a "comically smutty word" that was "merely gross, a scatological rather than a pornographic impropriety."[20] In perhaps a nod to William Godwin, Huxley tells us that in a World State of two billion people, there are only ten thousand last names. Sharing a surname means nothing.

Promiscuous sex and easy pleasures characterize Huxley's dystopia, and although the mind-controlling uses of "soma" often dominate discussions of the novel, the author doesn't introduce the drug until he has thoroughly described the full eradication of romantic and familial attachments that underpins this supposedly perfect society. At one point in the novel, Mustapha Mond, Resident World Controller for Western Europe, explains that: "The world's stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can't get. They're well off; they're safe; they're never ill; they're not afraid of death; they're blissfully ignorant of passion and old age; they're plagued with no mothers or fathers; they've got no wives, or children, or lovers they feel strongly about; they're so conditioned that they

5P_Ghodsee_EverydayUtopia_37832.indd 242 1/31/23 12:23 PM

practically can't help behaving as they ought to behave."[21] Huxley's *Brave New World* portrays a society where the full socialization of reproduction has liberated women's sexuality—"everyone belongs to everyone else"—but created a shallow, meaningless world where people drug themselves into submissive compliance with their place in life, and even the highest-ranking "Alpha-Plus" men like Bernard Marx and Helmholtz Watson feel frustrated and dissatisfied.

When Eric Blair (George Orwell)—briefly a student of Aldous Huxley—set out to write his own dystopian vision of a failed utopia, he also highlighted the breakdown in traditional family relations. By almost any measure, *1984* is one of the most influential novels in the English language. "*Nineteen Eighty-Four* has not just sold tens of millions of copies—it has infiltrated the consciousness of countless people who have never read it," wrote Dorian Lynskey, Orwell's biographer, on the seventieth anniversary of the book in 2019. "No work of literary fiction from the past century approaches its cultural ubiquity while retaining its weight."[22] Even more so than *Brave New World*, children in secondary schools in both the United States and Great Britain must read *1984* as teenagers. Taught on its own or together with *Animal Farm*, Orwell's last novel is a dystopian tale designed to warn readers specifically against the dangers of totalitarianism. Although Orwell himself embraced socialism, he hated Stalinism, and most American high school curricula specifically use *1984* to teach about the dangers of socialist ideologies.

In the superstate of Oceania, Big Brother has severed the links between love, sex, and child-rearing. In *1984*, members of the Party do not cultivate romantic or familial attachments. Where Huxley diminishes the importance of sexuality by making it freely available, Orwell conjures the Junior Anti-Sex League, which promotes political celibacy. "The aim of the Party was not merely to prevent men and women from forming loyalties which it might not be able to control. Its real, undeclared purpose was to remove all pleasure from the sexual act."[23] Although people are encouraged to marry and have children in the "prole" district, they are considered no better than animals. For the poorest classes, "Promiscuity went unpunished, divorce was permit-

5P_Ghodsee_EverydayUtopia_37832.indd 243 1/31/23 12:23 PM

ted" and the Party tacitly allowed prostitution: "Mere debauchery did not matter very much, so long as it was furtive and joyless and only involved women of a submerged and despised class."[24]

The ultimate link between dystopia and the destruction of the family comes when O'Brien explains to Winston that: "We have cut the links between child and parent, and between man and man, and between man and woman. No one dares trust a wife or a child or a friend any longer. But in the future there will be no wives and no friends. Children will be taken from their mothers at birth, as one takes eggs from a hen. The sex instinct will be eradicated. Procreation will be an annual formality like the renewal of a ration card. We shall abolish the orgasm. Our neurologists are at work upon it now."[25] As with Huxley before him, Orwell's dystopian vision stokes fears that the state will interfere in our most intimate lives, breaking down the attachments that people hold most dear.

Because *Brave New World* and *1984* both explicitly discuss sexuality and reproduction, a third text has become an increasingly popular choice to teach to American preadolescents.[26] Lois Lowry's 1993 book, *The Giver*, won the 1994 Newbery Medal of the Association for Library Service to Children, one of the two most prestigious literary awards for children's literature, although it has also often been banned for its discussion of suicide and euthanasia. The book has sold millions of copies around the globe, and a 2012 poll conducted by the *School Library Journal* listed *The Giver* as the fourth most popular "chapter book" for children.[27] In one review of the 2014 film adaptation starring Meryl Streep and Jeff Bridges, Sheila O'Malley noted that the book had become "a staple in middle-school literature curriculum, . . . introducing young students to sophisticated ethical and moral concepts that will help them recognize its precedents when they come to read the works of George Orwell or Aldous Huxley."[28] Taught as a sort of tween prequel to the more serious dystopias on the horizon, American youth are sometimes taught all three books in quick succession—a veritable smorgasbord of anti-utopianism.

