

Utopian research with children

Priscilla Alderson

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Introduction: complications in utopian research

'Utopian research' in this chapter is taken to mean documenting, imagining and analysing efforts to promote justice and well-being for the great majority of people of all ages. Such research involves crossing disciplinary boundaries and reviewing forms of agency and structure that enable change and that work beyond Weberian voluntarism and the structural functionalism of Durkheim and Parsons. As this chapter suggests, critical realism offers useful tools for research about utopias and about childhood, and a few of these tools will be reviewed.

Many children and young people, with their imaginative energy and willingness to take great risks, have been active utopians (Ferreira and Kleinert 2015; Hayward 2012; Popović and Miller 2015). Young people often lead the protests through which much utopian thought and action begin, from Soweto (1976, against Afrikaans being the main language in schools), to the US civil rights movement (1960s, against apartheid in student canteens), to the chain of uprisings in the 2013 Middle Eastern 'Arab Spring'. Yet utopian writers tend to sideline children, banishing them into communal care centres. The aim has been either to rear children as model citizens away from the subversive family, for example Plato (2007), or to abolish the stifling family and allow adults, and occasionally children, to enjoy utopian freedoms, for example Firestone (1970) in her scarily emotionless libertarianism.

Utopians interested in natural flourishing, such as William Morris (1994 [1890]: 30-1), valued children's freedom. He hoped that in his utopia (*Nowhere*), women could be 'less anxious' about their children and 'more maternal'. Children could

often make up parties, and come to play in the woods for weeks together in the summer time, living in tents, as you see. We rather encourage them to do it; they learn to do things for themselves, and get to know the wild creatures; and you see the less they stew inside houses the better for them.

During 1935-1939, before the NHS (National Health Service), there was a utopian Peckham Health Centre in a moderately poor part of London. There were three floors of sports and dance and social rooms, and the doctors who ran the Centre recorded:

Our failures during our first 18 months' work have taught us [that] individuals, *from infants to old people*, resent or fail to show any interest in anything initially presented to them through discipline, regulation or instruction which is another aspect of authority...We have had to learn to sit back for [the members' spontaneous] activities to emerge. Any impatience on our part, translated into help has strangled their efforts.

(Gribble 2010:163, *my emphasis*)

A staff member, Lucy Crocker, tried to plan a supervised timetable with the children so that they could safely use the swimming pool and gym, but this failed. She learnt, through pressure from a 4-year-old boy, Brian, to let the children use the pool whenever they wanted, unsupervised and still safe. Brian was at first 'a bit anti-social' but he soon became 'a responsible person'. Teasing, competing, fighting and bullying quickly disappeared.

This short-lived historical example illustrates key themes about utopias. Utopians' central aim, human flourishing, cannot be imposed or rigidly regulated. They have to take risks and respect the free though co-operating agency of adults and children. However, the long-term survival of utopias also depends on detailed political and economic structural planning, and strong defences against destructive critics and opponents.

Utopian research is often dismissed as invalid and irrelevant. To positivists, it is not evidence-based or scientific. Social constructionists may see utopias as too vaguely unrelated to social experiences and contexts. Postmodernists doubt that there can be either 'social progress' or evaluation of societies as 'better' or 'worse'. Politics are dominated by TINA: There Is No Alternative to neo-liberalism. Social researchers, who hope that their research might benefit children, mainly address fairly small-scale local problems and solutions, whereas enduring utopias also attend to larger structures on the macro-level of research advocated by Qvortrup (this volume). Yet large-scale surveys, such as the huge birth cohorts, concentrate on the apparent *effects* of public policies on children's performance, in terms of their education, health and likely future earning power. There is little of the critical analysis of underlying *causal* economic, political and alternative structures that is necessary to utopian research.

Individual agents create outstanding venues and services for children but, like the Peckham Health Centre, these tend to falter and fail after a while, as if the agents succeeded in spite of social structures rather than because of them. The long-lasting Italian early years centre in Reggio Emilia is internationally admired and widely imitated. Yet, the utopian education researchers Peter Moss and Michael Fielding (2011) conclude that Reggio has never been wholly replicated outside its uniquely supportive economic and political context (and see Corsaro, this volume). Utopian research therefore has to attend to interactions between personal agency and political structure.

Ruth Levitas (2013) considers that sociology must reclaim utopia as the major method of social inquiry. The desire for a better future is inherent in human culture, and was originally central to nineteenth century sociology. Utopian approaches were, however, later repressed by sociologists seeking to establish 'scientific' university departments. Yet inevitably, and implicitly or explicitly, critical research poses the possibility of alternatives to the problems observed, and the utopian method works out what the alternative imaginary reconstitution of society would mean. Levitas welcomes the renewed interest in utopian thought, which she sees as normative, prescriptive and future-orientated. Utopia is not a blueprint or a goal but a quest towards holistic and provisional approaches. Rather than rigid plans or predictions utopian research explores the new possibilities raised by each step forward (Levitas 2013; Wright 2010) though holding to long term aims and principles.

