

UTOPIA AS ADVERB.
ON THE EPISTEMIC CONDITIONS OF UTOPIAN THOUGHT
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Abstract

Why is utopian thinking so difficult today? This essay argues that this difficulty is rooted in a structural shift in the practice of knowledge. Under the current dominance of model-based thinking, an attitude has taken hold that I call the “as if not”: while we continue to be guided by myths and imaginative worlds, we treat them as cognitively insignificant fictions. Utopian thinking depends on the vital interplay between two irreducible epistemic forms: the model, which simplifies complexity for manageability, and the myth, which keeps contradictions open to make them bearable. What is being eroded is what Musil called the *Möglichkeitssinn*, the capacity to hold the actual and the possible in productive tension. When this interplay breaks down, utopia either solidifies into a rigid blueprint (a model without myth) or dissolves into nostalgic compensation (myth without a model). To restore the utopian impulse, this essay proposes reconceptualizing utopia adverbially, as a mode of orientation rather than a telos. This shift is enacted through metamythologization, which describes a reflexive practice of naming the imaginary worlds embedded in our models and maintaining their productive tension. The 1.5°C climate threshold illustrates this dynamic as a modeling target that simultaneously functions as a mythical condensation of intractable political tensions.

Keywords: Utopia; Epistemic monoculture; Models; Myths; Climate governance; As if not.

1. The Poverty of Alternatives

The call for submissions for this issue suggests that “utopia” should be understood as a verb rather than a noun¹. In other words, it is less a place to be reached than a movement that transforms the existing state toward a good that is neither final nor absolute. The present essay pushes this reorientation further, arguing that even the verbal form remains too tied to completion.

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¹ Carla Danani, “Call for Papers: (Re)tracing Utopia,” n. 111 (2026) of “Segni e comprensione”, December 2025.

Aristotle's account of action provides a useful framework according to which every action can only be understood in relation to its *telos*, the end toward which it is directed². This means that it is the final cause that makes an action recognizable as such in the first place. Acting thus always implies acting toward something. This structure is also significant for the grammar of the verb. "Utopifying" adopts this teleological orientation, whether intentionally or not. As if the verb subtly sneaks a goal in through the back door, even after the noun has been thrown out the front door. The movement it denotes still implies a starting point, a trajectory, and an arrival, however shifted or relativized these may be. Here, the adverb opens up decisively different possibilities, as it characterizes a manner, a form of orientation, a quality of how something is thought or done, without implying a before and after. For instance, thinking utopically does not mean designing a climate-neutral city for the year 2050, but rather engaging with the present contradictions: driving an electric car while being aware of the costs associated with cobalt, voting for incremental policy measures while simultaneously advocating for systemic change, without demanding a solution. "Utopian" denotes a way of inhabiting the present along with its alternative, and not necessarily a path aimed at a future solution. What is crucial, then, is that the adverb does not require the kind of philosophical reservation that the verb demands. One could, of course, attempt to keep the Aristotelian final cause out of the equation by defining it based on the verb form, but this would have to be reaffirmed every time the word is used. Structurally, the adverb is already free from what must be manually set aside in the verb. It merely qualifies the manner in which thinking or acting unfolds, leaving the horizon open.

One might also object that even the adverb implies a *telos*, that acting "utopically" still means orienting oneself toward something, however open-ended that may be. But here a second Aristotelian distinction comes into play, one that distinguishes the difference between *kinesis*, a movement that only reaches its completion when it arrives at a point outside itself, and *energeia*, an activity whose fulfillment lies in the act itself³. "Utopian" as an adverb denotes something that comes closer to *energeia*, because the *telos*, if there is

² Aristotle's teleology holds that every action aims at some good (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a1–3), with the final cause (τὸ οὐ ἕνεκα) making action intelligible as such (*Physics* 194b16–195a3; Cfr. *NE* 1111b15–1112a17 on deliberation and *praxis*). Translations: Irwin (Hackett, 2019) and Waterfield (Oxford, 1996).

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X.4, 1174a14–b14; *Metaphysics* IX.1–8, 1048b18–1050a23.

one at all, does not lie prior to the activity, but is embedded within it. In other words, the horizon is not aspired to, but inhabited⁴.