The Giver also creates a world where the traditional family has been replaced by artificial "family units" for the sake of "Sameness."

In this future community, children are born to designated "Birthmothers," but never allowed to meet or interact with them. Instead, babies spend their first year in a collectively run "Nurturing Center" with all of the other "newchildren." If they thrive, one-year-olds get placed with family units for the remainder of their upbringing. At the age of twelve, all children are assigned to a job that suits their unique talents and interests (including that of Birthmother). As they age, individuals can apply for a compatible person who will become their spouse, and each couple will be assigned exactly two babies. When the children reach the age of maturity, the family unit dissolves and the adults go to live in large childless communities until they are transferred to the "House of the Old," where they await their euphemistic "release" from life. Because it is a children's book, Lowry avoids sex by creating a world where the community intentionally suppresses emotions, passions, desires, or memories of what those things felt like. The carnal urges of *Brave New World* and *1984* are reduced to the twelve-year-old protagonist's growing desire to kiss his female best friend, and to experience this strange thing called "love."

In all three of these influential dystopian novels, and in many more contemporary books, films, and TV series that have followed in their footsteps, authors portray the eradication of eroticism and romantic love as well as the breakdown of the traditional family as the inevitable collateral damage of attempts to build a different world, no matter how well-intentioned those attempts may be. The community in *The Giver* gives up love, beauty, passion, and connection so as to rid themselves of hatred, prejudice, hunger, cruelty, and war. But the promised better world always turns out to be worse than the world it replaced; brutally worse in *1984*, existentially worse in *Brave New World*, and sentimentally worse in *The Giver*, but always and inevitably worse. The message of these books is loud and clear: you may be unhappy with the way things are, but forget about trying to change them. Any challenge to the "natural" order of things will end with an irretrievable loss of individualism and a slow slide into totalitarian hell.

This tactic has worked for a long time. As we saw with Marx and Engels's attempts to defend their critique of the family in *The Commu-*

5P_Ghodsee_EverydayUtopia_37832.indd 245 1/31/23 12:23 PM

nist Manifesto or Daniel De Leon's monogamy-upholding translator's note to August Bebel's book *Woman Under Socialism*, even the most committed revolutionaries get squeamish when faced with the idea that a revolution in the streets might entail a revolution in the bedroom. And Vladimir Lenin, who overhauled the entire political and economic foundations of imperial Russia in a few short years, quickly soured on Kollontai's ideas for replacing the traditional family with more collective forms of affinity. This is partially why people are so resistant to ideas about reorganizing the private sphere. The most persuasive dystopias will always make us fearful of losing the only reliable source of unconditional love and domestic coziness that we crave. Especially for the poor, for immigrants, and for racial and ethnic minorities struggling against hostile dominant cultures, the traditional family can provide comfort and protection against the frigid world of free market economies. As the cultural theorist Mark Fisher writes:

> The values that family life depends upon—obligation, trustworthiness, commitment—are precisely those which are held to be obsolete in the new capitalism. Yet, with the public sphere under attack and the safety nets that a "Nanny State" used to provide being dismantled, the family becomes an increasingly important place of respite from the pressures of a world in which instability is a constant. . . . Capitalism requires the family (as an essential means of reproducing and caring for labor power; as a salve for the psychic wounds inflicted by anarchic social-economic conditions), even as it undermines it (denying parents time with children, putting intolerable stress on couples as they become the exclusive source of affective consolation for each other).[29]

Given that modern life is already tearing our traditional families to shreds, shouldn't we resist by protecting them? If we further erode sexual monogamy and nuclear family ties, won't we accelerate the forces of hyper individualism and social atomization? If blood is thicker than water, why should we be diluting the strength of our consanguineous bonds at precisely the historical moment when those bonds provide

5P_Ghodsee_EverydayUtopia_37832.indd 246 1/31/23 12:23 PM

the only form of safety and stability upon which we can rely? These are good questions. Any plan to rearrange our domestic lives must address the fears and anxieties that people feel when faced with the further erosion of an institution that, despite its weaknesses, many still hold in high esteem.

But now let me tell you why it's worth it.

