

# Introduction: The Opportunities of Utopian Thinking



Before we get into this module, let's reflect for a moment on why we study history. It's not just because someone else tells us we have to (though perhaps you are reading these words because someone did assign them!). Human beings remember, retell, and revise their histories because they provide frameworks for them to better understand who they are, why the world is the way it is, and how they might use evidence from how we got here to steer our way toward the future. Professional historians do this. But so do you. And you do it every day. Sometimes you do it in ways that you don't think much about—checking your phone to remember an address you've forgotten, for instance. And sometimes you do this in ways that prove deeply meaningful—as you learn histories about your family or perhaps other people like you that touch your sense of purpose and identity enough to stir emotions in you or inspire you to action.

When these deeply personal ways of remembering the past get tangled up (and clash) with other people's deeply personal ways of remembering the past, the outcomes can be volatile. That is why so many political controversies and conflicts among humans involve competing memo-

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Robert McCall's mural, "The Prologue and the Promise," 1983.

ries of the past—heroic struggles of people some identify as ancestors, founding moments of places some regard as their home, or past injustices that some regard as unresolved. For better or worse, that is, much of our ability to solve problems facing us today centers on competing understandings of the past and corresponding competing visions for the future.

Sometimes, we use the past to guide our future. For instance, many of those today who see a recent breakdown in ideological or cultural consensus as the most serious challenge they face see solutions in returning to forms of national, ethnic, or religious agreement they imagine were stronger in earlier eras. Other times, people looking for better solutions have no models from history to turn to. For example, many who see human-caused climate change as the world's most pressing challenge imagine some future technological solution that can solve our problems without requiring changes in lifestyles. In these two examples (and many others), human beings often suffer from a lack of imagination in solving problems. Yes, perhaps some inspiring leader will finally unite people who have seemed hopelessly divided. And yes, perhaps some amazing inventor will create a new technology that supplies unlimited energy without any negative consequences. But hoping for such "magical" solutions is not a plan for the future. It is possible that our inability to think more creatively risks foreclosing imaginative and realistic solutions that could be right in front of us.

But humans have already developed solutions for creatively reimagining the future. For instance, the literary genre of speculative fiction—including science fiction—offers such opportunities. Here, it's useful to distinguish between two subgenres of speculative fiction: fantasy and science fiction. Fantasy stories usually depict fictional worlds—frequently presented as pseudo-medieval in nature—in which magical powers provide solutions to the challenges protagonists face. In such cases, these stories might be fun to read, but they don't provide much for us to imagine solutions to the challenges we face in the real world.

In contrast, science fiction (and related forms of speculative fiction) take place in alternative universes that usually operate using physics as it exists (even if it sometimes hypothesizes new inventions or discoveries, they rarely contradict our present understanding of the universe). We need not push this distinction too far; after all the line between the two styles of writing can be blurry. The Star Wars universe, for example, has elements of both science fiction and fantasy. But rather than getting into a debate about whether The Force represents magical thinking or a metaphor for world religions, let's just accept that some stories blend elements of both and move on. Key for us is to distinguish forms of speculative



Cover of *Imagination*, a magazine dedicated to science fiction and fantasy, from December 1952.

fiction that rely on escapism and magical thinking—like fantasy—from those (like science fiction)—that *imagine* societies that configure themselves differently from their readers' worlds by recognizing what's possible in new ways. The second type of stories often offer alternative solutions to problems facing their readers' society, which might logically be possible, but would not be feasible given the political, social, economic, or ideological structures of the readers' world. In such cases, speculative fiction offers implicit critiques, commentaries, or re-imaginings that permit readers to reflect on their own society. No story of speculative fiction operates completely in isolation from the author's society; they include parallels or analogies to that society that offer contrasts to the author's society often for the intended purpose of helping readers reflect on the shortcomings of their own world and

imagine possibilities for their future. The point of science fiction, and related forms of speculative fiction, is not to offer templates for readers to follow, but to spur us to creatively imagine possible alternatives to the world we live in.

This is the kind of utopian thinking these lessons aim to inspire.



A map of the world from 1565, by Paolo Forlani.

out, was far larger and more diverse than had previously been understood. Such realizations were profound for people living in Europe, the Americas, sub-Saharan Africa, and elsewhere. For many, such discoveries forced them to re-think their understanding of the divine or the stories they used to understand cosmic and human history. The results could be deeply destabilizing.

Many of us feel like the profound changes we are experiencing today are unprecedented—social media and artificial intelligence, global interconnectedness and growing inequalities in wealth and power, a climate crisis, and more. But humans

In what follows, we will be exploring utopian thinking at a critical moment in world history—the period of time when many societies faced the disorienting experience of learning that their understandings of their place in the universe had been incorrect.

The world, it turned



## Further Reading

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