



## Q33397 – Dark Futures, Tainted Pasts

### A Brave New Postmodern Utopia: (pre-)figurations of neoliberal capitalist realism in H.G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*

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'The past is so much safer', avers one of the narrators in Margaret Atwood's dystopian satire, *The Heart Goes Last*, 'because whatever's in it has already happened. It can't be changed: so, in a way there's nothing to dread'.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as Mark Fisher observes in his unfinished introduction to *Acid Communism*, the past is not something that has happened but, rather, repeatedly endures re-narration as a spectre haunting the present.<sup>2</sup> This idea seems pertinent to wider debates about dystopias and utopias, and the extent to which these past visions of the future can be traced in the present.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the most prolific exponents of such vatic visions are H.G. Wells and Aldous Huxley, who are respectively regarded by Peter Bowering as the twentieth century's 'prophet of scientific optimism' and 'prophet of gloom'.<sup>4</sup> Bowering's postulation, although not inimical, seems lacking, as it is predicated upon a cursory examination of Wells's canonical works and thus does not provide a holistic interpretation. In analysing one of Wells's more critically neglected utopian novels, *A Modern Utopia*, Wells's status as an optimist, at least in the twenty-first century, appears as a rather myopic assessment. By extension, in comparing the novel to *Brave New World*, Huxley's status as a prophet of gloom is also complicated.

Nevertheless, the critical consensus encircling *A Modern Utopia* over the past quarter-century would not give this impression. Patrick Parrinder's co-edited edition of the novel describes it as a foray into 'a Utopian Earth... one of Wells's most positive visions of a possible world'.<sup>5</sup> Parrinder has further insisted that *A Modern Utopia*'s appeal lies in its 'imaginative qualities, rather than its political ideas' which are what 'most repays study'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Michael Sherborne remarks that despite the novel's 'major political defect', *A Modern Utopia* is most notable 'in the field of utopian studies' for its 'imaginative and intellectual engagement'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last* (London: Virago, 2016), p.189.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Fisher, 'Acid Communism (Unfinished Introduction)', in *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writing of Mark Fisher*, ed. Darren Ambrose (London: Repeater Books, 2018), pp.753-770 (p.756).

<sup>3</sup> An example of such a debate can be seen in Angela Carter, 'Iain Sinclair: Downriver', in *Expletives Deleted* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), pp.119-128.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Bowering, 'Brave New World (1932)', in *Aldous Huxley: A Study of the Major Novels* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp.98-113 (p.98).

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Parrinder and Gregory Clayes, 'Back cover', *A Modern Utopia*, eds. by Gregory Clayes and Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Parrinder, *Shadows of the Future: H.G. Wells, Science Fiction, and Prophecy* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995), pp.96-7.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Sherborne, *H.G. Wells: Another Kind of Life* (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 2010), p.165.

Consistently, then, critics have dismissed the political whilst lauding the novel's optimistic and imaginary qualities. This, I would contend, is concomitant with perennially regarding *A Modern Utopia* as a utopia, that is, as an often 'idealist, impossible, and unrealistic' excursion into the future, with little political credibility as a result.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, in repeatedly placing the utopian genre at the centre of *A Modern Utopia*, that is, treating the utopian as what Jacques Derrida would call 'a fixed origin', critics are limiting the range of interpretative 'play' with the novel.<sup>9</sup> According to Derrida, the very centre of a text, and thus the resulting structural elements stemming from it, are subject to 'a series of substitutions of center for center' commensurate with the passage of time.<sup>10</sup> With this in mind, one may argue that it is possible that the utopian genre ostensibly at the centre of the novel, directing consequent criticism, has changed.

Utopia, coined by Margaret Atwood, is the 'combining [of] utopia and dystopia – the imagined perfect society and its opposite... [as] each contains a latent version of the other'.<sup>11</sup> Although Wells believes his political ideas to be utopic, they are encoded with a dystopia somewhat commensurate with the contemporary status-quo of neoliberal capitalist realism.