"The Miseries of Traditional Life Are Familiar"

Where I live in the United States, representatives of organized religious denominations stand on the front lines of fearmongering about the breakdown of the family and traditional forms of heterosexual monogamy. But while some of the fiercest resistance to changes in the way we organize domesticity originates from people like the late professor of literature Mitchell Kalpakgian, who asserted the "self-evident truth of the natural law that man and woman are created for each other in love and marriage and for the procreation and education of children,"[30] it is complemented by the ideological warfare waged in defense of the nuclear family by market fundamentalists. These strident defenders of capitalism consider all challenges to the status quo as potentially destabilizing factors to the social systems that underpin the free market. Some things, like girl boss liberal feminist demands to break the glass ceiling or expanding the legal institution of marriage to same-sex couples, pose no real threat to conservative interests as long as the work of bringing up the next generation remains in the private sphere. But other sorts of demands prove more difficult to commodify or co-opt, especially those that change people's expectations about how society should be organized.

The paradigmatic example of this secular defense of tradition comes from Jeane J. Kirkpatrick in her infamous 1979 essay, "Dictatorships & Double Standards."[31] Kirkpatrick was an influential neoconservative who served as the first American woman ambassador to the United Nations and on President Ronald Reagan's National Security Council and Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. She shaped

Reagan's rabidly anti-communist foreign policy in the wake of the Iranian Revolution and the rise of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. In what would later become known as the "Kirkpatrick doctrine," the Reagan administration justified its support of what she called "'right-wing' dictators or white oligarchies" in the Global South because they helped check the spread of communism. Throughout the 1980s, the United States supported military leaders and capricious monarchs—including those who "sometimes invoked martial law to arrest, imprison, exile, and occasionally, it was alleged, torture their opponents"—precisely because they defended the status quo. Kirkpatrick writes (and I swear these are her actual words):

> Traditional autocrats leave in place existing allocations of wealth, power, status, and other resources which in most traditional societies favor an affluent few and maintain masses in poverty. But they worship traditional gods and observe traditional taboos. They do not disturb the habitual rhythms of work and leisure, habitual places of residence, habitual patterns of family and personal relations. Because the miseries of traditional life are familiar, they are bearable to ordinary people who, growing up in the society, learn to cope, as children born to untouchables in India acquire the skills and attitudes necessary for survival in the miserable roles they are destined to fill.[32]

If test-tube babies were bottle-conditioned to accept their lot in life in *Brave New World*, Kirkpatrick views "the habitual rhythms of work and leisure, habitual places of residence, [and] habitual patterns of family and personal relations" as a similar technology to make people content with "the miserable roles they are destined to fill." In this passage, Reagan's foreign policy guru basically admits that challenging the ordinary structures of everyday life—reimagining the way we raise and educate our children, the homes we dwell in, the property we hoard or share, and the form of the families we choose—can have profound, long-term effects on people's desire to live in a more just and equitable world, one in which they collectively resist the familiar "miseries of traditional life." Kirkpatrick saw left-wing governments

as a mortal threat to the American aspiration of eventually bringing "freedom" to the countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, because they instituted changes at the level of everyday life. Even the most dramatic changes in the public sphere, such as suspending free speech, free assembly, and basic due process of law, could apparently be reversed in her view so long as the familiar rhythms of the private sphere remained intact. Utopian ideals and political movements are dangerous precisely because they give people hope: the cognitive capacity to imagine that a better world is possible and seek to make it real.

Kirkpatrick's reflections on the role of ordinary domestic life in upholding the status quo builds on a much longer political theoretical tradition of viewing the family as a basic training ground where future subjects learn to respect the absolute authority of monarchs. In his famous 1651 work, *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes proposes that people will trade obedience for the protection of an absolute sovereign since the state of nature is violent and unpredictable.[33] Without a strong, undivided state to control and direct them, human lives will be "nasty, brutish, and short." Hobbes predicated his theory upon the republican Roman ideal of *patria potestas*, where the father had unquestioned power over the life and death of his children.[34] Teaching children to accept the ultimate authority of the father in the home produced adults who would, in Hobbes's view, subordinate themselves to strong leaders in the public sphere. As a result, the patriarchal nuclear family played an essential role in producing docile political subjects. Conservatives like Kirkpatrick understood that disrupting the habitual rhythms of family life might ignite challenges to the authority of states as well as the unequal distribution of property that those states protect. It's not a coincidence that right-wing dictators and "white oligarchies" promote conservative family values and strive to keep women and children in the home under patriarchal authority.