Thus, to think or act utopically is to cultivate a relationship to the present in which its contingency is kept open, its contradictions are endured rather than resolved, and the not-yet remains a genuine dimension of the real.

The claim that nowadays we inhabit a moment without utopias is almost banal, but what counts as utopia has quietly changed. In popular usage it is reduced to specific harmonious fictions, while the deeper function of utopian imagination has been eclipsed. Musil called that function the *Möglichkeitssinn*, the sense of possibility: the faculty of holding the actual and the possible in productive tension without collapsing one into the other⁵. The standard explanation for its erosion is psychological or historical: disappointment with twentieth-century catastrophes, post-ideological caution, the waning of trust in collective transformation. These explanations say why we might be wary of utopia, but they say much less about *how* certain ways of thinking have made it harder to think utopianly in the first place.

If Bloch's delicate balance between warm and cold currents presupposed an imaginative openness in which a forward-looking consciousness could operate, and if Mannheim could still view utopia as a socially effective projection capable of disrupting the existing order, this suggests that the epistemic conditions for such thinking have shifted since then⁶. The contrast lies not primarily in whether Bloch or Mannheim were correct in their substantive claims, but in what their confidence reveals: that certain cognitive operations – the maintenance of contradictory temporalities, the cognitively serious treatment of unrealized possibilities – were once recognizable as forms of orientation. The fact that they are no longer treated as such today points to a structural shift. It is not that we hope less; quite the contrary. Rather, certain cognitive operations upon which utopian thinking is based have been selectively marginalized and are less recognizable as serious

⁴ This is where Bloch earns his place. "Hope" in the singular is not hope for something specific. It is a fundamental orientation of existence, a way of being that turns toward the open. The moment one speaks of "hopes" in the plural, one has already divided the horizon into specific objects and courses of events. Every hope points somewhere. Hope as such points nowhere in particular, or rather, it keeps the act of pointing itself alive without fixing its goal.

⁵ Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Rowohlt, Berlin 1930/1932.

⁶ Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1959; Karl Mannheim, *Ideologie und Utopie*, F. Cohen, Bonn 1929.

forms of orientation. I describe this situation, borrowing a metaphor from ecological criticism, as an epistemic monoculture⁷.

This structure becomes particularly evident in climate policy: as if their only function were to highlight necessary compromises, while the underlying narratives about economic growth, technological salvation, or acceptable limits of loss remain unquestioned. In such a context, the recourse to utopias appears either naive, because it seems to ignore the models' findings, or dangerous, because it threatens to reintroduce open-ended myths that we supposedly left behind long ago. The result is a narrowed horizon of imagination in which only manageable future scenarios are considered serious, and the ability to keep irreconcilable demands in play is dismissed as irresponsible.

Over the last decades, models have become the privileged form of organised knowledge across an ever wider range of disciplines and practices. Their success has been extraordinary and, in many areas, indispensable. But success has a less visible consequence, that it can crowd out other epistemic forms that do not meet the same standards of tractability and therefore become harder to acknowledge as cognitively legitimate. The hypothesis this essay explores is that utopian imagination requires a more diverse epistemic soil. It suffers under monoculture because it depends on a form of thought that models, as such, cannot on their own provide the capacity to hold incompatible demands in play without premature closure. The kind of operation at work here is better captured by the concept of myth, as developed by Lévi-Strauss and Blumenberg, than by the contemporary discourse on models alone⁸.

The guiding question is simple, even if the answer remains partial: what epistemic conditions does utopian thought require, and how have some of these conditions been eroded by the spread of epistemic monoculture? Section 2 distinguishes models and myths as two basic heuristic forms. Section 3 develops utopia as a phenomenon that arises at their boundary and identifies the two failure modes that result when the boundary collapses. Section 4 diagnoses the mechanism of erosion under conditions of epistemic monoculture. Section 5 sketches metamythologization as a constructive response and specifies the adverbial reconceptualization of utopia this implies.

⁷Vandana Shiva, *Monocultures of the Mind: Perspectives on Biodiversity and Biotechnology*, Zed Books, London 1993.

⁸Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le cru et le cuit*, Plon, Paris 1964.

Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1979.

2. *Models and Myths as Heuristic Forms*

The distinction between model and myth should not be understood in ontological terms, but rather as functional: the same construct – a narrative, a diagram, a theoretical framework – can function as both, depending on the cognitive task it is intended to fulfill. Oedipus, for example, functions as a myth when he combines contradictory demands (fate and freedom, knowledge and ignorance) without resolution. He functions as a model when he is reduced to a structural template for encoding kinship relations or psychoanalytic complexes. Models simplify, by isolating variables, suppress overdetermination, and optimize for manageability and predictive power. Myths, on the other hand, thrive on overdetermination, as they bundle paradoxes, maintain incompatible demands, and remain cognitively effective precisely because they refuse resolution. Utopian thinking arises at the boundary between these two heuristic forms and draws both on the discriminatory power of models and on the capacity of myths to bear paradoxes. An epistemic monoculture arises, in turn, when the model-based function encroaches on areas where the mythical function is necessary, where contradictions must be tolerated rather than resolved.

2.1 *Models as disciplined fictions*

On the account developed by Knuuttila and Loettgers, models are not miniature copies of reality but constructed mediators: epistemic artefacts that stand between theory and world, allowing us to explore consequences, test assumptions, and guide interventions without directly handling the complexity of the phenomena in question⁹. Their strength lies in their disciplined artificiality; that is, they simplify things to make them manageable, thereby enabling forms of calculation and simulation that would otherwise be impossible. The epistemic status of models is thus not that of transparent windows onto an independent reality but of fictions adopted because they work for particular purposes.

Vaihinger's philosophy of the *as if* offers a useful backdrop, because much of our cognitive and practical life proceeds by way of fictions we do not literally believe but act upon as if they were true¹⁰. Scientific models fit this description well, as we remain aware of their provisional status and are, in principle, open to scrutiny, revision, and replacement. Idealisations,

⁹Tarja Knuuttila and Andrea Loettgers, "Model-Based Representation and the Articulation of Theoretical Content", "European Journal for Philosophy of Science", 2013, no. 3, pp. 1-25.

¹⁰Hans Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*, Felix Meiner, Leipzig 1911.

counterfactual assumptions, and knowingly false simplifications can therefore be epistemically fruitful when constrained by empirical feedback and communal standards of good practice. This distinguishes models from myths as analysed below not as fictions versus truths, but as fictions that hold themselves accountable to their own fictionality versus fictions that are lived as if they were simply given.

2.2 *Myths as contradiction-holding forms*

If models organise our relation to the world under the sign of tractability, myths organise it under the sign of *inhabitable tension*. In Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology, myths are systems of transformation that work on fundamental oppositions – life and death, nature and culture, kinship and exchange – without eliminating them¹¹. As such mythical thinking rearranges and reshapes contradictions, by distributing them across a narrative space in which they become bearable.

Blumenberg radicalises this insight by thematising *Arbeit am Mythos* as a permanent human activity¹². Here myths are ongoing responses to a world that is, at bottom, indifferent and overwhelming and we rework them to domesticate what he calls the absolutism of reality. When contemporary societies figure climate change as catastrophe, crisis, transition, or war, they are doing more than choosing metaphors, as each condensation carries a distinct mythic configuration of agency, temporality, and responsibility, and the choice among them cannot itself be settled by models¹³.

Myth, so understood, is no less heuristic than model. It too is an *as if* operation which states that we inhabit a story as if it disclosed the true articulation of our world, even while knowing it is one story among others. The difference lies not in fiction versus truth but in the kind of cognitive work being done. Models simplify and isolate to capture specific relationships, while myths carry the potential to expand and connect to make existential tensions bearable and to orient action. In practice the two interpenetrate, as a model without mythic orientation is directionless, while a myth without modelling constraint risks becoming unresponsive to the world it claims to illuminate.

¹¹Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*, Plon, Paris 1958.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le cru et le cuit*, Plon, Paris 1964.

¹²Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1979.

¹³Mike Hulme, *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009.

