David Bell is a writer, musician and artist based in Nottingham whose work revolves around the concept of utopia. Drawing on a wide variety of political philosophy, social movement praxis, literature, contemporary art and musicology, he argues in favour of a ‘nomadic utopianism’: a nonhierarchical political movement which immanently creates prefigurative, utopian spaces. However, he argues that these spaces can only be considered utopian to the extent that they remain nonhierarchical and open to the future. In so doing, he seeks to create a concept of utopia which resonates with a variety of contemporary political movements in both the global north and the global south.

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When I close my eyes and I am just playing with other people in a free situation, where we can all do what we want, I am in a utopian space. And I have been very lucky to spend a huge amount of my life in that utopian space.”
Evan Parker, in an interview given to Stewart Lee, 2010

The fundamental argument of this essay is that the practice of collectively improvising music creates utopian space. But this is by no means a self-evident truth: it cannot simply be said that the space of improvising music is a utopia which solves problems of social and political organisation once and for all, for improvisation is an inherently muddy phenomena, frequently constituted by frustrations and failure. Though the adjective ‘utopian’ has been used to describe the practice of collectively improvising music, an investigation into exactly how its utopianism operates and what its utopia might look like is necessary before the claim can be taken seriously; and even then there are limits to improvisation’s utopianism. Nonetheless, I believe that the claim can be taken seriously and that these limits need not prove fatal. There is a utopianism inherent to improvisation.

Before this argument can be developed further, it needs to be established precisely what is meant by the term ‘collectively improvising music’. I use the phrase to refer to the activity of creating music in a group of people without reference to any ideal/limitation determining how the music created can, or should, sound; or which determines the relationships between musicians. An infinite number of possibilities should be open to each musician at all times during the creation of music. Ideals/limitations and hierarchies may be formally predetermined before the music is created or they may emerge during the performance itself, and they may be recognised or unrecognised by the performers. Following a score or agreeing before the performance to play in 7/8 time would be recognised factors, whilst the impact of music the performers
had listened to at any time in their lives prior to improvising might be recognised (“let’s do something that sounds like Can”) but would, without a doubt, place parameters on the performance that went unrecognised - as would the emotional state of the musicians, the temperature in the room, the musician’s life histories and innumerable other affective inputs. Playing in a certain time signature, scale or key may also emerge during the performance and may not be consciously recognised by the musicians if this is the case. In terms of relationships, meanwhile, improvisation is built on non-hierarchical relationships between musicians - there are no leaders in an improvising collective.

Making music free of these ideals/limitations is, of course, impossible in its pure state (just as it would be impossible to create ‘fully composed’ music that gave performers absolutely no freedom of choice regarding how to play, at least so long as the performers were human). This means that improvised music should not, therefore, be seen as existing in a binary opposition with ‘composed’ music. Rather, all human musical performance operates on a spectrum running from these two inaccessible poles: music is improvised to the extent that performers are free to explore the infinite for its entire duration and it is composed to the extent that they run up against ideals/limitations which prevent that exploration.

Like improvisation, utopia is a muddy concept: it too is littered with frustration and failure. I argue that there are two poles of utopia: the ‘nomadic utopia’ and the ‘State Utopia’. Like improvisation and composition, they form the opposite ends of a spectrum rather than existing in binary opposition, and cannot be realised in their pure states. A good starting point for exploring these poles is the etymological double entendre of Thomas More’s term: utopia is caught between ‘eutopia’ (good place) and ‘outopia’ (no place): ‘the good place that is no place’.

The only thing clear here is that utopia is a place. In arguing that the
practice of improvising music creates a utopia (more accurately, it creates a nomadic utopia) it is necessary, therefore, to consider how it is possible to speak of musical production as a place. Here, I draw on the definition offered by the geographer Doreen Massey, who argues that ‘place’ is “constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus” (2004: 69). There is a danger of circularity in this definition as ‘locus’ is Latin for place, and to avoid this, I understand the term in the mathematical sense, where it refers to a collection of points which share a property. The ‘points’ here would be the musicians; the shared property their desire to create music together - either in a particular style or through a particular process. In this sense, then, it is possible to think about a group of musicians working together as constituting a ‘place’, with the ‘locus’ being the music they create.