Rather Than Paradise, What If It's Hell?

But the pejorative connotations of the word "utopian" thrive well beyond conservative circles. Centrists and leftists both nurture their own

critiques of those wild-eyed dreamers who want to reshape our domestic spheres and propel us into uncertain (but better) futures. In the first case, self-styled reformers prefer to eschew revolutionary projects and visions in favor of more limited and achievable short-term policy goals. Rather than making a clean break with the present, pragmatists can point to dystopian novels like *Brave New World*, *1984*, and *The Giver* as justifications for their cautious approach to political and economic change. When the Saint-Simonian feminists gave up their fight for free love and focused instead on reinstating women's right to divorce, the realists won out over those dreamers still waiting for the female messiah to come and build a new world where women gave their children their own names and earned enough to support them without a husband or father. Closer to our own time, advocates of same-sex marriage chose to reinforce rather than challenge the ideal of the loving monogamous nuclear family. Given the wide array of legal and financial benefits afforded to married people, it was easier to ask to expand them to include all couples than to question why those benefits exist to encourage monogamous marriage in the first place.

Believers in incremental reform fear abrupt change, and not necessarily for bad reasons. Dystopian fearmongering aside, utopian impulses to remake the world anew might change things so fast that they spin out of control. When the world is turned upside down, no one knows what will come next. Rather than paradise, what if it's hell? The unsettling thing about the future is its almost total unknowability. Today, many fear that a political upheaval is more likely to usher in some form of white supremacist fascism or a Gilead-like theocracy than it will a system that promotes justice, sustainability, and direct democratic control of the economy. Given the risks involved in "dreaming dangerously," to borrow a phrase from the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, some people prefer to focus on small improvements, or what the linguist Noam Chomsky once called "expanding the floor of the cage."[35]

But if necessity is the mother of invention, do we preclude utopian solutions when we give in to the tyranny of our immediate needs? Does the proliferation of co-living and cohousing arrangements act

as a gateway to more communal dwellings? Or are these things half measures that prevent the growth of the kinds of intentional communities that will better serve to shrink our collective carbon footprints and break down patriarchal relations in the private sphere? When we let the good be the enemy of the perfect, are we not shackling our political imaginations to the choices already laid out before us? In their sweeping review of the diversity of the ways our evolutionary ancestors organized their political and economic lives, Davids Graeber and Wengrow suggest that, "If something did go terribly wrong in human history, then perhaps it began to go wrong precisely when people started losing that freedom to imagine and enact other forms of social existence."[36] Continuing to emphasize the pragmatism of incremental reform can also produce a strong disciplining function on our cognitive capacities to hope.

For advocates of full revolution or rebellion, utopianism is a different kind of half measure, but also one to be avoided. Marx and Engels drew their inspiration from the utopian socialists, but they criticized Fourier, the Saint-Simonians, and people like Flora Tristan for proposing that the new world could be built within the decaying carcass of the old one. Those who believe that a total rupture with the past is necessary reject the transformative value of a group of people joining together to build a phalanstery or live in an intentional community. Utopians are derided as clueless dreamers at best; as wealthy, self-indulgent, virtue-signalers at worst.

This disdainful attitude rears its ugly head in the comments on the niche TikTok hashtag #communelife, where disenchanted Generation Zers who have decamped to sustainable farms post about their experiences.[37] Marxist TikTok, or LeftTok as it is sometimes called, is peopled with a fair number of utopia bashers. One representative video posted by @namastehannah on December 4, 2021, racked up more than three thousand comments in its first month on the platform. In response to the idyllic footage showing an attempt to live more simply and sustainably, some commenters expressed admiration or envy, while others called out the perceived privilege of those who dare to retreat from society in this way. One user, Rustybucketkam,

commented, “I don’t know where these people live, but they are obviously wealthy . . . almost no one can afford to live like this.” Others wrote: “I just know y’all have rich parents.” “Rich ppl vibes.” “It’s giving extreme privilege from parents.” “We get it you’re rich.” “I wish I was rich enough to do this.” “Where is my trust fund?!” “Oh honey it’s funny how money makes everything sunny.” But @namastehannah also had her defenders. A user named roxi_sixx responded, “it’s literally way more expensive to live in an apartment in a big city and get mcdonalds and star bucks everyday [*sic*]. Why is everyone hating.” Another user, Violit420, tried to educate her peers on the whole point of ecovillages: “Why are people saying only rich can do this? The point of a commune is ppl pooling assets to serve a greater community.”