One might object, following Yorke, that mythical thinking is inherently retrospective, that it returns to origins and restores archaic orders, whereas utopian thinking requires a break with the status quo and an orientation toward genuine novelty.¹⁴ The objection has force against a conception of myth as repetition, in which a foundational narrative is compulsively re-enacted and shielded from critique. But this is precisely what Blumenberg's notion of *Arbeit am Mythos* refuses. The Prometheus figure illustrates the point. In Hesiod, Prometheus is the thief of fire, eternally punished and the story closes around a lesson about human presumption. In Aeschylus, he becomes a political prisoner whose suffering carries the seed of a different order. In Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, the archaic punishment is not reinstated but overturned, as the myth is reworked by refusing its original resolution. In contemporary climate discourse the figure resurfaces as an emblem of technological hubris and human creative agency simultaneously, condensing a tension no model can resolve. None of these workings returns to an origin, but can only transform inherited material in response to new conditions. Myth understood as ongoing work rather than compulsive repetition is not retrospective in Yorke's sense: it uses inherited figures to articulate possibilities that the present cannot yet express in its own terms. This makes it not the enemy of utopian imagination but one of its conditions.

3. *Utopia as Border Phenomenon*

If models and myths are two basic ways of organising experience, utopia becomes visible only where they overlap and disappears when they do not. It is not an independent third epistemic form but a specific configuration in which the simplifying, projective work of modelling and the contradiction-holding, horizon-forming work of myth are both active. Whenever one operation gains the upper hand, the phenomenon changes character.

3.1 *Why utopia needs both operations*

At its most basic, utopian thought does two things at once. First, it exposes the contingency of the existing order and sketches possibilities that transcend it. That is a function that resembles the model in that it selects, idealises, and extrapolates beyond what is currently given. And second, it articulates a space in which otherwise incompatible demands can be held together without premature resolution. That is a function that resembles myth

¹⁴Christopher C. Yorke, "Utopia, Myth, and Narrative", in T. Moylan and R. Baccolini (ed.), *Utopia, Method, Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming*, Peter Lang, Oxford 2013, pp. 181-200.

into an inhabitable horizon of meaning¹⁵. Without the first, utopia loses its transformative edge and without the second, it loses its capacity to orient a form of life.

Utopia is neither merely a plan nor merely a story. As a plan, it would be a blueprint for institutional arrangements that could in principle be implemented and, as a story, it would be a narrative that gives form to aspirations without claiming to be practically feasible. Utopian imagination draws on both aspects, yet cannot be reduced to either. Something similar is at stake when movements for climate justice combine detailed transition scenarios with broader visions of a just transition or a good ancestral role: visions that cannot be fully captured by any single model, as they condense a mythical temporality, an orientation toward a community that does not yet exist and cannot yet speak for itself¹⁶. Musil's paired concepts capture what is at stake with precision. The Wirklichkeitssinn, the sense of reality, and the Möglichkeitssinn, the sense of possibility, are co-constitutive faculties. Each requires the other to remain productive, while someone governed entirely by the sense of reality becomes, in Musil's formulation, an administrator of the given, capable of refining what exists but not of imagining it otherwise. Someone governed entirely by the sense of possibility loses grip on the resistance that reality offers and drifts into what he calls the subjunctive mood of life, a condition of permanent and weightless alternatives. Utopia, on the account developed here, is neither the administrator nor the drifter. It is the practice of holding both faculties in tension, by taking the real seriously enough to know what resists transformation, and taking the possible seriously enough to refuse the verdict that resistance is final. The two failure modes that follow are, in this light, simply the consequences of letting one faculty extinguish the other.

3.2 *The blueprint collapse: model without myth*

The first failure mode arises when the model side of utopia is dominant. Utopia is treated as a fully specified concept, as a comprehensive system of institutions, norms, and procedures that, if implemented, would bring about a specific vision of the good life. The underlying conviction is that the future can be shaped to such an extent that deviations become mere errors. Even Erik Olin Wright's project "Real Utopias" (perhaps the most rigorous

¹⁵ Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2013.