Like C Wright Mills (1959) relating private troubles to public issues, Frederic Jameson (1996, cited in Kunkel 2014: 171) envisaged utopian complexity:

One isolated cause or issue, one specific form of injustice, cannot be fulfilled or corrected without eventually drawing the entire web of interrelated social levels together into a totality, which then demands the intervention of a politics of social transformation.

Although research can inform and document creative utopian work, Kunkel (2014: 180) like Marx concluded that active 'social transformation is mainly the task of amateurs, not experts'. Levitas (2010: 545) agreed with Unger (2007) that

above all...we need to encourage in our children prophetic identities based on what they might become, rather than fixed [ascribed] identities...[with an] insistence on utopian ontology as processual and dynamic.

Levitas's (2013) utopian methods include: the *archaeology* that critically pieces together past and present images of the good society and of desired policies; the *architecture* of utopian designs; and the *ontology* that investigates how visions of a better world and alternative futures expose underlying judgements about human nature.

Utopian research especially relates to childhood studies, when it respects children's imaginative agency, their willingness to adapt and change, and their practical involvement in research and activism. Bronwyn Hayward (2012), Peter Kraftl (2014) and many others stress the benefits of education that encourages children's free agency in natural surroundings combined with their solidarity and willingness to protest against unjust and destructive policies. Children's present lives influence hopes for their personal and political futures, while utopias involve future decades when the youngest generations will live longest and be the most affected groups. Enduring reform therefore depends on children being involved and educated in critical questioning of present social, economic and political repression and injustice, and in creating alternative structures.

Utopian research with children thus involves moving beyond traditional boundaries, such as insistence that research be centred on evidence, which locks attention on to records of the past and can veto thinking about the future. The veto assumes narrow meanings of reality that will be questioned in the next section. Later sections will review further boundaries to be crossed: those that attempt to exclude morality from social research, that overlook political intergenerational research, and that discourage interdisciplinary research. The following sections also consider how critical realism supports utopian research.

Evidence and reality, change and absence

The conviction, which underlies and justifies utopian research about childhood, is that children and their joys and suffering, and the practical and political means to benefit or harm them, *really* exist and have *real* effects that can be compared and evaluated as better or worse. Although many childhood researchers and scholars

agree with this, it can be difficult to counter interpretive claims that there are no independent universal realities. How can we justify, or prove in our research that social relationships, justice, or social inequalities, suffering or rights really exist beyond subjective beliefs, feelings and behaviours? Is social life wholly and tenuously constructed from local, contingent experiences and relations?

Evidence-based research assumes a kind of hyper-reality, when it takes for granted, first, that replies to surveys are accurate and, second, that statistical analysis of 1,000s of replies can replicate and measure these realities. However, the statistics include misleading replies and over-simplified data of children's complex lives and ambivalent views. The real ontology (being and doing) of their daily lives cannot be reduced into the epistemology (thinking, analysis) of numbers, words and images. Conversely, interpretive research assumes a kind of sub-reality, when it claims that daily life is constructed or invented in our minds and transient ideas (epistemology), and does not have an independent, intransient reality (ontology) that we discover.

By contrast, critical realism helps in several ways to establish that *real* ontology exists. A few ways will now be briefly reviewed, ways or tools that are more fully explained in relation to childhood studies in Alderson (2013, 2016).

Critical realism accepts that there is independent, intransitive reality or ontology that we can discover, as well as a largely separate transitive epistemology that we invent. One key critical realist feature is *theory/practice consistency*. This expects researchers' real everyday practices to confirm and not contradict their theories (see Davis and Watson this volume). An example of contradiction, which critical realism critiques, is myths about the 'fiction of the social agent': 'agency neither starts nor finishes with any individual agent'. It is orchestrated within narrative structures, character is not 'real' and there is no single author but always multiple authors of agency (Oswell 2013: 264-70). Although this is partly true, if taken as wholly true this view would contradict a researcher's own individual agency as an author, with copyright claims and defences against plagiarism. If the social agent is a fiction, and agency is never a property but always relational, in-between and dispersed (Oswell 2013: 270) this would leave rights, such as the right to life, to food and shelter, or to freedom from inhuman and degrading treatment (UN 1989) including rape and murder, without embodied individual rights holders to claim them.

