Unravelling Utopias and Dystopias

Abstract: This chapter provides the broader context for this study by outlining and analysing how utopian thought has been discussed by scholars from a range of relevant disciplines (sociology, politics, philosophy and literature). Particular attention is paid to modern utopias and dystopias, and the way in which they centre upon the challenges presented by rapid social change and the place of technology in shaping human relations.

Introduction

It is now something of a truism that the internet has transformed social, political, cultural and economic life – from the rise of e-commerce (Castells, 2003, 2009), through the growth of new social media and social networking (Fuchs, 2013), to the use of new communication technologies in political protest and revolutionary movements (Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012). Scholarly and popular discourse addresses these developments, and presents them in contradictory ways – it imagines the internet as progress and liberation on the one hand, and as the site of risk, crime and harm on the other. This book starts with such contestation, and argues that the internet has rapidly become the space into which utopian and dystopian visions of the present and future are now projected. This imaginary, I suggest, can be located within a much broader social and cultural history, one that expresses profound ambivalence about technological change and its impact upon modern society. Consequently, in order to understand how and why we collectively imagine the internet in the ways we do, we must look beyond the past few decades and explore the cultural meanings that are sedimented around technology, and, in particular, the role ascribed to ‘techno-science’ in driving social change and reshaping human experience (and, indeed, potentially remaking humanity itself – Sloterdijk, 2009). This book aims to explore the meanings and narratives that shape our views of the virtual world. Its focus extends well beyond scholarly discussions to examine the wider imaginary manifest in popular culture, including film, television, novels and press reportage. In doing so, it seeks to uncover how our collective hopes, fears and fantasies about the future are now increasingly centred upon the virtual world. The concept of the imaginary used here does not imply something that is simply unreal or factually untrue – in the sense we might allude to a small child having ‘an imaginary friend’ or dismiss someone’s anxieties by assuring them that ‘you’re just imagining it’. Rather, drawing upon the work of Cornelius Castoriadis and Charles Taylor, the ‘social imaginary’ is intended to indicate a society’s ‘singular way of living, seeing and making its own existence’ and ‘which define what, for a given society, is “real”’ (Castoriadis, quoted in Thompson, 1984: 6, 22; see also Taylor, 2002). Building upon this conceptualisation, the term ‘cultural imaginary’ refers to the ways in which the social imaginary is given a concrete form in the sphere of cultural production.