Davis, J.C., and Miguel A. Ramiro Avilés. "Introduction." *Utopian Moments: Reading Utopian Texts*. Ed. Miguel A. Ramiro Avilés and J. C. Davis. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. xiii–xviii. Textual Moments in the History of Political Thought. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 25 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849666848.0005>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 25 April 2023, 23:29 UTC.

Copyright © Miguel A. Ramiro Avilés and J. C. Davis; individual chapters © the contributors. 2012. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Introduction

J.C. Davis and Miguel A. Ramiro Avilés

Thomas More inaugurated the modern tradition of utopian writing in 1516. Since then we can find in Western literature a vigorous expression of ideas about the nature, content and forms of utopian literature. How might this exceptionality be explained, and what does it tell us about those societies which produced this flowering of what is simultaneously a literary genre and a series of explorations of the limits of political and social possibility?

After some initial hesitation, Renaissance Europe (roughly fourteenth to seventeenth centuries) witnessed growing confidence in its ability to break down the barriers of distance, ignorance and, to some extent, a sense of inferiority, to acknowledge the extra-European world. That world became, and continued to be, a kind of mirror for European writers, exposing both the potential and the flaws of the societies that had shaped it. Utopian writing could turn that into a magnifying mirror in which both potential and flaws could be dramatized, highlighted as a spur to reform or used satirically to deflate complacency. Europe has examined itself by exploring the lives of others, and the liberation of fiction, offered by utopian writing, enabled a more systemic and radical self-examination.

The technological innovation that gradually equipped Europeans for global exploration, trade, colonization and empire also reinforced self-belief. Technological development rested in part on the advancement of science and the expansion of scientific knowledge. This, in turn, was a process that reshaped their sense of humanity's relationship with the environment, nature and God. Could the discovery of the laws of nature provide new, sounder or even more natural, principles upon which well-functioning societies could be built and human misery be reduced, if not eliminated?

Related to this was a confidence, slowly and painfully gained, that change itself could be mastered, taken out of the realm of fortune and providence to be purposefully shaped by human agency. Such confidence rested on a sense that it was possible to see beyond the surface of events and understand those unseen, underlying factors of history that shaped human destiny. If such factors were to be used for good, there had to be a guide to the good society towards which history should be driven. This sense that the unregulated flow of history could be brought under regulation has waxed and waned over the last few centuries but we should not underestimate its importance to utopian writers like Harrington, Condorcet and Cabet. It co-existed with what might now appear to be an alarmingly naïve belief in the possibility of limitless access to

the resources which could sustain social change as well as the quest for social justice, making deliberately chosen re-orderings of society viable.

Wherever we look, in the last five centuries, partly because their understandings of the world, their environment, nature, space and time have changed, Western societies have become immensely richer, more populous, more urban and more linked in more ways to the greater world than they ever were. They have undergone demographic transformations in terms of, amongst others, population size, life expectancy, age distribution and net reproduction rates. They have participated in revolutions in mobility, communications, information transfer and data accumulation. They have witnessed the convulsions of political and social revolution as well as the technological sophistication and enormously enhanced destructive capacities of modern warfare. Latterly, the scientific and technological innovation, which underpinned many of these changes and a sense of progressive potential, has come to seem rather more threatening. Bearing the weight of so much change, Western societies have, on the whole, had to adapt by becoming gradually less (but only less) hierarchical, patriarchal and dominated by closed elites (although there are signs that the pendulum may be beginning to swing the other way). To the extent that these and other changes were progress, they were, of course, uneven progress. Nevertheless, the mere prospect of such change continuing made it possible to ask not only “What are we?” but “What do we want to be?": a questioning in which the utopian imagination has been critically active.

As we journey further into the twenty-first century, however, such confidence is apparently faltering and problems, which seem unmanageable for even the wealthiest and most powerful of Western societies, multiply. To enumerate only the most obvious of these – managing our impact on the environment; dealing with the fiscal implications of the welfare state; caring well for growing numbers of the elderly; preventing the future for the young being a bleaker prospect than that experienced by their parents’ generation; fashioning more inclusive societies; overcoming social alienation and disaffection and dealing justly with the violence that may be associated with them – is immediately to confront their apparent intractability. Not so long ago, the triumph of the free market over the command economies was greeted as unqualified good news. More recently, the inability of the free market to control financial excess and the consequences of mounting debt has been exposed. In this century, powerful Western nations have been drawn into dubiously motivated wars they have found difficult to ‘win’ and from which they find it almost impossible to disengage without humiliation. Meanwhile, the corruption of a free press and of once trusted social institutions seems worryingly possible. Everywhere we see the democratic deficit of the apathy, indifference or principled withdrawal from participation of otherwise qualified citizens. Alongside this, we might put what we could call an ‘ideological deficit’; that is to say the absence of any ideology that lays claim to being able to address the most intractable of

these problems and their underlying causes. And part of this malaise might be attributed to a sense that the kind of states that we have developed and which preside over us do not have the capacity to deal with these issues.