Capitalist realism, a term re-popularised and redefined by Mark Fisher, refers to a mode of perception in which 'there is no alternative to capitalism', which is focalised through neoliberalism and its associated subjectivities.<sup>12</sup> It is in this way that Wells's utopia can be considered a spectre haunting our present.

Conversely, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* seems more localised in its concerns. In discussing a film adaptation of *Brave New World*, Huxley stresses that it must, like its source, 'stem inevitably and logically from present-day seeds' and depict 'the natural end-product of present-day tendencies'.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Huxley categorises *Brave New World* as an 'extravagant...satiric phantasy' launched from a 'contemporary spring-board', further undergirding the inference that he is using the future to conduct critical commentary of the present, rather than using the future to distance the reader from the present, as Wells does.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, this essay seeks to demarcate the extent to which the political ideas of *A Modern Utopia* and *Brave New World* haunt the neoliberal capitalist realism of the present and, in doing so, interrogate the aforementioned critical assessments of the novels.

Both Robert Elliott and Krishan Kumar have claimed that the narrative style of *A Modern Utopia* is 'clumsy'.<sup>15</sup> This judgement suggests that there is an ill-contrived property to Wells's stylistic expression due to a lack of careful consideration. Superficially, it is understandable why Elliott and Kumar perceive Wells's style in this manner, especially during the seamless transition of the Voice and the botanist between Earth and the parallel planet of Utopia:

<sup>8</sup> Ian Buchanan, 'utopia', *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (January 2010) <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199532919.001.0001/acref-9780199532919-e-723>> [accessed 16 Dec 2018].

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play', in *Writing and Difference*, trans & ed. by Alan Bass (Oxford: Routledge, 2001), pp.351-370 (p.352).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.353.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (London: Virago, 2011), p.66.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Fisher, 'Acid Communism (Unfinished Introduction)', p.754.

<sup>13</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Letters of Aldous Huxley*, ed. Grover Smith (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), p.534.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.534-5.

<sup>15</sup> See both Krishan Kumar, 'Introduction', in *A Modern Utopia*, ed. by Krishan Kumar (London: Everyman, 1994), pp.xxxi-xlii (p.xxxiii) and Robert C. Elliott, *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p.114.

'And behold! In the twinkling of an eye **we are** in that world! We **should** scarcely note the change. Not a cloud **would** have gone from the sky. It **might** be the remote town below would take a different air, and my companion the botanist with his educated observation, **might** almost see as much, and the train, **perhaps**, would be gone out of the picture... but that **would** be all the visible change'. (16-17) (emphasis added)<sup>16</sup>

Here, Wells begins in the jussive mood, asserting that 'we are' now in Utopia and what 'would' be there. Yet, the broader passage is subsequently littered with modal verbs, with their subjunctive mood implying Wells is not sure of how this world 'should' or 'might' appear, and that the reader is, 'perhaps', free to imagine these details. However, he soon reintroduces the jussive mood at the paragraph's terminus: 'but that would be all the visible change'. Consequently, the reader is forced to question whether s/he is being asked to participate in the construction of Wells's Utopia or not, as he simultaneously exhibits both uncertainty and absolute conviction. Whilst Elliott is keen to state that it is this uneasy transition between grammatical moods that is clumsy, Wells asserts in his preface that this novel's 'experiment in form...is not as careless as it seems...it is intended to be as it is' (5-6).<sup>17</sup> As Wells elaborates, the style is the result of an attempt to find a medium between both 'the argumentative essay', which he distanced himself from due to it attracting 'the solemnly impatient parasite of great questions', and the 'discussion novel', which he abandoned due to it creating 'unnecessary characters and the inevitable complication of intrigue' (5-6). I would agree that Wells's style is a calculated and precocious endeavour, particularly when broached via notions of neoliberal performance and manufactured consent.