But the TikTok haters highlight a real fear about the potentially escapist politics of utopianism. Those who decide to forge new lives in ecovillages or other intentional communities may contribute little to wider movements for social change. If too many people begin to isolate themselves away from mainstream society, walling themselves off into little pockets of resistance, the rest of us may be left alone to deal with the decaying system that remains without the support and resources of those intent on building a better world. On some level, this is not an unfair charge. At least in the United States, the majority of those living in what we might consider utopian communities or forging plural chosen family relations or moving into co-living or cohousing developments, are relatively more educated, middle- or upper-middle-class white people.

As a professor who has taught at elite American institutions, I know that it is often the most privileged young adults who can drop out and join a protest camp or live in an urban collective. If things go south or they change their minds, parental safety nets will support their reentry into the so-called real world. And the kids of the top 1 percent of the income distribution are sometimes the most honestly and ideologically committed to living a different kind of life. On the one hand, they have benefited from a more expansive education about alternative ways of being in the world, but on the other, they also have the economic security to take the kinds of risks most people are too precarious to even consider.

But while I understand the derision and skepticism people feel toward them, I think it is misplaced. Some of the most important utopian thinkers, thinkers whose ideas have reverberated across the centuries, hailed from the most privileged classes. Sir Thomas More was High Lord Chancellor. Peter Kropotkin was a prince. Henri de Saint-Simon was a count. Plato and Alexandra Kollontai were born into influential, aristocratic families. Friedrich Engels was the wealthy son of a successful German industrialist with a taste for fine wine and caviar. Julius Nyerere was the son of an African tribal chief. Many others benefited from solid middle-class educations and never spent a significant portion of their lives laboring in the fields or toiling in factories. And while it is true that men like ~~Charles Fourier and~~ Jean-Baptiste André Godin had private fortunes to build their pocket utopias, their efforts set valuable precedents and showed the world that alternative ways of living were possible.

If hope is a cognitive capacity that can be learned and strengthened with use, it is not surprising that those with the most leisure time to read and think and daydream have the mental bandwidth to imagine alternative futures. And while we might prefer to live in a world shaped by the ideas of what the Italian social theorist Antonio Gramsci called "organic intellectuals" from the less privileged classes, we shouldn't ignore potentially transformative social dreams because they arise in the minds of those who were born to wealthy parents.[38] Utopian ideas that turn the world upside down have often originated from the minds of those who have the most to gain from keeping it right side up.

As to the claim that utopians are ineffective idealists trying to build little model paradises that persuade by example rather than by revolution, the histories presented in this book have conflicting stories to tell. While Godin's Familistery did manage to survive for over a hundred years, other industrialists in Europe did not rush to replicate his experiment. But other "harmless" little communities had to be forcibly eradicated. The Romans wiped out the communal, slave-abhorring Essenes; the Bulgarians exiled the vegan, anarchistic Bogomils; and the Inquisition hunted down and murdered every last proto-feminist,

5P_Ghodsee_EverydayUtopia_37832.indd 253 1/31/23 12:23 PM

celibate Cathar who dared question the Church's hunger for material wealth. Thomas More and Thomas Müntzer were both executed, and the Anabaptists were forced to flee across oceans. The Beguines were ~~declared heretics~~ and disbanded. Prosper Enfantin and other prominent Saint-Simonians were sent to prison for their outrages against public morality. Members of the Oneida Community faced charges of adultery and threats that their children would be taken away from them. Today, ecovillages and intentional communities like Tamera are derided as "cults." Tax lawyers admit that our economy *could be* destabilized if too many groups decide to live together out of community treasuries. If utopian ideas and the communities they inspire are so harmless, why are those in power always so eager to crush them? Creating viable examples of alternative ways of living threaten the status quo because they may trigger our cognitive capacities for hope. This is a good thing.

