Utopia, history and the future
Part of the series: History and the Future
Institute for Social Futures

Date: 23 May 2017, 3-5pm
Where: Meeting Room 1, ground floor FASS Building

Speakers:
Adam Stock, York St John University
Barnita Bagchi, University of Utrecht (The Netherlands)
Maddi Nicholson and Stuart Bastik (Art Gene), Barrow in Furness, Cumbria

Chair:
Carlos López Galviz, Lancaster University

Rationale:
Inviting reflection from three different speakers, this panel will examine what the concept of utopia can tell us about the relationship between theory and practice, and among literature, communities, and landscapes. By thinking of utopia as a heuristic and creative methodology rather than as a narrative closed system, the panel will open up a discussion about the place of imaginaries in our perception of and orientation towards the English countryside; the different ways in which fictional and non-fictional writing and practice by women in South Asia qualify urban environments; and what role artists can play and have played in the regeneration of natural, built and social environments in Cumbria and Lancashire.

Each panelist will speak for up to 20 min, followed by an open discussion with the audience at the end. A brief description of their contributions is as follows:

Adam
In Thomas More’s Utopia, the journey to the island of King Utopos does not begin until the second half of the text, in book II. In his contribution, Adam examines the continued relevance of book I of the text to social relationships between the Commons and the expropriation of land and closing off of public rights to access in England in the present day. Of particular interest is the role of English literature in the imaginaries that contribute to the maintenance of the landscape, which attempt to preserve the countryside as amenable to a particular type of post-Romantic gaze. In the tradition of More and Bacon, Morris and Bellamy, Gilman and Piercy, although Utopia as a no-place (ou-topos) is discovered, its truth as the good-place (eu-topos) is revealed by Utopians - usually in lengthy dialogues with visitors. As such, the utopian genre shares important ontological links with that of the apocalyptic.
Barnita
In her contribution, Barnita will examine the work of two key South Asian women activists, namely, writer Rokeya S. Hossain (1880-1932) and the contemporary filmmaker and curator Madhushree Dutta (b.1959). By seen utopia through a transcultural lens, this talk puts forward a reading of their work that can be both open and attentive to the authors’ playfulness with and reinvention of history, specifically in the context of Indian cities. Such a reading recognises what is heuristic and creative of Hossain’s and Dutta’s practice as women, artists, and activists.

Maddi and Stuart (Art Gene)
Sustainability lies in the hands of whole communities. How communities behave and what responsibilities are they prepared to take in the change of the environments around them are central to successful strategies of (utopian) regeneration. An important part of the process relates to taking communities seriously and together taking responsibility for a future that is more inclusive. Drawing on their extensive work in and around Barrow in Furness, Maddi and Stuart will share their views on working closely with communities, including issues around the responsibility for and the ownership of change both local and global.

The panel complements a series of events on Mobile Utopia taking place in Lancaster throughout 2017, not least the international conference Mobile Utopia: Pasts, Presents, Futures (2-5 Nov 2017).

The panel is part of the series History and the Future, by the Institute for Social Futures.