In order to understand this place of musical production as a utopia it is necessary to consider it as a ‘good place’ and a ‘no place’. Here, two rival definitions of the ‘good’ come into play. The State Utopia (which conforms to colloquial understandings of the term as a perfect place separated from the present by time or space) is constituted by the ‘moral good’, in which that which is good conforms to universal laws and speaks to a vision of perfection. It sees itself as “divine, transcendent, superior to life” (Delueze, 1986: 122), judging and orienting action from a location beyond the material present. This location is the State Utopia, a place in which all actions conform to this particular moral vision. Hierarchy is necessary to enforce this conformity and deny difference, meaning that the only form of freedom is a negative freedom; in the words of the utopian scholar J.C. Davis, Utopia provides “freedom from disorder and moral chaos, freedom from moral choice altogether” (1981: 384).

This, clearly, is antithetical to the social organisation of improvising
collectives. Indeed, it seems to offer a description of the orchestra, in which individual players are generally given no freedom to explore or pursue their own interests, and in which a strict hierarchy - flowing from conductor down through soloists, the first violinist, section leaders, and so on - enforces the strict moral ordering of the composer, whose score functions as an object of ‘perfection’. Like those living in a State Utopia, the orchestral musician has “accepted a discipline which is totalitarian in its scope and denial of human individuality” (Davis, 1981: 54).5

Whilst Davis is an advocate of (State) Utopia, he shares with its detractors a belief that it is ‘totalitarian’ in scope, denying the individual the capacity to act on their own desires, or create their own conditions for life. For many (myself included), this would be a fundamentally dystopian state of affairs where the totality utterly dominates the individual. Marylou Speaker - a violinist in the Boston Symphony Orchestra - notes that “the more successful we are as instrumentalists, the more we have to sublimate our individuality…. to the tyranny of the conductor…. players in an orchestra have to submit, instant by instant, to the dictates of a single individual… every movement you make, in the music that is the substance of your being, is dictated to you by others” (quoted in Fischer, 1994: 28).

This is clearly a long way from the experience of improvising musicians, so how might it be possible to use the term ‘utopia’ to describe the spaces they create? To do so requires a different understanding of the concept of ‘the good’. Unlike State Utopianism’s moral good, the nomadic utopia orients itself around an ‘ethical good’. Drawing on the work of Spinoza, Nietzsche and Deleuze, this can be understood as that which unfolds immanently and increases the capacity of those present in a space to act. This should not be understood simply as a reversal of the domination of the collective over the
individual found in State Utopianism, however. Rather, it collapses the binary opposition between the individual and the collective: the ability of one to act from their position of difference increases the ability of the collective to act: an increase in the power of one increases the power of all, meaning power is distributed and produced nonhierarchically (and indeed, the imposition or emergence of hierarchy is damaging to such power). As such, the concept of the ‘individual’ is replaced by the ‘dividual’, someone who - in the words of Lewis Hyde - is “constituted by the complexity of the world around him [sic]”. To be a dividual is to know that “we are always simultaneously individuals and sunk in our communities” (Hyde and Wallace, 2010: online at http://bombsite.powweb.com). An increase in the power of the individual results in an increase in the power of the collective, and vice versa.

The nomadic utopia is made (and remade) by these productive operations of power, meaning it exists in a state of becoming. It is like Heraclitus’ river “which is not the same and is” (2003: 51), or Deleuze and Guattari’s “schizophrenic object” which cannot be understood without reference to the forces that produce it (2004: 6). It is a residue of materialist utopianism and not the telos of idealist Utopianism; a prefigurative space in the immanent here-and-now that is open to becoming; not a perfected space in a transcendent future which is closed to becoming.

