

Gratitude for a Utopian Friendship

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I heard about this Festschrift after the conversation with Lucy Sargisson's other PhD students had already taken place, but I did not want to miss the chance of contributing to this volume. I am very thankful to Lyman Tower Sargent for inviting me to submit this stand-alone contribution after having read the beautiful conversation piece on "Utopia, Pedagogy and Care" by Ibtisam Ahmed, David M. Bell, Elena Colombo, and Robyn Muir. Similarly to their contribution, I hope to reflect on some of the ways in which Lucy's work (again, in every sense of the term) has affected me. I found this piece rather difficult to write because I consider my relationship with Lucy not simply as that of an erstwhile student to their supervisor, but as a lifelong friendship, and friendships are personal, and hard to write about. Nonetheless I view this as a wonderful opportunity to reflect and to express gratitude for the ways in which Lucy's mentorship, support, and guidance have moved my life. Lucy's political project has been about breaking down the boundaries between the public and the private, and I have often felt inspired by the deep integrity between Lucy's academic project and her lived life.

My path to meeting Lucy began in 2003, after I had completed a degree in Combined Studies at the University of Leicester. It was a broad-based degree in which I selected to focus on Politics, English, and Economic and Social History. Despite obtaining a First, and having a real passion for environmental politics, I did not initially consider pursuing an academic path, and attempted to enter the job market in Leicester where I had also grown up. After a year of dismal jobs, the dole, and struggling to find fulfilling ways to spend my time, I decided to look at ways to do something more stimulating. One of my undergraduate lecturers had previously tried to encourage me to undertake postgraduate study, so I got back in touch to discuss my options. He suggested I apply for ESRC 1 + 3 funding to do a Master

and a PhD, and he recommended Lucy as someone at Nottingham who he thought would make a great supervisor and would support my interests.

When I first approached Lucy, I had very little confidence and did not really think I belonged in academia. Robyn in the contribution mentioned “imposter syndrome” and this is certainly something I can relate to, even now, but especially then. I had some rather vague and underdeveloped ideas about wanting to study alternative lifestyles as political forms, having spent several years hanging out in the rave and traveler scene in Leicestershire, and wanted to link this somehow to my interests in environmentalism and feminism. Lucy suggested I read her book *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, and a few other sources on lived utopias while she worked with me to develop my proposal. Since I was no longer registered at any university, Lucy secured my access to the library at Nottingham, and I remember vividly my excitement in travelling up to Nottingham University to use the library having booked a week’s leave from work. I was aware how competitive the funding was and never really thought I would be successful, but reading Lucy’s work on intentional communities (*Utopian Bodies*) reignited my passion for study and her support with my proposal helped to build my confidence. I was successful in securing the funding, which ultimately changed the course of my life, as I am almost certain I would not have undertaken postgraduate studies at that point without the funding and Lucy’s encouragement.

I moved to Nottingham and began my studies in 2004. I visited my first intentional communities during my Master’s fieldwork at Lucy’s encouragement, and throughout the MA year and my PhD I visited eleven different intentional communities, ecovillages, and autonomous social centers around the UK. I was very anxious at every stage of this process. I was nervous to send emails in case I received no reply, I was scared of travelling alone to meet strangers, I was scared they would laugh at my interview questions, I was worried that the data I collected would not be good enough and my thesis would fall on its face, and I

faced some intensely chaotic personal crises that really threw me back and held up my work. Lucy was there every step of the way with encouragement, support, and genuine concern and interest. Lucy's support not only changed my life academically, but also, despite my initial hesitancy, led me to fall in love with the intentional communities movement and autonomous social centers, and to visit and support these spaces whenever the opportunity arises.

I would like to echo David's point about Lucy practicing a form of care with a utopian excess that estranges us from the everyday circulation of exchange value, and also Ibtisam's point about Lucy's outlook challenging the taken-for-granted competitiveness of higher education. Lucy's work and crucially her distinction between totalizing and transgressive utopias (*Contemporary passim*, but particularly 63–97) has been central to my own work on anarchist utopias (cf. Firth) and on feminist consciousness raising (cf. Firth and Robinson). This distinction has enabled me to conceptualize the exteriority of anti-authoritarian desire in relation to structures of domination, whilst acknowledging that these co-exist in hybrid forms. Whilst, following Lucy, I find it useful to problematize simple binaries, this particular distinction is less a definitional boundary than an attitude and a praxis toward difference and multiplicity: does one desire to control and suppress it, to direct everything toward sameness and identity, or does one desire to nourish difference and enable it to flourish? Reading the prior piece by the conversation participants, considered alongside my own trajectory, has made me realize quite how wonderfully varied her supervisees' research has been over the years, and the role that Lucy has played in tending and caring for this multiplicity of ideas, and enabling her supervisees and students to flourish in many different directions.

One thing that really sticks in my mind is Lucy's gentle rebelliousness and transgressions, and her quietly witty anti-authoritarianism. During supervisions, she had a habit of making me laugh when I was taking my work, or myself, too seriously. I remember

her poking gentle fun at the work of hard-going theorists like Max Stirner and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari after I had spent long hours trying to get to grips with what they were saying. She reminded me that no matter how difficult or authoritative a voice may seem, it is not beyond critique or humor. I also remember an intensely anxious episode before giving one of my first conference papers. I had done lots of fieldwork, had tons of data, but had not yet formed a coherent argument. Lucy's advice was to "just show them lots of pictures and tell stories about your fieldwork. You've got some great pictures and stories, everyone is tired at the end of the day in these conferences and they'll appreciate the break." At the time, I was in awe of the alienating formality of academic conferences. Lucy's advice seemed invigoratingly irreverent and unpretentious, yet practical, and it was good advice. Academics often pay scant attention to our own embodiment and too frequently pour immense energy into hiding our vulnerabilities from one another. I have given my own supervisees the same advice under similar circumstances, but more than this I think that Lucy's advice was emblematic of a broader attitude that expressing one's own vulnerabilities openly and honestly is a powerful act of rebellion in a hostile and competitive academic environment.

Marie Louise Berneri contrasts utopias based on plans of societies functioning mechanically, where humans are turned into "Taylorised robots, subordinated by the machines they serve," with those utopias that have been "the living dreams of poets" (309, 317). Not only does Lucy live, write, and reproduce in her work, friendship and care, the latter utopia – but I also remember her having written some pretty awesome poetry, and making beautiful ceramic pots too. She would be the last in the line to become a Taylorized academic robot. The biggest influence that Lucy has had in my life is through her practical advice and lived example of how to survive as a sensitive, creative, and humble yet uncompromisingly honest and radical person in a competitive and sometimes hostile academic environment. She will always be an inspiration to me.