

Research Institute CLUE+ cordially invites you to:

THE QUEST FOR PERFECTION: THE ROLE OF UTOPIA IN LAW, RELIGION AND ART

EXPERT MEETING

On 11 October 2019 at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, an expert meeting will take place on the role of Utopia in art, religion, law and other fields. The expert meeting is organized by the research group Societas Im/perfecta, which aims to study the role of utopia and dystopia in contemporary society from a multidisciplinary perspective. It is our goal to institute an international consortium consisting of scholars from various disciplines, including legal, political and social theory, theology and religion studies, art and literature studies.

You are very welcome to participate in the expert meeting. The entrance fee (including lunch and drinks) is € 75. The maximum amount of participants is 25. We work on a first-come-first-serve base.

Friday 11
October 2019,
Vrije Universiteit
Amsterdam

CLUE+

RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR
CULTURE, COGNITION, HISTORY AND HERITAGE



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Below, we will first introduce the general theme of the expert meeting (1) and present our research group (2). Subsequently, a provisional outline of the expert meeting is given (3), followed by some practical information (4).

1 THE UTOPIAN CHALLENGE

More than 500 year after the first publication of Thomas More's *Utopia*, there seems to be again a growing interest in utopianism. In her recent book *No is Not Enough*, Naomi Klein welcomes the revival of "utopian dreaming" which was lacking in social movements around the world for too long. In her view, this revival could provide the answer to the current rise of populism thriving on anger and resentment. In political liberalism there is, however, a deep distrust of utopianism. Isaiah Berlin (in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*) considers the search for perfection to be a "recipe for bloodshed". In his post-war essay "Utopia and Violence", Karl Popper directly links Utopia to violence. In order to achieve its aim of an ideal society, it has to prevent competing aims to emerge by suppressing dissent by all means available. Whatever its good intentions, it will only bring the "familiar misery of being condemned to live under a tyrannical government." At the same time, liberal politics appears to be a rather dull affair. Compared to Utopia, it seems to have less inspirational and motivational force. According to Michael Walzer (in

his blog 'Reclaiming Political Utopianism'), liberalism needs to "accommodate and deflect utopian aspiration" in order to secure its success and survival. In his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, Paul Ricœur even goes so far as to claim that a society without Utopia is unthinkable: "We cannot imagine (...) a society without utopia, because this would be a society without goals." Society would be dead, when there is nothing left to strive or fight for. Does modern society completely rule out utopian thinking, as Berlin, Popper and others claim? Or does it need to incorporate some kind of utopianism, as Klein, Walzer and Ricœur indicate, in order to keep society alive and to move and motivate citizens? If so, how to prevent that the utopian inspiration leads to violence and oppression?

In faith communities utopia is less on the radar, but they are (more) focused on eschatology and the life hereafter. Although, this was the case for many centuries. The faith communities played an important role with view to the salvation of the souls. As from the 20th century this has radically changed. In 1964 74% of the Dutch believed in the life hereafter. In 1985 this was reduced to 44% and in 2002 to 40%. However, 30% of people outside faith communities believe in the life hereafter. Also, some people who state that they do or cannot believe long for the heaven. This excludes the hell and the devil. People changed the belief in the life hereafter (*hiernamaals*) for the

life here and now (*hiernumaals*). Moreover, the views on paradise have changed to a variety of (individual) imaginations of heaven, as if everyone has his or her own concept of heaven, at least if people still believe in it. How does this matches or mismatches with eschatological-doctrinal views of faith communities and/or religious thinkers when the faith in paradise and/or in the life hereafter evaporates and has been replaced by the notion of an earthly paradise nowadays? From this perspective: what does it mean to have to be the architect of one's individual happiness and one's own individual paradise? And how is the notion of utopia and/or eschatology represented in literature?

These questions have become urgent again with the various challenges that modern society is facing. Presently, we seem to be confronted with all kinds of crises: an ecological crisis as a result of global warming, a humanitarian crisis because of the on-going immigration flows, a political crisis due to the rise of populism, and so on. How can utopian aspiration help to counter these dystopian tendencies?

2 SOCIETAS IM/PERFECTA

The research group *Societas/Imperfecta* was established by Professor Bart van Klink (Legal Theory), Dr. Leon van den Broeke (Religion and Theology) and Dr. Jacqueline Bel (Literature and Society), Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. *Societas Im/perfecta* investigates the role utopian and dystopian thinking plays in the various

fields of modern society: law, politics, religion, literature, art and other fields. Our aim is to establish an international and multidisciplinary consortium of scholars from a broad range of disciplines, starting with law, theology and religious studies, and literature studies and seeking connections with philosophy, ethics, political studies, sociology, anthropology and art studies. We intend to enlarge our research group by organizing several meetings and working towards joint publications, both for an academic and a more general audience.

3 EXPERT MEETING

The expert meeting will kick off with a keynote lecture, delivered by Prof. Davina Cooper. Subsequently, short presentations (approx. 15 minutes) will be given in which scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds reflect on the general theme and their possible contribution to the consortium, followed by discussion.

Keynote lecture

Davina Cooper (Research Professor in Law, King's College London): 'Prefiguring the State: Everyday Utopias of Activism, Institutional mimicry and Play.'

Presentations

Britta van Beers (Legal Theory, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam): 'Imagining the Human: Human Rights and the Challenges of Technological Utopianism.'

Jacqueline Bel (Literature and Society, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam): ‘Multatuli and Utopia – 1860-2019.’

Leon van den Broeke (Religion and Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Theologische Faculteit Kampen): ‘A Paradise Lost: The Role of Utopia and Eschatology in Legal and Political Theory and Theology.’

Carinne Elion-Valter (Legal Theory, Erasmus University Rotterdam): ‘Today’s Answers Trigger Tomorrow’s Questions: Hans Blumenberg’s Anti-Utopia of Modernity.’

Jaap Grave (Literature and Society, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam): ‘Utopia and the Coming of Age Novel.’

George Harinck (Humanities and Religion and Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Theologische Faculteit Kampen): ‘Christian and Socialist Utopia’s: Klaas Schilder on the Revelation of John and Social Life.’

Bart van Klink (Legal Theory, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam): ‘The Utopia of Liberal Anti-Utopias.’

Oliver W. Lembcke (Political Theory, Erfurt): ‘The Coming Community: Agamben’s Vision of Politics and Religion.’

Jan Willem Sap (European Law, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam): ‘The Utopian Ideals of the Political Order of the European Union.’

Marjolein van Tooren (Literature and Society, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam): ‘The Utopian Dream of Artistic Perfection: The Inverted Pygmalion Myth in *When I Was A Work of Art* by Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt.’

Mark J. de Vries (Values, Technology and Innovation, TU Delft): ‘Technological Utopias and Hidden Assumptions of Progress.’

4 PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Date: Friday 11 October 2019

Time: 10 AM – 5 PM

Venue: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, only seven minutes by train from Schiphol Airport and at walking distance from the railway station Amsterdam Zuid

Entrance Fee: € 75 (including lunch and drinks)

Registration: https://www.formdesk.com/vu-onlinepayment/Aanmelden_Expert_meeting_Utopia.

NB No more than 25 participants can register (first come, first-serve!).

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