Another contradiction is Actor Network Theory (ANT) which sees little difference between intensive care ventilators and the babies attached to them (Place 2000). That denies the reality of human emotions and relationships. Machines can easily be mended or replaced whereas, in real life, beloved children are irreplaceable. Public support for the immense costs of intensive care for fragile newborn babies would be entirely missing for similar efforts to care intensively for fragile machinery, which illustrates the theory/practice contradictions in ANT. Although parents' views and feelings about their baby powerfully influence the baby's life and development, so that being (ontology) and thinking (epistemology) interact, alter one another and partly overlap, they are also partly irreducible. Parents' thinking cannot bring a dead baby back to life, epistemology is not all-powerful, and ontology is largely independent.

Critical realism therefore sees three tiers of reality. First are our *empirical* experiences and perceptions, such as concern on witnessing a sick baby, or the

medical recordings and notes. Much childhood research is conducted on this descriptive level. Second is the stronger reality of the *actual* embodied baby, the machinery, and the practical care. However, critical realism identifies the *real* at the third level of underlying causes: the problems that lead to premature births, the healthcare systems that provide neonatal intensive care, the reasons that compel staff to welcome and involve parents in their babies' care, or to exclude parents.

Research that is confined to just the empirical and actual levels is like observing and describing many falling objects or many birds' different beaks. Yet research that also looks further, at real causal explanations, follows Newton discovering gravity, or Darwin discovering natural selection. Evidence-based forms of research, which accept only empirical data and correlations, or postmodern research that concentrates on discourse, both avoid examining causes when these are usually invisible, and can only be known in their effects. However, by accepting invisible causal realities, the critical realist Roy Bhaskar (2008) supports research, including utopian research, into driving causal mechanisms, such as class or inequalities that can fix or transform societies.

One example is the current cuts and the privatising of the English NHS, which particularly endanger children and young people (Lister 2013). They threaten the great advances in children's physical and mental healthcare, which were enabled through the resources, research and staff training the NHS has introduced and supported for nearly 70 years (Alderson 2016: Chapter 10). Policy analyst David Hunter (2012) contends that the government's austerity health policies are not guided by science or evidence, but are driven by unseen, barely acknowledged beliefs that underlie the choices ministers make and the interests they represent. To counter their neo-liberalism, Hunter advocates a new political economy of health created through new public debates about health, which place politics centre stage.

Moving further into invisible reality, critical realism accepts *absence* as a great reality: everything in the past and future, everything that might have been or might become, all need and lack. Concepts of childhood are imbued with absent adult capacities and freedoms, and with the so-far absent adult that the child will become. Although babies cannot be replaced like machines, children and adults are constantly changing, being and becoming. Science and philosophy usually identify change with difference, and ponder how we can each sustain our identity. If we change, how do we avoid becoming, or being replaced by, another person? (Martin and Barresi 2006). Critical realism, however, connects transformative human change to partial continuity within each sustained person (Alderson 2013: 161-64; Bhaskar 2008: 309; Norrie 2010: 169-74). This change involves transitions among the empty spaces of infinite unfulfilled possibilities, absence and negativity, which are so immense that the present, the positive, is 'a tiny but important ripple on the surface of a sea of negativity' (Bhaskar 2008: 5).

Absences and spaces are essential for real movement and change. A world fully packed with presence and evidence and TINA has no room for movement, alternatives, imagination or utopias. Absence includes 'non-occurrences, the undone or left alone...the failed exam...the monsoon that didn't occur...' (*Ibid*). And the missing monsoon may be followed by so-far absent negatives of famine, hunger, war and migration. The 'undone' includes the dislocation between current knowledge

about dangers, but inaction to reduce and prevent them, through lack of utopian forethought and activity. Concern about growing economic and ecological crises emphasises the need for alternative thinking to search for so-far absent remedies.

The moral basis of social research

Utopian research is value-laden when criticising problems and advocating preferred alternatives. Many social researchers, however, warn against deriving values from observed facts, an ought from an is. Like many ethnographers, Martyn Hammersley (1995:14) insists on separating what is and what ought to be. He cites the example of assuming that starving people who (factually) might die therefore (morally) ought to be fed. What if 'the starving people might be an oppressive army?' he asks. Would we then expect that they should be fed? He believes researchers 'should strive to be value neutral or objective' in their own work, while accepting 'that value argument...is essential to governance and to everyday life'. Yet his response to the starving army example increases the complex morality inherent in social research instead of removing it. In critical realist terms, Hammersley collapses the intransitive ontology of real values as causes of human interactions and policies, into transitive epistemology as if they are simply expendable ideas. Hammersley cannot escape from making value judgements such as his edict that morality 'should' not be part of social research.