Grahame Thompson describes the notion of neoliberal performance as a key facet of its 'conceptual apparatus', as it seeks to "unite the left's commitment to 'participation' with the right's commitment to 'responsibility'".<sup>18</sup> The results are narratives that possess a 'sense both of empowerment *and* policing, of autonomy *and* control'.<sup>19</sup> One can identify this in Wells's narrative style above, as he seeks to provide the illusion of participation, but not enough to develop 'the inevitable complication of intrigue' that will distract or detract from his ultimately immutable vision (6). This corresponds with contemporary media strategies that seek to manufacture consent towards the neoliberal status quo. As Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky write in their polemic against contemporary media organisations, their "'societal purpose"... [is] not that of enabling the public to assert meaningful control over the political' narrative, but 'providing them with the information needed for the intelligent discharge of... responsibilities'.<sup>20</sup> Wells's own narrative style (or, perhaps, strategy) provides prescriptive details of Utopia whilst proffering the reader the illusory possibility that they are participating in the interpretation of the future, a necessary act to obviate resistance and manufacture consent.

Elliott also derides Wells's inability 'to create characters of any dimension who enact the constitutive ideas of utopia. He cannot make them *interesting*'.<sup>21</sup> What Elliott does not

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<sup>16</sup> All parenthetical citations are to the following edition: H.G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, eds. Gregory Claeys and Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Elliott, *The Shape of Utopia*, p.114.

<sup>18</sup> Grahame Thompson, 'Responsibility and Neoliberalism', openDemocracy, (2007), <[https://www.opendemocracy.net/article/responsibility\\_and\\_neo\\_liberalism](https://www.opendemocracy.net/article/responsibility_and_neo_liberalism)> [accessed 04 Dec 2018].

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 2002), p.298.

<sup>21</sup> Elliott, p.116.

consider, is that interesting characters would be risking the 'complication of intrigue' (6). Wells's characters are ineffectual narrative foils created precisely to undergird his broader strategy to gain consent without resistance via the illusion of discussion. Despite having two cicerones who constantly spar over whether Utopia is a utopia, this does not prevent Wells from delivering several declarative chapters on freedom, nature, the economy, marriage, and race in Utopia, which seek to affirm its paradisaical status. Further illustrating the protagonists' lack of influence, Wells ends the novel by truncating the Voice's terminal monologue with his own authorial intervention, describing the Utopia as '*one individual's aspiration*' (246). Wells's use of characters and style, then, are analogous to the objective of capitalist realism, that is, to occupy 'the horizons of the thinkable'.<sup>22</sup>

Wells's ideas about governance and work in Utopia also suggest 'there is no alternative to capitalism'.<sup>23</sup> According to Wells, ideal governance must take the form of a World State of hegemonic autarky, 'powerful enough to keep isolated... powerful enough to rule the world' (15). For if one allows for any power 'outside your boundary lines', then eventually 'the epidemic, the breeding barbarian or the economic power will gather its strength and overcome you' (15). Central to this omniscient and omnipotent form of governance, in which all alternatives are perceived as threats, is the absolute conviction upon the centrality and necessity of capital:

'Money... a good thing in life, [is] a necessary thing in civilized human life... as natural a growth as the bones in a man's wrist, and I do not see how one can imagine anything at all worthy of being called a civilisation without it' (55).

It appears impossible to consider Wells's world as containing any alternative political possibility beyond capitalism. Eerily, after detailing the nature of freedom, the economy, and the need to move away from the small island utopias of the past, Wells claims 'There is no alternative' (103) to his globalised, singular World State, a phrase Margaret Thatcher would use as a slogan to justify her own policies almost three-quarters of a century later. The World State is also forever reconstituting itself, as Wells believes that governance 'must be not static but kinetic, must shape not as a permanent state but... a long ascent of stages... For one ordered arrangement of citizens' who act as 'a flexible... succession of individualities' (11). This corresponds strongly with Gilles Deleuze's model of a 'society of Control', in which governance becomes 'a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point'.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Wells's need for a 'flexible... succession of individualities' (11) further evokes Fisher's description of contemporary governmentality: "'Flexibility', 'nomadism' and 'spontaneity' are the very hallmarks of management in a post-Fordist, Control society".<sup>25</sup>

This nomadism proves key to Wells's depiction of 'freedom of movement' (30) in relation to work. He insists that '[t]he population of Utopia will be a migratory population... not simply a travelling population, but migratory' (38). In this parallel world, 'Labour will be regarded as a delocalized and fluid force' (106), and as the World State keeps track of 'the economic conditions of every quarter of the earth... constantly' (104), it will move sections of the populace 'once or twice a year from a region of restricted employment to a region of labour shortage' (105). Of course, to ensure that workers are complying with their reassignment, 'the

<sup>22</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Hampshire: Zero Books, 2009), p.8.