¹⁶ Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2014.

contemporary attempt to combine utopian aspirations with institutional feasibility) follows this logic when it treats utopia as a series of realizable designs that must be tested for their feasibility and appeal¹⁷. The problem is not that such specifications are useless (they are often indispensable), but that they exhaust what counts as serious utopian thinking. What disappears in the process is the ability to regard the not-yet as a genuine dimension of the real without already translating it into a manageable model. Once conceived this way, contradiction becomes something to be eliminated and the tensions that originally drive utopian imagination – between equality and freedom, individuality and community, vulnerability and security – are resolved at the level of design. The project aspires to a state in which no remainder is left. Utopia becomes a target state to be approached by linear optimisation. In this guise it is structurally close to what we now call dystopia, a closed system that cannot tolerate deviation without perceiving it as a threat¹⁸. Critical and emancipatory energies are converted into enforcement and normalisation, whether in visions of perfectly ordered cities or in technocratic climate futures that treat alternative trajectories as simply irrational¹⁹.

It is worth pausing to note both the proximity and the distance between this diagnosis and Popper's critique of utopian thinking. Popper distinguishes two modes of social reform: utopian social engineering, which redesigns society as a whole toward a determinate ideal, and piecemeal social engineering, which identifies and eliminates specific, concrete suffering without presupposing a blueprint. He argues that the first inevitably becomes authoritarian, since the ideal cannot be rationally demonstrated, disagreements about it get resolved by force, and any gap between design and reality is treated as human failure to be corrected. His prescription follows by stating that ethical demands should be reformulated negatively, as the *elimination* of suffering rather than the promotion of happiness, because only negative criteria are precise enough to guide reform without licensing the suppression of deviation²⁰.

The present argument agrees with Popper that the blueprint form of utopia carries exactly the dangers he identified. But his critique dissolves the utopian horizon entirely rather than reconfiguring it. By reducing the options

¹⁷ Wright, Erik Olin. 2010. *Envisioning Real Utopias*. London: Verso.

¹⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Polity, Cambridge 1989.

¹⁹ Sheila Jasanoff, "A New Climate for Society", "Theory, Culture & Society", 2010, no. 27, no. 2-3, pp. 233-253.

²⁰ Popper, Karl R., *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Routledge, London 1945.

to either blueprint or renunciation, it forecloses the adverbial possibility, namely an orientation that maintains the openness of the not-yet precisely by refusing to specify a terminal state. Popper's piecemeal alternative is itself, in the terms developed here, a model without myth. It gains precision and safety by abandoning the tension-holding, horizon-forming dimension that makes utopian imagination more than a variant of institutional design.²¹ And his own "open society" functions, unreflectively, as the mythic imaginary that orients his models – a condensation of contested liberal values treated as a neutral procedural framework. The "as if not" is already at work in Popper's solution to the problem he so lucidly diagnosed.

3.3 *The nostalgic collapse: myth without model*

The second failure mode pulls in the opposite direction. Utopia is treated as a pure story, symbolic elsewhere with no real purchase on the organisation of the present. It functions as compensation or solace but not as a serious horizon of transformation. This can take the form of backward-looking idylls – golden ages and imagined communities of harmony – or forward-looking fantasies explicitly bracketed as only fiction²². In both cases the utopian motive is displaced into a realm where it no longer has to answer questions of feasibility, conflict, or institutional mediation.

Political and cultural nostalgia illustrates this structure by offering an idealized return to past stability as a kind of inverted utopia. As Chiara Bottici argues, such forms of nostalgia are not merely false memories, but active forces within the political imagination that coalesce into myths – narratives that make the complexity of history manageable by offering a restorable origin²³. Much like the modeling of future utopias, the nostalgic myth promises a specific endpoint (the restored past) that can be reached if only deviations are eliminated. Both reduce the open horizon of utopian thinking to a closed trajectory: one forward, the other backward, but equally hostile to the contingency that makes utopian thinking possible in the first place. That would be a future-past that promises comfort while foreclosing genuine

²¹ Popper, Karl R., *The Poverty of Historicism*, Routledge, London 1957.

²² Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic Books, New York 2001.

