‘Utopian Confluences’
A Critique

The first 2021 issue of *Social Anthropology* contains a Special Section on ‘utopian confluences’ guest-edited by Ruy Blanes and Bjørn Enge Bertelsen. This is, indeed, an interesting and important topic, partly because the multiple crises that characterise our times call for progressive visions and practices, but also because they challenge our analytical grip: how to understand – that is, conceptualise and theorise – utopian mobilisations in the contemporary context of immense global complexity? Incidentally, the contributions also pose another challenge, which one often confronts in current anthropological discourse: how to discern substantial arguments in texts that overflow with evocative and metaphoric prose? What are actually claimed here about the character of utopian mobilisation?

Genuinely struggling to grasp what the guest editors aim for, in the following I will try to discern the logical structure of their reasoning. Concentrating on the joint Introduction and Bertelsen’s ethnographic case by way of illustration, I seek to tease out what the substantive propositions, inferences and conclusions are. While these counter-intentional tactics – reading against the authors’ textual flow – may seem like an unfriendly move against good colleagues, I believe these questions are sufficiently critical to risk committing the crime.¹ I take Blanes and Bertelsen’s contributions to reflect a way of thinking that has wide-ranging – and to me problematic – analytical and political implications, among others for our understanding of utopian projects.

Immediately, it seems that Blanes and Bertelsen make two very promising perspectival moves. First is the attempt to make Deleuze and Guattari ‘this-worldly’ (i.e. researchable) by shifting from an entirely open, abstract and un-determinable notion of potentiality (the overall metaphysics of becoming) to a study of observable, here-and-now utopian experimentations. Second, this entails as well an analytical shift from imaginings (utopia as speculative endeavour) to praxis (instances of social activity), or rather a combining of the two. These are intriguing reformulations indeed!

However, I doubt whether we can realise this potential unless we also pay attention to the ground of our figure, as it were – the relevant non-utopian ‘being’ within which, out of which and against which utopian visions and practices are being fashioned. I am thinking of the specific socio-material, structural and historical features that surround, constrain, affect and possibly forge utopian
praxis – features that are not necessarily thematised by the protagonists themselves. While the contributors to the Special Section certainly contextualise their cases ethnographically, what I miss is a theorising of this ‘grounding’ – or, more precisely, a discussion of figure/ground relationality; how utopian experiments and their given environments are interlinked, logically and practically. The guest editors seem reluctant to interrogate this dimension, in particular the constitutive effects of utopian practices on their grounding, and I believe this ignorance effectively muddles the twin ambition to get past imaginational potentiality. Essentially, I argue that to disregard the exteriority of utopian mobilisations (i.e. figure/ground mutuality) entails projecting them as potentials despite the expressed methodological shift to actuality. Moreover, it furthers a concern with imaginings despite the methodological emphasis on social praxis. I will return to this critique after trying – positively – to discern the logical structure of Blanes and Bertelsen’s reasoning.

In Bertelsen’s case, the relevant ‘ethnographic facts’ are as follows. The bairros of Maputo under study are undergoing profound change due to processes of gentrification. As a consequence, local residents lose access to space and housing (which are being commodified, turned into fortified enclaves and estranged), while, in terms of class formations, marginalised locals are increasingly being reconfigured as cheap labour (security guards, housemaids, for example) for the incoming rich. Overall, the state and political rights of polis recede, while market dynamics gain ground. Bertelsen connects these transformations to a form of governance that gains traction in the current context of the Anthropocene: an increasing valuation of ‘resilience’, which, inter alia, entails flexible adaptability and reductions in consumption. This form of governance is shot through by a discursive figure that Bertelsen dubs ‘the lesser human’. It goes without saying that some retain their status as ‘complete’ humans, while others are being marginalised, and legitimately so in the frame of resilience discourse, since they contribute ‘positively’ to environment and climate.

These transformations, which reach deep into the lives of local residents, cause discontent. The ethnographic account demonstrates that some bairro residents shrewdly identify the dynamics at work and their effects, including the ensuing reframing of their very humanity as ‘less’. Bertelsen is particularly concerned with networks of young, predominantly male, locals who assemble in what they call ‘teams’. Team members typically play out their utopian experiments in and through cars; vehicles that they operate so as to make themselves visible and audible in the urban areas (zonas) that they roam. Bertelsen emphasises their noisy, rowdy motility in the bairro and their practices of tagging (on cars, walls, and so on), which can be seen as experimentation in transgressive coding as well as markings of the zona they traverse. Also, to some extent, teams evoke socialist utopias of the Mozambique past, although this dimension seems to surface in conversations with the ethnographer, rather than in team action.
I have absolutely no issue with Bertelsen’s eminent account of resilience governance, gentrification and team practices in Maputo. The core question in my critique is what Bertelsen makes of the relation between gentrification on the one side and team mobilisations on the other. Evidently, teams ‘are there’, and the ethnographic account demonstrates that team members reference the problems of marginalisation and subordination that they experience. But what more can be said about the character of their mobilisations relative to ongoing socio-material and economic transformations?

