

Utopia, Dystopia

An Interview with Gregory Claeys

By Ophélie SIMÉON

As literary concepts, “utopia” and “dystopia” have functioned as powerful tools of social and political critique, as they propose alternative visions of the future gone good or wrong. Gregory Claeys explores this dual nature, and its potential for imagining social change, while tracing back the historical roots and uses of utopianism.

Gregory Claeys is Professor Emeritus of History, University of London. His main research interests lie in the fields of social and political reform movements from the 1790s to the early 20th century, with a special focus on utopianism and early socialism. His most recent book was *Marx and Marxism* (Penguin Books, 2018). He has also authored *Searching for Utopia: the History of an Idea* (Thames & Hudson, 2011) and *Dystopia: A Natural History* (Oxford University Press, 2017). His next book is entitled *After Consumerism: Utopianism for a Dying Planet* (Princeton University Press).

Books & Ideas: How did the concepts of utopia and dystopia originate?

Gregory Claeys: The term “utopia” was coined by Thomas More his 1516 work, *Utopia*. It means “no place,” but puns on eutopia, meaning “good place” in Greek. For a long time, it was assumed that “dystopia” was coined by John Stuart Mill in an 1868

parliamentary speech.¹ However, recent research has shown that dystopia, spelled “dustopia,” appeared in 1747, and in 1748, as “dystopia,” was defined as an “unhappy country”.² The latter term did not enter general circulation in English until the 1950s, however, largely instigated by the Cold War, fear of nuclear conflict, and the impact of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In English, “utopian” has functioned as a synonym for “impossible” for most of the last five centuries, and “utopianism” has been taken to describe all the forms in which the search for an ideal society manifests itself. “Dystopian,” in the sense of dismal, declining, fearful, or authoritarian, has been in circulation from the mid twentieth century. “Dystopianism” is less common in English.

Books & Ideas: Though they are rooted in a long-standing literary tradition, utopia and dystopia have taken on an increasingly political meaning over the centuries, with works such as Francis Bacon's *Atlantis* (1627). How can we explain that shift?

Gregory Claeys: Both terms were deeply political from the outset, utopia in describing the ideal or best possible state, and emerging from a tradition first defined by Plato in his *Republic*; and dystopia in describing its negation, often in the form of a despotism. Plato's sources were Cretan and Spartan custom, implying that broadly utopian institutions might indeed be practicable. The term “eutopia”, or good place, is sometimes used to indicate this possibility.

An apparent shift towards a later more political context only takes place if we consider utopianism as chiefly or even exclusively literary. If however we take it to be composed of three components, literature, ideas, and intentional communities, we see that discussions of the term have always addressed all three from the Greeks onwards. Examples include More's *Utopia*, of course, but also Tommaso Campanella's *City of the*

¹ UK Parliamentary Debates, London: Hansard, 12 March 1868, p. 1517, column 1. The quote reads: “I may be permitted, as one who, in common with many of my betters, have been subjected to the charge of being Utopian, to congratulate the Government on having joined that goodly company. It is, perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dys-topians, or cacotopians. What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable, but what they appear to favour is too bad to be practicable.”

² Anon [Lewis Henry Younger], *Utopia : or Apollo's Golden Days*, Dublin, George Faulkner, 1747. See Deirdre Ni Chuanacháin, *Utopianism in Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2016.

Sun (1602) and Bacon's *Atlantis* (1627). More discernible, perhaps, are shifts in utopianism from religious to secular meanings since the Enlightenment era, and from an orientation towards a past Golden Age, or distant and remote location (like the island country of Utopia), to future-centred narratives, notably in such texts as Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'An 2440* (1771). This process is often conceived in terms of the concept of secular millenarianism, wherein religious content like the Apocalypse and the Second Coming are rendered in a secular context. Marxism and many other forms of socialism are often associated with this trend. Now assumptions of a radical improvement in human nature were associated with the revolutionary process, and the abolition of private property, rather than with divine intervention.

Books & Ideas: Early, pre-Marxian socialism is often understood as 'utopian', though it informed very real political movements and experiments. How can this label be qualified?

Gregory Claeys: In their *Communist Manifesto* (1848) Marx and Engels called the early socialists "utopian" primarily because, in their view, they were impractical, because they did not address the necessity of a revolutionary proletariat to serve as the agency for ushering in the future society, but instead provided "duodecimo editions of the New Jerusalem," "castles in the air," or mere fantasies of the ideal state, and relied on bourgeois good-will to ensure the change. Their own alternative was "scientific socialism," defined in Engels's later writings and in the unpublished *German Ideology* (1845-6)³ in terms of a materialist perspective grounded in history and political economy, and free from idealism and religion.