²³ Bottici, Chiara. 2007. *A Philosophy of Political Myth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Bottici's core argument states that myths are not false beliefs but ongoing imaginative workings that structure political reality. This illustrates nostalgia as being an active imaginary, not passive error; Bottici, Chiara. 2014. *Imaginal Politics: Images Beyond Imagination and the Imaginary*. New York: Columbia University Press. Here she develops the concept of the "imaginal" as the space where images become politically efficacious, which links nostalgic images to political efficacy.

transformation²⁴. Utopia no longer challenges the existing order as something that might be otherwise, but becomes a safe space of imagination that makes the existing order more bearable precisely by leaving it intact. The danger here is not totalising control but resigned melancholy, and the accompanying sense that utopia belongs to art or private fantasy but has no place in the serious work of shaping the future²⁵.

The claim this typology supports is that utopian thought can function as a medium between present and future only when modelling and myth-making are kept in tension and neither is allowed to eclipse the other. Understanding how this balance has been systematically disturbed requires returning to the question of epistemic monoculture.

4. *Epistemic Monoculture and the “As If Not”*

The rise of models as the dominant epistemic form across an ever wider range of disciplines is well documented.²⁶ What matters here is less the use of models as such – indispensable in climate science and elsewhere – but the gradual elevation of the model-form into a tacit standard for what counts as rational orientation in general. When tractability, parametrisation, and optimisation within a fixed variable-space become default criteria for serious cognition, other ways of organising experience do not disappear, but they become difficult to avow. As Porter has shown, the appeal to numbers and models in public life is often less about epistemic superiority than about the social demand for objectivity, a demand that systematically disadvantages forms of knowing that cannot present themselves in quantified terms²⁷.

There is a deeper dimension that the language of tool use does not capture. Drawing on Stiegler, one can say that when a particular epistemic form achieves cultural dominance, it does not only influence how we think but reorganises what kinds of thinking feel natural, necessary, or even possible from the inside²⁸. Models shape in advance what is available to be noticed, valued, and imagined, so that the futures that appear tractable, the

²⁴ Agnes Arnold-Forster, *Nostalgia: A History of a Dangerous Emotion*, Chatto & Windus, London 2024.

²⁵ Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*, Columbia University Press, New York 2016.

²⁶ Roman Frigg and Stephan Hartmann, “Models in Science”, “Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy”, 2024.

²⁷ Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1995.

²⁸ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, vol. 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1998.

tensions that can be publicly borne, and the possibilities that seem worth articulating are quietly pre-configured before explicit reasoning begins. Narratives that do not meet the formal requirements of the model are easily dismissed as purely subjective or ideological. They may be tolerated as cultural heritage or private consolation, but they are not recognised as having cognitive standing in the same sense as models or data.

This delegitimisation has two direct costs for utopian thought. First, it reduces the shared narrative space in which irreducible tensions can be staged and borne. Second, and more insidiously, it makes it harder to acknowledge that models themselves are guided by imaginaries: that the choice of variables, parameters, and evaluative criteria is never neutral. What Jasanoff and Kim call sociotechnical imaginaries – collectively held visions of desirable futures co-produced with scientific and technical practices – continue to orient action, but they do so without being recognised as contestable constructions²⁹.

This is the mechanism the essay calls the *as if not*. Vaihinger's original concept of the *as if* described a form of reflexive fictionalism, by stating that we construct and live within fictions we know to be incomplete, act through them because they are useful, and remain aware of their provisional nature. The model form, at its best, institutionalises this stance. Trouble arises when the cultural dominance of models produces a different, inverted attitude toward the imaginaries that guide them. The addition of the negation requires a brief justification. Vaihinger's "as if" already implies reflexive self-awareness. This means we construct fictions we know to be partial, act through them because they are useful, and remain, in principle, open to revising them. This reflexive moment is precisely what gives the model form its epistemic tractability, and it is also what has led some readers of Vaihinger to treat the "as if" as inherently critical, a way of holding open a gap between what is and what could be. The "as if not" names a structurally different, and in some ways opposite, attitude. Here we are not dealing with a fiction consciously adopted and held at arm's length, but with one that has been disavowed. We continue to be guided by imaginaries of progress, growth, or catastrophe, but we act as if this guidance were not happening, as if our orientation were determined entirely by neutral data. The "not" marks this asymmetry. It is not a stronger version, but its inversion: whereas the "as if" acknowledges fictionality in order to work with it, the "as if not" suppresses

²⁹Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, "Containing the Atom: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and Nuclear Power in the United States and South Korea", "Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science", 2009, vol. 623, no. 1, pp. 112-124.

that acknowledgment to sustain the appearance of pure objectivity. The critical potential traditionally attributed to the “as if” is precisely what the “as if not” forecloses.