<sup>23</sup> Fisher, 'Acid Communism (Unfinished Introduction)', p.754.

<sup>24</sup> Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October* 59:1 (Winter 1992), 3-7 (p.4).

<sup>25</sup> Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p.28.

freedom of Utopia will not be incompatible with the universal registration of thumbmarks' (104). Again, this invokes Deleuze's society of Control:

'The disciplinary man was a discontinuous producer of energy... the man of control is undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network... [in which] [i]ndividuals have become "dividuals", and masses, samples, data'.<sup>26</sup>

The rebarbative implications this would have on social bonds are not considered; the populace are judged solely as workers, tracked as mere data via their fingerprints. Wells goes further in declaring that a worker 'shall not become a parent until he is established in work at a rate above the minimum [wage] and free of any debt' (98). Notions of 'privacies', 'more space in which to live', and even the ability to meet 'interesting people' will be granted only if working 'above the minimum wage' (107). Clearly, this Utopia 'aligns social relations with the model of the market [transforming] the individual... to conceive and conduct him- or herself as an enterprise'.<sup>27</sup> Like a multinational corporation, the populace must possess the flexibility to migrate wherever the state-supported market dictates, and any semblance of meaningful social bonds and freedoms are rewarded on the basis of highly productive, self-regulated conformity and success.

To some extent, social relations are also conducted under a neoliberal rationality in Huxley's *Brave New World*. According to David Harvey, neoliberalism 'holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market'.<sup>28</sup> Interconnectedly, regarding postmodernism, Lyotard claims that 'the temporary contract is in practice supplanting permanent institutions in the professional, emotional, sexual, cultural, familial, and international domains'.<sup>29</sup> These claims coalesce when one examines sexual relations in *Brave New World*, as 'everyone belongs to everyone else' and it is considered 'horribly bad form to go on and on... with one man' (34).<sup>30</sup> The populace are encouraged to engage in as many short-term sexual trysts possible, in a manner akin with Harvey and Lyotard's description of postmodern and neoliberal social bonds. However, crucially, Lenina is able to question whether polygamy carries moral rectitude, and Fanny responds in resigned affirmation of this doubt: 'But one's got to make the effort'" (37). Despite the neoliberal social subjectivity, Huxley's World State allows for the possibility of dissent, of an alternative, due to intentional interstices within Huxley's disciplinary society. Whilst Wells's World State pivots upon perennial precarity, Huxley stresses that there is '[n]o civilization without social stability' (36). This World State secures this stability via Michel Foucault's notion of discipline:

'A SQUAT GREY building of only thirty-four storeys. Over the main entrance the words, CENTRAL LONDON HATCHERY AND CONDITIONING CENTRE, and, in a shield, the World State's motto, COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY.' (1)

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<sup>26</sup> Deleuze, 'Postscript', pp.5-6.

<sup>27</sup> Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* (London: Verso, 2013), p.3.

<sup>28</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.4.

<sup>29</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.66.

<sup>30</sup> All parenthetical citations are to the following edition: Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Vintage, 1994).

