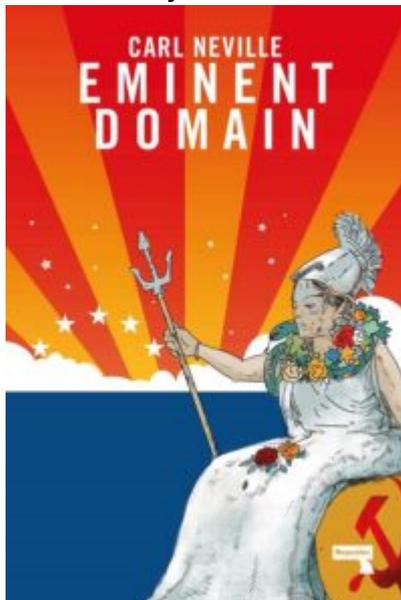


[A Haunted Utopia: on Eminent Domain by Carl Neville](#)

written by Guest Contributor | August 20, 2020



Eminent Domain by Carl Neville

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“Is it possible to write a utopia, now?” asked Ursula K Le Guin in 2016, before acknowledging: “Dystopias are certainly easier.” Dystopia, with its inherent conflict, serves as fertile ground for fiction writers, particularly in a contemporary moment marked by accumulating crises and the pervading sense, as noted by Mark Fisher (and Slavoj Žižek and Frederic Jameson), that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Its tropes and structures are familiar, not least from the recent decade’s rush of disaster and YA cinema, but those of utopian narratives are hazier, more open to contestation. Utopia, it might be argued, is trickier to spin compelling narratives from – after all, who wants to read about societal harmony? – but it might also be argued, following Fisher, that the impossibility of the utopian imagination in the current moment stems from neoliberal culture’s narrowing of horizons. Carl Neville, film critic for the leftist magazine *The Tribune* and Fisher’s contemporary, responds to this difficulty by claiming that, rather than being opposites, the two genres haunt, infect and inhabit each other. His ambitious, immersive *Eminent Domain*, published by Repeater Books, combines elements of science fiction, procedural thriller, political satire and modernist vision, and contains echoes of its dystopian predecessor, 2016 *Resolution Way*, as well as the real, increasingly dystopian present. As Le Guin writes, using the concept of ying and yang, “Every eutopia contains a dystopia, every dystopia contains a eutopia.”

For Neville, Derrida's hauntology is a more salient concept, a framework which gained popularity among his milieu of bloggers in the '00s to describe an aesthetic preoccupied with temporal disjunction and a nostalgia for 'lost futures'. In *Ghosts of My Life*, Fisher argues that hauntological melancholia is not simply nostalgia for post-war social democracy, but the awareness that the present is haunted by "the spectre of a world in which all the marvels of communicative technology could be combined with a sense of solidarity much stronger than anything social democracy could muster." Neville revives the revenants of radical theory and stymied social movements to construct an alternative history in which the central architect for social democracy is not Attlee or Bevan but (the fictional) Alan Bewes, who, as part of the 'Cybernetic Commons Committee', has transformed 'the People's Republic of Britain' (PRB) into such a world. He presents a compelling model of what might have been for the Left, while examining the ways that this version of utopia is only possible "on the basis of a whole series of absences which precede and surround it" (to quote Fisher on hauntology).

The PRB is part of a broader Communist union, or 'Co-Sphere', that spreads across Europe; advances in technology, accelerated by international co-operation and years of class war, have ensured that the drudgery of nine-to-five waged labour has disappeared, while everyone has full and immediate rights to care, housing, transport, education, work and leisure activities. This society might be called '[Acid Communist](#)', especially since there are officially sanctioned 'Recreational Pharmaceutical Providers' which supply a range of uppers, downers and psychedelics, but it's also almost-familiar from the ideas and energies that suffused Corbynism, with its promises of a National Education Service, a four-day week and nationalised super-fast broadband. With the inclusion of various witty details, including the population's penchant for 'Internationalist Pale Ale' and the consumption of pills in tea, the PRB is also (just about) recognisable as Britain. In 2018, the now peaceful country is celebrating the twenty year anniversary of the removal of the House of Windsor and preparing to host an international sporting event organised by Bewes. At the start of the novel, however, Bewes is murdered (a rare event, surely, in any utopia) and with the PRB "moving toward a purely voluntary and co-operative model" in security matters, the team of investigators is slow to kick into gear. The plot unfolds via interweaving narratives of investigators and suspects, including Tom, a poet with links to radical intellectuals, Julia, an American exchange student and PRB-ophile, Franklin, an American smuggler with a taste for human breast milk, and Bewes' handsome, suited grandson Dominic, whose playwright father defected to the USA.