The critical realist Andrew Sayer (2011) questions why researchers are supposed to suspend their humanity when at work. He notes a double standard (theory/practice contradiction) if social researchers attempt to delete values from their research, but depend on values in their daily lives and relationships (see Davis and Watson this volume). And to suspend values during research, Sayer believes, risks breaking the golden rule of always treating others with the same justice and respect as you would expect to be treated yourself. Even 'objective' research involves the values of veracity and accuracy, of being fair and impartial when openly listening with mutual trust and respect, trying to understand and report every side. But that need not mean valuing everything neutrally, evenly, and inconclusively, or overlooking cruelty and injustice, or remaining silent about them. 'A politics without ethics can embrace genocide as easily as democracy' (Sayer 2011; 248). Instead, we need utopian social science that openly seeks to reduce harms and promote flourishing.

Alphonse Omolo's (2015) research about the violence in families and neighbourhoods in Kenya, which drives so many children to live on the streets, shows, for example, how value judgements are central to research with children. There is no neutral central ground. Attempts at neutrality tend inadvertently to side with and reinforce the more powerful groups. Omolo's work is utopian in that he concludes by listing major causes of the endemic problems, and major remedies informed by values of justice, respect and care.

Bhaskar (2008: 261) contends that social science is 'value-saturated', and with Sayer (2011: 11) considers that social researchers' attempts to be value-neutral drain away the real meaning from their work. Value-neutral research lacks 'an adequate account of human capacities and vulnerabilities, generally through an exaggerated fear of ethnocentrism' (fear of imposing neo-colonial values). It is too

cautious and inward-looking, Sayer believes, denying our common human wisdom, and our constant need and hope to flourish and to avoid suffering. Sayer adds that to claim that these are only 'Western' values denies common humanity and universal principles of justice and equity, which underlie the many diverse ways these are understood, practised and fought for around the world.

Political intergenerational research

Utopian research is political but children are generally barred from political research in two ways: 'adult' mainstream research tends to ignore children, and childhood researchers tend to ignore politics. Dominant traditions in sociology have also avoided human rights (Alderson 2012), which can work as utopian maps. The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations 1989) details a world where all children are adequately protected and provided for, and where all enjoy freedoms, justice and equity. This section reviews ways to cross the boundaries and promote intergenerational research, and begins with Jeremy Gilbert's (2015) two contrasting forms of democracy.

In 'Liberal' politics and journalism, attractive, smart, competent candidates sell a political brand to please rational, self-interested voters. Government is then seen as a more or less neutral tool to be used towards any ends that might buy votes and power, and power tends to be seen as the negative coercion of opposition and enforcing of self-interest. Critical realism challenges this usual but negative view of power, and usefully shows how one word, power, stands for two wholly opposite meanings (Bhaskar 2008: 402). Critical realists term negative power as power₂, and contrast it with creative emancipating power₁. Positive power₁ is necessary to childhood studies if children's powerful energy, ideas, hopes and emotions are to be welcomed and respected, rather than feared because of unexamined fearful assumptions that power is always dangerous.

Gilbert's (2015) alternative 'Sociological' democracy celebrates the positive power of the great majority. It is highly aware that politics is 'essentially a matter of conflicts between competing sets of interests' held by different groups. These groups that drive government policy are 'of various shapes and sizes', strengths and public influence, differing in 'their wealth, how well organised they are, their access to bits of the state, their access to technology'. Gilbert avers that effective governments are backed by 'a powerful coalition of these social forces'.

In public debate, Gilbert's Liberal democracy concentrates on individuals: personable politicians and self-interested voters. Sociological democracy, however, also critically addresses causal social structures. Despite their usual silence on these matters, Liberal governments very actively increase their powerful corporate support, such as from most of the mass media run by a few billionaires, and from financial and other multinationals. These fund, lobby and employ politicians to run affairs in order to enrich the rich (Sayer 2016).

The groups that campaign for justice and public services, for the wellbeing of the vast majority of people and redistribution of wealth, the trade unions that support fair wages and working conditions, the alternative news agencies, the green and peace

movements are all now too small and weak to be in Gilbert's terms a 'powerful coalition of social forces'. Any government that manages to be elected to work for these weaker groups is most likely to be ineffective, for lack of power¹ supportive structures, while being attacked by overwhelmingly hostile corporate power². The Black journalist Gary Younge (2015) reviewed this problem at the launch of the Stuart Hall Foundation. He cited the trail of governments that have recently swept into power with great public support for their policies of freedom and justice, but were soon overcome by hostile powers.