Practice Radical Hope

We live today in a world where the preexisting pathways to instigating change are increasingly foreclosed to most ordinary citizens. An erosion in democratic institutions, the rise of illiberal populist leaders, or an overall disgust with the corrupt machinations of the political system have weakened the belief that social change can be pursued by influencing the shape of our elected governments. Given the chaos and precarity of daily life, many people feel too overwhelmed to sustain the level of political engagement or activist commitment required in a system increasingly designed to distract us or grind us down. In a world of alternative facts and awash in conspiracy theories, public trust has collapsed, and it is harder than ever to sustain broad-based social movements. One only has to spend a few moments witnessing the tribalism and divisiveness on social media to realize that any strategic political coalition that becomes too powerful will be almost immediately undermined by internal infighting.[39]

Aside from the practical difficulties of influencing the shape of our

5P_Ghodsee_EverydayUtopia_37832.indd 254 1/31/23 12:23 PM

governments, many have long been suspicious of states with their legitimate monopolies on violence. Both revolutionaries and reformers set their sights on the state, hoping to use its authority and resources to instantiate change. As someone who has spent her entire adult life studying the ideals and realities of twentieth-century state socialism in Eastern Europe, I understand how bold social visions can devolve into horrendous nightmares. But the lessons of the twentieth century must not frighten us into submissively accepting the status quo. The failure of past dreams should not mean an end to social dreaming. Without recognizing the possibility of failure and disappointments, hope is little more than wishful thinking.

We must learn from the past and make plans to avoid previous mistakes. One of the strengths of utopian ideas and movements is that they don't necessarily require state intervention. Utopian dreams can grow into revolutionary upheavals or concrete policies for reform, but just as often they stay far out beyond the margins of what seems achievable in the present day, existing as "utopian demands" in the words of feminist theorist Kathi Weeks.[40] That's part of their value—to push the limits of what seems politically, scientifically, or psychologically feasible, to boldly go where no one has gone before. That's what makes them utopias.

If, for whatever reason, our ability to influence state power and authority are foreclosed to us, this doesn't mean that we should just give up. Changing how we live our daily lives is a form of politics. Transformations in the private sphere can be more powerful and enduring than grand sweeping gestures of public activism. As Jeane Kirkpatrick so astutely observed in 1979, only by disrupting the habitual rhythms of how we eat, sleep, love, educate, and raise our children can we shake ourselves and others out of our acquiescence to the miseries of the world in which we live. The growing levels of inequality and the atomizing individualism that pervade our societies have their roots in the way we choose our partners and raise our children, in where we live and with whom we share our possessions. Our governments have a vested interest in upholding the monogamous nuclear family, encouraging the ownership of single-family homes, and making us all

worry about the care and education of our own children to the exclusion of the children of others. People with big mortgages are not free to quit their jobs and run off to a communal farm. Houses, kids, and consumer debt trap us in a certain way of life. This is why governments write tax codes to encourage marriage and homeownership.

In a world of real or imagined scarcity, we arrange our domestic lives to protect ourselves against an uncertain future, hoarding as many resources and privileges as possible. In a society with less precarity and with resources more equitably distributed, we will worry less about hustling to make sure we have a bigger slice of the pie than those around us. But it works the other way, too. If we lived in wider networks of people who shared their resources, we would become less precarious. Both processes are interdependent. It may be that we will geoengineer our way out of the climate crisis, and that one day we will all share unlimited, free solar power; enjoy universal basic incomes funded by our collective ownership of the robots and algorithms that will do most necessary labor; and live in real democratic societies where “material needs no longer exist,” but none of that is possible without fundamentally rethinking the basis upon which we organize our intimate lives to free us from selfish individualism.[41]

Domestic transformation is therefore a key node—if not *the key node*—of resistance and reinvention. On a purely practical level, living with more people means buying fewer things. In the United States, consumer spending accounts for about two-thirds of the gross domestic product, which means that individual decisions about how we arrange our private lives and define who counts as family can undermine the internal logics of a growth-obsessed economy. Fewer babies means fewer future consumers. If more people share their homes and stuff, there are fewer demands for new things. If people have wider social networks within which they find love, support, and companionship, people may begin to care less about chasing the external accoutrements of material success. Status markers matter less in more equitable societies.

This doesn’t mean that we will lose our individualism. It does mean that the ways we mark ourselves as different and interesting will be

5P_Ghodsee_EverydayUtopia_37832.indd 256 1/31/23 12:23 PM

decoupled from how much those markers increase our value on competitive labor or marriage markets. Personal branding will be a thing of the past. Our tastes and passions will be shaped by what we truly love and not by what we think will look good on a college application, résumé, or LinkedIn page. By undermining the wasteful planned obsolescence that underpins competitive acquisitiveness, we can reduce the environmental impacts of our materialistic lifestyles. This doesn't necessarily mean that we will enjoy access to less stuff, it just means that stuff will be useful to a wider network of people rather than sitting unused in our closets, basements, attics, and garages. Why buy a new wheelbarrow when you can borrow one? Public libraries, free stores, and websites like Rent the Runway model how sharing our stuff might work in practice. We might even have access to *more* stuff if building local networks allows us to pool monies to buy things we might not be able to afford on our own.