Here are a series of propositions I glean from Bertelsen’s text (emphases mine; parentheses referring to page numbers): ‘Teams attack the very dictums of flexibility and adaptability inherent to resilience governance’ (88), ‘their actions and presence . . . undermine the total ambition of resilience governance’ (88), they are ‘refusing to be relegated to positions as lesser humans’ (88), they seek ‘to thwart the machinations of urban politics’ (97) and so on. Clearly, Bertelsen ascribes a large degree of agency to teams; he does not in the least cast team members as unaware, passive or submissive. The next logical question, then, is where all this energy goes. If we, instead, underline the nouns in Bertelsen’s formulations we end up with a strong focus on the discursive figure that allegedly underpins transformations: team members attack the ‘dictums’, ‘ambitions’, ‘machinations’, and so on, of the resilience governance that render them as lesser humans. In other words, their utopian agency targets above all a certain way of thinking (or ‘figuring’) and this is also evident from the verbatim examples provided. Reframing Bertelsen’s point from a critical perspective, one could argue that team members are acutely aware of the ideology at work.

Now, how does Bertelsen characterise the mutual imbrications of gentrification and team mobilisations? The one substantive proposition I manage to find in his text is very interesting; he argues that team members are ‘policing their own state of submission’ (94). Given that locals are, inter alia, involved in gun trade and guard the fortified enclaves of the rich, this seems a most apt caption. However, Bertelsen takes care to add ‘at one level’, implying that in other ways team members are not privy to their own subordination. Rather, as noted, he casts them as highly conscious and agential with respect to their surroundings; they are prime examples of what Blanes and Bertelsen in their Introduction dub ‘generative politics’ (5).

We are deep into the core question already. In what sense are teams and other utopian projects efficacious – what do they accomplish by way of their utopian form of mobilisation? Apparently, Bertelsen offers some very strong propositions in this respect when arguing that teams comprise a subversive ‘engagement with the production of the poor’ (98), are ‘an actual political intervention unto the world’ (88) and embody ‘forms of life inimical to capitalist forms of exploitation and predatory state violence’ (103). Immediately, it seems that, here, he references not the ideas that undergird resilience discourse but the very economic and socio-political formations that affect team members’ lives. He also notes that
team experimentation may transmogrify into more formalised political activity. However, these claims are undocumented ethnographically; it is exceedingly difficult to glean from Bertelsen’s account how team activities affect poverty production, capitalist exploitation and state violence. Moreover, his comment on formalised mobilisation, which could perhaps bring utopian agency into more sustained and efficacious forms, is just mentioned in passing.

In other words, Bertelsen’s fascination is clearly with the alterity of team activities – how they, in a sense, conceptually escape rather than materially affect their surroundings. This is evident from the explicit (and unsubstantiated) statement that team activities are ‘equally important’ (97) to other political forms such as large-scale protests (and, as noted, formalised mobilisation). Moreover, it is also reflected in Bertelsen’s evocative, metaphoric prose – which must be seen as experiments in writing beyond the constraints of accustomed (‘non-alter’) vocabulary. This is patently evident when we keep on tracing his formulations on team qualities and efficacy, which, at least to this reader, descend into nonreferentiality. Team practices are allegedly ‘creating openings in the texture of the urban’ (88), stand for a ‘flickering, ambulatory anti-resilience urban governance politics’ (102), ‘oscillat[e] between presence and absence’ (102), have a ‘spectral nature’ (102), their temporality being ‘unstable, slippery, twisted and changing’ (13), and so on.

We note how Bertelsen’s analytical trajectory entails an ever-increasing degree of abstraction – which is, simultaneously, an ever-increasing analytical distancing from the realities of team members’ lives and problems. We start with powerful forms of subordination – clearly visible to the perceptive observer and possibly devastating for the people in question – and end up in a metaphoric universe. It is hard to avoid the sensation that claims about team efficacy – that is, their matter-of-fact importance – are rather forced in comparison with the sober and convincing account Bertelsen gives of gentrification. Arguably, the trajectory can also be seen as a slide into exceedingly romantic framings of utopian praxis.