'Liberal' governments increasingly deter or discourage the most disadvantaged groups from voting at all: the young, low paid and unemployed, indebted, home-renters and homeless. Changes to political party funding, electoral registration and constituency boundaries are removing millions of these individuals, especially students and young families in privately rented homes, from the electoral roll (Mason 2016). This further increases the power of wealthier groups. Oxfam (2016) records the annual inexorable transfers of wealth and power to rich individuals. In 2016, for the first time, the richest '1%' owned more than all other people in the world. The upward transfers are hastened by international austerity policies, which especially increase child poverty (Hills 2015). There is the sale and privatising of public assets and services, from water to healthcare, social housing to land, which older age-group generations used to enjoy freely but which everyone will in future have to pay for – if they can afford them (Alderson 2016; Meek 2014). Younge (2015) commented:

If politics is the art of the possible then radical politics, the kind of politics that Stuart [Hall] espoused, must at very least engage with, showcase and promote new possibilities. And right now we are in need of imagining and articulating new possibilities.

To establish utopias of greater freedom, peace, justice and solidarity depends on expanding support for Gilbert's Sociological democracy beyond active protest groups to the great majority. This would involve convincing them where their best interests lie, and countering misinformation from propaganda claims that wealth 'trickles down' and can be generated only by the very rich. Research is urgently needed into the childhood and school experiences that precede the unwillingness of the youngest adult group in England, aged up to 35, being least likely to vote. Neutral, 'objective', 'value-free' school teaching preaches dominant Liberal democracy, and covertly and uncritically promotes its values. This appears to leave most young adults too compliant or despairing or cynical to vote out Liberal or neoliberal governments. If Sociological democracy were taught in schools then at least critical questions essential for informed voting would be analysed. Yet before schools can engage with Sociological democracy, they need public and political support to change from their present tasks of training compliant workers and consumers, into supporting active critical young citizens. That is too large a topic for this chapter, except to consider its relevance to childhood studies being connected to future adulthood.

The chapters in this book indicate that the traditional research attention in childhood studies is mainly to personal matters, rather than political concerns about democracy, freedom and justice. By design or default, this fits Gilbert's Liberal emphasis on personal interests rather than collective political concerns. There is

important research on children's agency, , for instance, in political awareness (Connolly this volume), child soldiers (Dumble 2012) and working children (Liebel 2015 and many others), although they tend to seem like exceptions 'outside childhood',. Even human rights are mainly shrivelled into Article 12, the child's right to express views on 'all matters affecting the child' (United Nations 1989). These 'matters' are usually limited to personalised individual Liberal matters and less to Gilbert's politically aware Sociological collective democracy. Article 12 tends to involve functionalism rather than critical theory, talk (epistemology) rather than being and doing (ontology), and is seldom applied in research that questions political structures.

An exception is the work of Jessica Heybach and Eric Sheffield (2013; xix) who warn that seemingly utopian USA policies, such as 'No Child Left Behind' intended to raise standards for everyone in schools, are so blindly optimistic that they become oppressively over monitored, controlled and punitive. They restrict agency, devalue creativity, individuality and inquiry, commodify knowledge and experience, and destroy the 'self for the good of the unattainable goal'. Heybach and Sheffield (2013: xxiv) use 'a vehement dystopian lens to crack open a covert and creeping dystopian evolution' in schools:

Dystopia as a 'method of exaggeration' clearly exposes that which is often veiled in righteous justification and paternalism set in motion to save children from themselves.

They cite the philosopher John Dewey's (1933) belief that utopia would have no schools and real education is informal and flexible. Dewey considered that unless educators

connect with some activity which the child is carrying on of his own initiative independent of the educator, education becomes reduced to a pressure from without. It may, indeed, give certain external results, but cannot truly be called educative. Without insight into the psychological structure and activities of the individual, the educative process will, therefore, be haphazard and arbitrary. If it chances to coincide with the child's activity it will get a leverage; if it does not, it will result in friction, or disintegration, or arrest of the child nature.

This echoes the Peckham doctors in 1935 quoted earlier (Gribble 2010). Utopias cannot be imposed any more than real education can be, so that research is needed into how children too can be involved in planning, working towards and living in better societies.

Many specialists research specific areas for possible improvements, from schools (Fielding and Moss 2011), to health services (Lister 2013) to urban planning (Minton 2012). However, utopias are whole societies and lasting change depends on large political-economic-structural changes along with all the smaller local ones as political utopians consider (reviewed in Alderson 2016: Chapter 12). Although very varied, these writers tend to warn of the dangers of violent revolution, and advocate peaceful, incremental yet radical transformation (D'Souza 2013; Fielding and Moss 2011; Gribble 2010; Hayward 2012; Kunkel 2014; Levitas 2013; Omolo 2015; Popović and Miller 2015; Unger 2007; Wright 2010). Importantly, these

comprehensive forward movements involve all generations. To separate off and to study only childhood is like trying to understand a household by looking only, say, at the living-rooms. And 'adult' research that ignores childhood is like researching households but ignoring the living-rooms. Intergenerational research involves researching all the rooms, in effect studying whole instead of partial societies.