The Hatchery embodies one of Foucault's key disciplinary techniques: 'enclosure'.<sup>31</sup> *Enclosure* refers to 'a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself... the protected place of disciplinary monotony'.<sup>32</sup> The 'GREY' appearance of the Hatchery evokes an image of sterility, and Huxley's use of small caps typographically reifies the ostensible immutability of an institution irrevocably chiselled into permanence. The Hatchery is 'only thirty-four storeys', rendering it heterogeneous from the taller structures, and the complete absence of verbs in this opening moment, again, suggest a sterile monotony quite divergent from the fluid, plastic governmentality of Wells's World State. The Hatchery, then, aligns with the notion of *enclosure*. A disciplinary society also seeks 'to derive the maximum advantages and to neutralize the inconveniences' from its social body, which Bokanovsky's Process further emblematises.<sup>33</sup> Its sole purpose is 'to manufacture as many batches of identical twins as possible' via 'the same ovary and with gametes of the same male' (5). The use of 'identical', alongside the almost fainéant and repetitious use of 'same', imparts a rigid system barely differentiated, resonant with the production of what Foucault calls 'docile bodies', which are the result of a discipline that 'increases the force of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in terms of political obedience)'.<sup>34</sup> The Hatchery also employs 'partitioning', the segmentation of the *enclosure* into a concatenation of discontinuous disciplinary spaces, so 'each individual has his own place; and each place its individual'.<sup>35</sup> One can see this in the 'Bottling Room' (6), 'Social Predestination Room' (8), 'Decanting Room' (9), and 'Psychology Bureau' (28), *inter alia*, which work to 'break up collective dispositions'.<sup>36</sup>

Yet, although beginning with an ostensibly indomitable Fordist disciplinary society, the subsequent narrative evinces the rupturing of that authority, precisely because Huxley allows interstices within the disciplinary structure. A discipline society must not "treat the body, *en masse*, 'wholesale', as if it were an indissociable unity, but of working it 'retail', individually; of exercising upon it a[n]... uninterrupted, constant coercion".<sup>37</sup> Huxley's World State, however, enforces a complete rejection of individuality and relies on the constancy of a 'wholesale' unity. The bi-weekly 'Solidarity Service' (67) intends to strengthen this, but both Helmholtz Watson and Bernard Marx lack the somatic uniformity essential for a disciplinary society. Watson possesses a 'mental excess' that renders him 'a little too able' in the eyes of his 'superiors', whilst Marx suffers a 'physical defect' that isolates him from his contemporaries (57). Worst yet, Watson and Marx are freely able to associate in the latter's room, in which the first signs of their breaking the matrix become evident. Although Marx is fearful of them being overheard, Huxley fatalistically intervenes: 'There was, **of course**, nobody there' (60) (emphasis added). The World State does not utilise devices akin to the telescreens in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to prevent dissidence in home spaces, as Huxley deliberately ensures the World State's failure 'to cover the entire social body' and prevent the 'diffuse circulation' of individuals necessary to enforce discipline.<sup>38</sup>

Consequently, in an affront to Wells's assertion that the old island utopias are outmoded, Marx and Watson are eventually 'sent to an island' (199) due to their rebellion with John the Savage. Here, they will 'meet the most interesting set of men and women to be found anywhere in the world... who've got independent ideas of their own' (199-200). The existence of an alternative political consciousness allows for individualism, independence, and meaningful social bonds. Whereas, in Wells's World State, there is no alternative to his vision, and social bonds come

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, tran. Alan Sheridan (Penguin: London, 1991), p.141.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.143.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.138.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.143.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.137.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.139 & p.143.

at the price of an absolute conformity that negates their very existence. Furthermore, as Huxley stresses in his preface to the 1946 edition of *Brave New World*, if he were to rewrite the novel, he would extend this optimism towards a political alternative for John the Savage, allowing him to join 'a community of exiles and refugees... [whose] economics would be decentralist and Henry-Georgian, politics Kropotkinesque and co-operative' (xi).

In conclusion, it would appear that Bowering was misguided in labelling Wells the prophet of an optimistic tomorrow and Huxley the vatic of despair. *A Modern Utopia's* attempt to stylistically manufacture consent, and political ideas for work and governance, render it a utopia hauntingly resonant with neoliberal capitalist realism. Conversely, although depicting a Fordist disciplinary society far less commensurate with our present, Huxley's *Brave New World* appears as a comparatively hopeful text in which variegated political subjectivities are possible.

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