In climate politics this structure is particularly visible when integrated assessment models are invoked as if they simply revealed necessary trade-offs, while the underlying narratives about economic growth, technological salvation, or acceptable levels of loss go unexamined. Appeals to utopia in such a setting appear either naïve – because they seem to ignore what the models say – or dangerous, because they threaten to reintroduce overt myth where we have ostensibly moved beyond it.

Epistemic monoculture therefore does not eliminate myth so much as relocate it. The more models claim neutrality, the more easily they acquire the status of unacknowledged myths, orienting action while escaping the work that would keep their fictionality visible and contestable. Under these conditions, the specific cognitive operations on which utopian thought depends, namely holding contradictions open, figuring the not-yet as genuinely available, keeping the tension between model and myth productive, become difficult to perform in public. Utopia retreats into private fantasy or hardens into blueprint, because the epistemic conditions for imagining otherwise have been quietly narrowed.

5. Metamythologizing: Utopia as Adverb

Metamythologization, as the term is used here, does not refer to a method in the technical sense, but rather to an attitude: a second-order relationship to the fictions that already structure our models and our politics. It arises directly from the diagnosis of the “as-if-not.” If the problem lies in the fact that mythical worlds of imagination continue to guide action while their cognitive value is denied, then the answer cannot simply be to call for “new narratives” or to add a narrative layer to existing models. That would leave the underlying asymmetry untouched. What is needed instead is a practice that makes the interplay between model and myth explicit, open to questioning and revision, without dissolving one into the other. Metamythologization is this practice. It functions neither by dissolving models into myths nor by reducing myths to a variable within a model, but by keeping their tension productive and public. Three gestures concretely characterize it.

5.1 *Three gestures*

Naming. Metamythologization begins by making visible the conceptual frameworks that already underlie a particular model or political concept. This means questioning which narratives of progress, loss, agency, or temporality are embedded in the choice of variables, the presentation of contradictory goals, and the establishment of starting points. The goal is to bring the mythical dimension to light so that it can be addressed and examined rather than tacitly implemented. This is already a political act: it breaks through the appearance of technical neutrality and reveals the contested imaginaries that structure collective life.

Holding. Once the imaginary has been named, it is not dissolved or replaced, but remains open alongside the model that guides it. This means tolerating the tension between what the model can parameterize and what the imaginary demands but cannot yet express in these terms, and resisting the pressure to resolve this tension prematurely – whether by incorporating the imaginary into the model as merely another variable or by abandoning the model in favor of a pure narrative. This, too, is political: it rejects the imperative of governance, which demands closure, controllability, and actionable certainty at the expense of alternative futures. Maintaining this tension means insisting that the present remain contested.

Questioning. Since the imaginaries that guide our models shape the collective future, engaging them is a public and political act. Metamythologizing makes these fictions open to scrutiny by asking whose losses they exclude, whose temporalities they disregard, and which alternatives they render unthinkable. In doing so it connects directly to utopian imagination: by making the mythical dimension of existing models visible and contestable, it reopens the space in which genuinely different futures can be articulated. Where Naming exposes and Holding sustains, Questioning mobilizes: it transforms the exposed tension into a site of collective deliberation and contestation.

5.2 *Utopia as adverb*

In this context, utopia is best understood not as a noun or a verb but as an adverb. As a noun, it denotes a place, a specific configuration that could in principle be defined and attained. As a verb, it denotes an action, like the projective gesture toward something other than what is, which nevertheless implies a moment of completion. As an adverb, by contrast, it denotes a processual *manner*, a quality of orientation that can characterise thought and action without being reducible to their products. This grammatical shift

extends what Bloch called the utopian function and what Levitas has termed utopia as method, but specifies it in a way that connects directly to the epistemic analysis above³⁰. In which we proceed: holding contingency open, bearing contradiction rather than resolving it, keeping the not-yet genuinely available as a dimension of the real.