When I speak and write about transforming the way we imagine our private lives, the most frequent comments I hear concern the politics of bringing children into this world at this particular historical moment. In the last five years, I have met an increasing number of younger adults who believe that a BirthStrike is the only way to responsibly deal with the reality of the climate crisis. Others fear they will never enjoy the financial stability necessary to start their own families or worry that their career prospects will be limited by the very real burdens of caregiving. Everyone suffered during the pandemic, but mothers and fathers of young children faced many extra challenges as they struggled to care for their kids when kindergartens and schools closed, setting a daunting precedent for those considering parenthood in the future. While I respect those who feel confident in their decision to forgo children, I know there are BirthStrikers out there who want to start families but feel overwhelmed by the many compelling reasons not to, not least of which are the cynical government diktats encouraging young people to get busy and reproduce for the sake of the nation-state. I fully sympathize with the big middle finger to society that childlessness represents.

And there is a long tradition of childlessness among utopian com-

munities. Often, prohibitions on reproduction grew from the recognition that children tied parents too closely to the material world. Bogomils, Cathars, Shakers, and Catholic monastics focused their collective efforts on creating the conditions to achieve spiritual salvation. In the Buddhist tradition, worldly attachments hinder the quest for enlightenment. Family means attachment. Those who seek peace must break the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. But for those utopian movements that sought to create a better future in the here and now, children were always part of the plan.

Instead of not bringing children into this world at all, utopians have often committed to bringing them in differently: challenging parents' unique investments in their own biological offspring to return to a form of cooperative breeding that would ensure a better future for the community. Having babies is political. Raising children is political. And even if you don't want to have your own children, you can participate in the utopian project of raising the next generation by helping others who do decide to have them. Instead of ceding the task of making new people to those who would uphold the status quo, raising a militantly optimistic next generation— nurturing, nourishing, and protecting their cognitive and emotional capacities for hope—is one of the most radical things we can do.

In this book, I have tried to review various utopian ideas that have come down to us through the ages, with examples of the individuals and communities still experimenting with these ideas today. Many failed or faded away. And no doubt they each had their problematic aspects. But similar visions have persisted over millennia, in many different cultural contexts, and we dismiss them at our peril. Part of developing our own cognitive capacities for hope involves a remembrance of the sometimes humble, sometimes astounding victories of the many social dreamers who came before us, victories that those who would uphold the status quo want us to forget. As the historian Howard Zinn reminds us:

> To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cru-

> elty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.[42]

Each one of us, right now, has the power to start building a different world, beginning with our own families and communities. There are countless things you can do to cultivate change in your daily life as it is. If you are in a monogamous pair, try to spend more time with your non-couple friends and make sure your partner does the same. Nurture all sorts of lateral relationships by finding novel ways to share with your neighbors and colleagues. Get back in touch with old friends. Chat with people at the grocery store. Daydream.

If you have kids, let them spend more time with their grandparents, godparents, aunts, uncles, and family friends. Try to swap more childcare with other parents and create long-term parenting pods. Consider different housing arrangements or join a book club or some form of continuing adult education. And if you have the freedom and opportunity to do so, why not shake things up entirely? Start a free store or join an upcycling collective. Uproot and resettle in an intentional community or ecovillage. Explore different forms of cooperative living and working. Adopt a mononym. Try to meet new people way outside of your established circle of acquaintances. Make strangers into kin.[43] There are many creative ways to resist the lingering effects of patrilineality and patrilocality in our daily lives. As the historian Gerda Lerner reminds us, "The system of patriarchy is a historic construct; it has a beginning; it will have an end."[44]

5P_Ghodsee_EverydayUtopia_37832.indd 259 1/31/23 12:23 PM

Perhaps even more pressing is the need to flex our cognitive capacities for hope. We must imagine the future that we want, to think of it as a concrete goal, and consider the different pathways available to realize that future, no matter how outlandish or impossible this future might seem to us now. Sometimes the sheer imagination of something helps to make it real. We can all cultivate the ability to project ourselves into the future if we resist the fear and anxiety that immobilizes our inherent abilities to dream. The more we hope, the better we get at hoping, and the more we inspire those around us to flex their own cognitive capacities for hope. This is not just fluffy positive thinking; it is learning to "remember" the future using a similar set of mental acuities as those we use to remember the past.