I believe that the place of musical improvisation is a nomadic utopia. In it, dividual musicians assert their difference through their playing, yet this asserted difference does not deny the difference of fellow improvisers. Rather, each player responds to the difference of the other players and adapts their own output accordingly. This is often described as ‘nobody solos, everybody solos’, although I prefer George Lewis’ term ‘multi-
dominance’ (2000): a nonhierarchical arrangement in which the expression of power is not dependent on others occupying a position of powerlessness.⁷

This nonhierarchical multidominance unfolds immanently, meaning that the music created cannot be known in advance - nor can the specific form the social relations between the players will take. This is the essence of the nomadic utopia which, as noted above, results from - rather than creates - utopianism. In the liner notes to *Change of the Century*, Ornette Coleman notes that “[w]hen our group plays, before we start out to play, we do not have any idea what the end result will be. Each player is free to contribute what he feels in the music at any given moment. We do not begin with a preconceived notion as to what kind of effect we will achieve” (2006: 253).

It is important, however, not to forget the ‘no’ in utopia’s etymology. As I noted above, it is impossible to create music that is purely improvised, and the nomadic utopia cannot be actualised in its pure state. Even if no hierarchy or ideal/limitation is placed upon musicians before they begin to play, they will emerge as a performance progresses. A key or rhythm may be settled upon, or multidominance may give way to dominance by a single player or a section of the collective. These moments may be among the most powerful in improvisation - the feeling that a band has really hit its ‘groove’ and synced around a spontaneously created order - and they may well be necessary, moments of recuperation, of taking stock of gains achieved.⁸ Heraclitus’ river is not a site of pure becoming, remember - it is “not the same and is” - and such synchronisations are perhaps necessary to give a sense of cohesion, identity and continuity to the nomadic utopia; they enable it to have a name, to be more than undifferentiated chaos.
Yet they are also moments which lessen the extent to which the music is improvised, and as the mode of musical creation moves along the spectrum away from the pole of improvisation and towards the pole of composition, the musical place moves along the utopian spectrum away from the pole of nomadic utopia towards the pole of State Utopia. Tyrannies of habit may emerge - informal hierarchies which show that it is not enough to simply overthrow formal hierarchies and declare the end of history. In Ursula K. Le Guin’s novel *The Dispossessed* an anarchist (nomadic) utopia, in which there are no formal hierarchies, slides towards State Utopia/dystopia as habit becomes ossified into moral order, with those who question this order alienated from the society. Change becomes something to be resisted; the society begins to close itself off to the future. Tom Moylan cautions against such an occurrence, and his words could equally apply to improvising musicians ‘in sync’:

> Remember to be historically vigilant, do not lock in the utopian achievement, do not remove the social utopia from the processes of time. Don’t cut a deal with the false utopian devil of your own collective imagination as it dreams of the end of history; and don’t cover up the deal by changing the [utopia] from that of a place-in-process to one of eternal delight…[do] not let the processes of learning and change end (2000: 15).

The ‘no’ in utopia’s etymology, therefore, should serve to remind the improvising collective that they must not settle permanently on any given order; that they must always look to keep the musical space open to the unknowable future. Improvisation creates utopia, and it must do so continuously.

What, then, can improvisation do on a larger scale? What sort of role
might it play in a more ‘macro level’ nomadic utopianism? A small one, of course: improvisation is not going to save the world, and it would be a mistake to simply extrapolate from the specific micropolitics of improvisation to tackle the messy dystopia of neoliberal capital. Yet I do believe that improvisation can play a role, no matter how small. It can teach people the joys of nonhierarchy, and help us understand that there is not a necessary war between the interests of the collective and the interests of the individual. Similarly, the techniques used by improvisers to overcome problems of hierarchy and lack of ideas may suggest techniques applicable to those involved in nonhierarchical forms of social organisation and political action (and vice versa).