What this adds to existing accounts is a specific vigilance, that comes as the insistence that the models we use do not exhaust the futures we can inhabit, that the parameters we have chosen are not the only ones that matter, and that tensions bracketed for tractability have not thereby been resolved. The adverbial stance carries a determinate demand on practice that enables us to work on our myths with the same care we bring to our models, to acknowledge their fictionality without abandoning their force, and to keep the tension between them productive rather than resolving it in favour of either control or resignation.

5.3 *A brief illustration: climate governance*

Climate governance offers a compressed illustration. The domain is saturated with models: integrated assessment models, emissions pathways, carbon budgets, scenario ensembles. These are, or seem to be indispensable. Consider the treatment of 1.5°C as the threshold of acceptable warming, as established in the Paris Agreement and operationalised across successive IPCC reports. At the model level, 1.5 degrees is a parametric boundary as a value within a variable-space that can be given precise physical content and linked to sea-level projections, crop-yield impacts, and extreme-weather probabilities.

Yet 1.5°C is also a mythical abstraction. The choice of this threshold rather than 1.6 or 2 degrees already implies a judgement about whose losses count and over what time horizon. Small island states fought for 1.5 degrees because, from their perspective, 2 degrees effectively meant sinking: a loss no cost-benefit analysis can adequately capture, since it concerns the existence of a community and a way of life rather than a marginal change in prosperity. The threshold holds together a series of irresolvable tensions without resolving them: between the pace of decarbonisation and the security of fossil-fuel-dependent communities, between present sacrifices and future benefits, between global justice and national sovereignty, between those

³⁰Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Verso, London 2005.

Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2013.

whose losses are quantifiable and those whose losses are not. No integrated assessment model can resolve these tensions from within, for the issue is not optimisation within given parameters but which parameters, and whose losses, should count at all.

A metamythologizing approach to this case would do three things. It would identify the mythical function fulfilled by the threshold – not to dismiss it but to make visible its character as a political and ethical construct as well as a scientific one. It would keep the tension between model and imaginary open, resisting both the pressure to treat the threshold as a purely technical object and the temptation to abandon modelling entirely in favour of moral rhetoric. And it would question the threshold by asking whose imaginations are condensed within it and whose are not, thereby raising the question of what a just shaping of the climate future might look like if the losses of the most vulnerable were not treated as marginal cases in a variable-space designed elsewhere. This gives a different scenario, with a different relationship to the scenario space itself keeping it open against the *as if not*, insisting that the imaginaries guiding it are contestable and that other futures remain genuinely possible.

5.4 Retracing the utopian impulse

The call for this issue speaks of retracing utopia in a moment of disenchanted re-enchantment, where stories proliferate but the horizon of the future contracts.³¹ The diagnosis proposed here suggests that this contraction reflects the cognitive forms available for giving hope a shape. Where the *as if not* prevails, the operations on which utopian thought depends become difficult to perform publicly, and utopia retreats into private fantasy or hardens into blueprint.

Retracing the utopian impulse under these conditions cannot mean recovering a lost object. There is no pre-monocultural moment of epistemic abundance to which we could return, and nostalgia for one would itself be a symptom of the nostalgic collapse described in section 3. What can be cultivated though is a stance that motivates a willingness to work on our myths with the same care we bring to our models, to acknowledge their fictionality without abandoning their force, and to keep the tension between them productive rather than resolving it in favour of either control or resignation.

³¹Danani, “Call for Papers,” cit.

The call proposes that seeking the traces of utopia is already an intrinsically utopian act. The argument here adds a condition: such seeking is utopian only if it proceeds with the reflexive awareness that the traces it finds are always partly traces of the fictions we bring to the search. To retrace utopia is to work carefully and publicly on the myths that already guide our models, keeping visible what they foreclose and what they make possible, and holding open – against constant pressure toward premature closure – the space in which the present might still be imagined otherwise. That is what it means to think utopianly, understood as an adverb. Musil's man without qualities knew that the sense of possibility is not the denial of reality but its most demanding form of fidelity: to hold open, against everything that insists on closure, the small and stubborn conviction that things could also be otherwise.

