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*Utopia-Method-Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming* is the first book of a series that will be published within a project developed by the Ralahine Centre for Utopian Studies (University of Limerick), and the Department of Intercultural Studies in Translation, Languages and Cultures (University of Bologna at Forlì) on the theory and practice of utopianism. The intent to develop an alternative approach to the study of utopia is clear from the very title of this book. In this spirit, Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini present a multifaceted investigation of utopia, which is aimed at interpreting it in its being both *forma mentis*, *modus operandi*, and mode of expression. Utopia and utopianism are explored here in their experiential, theoretical, and textual manifestation, and also as far as their reception and modes of observation are concerned, through the work of twelve scholars in utopian studies from different countries and research areas. Such a combination of international, interdisciplinary, and individual perspectives is what probably makes this book particularly useful and stimulating for scholars and students who are interested not only in utopian studies, politics, cultural studies, feminist and gender studies, literary studies, film studies, and social-cultural theory, but also in obtaining deep insights into research methods.

The general structure is composed by three main thematic sections. The first four contributions focus on the theme utopia and method, and they examine the “pattern” of principles that govern the nature and dynamics of the utopian
process according to the author’s individual disciplinary area. The second set of essays investigates how utopian thought articulates within literary, cultural and gender studies and calls into play the question of reception. The last section offers analyses on utopian political practice, activism and community construction, and their driving forces. Each contribution, in turn, develops according to two main perspectives, which involve a look backward and a look forward, and thus “mirror” what is often defined as the Janus-faced nature of utopian thought itself. At the beginning of the essay the authors focus on their personal experience and engagement with utopianism, and then they offer their individual interrogation and investigation on utopia and its future horizons within their specific disciplinary area.

“The Curious Relationship Between Politics and Utopia” by Lucy Sargisson opens the first section with a detailed analysis of the relationship between politics and utopia, which she describes as both ambivalent and symbiotic. Such a relationship is observed as possible key that may defend utopianism against anti-utopian critique, since it represents the crucial moment in which the power of utopia as critical force finds its proper translation into positive action. This essay is followed by Ruth Levitas’ “The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society: Utopia as Method”, where she formulates a new political and analytical method for the critical study of social and cultural processes based on the idea of Utopia as principle for the imaginary reconstitution of society (hence the acronym IROS). Interactions between politics and utopian thought are further observed by Vincent Geoghegan in his “Political Theory, Utopia, Post-Secularism”. Here he combines the conception of utopia as source of hope for positive change with the dimensions of ethical engagement and religious belief, thus extending the scope of discussion. Finally, the dialectic approach to Marxism developed by Gregory Claeyss in “Rethinking Modern British Utopianism: Community and the Mastery of Desire” offers interesting insights into eighteenth- and nineteenth century British Utopianism, particularly as far as its articulation in political and literary works and their reception are concerned.

The second section presents Phillip E. Wegner’s “Here or Nowhere: Utopia, Modernity and Totality”. Wegner offers an investigation of utopia within literary and cultural studies based on Fredric Jameson’s idea that utopian hope
pervades every form of cultural production, and thus contributes to a re-elaboration and re-application of utopia as cognitive structure. The issue of reception is explored in Kenneth M. Roemer’s essay “More Aliens Transforming Utopia: The Futures of Reader Response and Utopian Studies”, where he describes his study on readers’ reception of Edward Bellamy’s literary utopia Looking Backward, 2000-1887 (1888). This paves the way for a wider discussion on how readers interpret and are influenced by utopian literature, and on the social role that readers of utopian literature may play in promoting the transformative power of utopia. New perspectives for the study of utopia are introduced by Raffaella Baccolini’s “Finding Utopia in Dystopia: Feminism, Memory, Nostalgia, and Hope”. Dystopian articulations within the issues of desire, hope and nostalgia, and within the perspective of feminist literary theory are here turned into effective keys of interpretation of the essence and potential of utopia, and are reconceived as possible sources of critical force to stimulate utopian impulses. Tom Moylan closes the book’s second section with “Realizing Better Futures, Strong Thought for Hard Times”. On the basis of his personal, academic, and political experience he offers a thorough analysis of the transversal nature of utopian thought and action. The encounter and confrontation of anti-utopian and dystopian approaches with utopianism, as Moylan explains with particular reference to the literary and political sphere, may produce a critical utopian method through which utopia may acquire renewed strength and keep moving forward while being fed by past utopian efforts.

In “Utopia and the Beloved Community”, Naomi Jacobs shifts the focus to what she defines as postmodern utopianism, and on the basis of Bernardette Mayer’s Utopia (1984) she dedicates special attention to the relational aspect that characterizes discursive communities such as the feminist poets and experimental writers of the 1970s and 1980s. In “Beyond this Horizon: Utopian Visions and Utopian Practice” Peter Fitting discusses Jameson’s theory of utopia by observing how science fiction may play a political role as a source of alternative visions of society. Central to Hoda Zaki’s “New Spaces for Utopian Politics: Theorizing about Identity, Community, and the World Conference Against Racism” is the concept of community, through which she analyzes the utopian potential of science fiction and politics, with particular reference to
global political events such as the "World Conference Against Racism". The last essay is “Choosing Utopia: Utopianism as an Essential Element in Political Thought and Action” by Lyman Tower Sargent, which introduces the concept of “utopian energy” as a new definition for the transformative power of utopia. While discussing the issue of awareness and the value of collective social dreaming and action, Sargent also provides readers with alternative “weapons” for defending utopianism and encouraging further research in this field.

At the basis of the essays seems to be a common effort of giving new impetus to utopian studies in order to respond to two recent issues related to the perception of utopia, i.e., the utopian revival which is emerging in popular and political spheres (Barack Obama’s speeches during his 2008 election campaign, and several recent commercials provide significant examples in this sense), and the rejection vs. renaissance of utopian thought and practice in scholarly investigation (interesting insights on this topic are to be found in Baccolini and Moylan’s Introduction and Conclusion). Baccolini, Moylan, and each of the book’s contributors are ready to question their very beliefs, to challenge utopianism and to engage in a dialectic approach with anti-utopian views. In so doing, they explore the foundations of utopian thought and action until they reach their limits, and they subsequently initiate a phase of reconstruction, reformulation and re-orientation of utopia, which, despite its being potentially dangerous, as Sargent points out, still reveals itself as the primary and indispensable source of hope and collective improvement. It may be argued that what emerges from this volume is a synergetic combination of definition, consolidation, and promotion of the study of utopia in its several research perspectives, which is certainly beneficial to the life of utopia. It takes utopia beyond disciplinary boundaries and elevates it to the bivalent status of essential cognitive principle and desirable orienteering compass. And it invites anti-utopians to take up the gauntlet of the utopian challenge.