That ‘realism’, which might have served us well in the past, might now confront a world so beyond its policy options, let alone its ‘solutions’, that it would be easy to despair. New solutions have to be imagined, and given the interconnectedness of the problems we face those solutions have to be systemic. Such systematic re-imagining of society, politics and humanity’s relationship with the natural environment has been offered to us repeatedly over the last five hundred years by utopian fiction. This volume, with its invitation to look again at some of the classics of the modern utopian tradition, has, in this regard perhaps, a certain timeliness. The suggestion is not that here we might find a checklist of solutions to our present problems but rather that, in exploring and coming to understand both the possibilities and the limitations of utopian thinking, we may be better equipped to nurture the principle of hope in our own times and to discipline the imaginative capacities necessary to establishing a new, better and sustainable ‘reality’.

This book then offers fresh readings of a range of those classic utopian texts extending from Thomas More’s *Utopia* of 1516 to Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* of 1974. Each essay focuses on a moment in the text and uses it to engage with a closer reading of the work as a whole. We have assembled an international team of distinguished experts on the works in question and have asked them to produce a short and accessible guide to their reading of the text. We have kept the scholarly apparatus to a minimum but their responses reflect the cutting edge of current thinking about these utopian writings. Our hope is that the result will not only be stimulating in its own right, but will encourage you to turn to these utopian texts, and others, and to read them critically for yourself. The selection we have made here is necessarily arbitrary and, even with coverage of nineteen utopian works, limited. We have, nevertheless, attempted to reflect the value and diversity of utopian literature over the last half millennium and to consider those texts that either have had a significant influence on the tradition or have raised the most critical problems of the genre. We have devoted three of the essays to More’s *Utopia*, both because it is in many senses the foundation work of the modern utopian tradition but also because it self-consciously embodies and reflects so many of the continuing issues faced by utopian writing. One of the most immediately striking features of assembling a collection of readings of utopian works is the diversity of the works in question. There are, nevertheless, recurrent themes with which they engage, albeit in different ways. The final part of this introduction will draw attention to some of them.

Over the last thirty to forty years, there has been considerable debate about the form and nature of the literary utopia. It is a debate that, as the works chosen here illustrate, can be traced back to the utopias themselves. Almost all their authors show a searching interest in questions of form and, above all,

in the relationship between fiction, reality and an imagined alternative. It has been common amongst commentators to see the fictionality of much utopian writing as a strategy to evade censorship, but that rarely tells anything like the full story. More pressing reasons are inherent in the nature of the comprehensive transformation of social and political relationships which utopian fiction envisages. Such transformation is bound to require imaginative leaps. To make that alternative world 'real' to the reader, the author requires their imaginative participation and, as in the cases of so many utopian authors – More, Bacon, Harrington, Bellamy, Le Guin, for example – an artfully constructed fictional narrative is the chosen means. That fictional narrative has to establish and bridge the distance between what is and what might be. In the process, it exposes the folly of our 'wisdom', the self-deluding fantasy that sustains our 'normality', and the fiction that is our 'reality'.¹ Just as the communities we inhabit are imaginatively constructed by us, so the 'reality' that adheres to them is, to an extent, fictitious. Post-modern literary theory may have brought us to conclusions akin to this, but modern utopian literature's grappling with form and imagination has been informed by them from the beginning. From More to Le Guin, these essays tell us, utopian authors have been playing, teasingly, with the potentialities of literary form. Central to this has been the fundamentally aesthetic question: What can we use to help us grasp an unfamiliar 'reality' in order to use that grasp to shape better lives and societies?

Also apparent through a reading of these essays is that utopian works rarely settle for a one-dimensional form but are almost always multifaceted. They are demanding of their readers. Often they appear to defy easy interpretation, laying false trails, subverting their own claims and questioning their own premises. More's *Utopia* is, of course, a masterwork of this kind but Fourier's studied 'bizarreness', Bacon's oscillation between display and concealment, the struggle of Bellamy's Julian West caught between two socially shaped psychologies and Le Guin's protagonists' desire to escape a world of limited, linear possibilities for a more open escape from social oppression – all of these exemplify the same tendency. Inhabiting a new world – even in the imagination – should be and has to be made an unsettling experience. Thomas More's doubling as Morus in *Utopia* is echoed in Julian West's double identity in *Looking Backward*. In one case, More's utopians might use their superiority to claim rights to use the territory of others as 'necessary'. In another, the inhabitants of Henry Neville's Isle of Pines have declined so far into arcadian sloth and decay that their inferiority to their Dutch discoverers is all too painfully obvious. Utopia may only be imagined; it is the other that has to be discovered. Spatially, it means an imaginative venturing into the unknown: sailing to the New World, to *terra australis incognita*, or voyaging to the moon or the centre of the earth. But it is also instructive to note the influence of the half-known exotic. As three of the essays below illustrate, More's Utopians, Veiras's Sevarambians and the inhabitants of Sinapia all take something from Persia in the shaping of their

ideal society. Utopian writing may have been largely a Western phenomenon, and it may rest in part on cultural confidence verging on a sense of superiority but, at the same time, that confidence is qualified by a critique exposing the profound failures of contemporary Western societies and a willingness to look outside of those societies, both in time and space, for better alternatives.