Though tranquil, the PRB is destabilized internally by 'the Enthusiasm' – a massive, orgiastic party fuelled by a drug called 'Everlasting Yeah', reminiscent of 90s rave culture and the thought of anarchists like Hakim Bey – and externally by the USA, led by a Trump-like figure called Connaught whose speeches harness 'the power of nonsense'. In opposition to the Co-Sphere's promises of equality, sustainability and human flourishing, Connaught offers his own utopian vision, encapsulated in the image of a "beautiful, hallucinatorily bright artificial [golf] course, a gently rolling monochrome slick" with a "teeming profusion of servants and caddies all

beautiful deep mahogany shades of brown, Latinas, Filipinas, in crisp white and purple overalls [...] instantly available to fuck and kill.”

As indicated by this passage, in which a character within the PRB fantasizes about American ownership and history of slavery as a ‘divine prospect’, the necessary absences that make the PRB possible both entice and menace the characters. Tom believes in the PRB’s ethic of polyamory but struggles with his urge to possess Julia sexually, and therefore medicalizes himself as having ‘Infantile Possession Syndrome’, while the lead investigator Barrow is haunted by flashbacks to the revolutionary violence of the past and his lover, Rose, is occupied with thoughts of her child, given away as part of the ‘Fire/Stone’ communal rearing experiment. These passages of dreaming and retracing provide respite from the sometimes disorienting plot and world-building, and are among the novel’s most compelling; these internal conflicts allow Neville to interrogate the relationship between desire and absence in a state that claims to fulfill all needs, as well as the disjunctions between political principles and instincts, an instability within the concept of utopia itself.

The absence of the real United Kingdom also haunts the novel. Neville’s London is less a city than an idyll of subsistence gardens, community centres and canteens, but one character, emerging from a tunnel, “imagines she might come up in a different London...high-rise, gleaming, metal and glass”, while another dreams of “old seats of power and prestige that we have razed, new skyscrapers made of chrome and glass, citadels ringed at the base with fences, dogs, men with guns.” At the same time as reminding the characters of the fragility of their utopia, these moments serve to remind the reader of both the existence and the contingency of our neoliberal present. The effect is both melancholic and politically motivating: it didn’t have to be like this, Neville argues, and it doesn’t always have to be like this.

Fisher writes that though hauntological melancholia acknowledges that “not only has the future not arrived, it no longer seems possible” it also constitutes “a refusal to give up on the desire for the future” which amounts to a failure to accommodate to the closed horizons of capitalist realism. His now widely used concept refers not so much to the lack of political imagination (which, before 2015, was taken as given) but to the death of what he called ‘popular modernism’, forms of mainstream culture that could provide moments of ‘future shock’. Neville has [written](#) about how music, film and TV were “a seam of something bright and dazzling” while growing up, providing glimpses of alternative possibilities and parallel universes that could provide temporary escape from neoliberal logic, and popular modernism is very much alive in his utopia. One of the joys of reading the novel comes from its descriptions of new cultural and social forms, complete with footnotes and fact-files listing fictional records, books, and academic papers: music in the PRB, for example, seeks to “weave sound in all its ephemerality into the very fabric of life” and one track that figures prominently in the plot will “alter the listener irreparably”, causing hallucinations of another world. Film, meanwhile, uses split screens to grant equal weight to narratives and one film, *Safety for the Apes*, is unable to be comprehended in its entirety without an understanding of ‘non-human languages’.

The text itself can be read as an attempt at a radical, utopian aesthetic: its modernistic reveries and more functional passages of necessary world-building combine to immerse the reader in a coherent alternative society, in a clear rebuke to the claim made by capitalist realism, and, unlike in a traditional dystopian narrative in which a hero/ine resists or overcomes a shadowy government, not one character among the novel's huge cast is privileged. Moving between narratives helps to generate pace and give a panorama of the various conflicts and complexities playing out in the PRB, but at times it feels like character development and definition have been sacrificed, especially with the team of investigators. When the ambiguities surrounding characters clarify in the final third to resolve the plot, the turn feels sudden and not altogether earned, the friction arguably reduced to an overly simplistic problem of individual evil. Nevertheless, *Eminent Domain* combines the readerly pleasure derived from a murder mystery's narrative drive with the intellectual stimulation of witnessing ideas denied by capitalism given life in fiction, similar to the philosophical science fictions of Le Guin or China Mieville. This makes for thrilling escapism, but it also underlines the importance of utopianism: as Mieville writes, "when the cracks in history open wide enough" the utopian impulse "may even jimmy them a little wider". With the failure of the Corbyn project in the UK and Bernie Sanders' campaign in the US, a return to melancholia for the Left seems certain, but in the present moment, when the cracks in the existing system are almost visible, reading Neville's kaleidoscopic novel enables vital dreaming of a better one.



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