Interdisciplinary research: expertise, safety and risk

When researching all age groups and areas of society, and therefore all related academic disciplines, utopian researchers have to be interdisciplinary, moving outside the relative safety of their areas of expertise. This can feel like stepping off the island of childhood into deep waters of unfamiliar disciplines such as politics. Yet childhood is not an island but an integral part of political mainland society. Childhood cannot be a partly isolated specialist topic like transport or housing. Like adulthood, childhood can only be understood *in relation to other topics*, from families to cities, from poverty to music, from prisons to war. This involves venturing outside an artificially enclosed semi-private arena of childhood, into the 'adult' arenas of economics and politics, which so greatly influence, infiltrate and explain children's daily lives.

Utopian research does this. It connects many disciplines and dichotomies and traces their interactions: local and global levels, personal and political, structure and agency, present and potential, the 'worlds' of childhood and adulthood, fact and value, economic and ecological, causes and effects, natural and social sciences in open systems. Research that looks for a single dominant cause or influence treats society as if it is a closed system, whereas in reality there are always two or more influences and their related disciplines, and usually very many in open systems. Influences cannot be measured for their relative impact as statistical analysis attempts to do, but are better analysed for their intersections and interacting causes and effects. Pressing, interrelated global problems of excessive consumption and climate change, inequalities and injustices lead social, political and economic researchers to share analyses of future trends and possible remedies. Some natural scientists working on climate change feel compelled to warn of coming social and moral disasters, and of necessary political action to protect younger generations (Hansen et al. 2013).

Alan Prout (2005, 144-6) believes that reconceptualising 'childhood's ontology' through interdisciplinary study is so important that it is worth working outside 'disciplinary comfort zones', and braving the risks of 'dilettantism and amateurism' when venturing into other disciplines. He explored how psycho-pharmaceuticals and the reproductive and communication bio-social-technologies reveal childhood's changing present and potential future. In doing so and working with ANT theory, Prout (2005, 113-142) aimed to work beyond dualisms, by setting children and the technologies at a comparable level of ontology in heterogeneous bio-social-technical assemblages.

This involves assuming two kinds of uniformity across the natural and social sciences: first, uniformity between their subject matters, such as between people and objects, the theory of *reductionism*; second, uniformity between methods of researching the natural and technical and social, the theory of *scientism*. These two

uniformities, of subject matters and of research methods, set aside differences between inanimate objects and sentient human agents. It is then logical to conclude that no single determinant process, social, biological or technical, 'drives' change and events, which are seen as 'non-teleological' (lacking purpose, meaning or goals) (Prout, 2005, 141). In non-teleology, human flourishing and suffering, harm and benefit, morality and hope of social progress also lack relevance and meaning. Objective social scientists can therefore describe seemingly random change, but it would be pointless for them to search for assumedly non-existent or irrelevant political or moral causes, explanations or judgments. Social science becomes non-teleological.

Bhaskar (1998, 2-3), however, contrasts reductionism and scientism with critical realism's interdisciplinary theory of *naturalism*. First, naturalism recognises a unity but not a uniformity between social and natural *systems*. The hidden natural causal system of gravity is similar to the hidden social causal system of class. Second, on *methods* of researching causal structures, beyond collecting and counting examples (for example, of children's success or failure at school) social scientists also search for underlying causes (in the political economy of families, schools and education systems). Another analogy is when, to prove that all emeralds are green, scientists do not simply look for emeralds that might not be green, but instead they analyse how the molecular structure of emeralds ensures the green colouring. Social scientists similarly analyse class or racist structures. Third, on comparable *subject matter*, instead of reducing social beings to the level of technical objects, naturalism understands human nature and our *natural necessity* (ways we feel compelled to act) as physical, social, emotional, vulnerable and moral. The critical realist Christian Smith (2011) lists 30 essential human capacities (Alderson, 2013, Chapter 6).

Critical realists agree that in open systems it is often hard to identify specific aims and causes of events, especially as we cannot choose our circumstances or history, and also when many if not most outcomes from our limited, blinkered, largely sub-conscious agency are unintended, inadvertent and unwanted. Yet human agency still intentionally 'drives' change, in teleological ways (intended to benefit self and others), which chance, nature and technology do not perform. Thus, hopes to achieve inter-disciplinarity by denying differences and dualisms between animate sensitive moral beings and inanimate objects set too high a price, if the teleology in morality and politics is lost to analysis. This is a particular problem when the humans concerned are the most vulnerable, powerless group, children. Rather than setting aside nature/culture, human/technology dualisms, as ANT analysts do, critical realism examines rich illuminating interactions and dialectics between them.