For those of us afraid of regret, fearful of risk, and frozen by the thought that things could get worse, the hardest step will be to give in to hope. As the Dutch historian Rutger Bregman observes, embracing a positive vision for the future usually means "weathering a storm of ridicule. You'll be called naive. Obtuse. Any weakness in your reasoning will be mercilessly exposed. Basically, it's easier to be a cynic."[45] That is why we need to hope together: out loud, with each other, every day. Believing that the future cannot be changed by our actions is just a convenient way of absolving ourselves of the need to take those actions. "Pessimism (or rather what is called such) is, in brief, playing the sure game. You cannot lose at it; you may gain. It is the only view of life in which you can never be disappointed," wrote the English novelist Thomas Hardy in 1902.[46]

Visions of a bleak future saturate our cultural world and conspire to breed fear and anxiety at the prospect of organizing our lives differently. Those in power benefit from our despair. It's hard to fight the urge to retreat. We often consider our homes as refuges from the world, hiding behind locked doors, and envying the rich, beautiful people living rich, beautiful lives on our social media feeds. Books and films like *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *Uglies*, as well as streaming series like *Black Mirror*, *Squid Game*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* exacerbate our despondency, filling us with specters of a cruel, brutal future. Dystopian stories are edgy and filled with plot-propelling existential

struggles. Action, conflict, and violence titillate audiences and captivate attention. But these cultural products also work to diffuse our dissatisfaction with our present societies, since after all, things could become much worse if we try to change things too drastically. But we must reject the ubiquity of cynicism and dejection. Which brings me back to *Star Trek*.

Anything Is Possible

In 2017, after a twelve-year hiatus, a new show joined the franchise. Launched as a prequel to the original series, *Star Trek: Discovery* introduced a new generation of viewers to Gene Roddenberry's post-scarcity world of the United Federation of Planets, the intergalactic union of semi-independent civilizations.[47] Starfleet is the Federation's research, defense, and diplomatic arm, operating as a uniformed force of multispecies space Samaritans who must follow a strict code of conduct.[48] The *Discovery* is a special Starfleet science vessel conducting research in the mid-twenty-third century.

After two seasons of adventures, the beginning of the third season finds *Discovery* and her crew catapulted nine centuries into the future to a time when the Federation no longer exists. The former member worlds have descended into poverty, violence, and isolationism with scarce resources controlled by a brutal criminal syndicate of avaricious green and blue humanoids called the Emerald Chain. When the ship gets spit out of a wormhole into the year 3189, only a few "true believers" still have faith that one day a renewed Federation can restore peace and prosperity to the galaxy. The plot of the next two seasons follows the efforts of the captains and the crew of *Discovery* as they try to rebuild the Federation world by world, faced with the suspicion and hostility of embittered and deeply divided populations.

The fourth episode of the fourth season is called "All Is Possible." In it, an official of the newly reopened Starfleet Academy, Dr. Kovich, tells Lieutenant Tilly of the *Discovery*, "When *Discovery* first arrived, no one here trusted you. It wasn't just that you were in a nine-hundred-

and-thirty-year-old starship. . . . It was the way you carried yourself, like you grew up in a world that believes anything is possible. Quite frankly, it stung."[49]

More than fifty years since the original series began on network television, *Star Trek: Discovery* carries on the militant optimism of Gene Roddenberry's vision by showing how the people of the future find their way back to hope.[50] The presence of *Discovery* and its crew, people who "grew up in a world that believes anything is possible," rekindles faith that things can be different again. If the recovery of a certain past can make a different future possible, then, now more than ever before, it is essential for us to mine past utopian ideas and experiments, to reject the stuff that didn't work out so well, and rescue and repurpose the things that did. If our schools insist on assigning dystopian novels to our children, and our media environment feeds us nothing but a steady diet of doom, gloom, and the impending apocalypse, we must fight against them by allowing ourselves to dream.

Although progress is made in fits and starts, social change does happen; utopian proposals for the private sphere that once seemed impossible—childcare, divorce, and same-sex marriage—are now relatively commonplace. Change is always fueled by the perseverance of those who believe that we can do better. Hope is a muscle we must use. Some people train their memories; why not get into the habit of routinely flexing our emotional and cognitive capacities for hope by imagining a better tomorrow together? This is not to merely engage in naive optimism or self-help-style positive psychology, but rather to remember that, as Zinn pointed out, the stories we tell ourselves about the past determine the possibilities for our future.

Radical hope is the most powerful weapon we have. It's time we use it.