These tendencies are exaggerated in the Introduction where Blanes and Bertelsen discuss utopian mobilisations in more general terms. Without recourse to criteria by which to assess efficacy, utopian projects must, necessarily, be couched in positive terms. They are, in a sense, relevant and important modes of praxis just by way of existing; by being precisely what they are. This is also evident in the guest editors’ rendering of utopia as ‘the materialisation of desire and will themselves’ (10). The Introduction overflows with celebratory formulations about this élan vital – about the ‘intensity of utopia’s generative, playful and meaning-making engagement with reality’ (5), its ‘generativity in the face of the eclipse of the future’ (9), its capability to operate ‘across different spectra’ (9; e.g. of political binaries such as Left versus Right), its ability to move into ‘domains of non-conformity’ (11), and its capacity to provoke ‘concrete consequences’ with ‘effervescent and transformative’ qualities (10).
Now, a realist re-reading of Bertelsen’s account would register that the Maputo case evinces an ontological asymmetry that remains implicit in the ethnographic analysis and untheorised in the introduction to the Special Section. Evidently, gentrification transforms the lives of team members over and above how team members transform gentrification. In terms of constitutive impacts, team mobilisations are clearly subordinate to the realities that spur them. Although I subscribe to philosophical realism more generally, here I use ‘reality’ not in an abstract or metaphysically pretentious sense, only with reference to the specific socio-material transformations that Bertelsen himself so brilliantly brings out. The point is that, ethnographically, we deal with a unidirectional or at least asymmetrical relation. Teams are quite powerless when it comes to changing the manifest, empirical problems at which they are directed. Despite their experimental, creative, transgressive vitality, we must be so frank as to admit that they hardly actualise anything apart from themselves. At least, it is difficult to discover a more forceful role for teams in the ethnographic account provided. I don’t disagree with the guest editors’ point that to highlight actual practices broadens our grasp of utopian mobilisations, but if these practices have no constitutive impacts beyond singular instances of self-realisation, they can hardly be called anything else than potentials – practices that might be efficaciously formative, but in a different place, time or world. This ‘ontology of potentiality’ shines through in explicit formulations, such as when team practices are rendered, exactly, as ‘experiments in potential futures’ (98) and, more fundamentally, when Blanes and Bertelsen posit a ‘non-contingent’ (10) dimension in utopian mobilisation. Hence, I doubt whether the guest editors manage to turn Deleuze and Guattari more ‘this-worldly’.

What remains to explore in this emphasis on potentiality is the interiority of utopian mobilisations, not how they affect or transform the ‘ground’ out of which they emerge (because, analytically, this dimension is either bracketed or denied), but what they may convey in and of themselves; in effect, de-contextualised from Maputo and other settings. And this I take to be the thrust of Blanes and Bertelsen’s general reasoning. What is interesting about utopian mobilisations is how they recursively might interrogate Western or modern thinking – and anthropology as integral to these configurations; for example, our renderings of humanity, politics, critique and temporality. In the Maputo case, the target of destabilisation is the figure of the ‘lesser human’ in resilience discourse (and anthropology); other ethnographies launch other challenges, but in either case we recede into epistemological domains – hence, my claim that Blanes and Bertelsen remain concerned with thought despite their emphasis on praxis. Utopian projects can only be assessed in terms of the conceptual change they might engender – captured by the guest editors themselves in references to ‘imaginal political domain[s]’ (11), ‘notions of the real’ (11), ‘against-the-grain semantics’ (10), ‘utopian revolutionary mind-sets’ (13), and so on (my emphases). There is no way
to explore the force of utopian mobilisations relative to sociopolitical realities of
gentrification, poverty and the like; only academic thought.

Finally, regarding the political implications of this ‘generativity and vitalism’ (9) stance, one wonders whether Blanes and Bertelsen’s principal embrace of transgressive alterity might, inadvertently, legitimise figures of ‘lesser humans’, but inversely so. The question is whether their positive valuation of utopian experimentation in and of itself – that is, in any and all seemingly ‘life-affirming’ forms – instantiates a ‘fuller-than-itself’ figure of humanity, as it were. Lacking a perspective on the distribution of capacities to make realities come through, I worry that this over-optimistic and irreal (i.e. romantic as well as unrealistic) figure might work to divert utopian energy away from engagements that could really matter. In other words, we risk courting a concept of humanity that, in its discursive effects, might undergird transformations that keep actual humans in ‘lesser’ positions within structures of power and inequality.

Now, my critique may, of course, be dismissed wholesale by recourse to the programmatic subversiveness that suffuses the guest editors’ stance: my emphases on efficacy and all the rest of it are just instances of the ‘Western’, ‘modern’, ‘neo-colonial’, and suchlike, thinking that the discipline of anthropology ought to destabilise. Very well, but I believe it is equally important to ponder this migration out of academia, as it were; what is entailed in terms of analytical accountability by the dismissal of logical principles, propositional (rather than metaphorical) references, critical reasoning (as opposed to evocative descriptions), positive (instead of subversive or deconstructive) reality accounts and some notion, however small, of contingent constraints (rather than indeterminable possibility).

ELDAR BRÅTEN is Professor at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen, Norway. His research has focused on several topics based in fieldworks in Central Java, Indonesia: Islamization, concepts of self and person, entrepreneurship and state decentralization. Bråten has also carried out research on historical transformations of social inequality in Norwegian rural communities and is now publishing on theoretical issues. E-mail: eldar.braten@uib.no; ORCID: 0000-0002-8903-5220.

Notes
1. This text is a condensed version of a critique that occasioned an email exchange between Bjørn Bertelsen, Ruy Blanes and me during the Easter holidays of 2021. Bjørn graciously suggested that I share my points with a wider audience through Social Anthropology.
2. While my research experiences are from Java and Norway, so I cannot assess Bertelsen’s contribution based on area expertise, I find his ethnographic account substantial and compelling.