Among other researchers, Levitas (2013) believes that sociology uniquely understands the matrix of all the social and natural interactions related to utopian research. John Urry (2011) contends that only sociology can integrate the many disciplines relevant to climate change into coherent forward-thinking analysis, which might avert the dystopian catastrophes he foresees. While many endorse interdisciplinary research, it is still unusual, and multi-disciplinary edited collections of chapters usually have little interdisciplinary interactions between the authors (Melton et al. 2014 is among many multidisciplinary examples). While sub-sub-specialisms are increasingly promoted, interdisciplinary movement outside these 'comfort zones' (Prout (2005: 146) can become harder. A colleague recently commented to me, 'We

shall have to become comfortable about doing interdisciplinary research, it is so important.' Yet rather than being 'comfortable', interdisciplinary researchers may have to adjust to cope with the discomfort Prout mentions, when venturing into specialties in which we are neither trained nor widely read, trying to grasp the basics and connect many aspects of children's everyday lives.

Thus, for example, while writing my two volumes on *Childhoods Real and Imagined* (Alderson 2013, 2016), I aimed for the level of an informed general reader and citizen in many specialist areas, where my only expertise was to apply the sociology of childhood. I noted where children were mentioned or, more often in the mainstream literature, were ignored, as apolitical non-economic beings, just as women used to be. Instead of reading academic books and peer-reviewed papers on specialties from ecology and economics to healthcare politics and cities, I relied largely on popular books on these topics (many by academics), besides websites, NGO reports and journalism. These sources clarify and highlight major current concerns, whereas the academic press tends to be two years or more out of date.. Although relying on these newer sources breaks academic conventions, some leading analysts adopt this approach (for example, Sayer 2015).

Mainstream 'adult' academic analysis in most disciplines is, however, seriously biased with the youngest generation being routinely ignored (children are seldom mentioned in the index of books). Yet around one fifth of society in the UK, one third globally, and nearly one half in some states is aged under 18-years. The median age in Uganda is 15 years (Index Mundi 2016); in the UK it is 41. This neglect distorts researchers' information for policy makers and the general public, and supports policies and dominant values that reinforce the ignoring of children in public life and in mainstream future research. Just one from countless examples of overlooking children is when women are said to be the group most hurt by current financial austerity measures. Yet it is women with children who are at highest risk, and children who are the index group.

international neoliberal politics are shifting children away from being seen as public goods when we all benefit from supporting the health, education and happiness of younger generations and future workers and carers. Increasingly, children are seen as costs and burdens, to be supported privately by their parents who will gain the rewards or bear the blame depending on their investments in the childhood years. The split between the sociologies of public adulthood and of semi-private childhood reinforces this harmful separation of children from mainstream society and economics.

Interdisciplinary inter-generational analysis is, however, vital to explain seemingly irrational choices. In England, for example, the 2013 tax on 'spare' bedrooms in social housing was supposed to get families to move to smaller homes with lower rents. So why do 100,000s of families now remain in their slightly larger homes, with mounting rent arrears and debts, while so many of the children are cold, hungry, stressed and unable to concentrate at school (Hills 2015)? The dearth of smaller homes prevents many families from moving, but there are other reasons, revealed in research on topics ranging from economics to cities (such as by Harvey 2012; Minton 2012; Nadesan 2010; Wacquant 2008).

The constant churning in London, when one third of tenants with private landlords move home at least once a year, tears up the social fabric of neighbourhoods, which is as vital as the built environment. In the inner-London estate of mixed social and private housing built in the 1920s where I live, residents meet in their gardens (parties are great events) and on their trampolines, in the parks, playgrounds and sports fields, as well as in the shops, cafes, post office, pub and surgery. Adults, who have enjoyed the estate's clubs and sports when children, now support and coach new younger members. Many older people have lived here for decades; some care for their grandchildren, others are cared for by younger relatives. Central to the community, the primary school draws in all the local children and many adults, helping them to meld together. The peaceful, mainly law-abiding, all-age social networks are stitched together strongly and securely enough to receive the constant flow, in and out of the estate, of new residents from around the world. Too often, the high costs of moving home include losing these many benefits, which are main reasons to stay and pay the bedroom tax, and which need to be understood through interdisciplinary and intergenerational analysis. Occasional claims to safeguard children's futures are even used to excuse anti-child policies, as when austerity measures are defended by claims to reduce the debts that future generations will inherit. Yet present measures most severely cut the inter-connected family income and resources, the public services and amenities on which children and young people most rely: education, health, social and housing services, libraries, buses, parks, youth and sports centres, legal aid, and refuges from violence.