These utopias are inescapably political. They begin with a sense of unease or dissatisfaction with existing political, economic, social, legal and welfare arrangements and a need to imagine a political order that can maintain a radically improved society. This means that they must deal with issues of partisan advantage and conflict. They must re-order the relationships between minorities and the majority and between the weak and the strong. They must establish institutions that work with, rather than against, the new order while increasingly, from Wells to Le Guin, seeking to establish a new order capable of change.

What is also striking is the number of occasions on which these utopian writers seek to penetrate behind the superficial appearance of things to underlying causes. As George Logan argues in the case of More, their analysis of the problems is systemic and their responses are likewise systemic. The whole of the socio-political order must be recast if the causes, and not merely the symptoms, of social misery are to be addressed. For Morelly then the distorting forces of history had to be addressed, and by the later stages of the Enlightenment, as in the cases of Condorcet and Cabet, science (especially social science), reason and technocracy could be envisaged as taming history and bringing it into the service of utopia. Such optimism raised again old questions about the relationship between the intellectually equipped minority and the majority, precipitating tensions like the ones that can be seen in the work of Saint Simon, for instance.

Balancing the claims of the individual against those of society could be mitigated in utopian thought by the reconstruction of the individual's second nature, habituating him or her to new social norms and behavioural patterns congruent with the desired social outcome. This again reinforced the utopian tendency towards systemic or holistic solutions. All means had to be used to reshape the habitual behaviour and expectations of members of the ideal society. In consequence, we find throughout these utopian works a recurrent insistence on the importance of education. This is complemented by an equal insistence on law rigorously enforced as a means of containing and conditioning behaviour. If we think of education in a broad sense as equipping citizens for society, then the law and the judicial system, along with many other social arrangements and customary patterns of behaviour, become as much educational tools as the more formal institutions of learning. But law and a formally controlled, purposeful system of social education require an institutional framework to sustain and manage them. For this reason amongst others, the utopian imagination has to grapple with issues of constitutional and legal codes. How and by whom decisions are to be taken within those frameworks are questions that reinforce this political disposition inherent in

utopian writing, and we see those issues reflected in almost all of the texts discussed here.

What is also striking is how many of these texts grapple with issues of equality and inequality. Even those that do not embrace total material equality are looking to modify hierarchical and/or patriarchal structures. In part, this may be because inequalities are seen as sources of conflict or of a materialist corruption distracting individuals and society from the true essence of the good life. However, it is also perhaps a question of the notion that, in an environment of limited satisfactions, social misery and alienation can only be mitigated, if not eradicated, by creating the conditions for a more equal society. In the process, the 'rights' of property begin to appear less fundamental and inflexible in utopian societies generally. Indeed the more general question might be asked as to whether, in the good society (at least, in the forms envisaged here), individual and corporate rights do not become conditional upon the greater social good. Is it true that the languages of civil rights, and a *fortiori* human rights, are conspicuous by their absence in utopian society? On the contrary, it might be argued that what to us seem like the natural rights of women or the poor were better provided for in Fourier's or Owen's vision than in the societies from which they sprang. But the question remains as to whether a language of rights could really function in the utopian ideal society.

Unlike the visions of natural abundance, or of easeful plenty, dreamt of in Cockayne or Arcadia, utopian society and the individuals comprising it are to be found in an environment constrained both by the limitations that nature imposes on them and by the level of knowledge and understanding of the forces of nature which have been or are being achieved in that society. In other words, and again we see it illustrated in these utopian fictions, the relationship between humanity, nature and, where appropriate, God, the author of nature, remains pivotal. The quest for a 'practical science', whether it acknowledges or ignores God, appears as a key to social amelioration in Campanella's Solarian astrology, in Andreae's partnership of religion and science, in Bacon's natural philosophy and in the triumph of science and reason in Condorcet's writings. The elusive promise of progress can be recaptured in a well-ordered, educated and technologically equipped society but progress in turn poses the problem of the kinetic or 'non-Euclidean' utopia as explored by both Wells and Le Guin.

The societies that for the last five centuries have been most fertile in utopian imagination, and which remain amongst the richest on the planet, are now experiencing growing social and material inequalities, faltering free markets, a fiscal/welfare crisis, failed ideologies, incipient corruption, declining educational standards, massive personal and public indebtedness and the danger of being eclipsed by the non-Western economies they once dominated. Their utopian tradition may well not have the answers but it does appear to ask some of the right questions. We hope that this collection will encourage you to seek those questions out for yourself.