And of course there are problems relating to exclusivity which must be addressed before improvisation can truly be hailed as even the smallest part of political movement. Whilst my focus in this essay has been on improvisation as a practice rather than a genre (or an umbrella term encompassing a number of sub-genres in the jazz and improv traditions), serious questions need to be asked about why improvisation is so dominated by men; why there are still racial divides; and why queer and many other minority issues are so absent from the discourses and practises of improvisation (including this discourse, I should add). A nomadic utopia needs difference; it thrives on difference: it cannot be an exclusive, privileged sphere. Discussions must therefore take place around the practice of collective improvisation to ensure that it becomes a space in which all those who want to take part can do so (not everyone, of course, wants to make music - and some may simply prefer to play composed pieces: that is fine, and I would not suggest this means they are likely to have ‘bad’ politics).10

Improvisation is indeed a muddy, contested practice. But so is utopia
- and by getting our hands dirty and engaging, we might just be able to move towards a freer, fairer, more exciting world for all. In the utopian community he founded at New Lanark (just thirty miles south-east from this gallery) in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Robert Owen established a number of musical groups - choirs, orchestras and brass bands - believing they ‘had the capacity to break down barriers and offer the opportunities for collective activities that would foster friendship and cooperation’ (Davison, 2010: 234). Whilst there were disconcertingly hierarchical aspects to Owen’s use of music (it could, he asserted, create “obedience and order in the most imperceptible and pleasant manner” [quoted in Davison, 2010: 238]), the use of music to help create community is inspiring. We can only imagine the joys that a nomadic utopia which replaced the brass bands with free improvisation collectives might obtain as they played the future into existence.
NOTES

1 See, for example, Cox and Warner (2002: 251-252), Fred Van Hove (online at http://enotes.com) and Evan Parker (2010: online at http://guardian.co.uk).

2 I write this term as such because an ideal necessarily imposes a limitation on possibility - if you are a cellist performing Elgar’s Cello Concerto it is not possible (or at least not permitted) to start using the body of the cello as a percussive body, for example. It should also be noted that improvising collectives might involve non-human actors: computers, animals, cyborgs, the acoustics of the room – although I do not consider these in this essay.

3 Initially, it may seem that this commitment to infinity would require each improviser to have infinite musical talent and a continuously tuned and instantly responsive instrument capable of synthesising all possible sounds. This fails to understand that there are near infinite potentials within discrete parameters, however, not least when notions of playing an instrument ‘properly’ are abandoned, and when there is more than one person involved in the production of music.

4 Indeed, I have been tempted to reject the term ‘improvisation’ in favour of ‘instant composition’. This would draw on Adam Harper’s insight that “technically, the word ‘composer’ suggests anyone at all who might create music. In this sense, the term overlaps with the word ‘performer’. Composers may also come in groups that collaborate on the creation of music” (2010: 7). As the term improvisation is more clearly recognised, however, I am inclined to stick with it.

5 In line with my earlier comment that it is impossible to have music in which performers always have an infinite number of options open to them, it is impossible to perform music which leaves no space for individuality on behalf of the performers. However, the degree of freedom an orchestral musician is given is likely to be miniscule, with soloists, or those at the very top of the orchestral hierarchy the only musicians truly permitted to stamp their individuality on a piece (the conductor, of course, has relative autonomy in deciding how a composer’s instructions are to be interpreted). It should be noted that this has not always been the case, however, and many baroque compositions left significant space for musicians to improvise within a given set of parameters.
6 In his *Ethics*, Spinoza calls this understanding of power *potentia*, and distinguishes it from *postesas*, which is power as domination (2000).

7 For Lewis, the concept of multidominance is Afrological, and is central to a great deal of art (both visual and sonic) from the African diaspora. Though he notes this is “historically emergent rather than ethnically essential” (2002: 217), for a fuller account of improvisation’s utopianism the way in which social histories have informed its development would need to be taken into account.

8 A process of pure flux would be overwhelming; chaos without the potential for self-ordering. Angela Carter’s novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* is set in a society in total flux, and its narrator - Desidero - is so overwhelmed by the constant play of difference that he “only has one desire: that everything stop” (2011: 2), an experience that many who have played (or listened to) improvised music may well be able to relate to.

9 The writings of the ‘postanarchist’ Saul Newman are of relevance here. See, in particular, p.47-51 of *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power*.

10 I would suggest that these discussions take the form of popular education workshops. Popular education - a form of radically inclusive learning largely developed in Latin America - is, I argue, another nomadic practice which has a number of striking similarities with the practice of free improvisation (see Bell, 2010: online at http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk)
WORKS CITED


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