Children are also missing from so much public debate internationally. Although 'future generations' are mentioned vaguely in climate debates, there is less attention to today's children's current and likely future suffering. Small bodies are least able to withstand the present dangers of extreme heat, drought and floods, hunger and disease, forced migration and armed conflict, which mainly occur in parched, water-stressed areas and in low-lying coastal cities where many millions of children live. Lost health and education can have life-long effects; every year up to an estimated 500,000 children go blind for lack of vitamin A (CBM 2016). Present harms to children affect their descendents as epi-genetics reveals (Pembrey et al. 2006).

Long-term human survival thus depends on utopian rethinking and reforming of countless attitudes and structures, which damage, waste and destroy the natural world that includes children and adults as well as all other interdependent species. This would involve replacing predominantly commercial systems with ones based on social justice. Present trends point the opposite way, however.

Conclusion: Research about utopian futures

How do children and young people work with adults to create more just, free, equal, generous and sustainable societies? This question prompts research beyond single discipline, short-term and age-based boundaries, because utopian research about children's futures over the next 40 or 80 years aims to redress current short-termism in annual targets, 24/7 media, quick profits and frequent elections. . Future-orientated research needs to expand in two main ways: more research on children's future-orientated agency, as in Hayward's work (2012) among others; and more attention to the youngest generations among mainstream adult-centric researchers, on topics

ranging from rapidly increasing obesity or migration to economic and ecological crises. . Research that includes children's as well as older generations' interests takes greater account of potential long-term trends and multiple ways to reduce and avert impending disasters (for example, Hayward 2012; Hensen et al. 2013).

Structure-agency interactions are also vital concerns when, although pioneers create outstandingly good children's services, these seldom endure or are widely copied when they lack supportive social and political structures. Micro-macro, local-global interactions can crucially inform childhood studies. Children's diet, for example, relates to many themes: space, time, income, trade and agriculture, social routines, relationships and values, and exercise. In cities such as Beirut, almost all the natural public spaces, the beaches and the one large green park, have been privatised. Access is now by ticket only, bought in advance by people aged over-30 (Next City 2014). This denies many children's rights, including an adequate standard of physical, emotional and social health, refreshing rest and leisure, enjoyment of the natural world, rights to meet friends and assemble freely, and to join in public entertainments, sports and peaceful protests.

Wright (2010, 367-373) believes that living utopias exist through intensely active, thick, democratic civil societies and through the rule by, for and of the people. Efforts to subordinate economic to social power work through multiple pathways, and constantly have to be revitalised and renewed against opposition from the elite or would-be elite. Utopias do not guarantee social justice, Wright warns, but they set the conditions that help justice and humane people to flourish. Wright overlooks the most important part of renewal, however, when it is younger generations who inherit, continue and further develop their predecessors' work. Critical realism can assist such research with its attention to absences, potential and totalities, its methods of organising and analysing complex, multi-layered, interdisciplinary, structure-agency interactions, and its concern with transformative change towards flourishing (Alderson 2013, 2016; Bhaskar 2008; D'Souza 2013).

Children's expert experience-based views can also inform public debates on present problems and potential alternatives. Children need to be actively involved from the start, not confined into care centres and schools that discourage imaginative adventurousness, and teach compliance, lessons that democratic adults must unlearn. Schools are too concerned with abstract epistemology instead of the living ontology of real experience. For example, shocked by experiencing the government's mistreatment of asylum-seeking children who were their friends, London primary school children moved beyond talk to action and they led compassionate public protests (Pinson et al. 2010). In New Zealand, nine-year-old Ashley shared in campaigning to retain a local pool and said:

You've got this kind of vibe inside you, cause you feel like you're getting heard and everyone in the world knows, cause you're shouting so loud and you're putting your heart towards something (Hayward 2012:155).

Children and adults who work together for justice benefit many others when they help to reduce crime, illness, and many other harmful effects of inequalities (Hills 2015; Wacquant 2009; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). Reports of children's own plans and hopes can thus inform and rebalance skewed adult-centric research, public

opinion and policy that ignore the youngest generations. There are countless otherwise well designed but adult-centric studies waiting for childhood researchers and children to fill in the gaps. Childhood researchers could also write more for the general public, reporting the many ways in which children are especially affected by present adversities and future prospects. Like the annual UNICEF report (2015: 2) that looks towards 2050, we could ask all agencies concerned with children whether they will continue with present inadequate policies: 'or can we be bolder, trying out unconventional approaches and looking for solutions in new places to accelerate progress towards a future in which all children can enjoy their rights?'

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