The contrast of "utopian" to "scientific" socialism is suspect on at least three grounds. Firstly, some of the early socialists, like Robert Owen and his followers, did develop a theory of capitalist crisis similar to that which first Engels, then Marx, adopted in the mid 1840s, and also the alienation of the product of labour through an unfair exchange of the produce of labour for a wage. Some were also radical democrats, and supported the extension of the franchise as a means of reforming the social and economic system. In France, Étienne Cabet in particular successfully constructed a large political movement. Secondly, Marx and Engels were themselves

³ It was posthumously published in 1932. See also Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880).

utopian in a number of key senses, notably in their expectation that behaviour would be profoundly improved in the future society, largely as a result of communal property holding, and that an enhanced sociability or solidarity would characterise human relations in the future. Thirdly, “scientific” socialism implied that the use of history and political economy indicated the inevitable fall of capitalism as a result of crisis and a subsequent proletarian revolution. This has not (yet) occurred.

Books & Ideas: Dystopia is often understood as a ‘counter-utopia’ or ‘utopia gone wrong.’ How do the two concepts differ and overlap?

Gregory Claeys: Literary dystopias can be descriptions of utopias which have decayed. A prime example is George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), which satirises Stalinism, though not, as is sometimes still assumed, socialism in general, since Orwell remained a socialist until his death in 1950. But many dystopias, particularly of the post-apocalyptic type popular in the last few decades, portray societies already destroyed, often with a few survivors attempting to cope, with whom readers are encouraged to identify. Often an extensive analysis of what caused the collapse of the old society is lacking, or is hinted at only in vague terms. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) is a typical example here, while Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) offers a pandemic-centred account familiar to readers in 2021.

The relation between the two concepts is however complex. Not all utopias, either literary or ideological, end in dystopia. Not all dystopias are failed utopias. Utopias may possess a dystopian aspect, or be dystopian for some group, insofar as they rest on the exploitation of that group to the advantage of the rest. (Consider the privileged Inner Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for example, by contrast to the proles.) Dystopias may also possess a utopian element to the degree that some spaces are clearly a retreat from the generally dystopian qualities of the society as a whole. (Consider here for instance the role played by both the Savage Reservation and islands where dissidents are exiled in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, 1932). Moreover, while it is generally conceded that the literary genre witnessed a “dystopian turn” in the twentieth century, in the sense of the number of dystopias being produced vastly surpassing those of literary utopias, no “critical utopia” emerges in the late twentieth century as a response to dystopian writing which engages with the history of the tradition. In fact all utopian writing from Plato onwards self-consciously and critically

engages with the tradition as a whole, including Thomas More (Plato, Sparta, Christianity), Edward Bellamy⁴ (Carlyle, Comte, socialism, Christianity), H. G. Wells (Plato, Bellamy), Aldous Huxley (Bolshevism, eugenics) and George Orwell (socialism, Wells).

Books & Ideas: The idea of dystopia has entered the mainstream through its association with twentieth-century totalitarianism. Is there such a thing as a dystopian ideology?

Gregory Claeys: Again much depends on definition. If we assume a dystopian society to be characterised by extreme inequality and extreme exploitation, then virtually all racist and imperialist ideologies would count as dystopian, and so might capitalism insofar as it possesses an inherent tendency to increase exploitation. According to a rule of proportionality, any society is dystopian for the majority in which they are harmfully exploited by a minority, so capitalism too would qualify here. But no self-proclaimed “dystopian” society has ever existed.

Books & Ideas: How can utopia and dystopia help us make sense of global crises, such as climate change or the current pandemic?

Gregory Claeys: Both concepts are extraordinarily useful in assessing where we are, how we got there, and where we are going. Utopias have functioned to envision long-term futures for humanity by offering projections, both literary and theoretical, of where we are going, to give us alternative visions of much better places where we might go, and to suggest how we might get there. (Sometimes the concept also mocks our failure to reach the destination.) The long phase of consumerist capitalism rests on a utopian ideal of universal affluence for all which is unattainable insofar as the earth's resources do not permit it for an indefinite number of people. A sober assessment of our environmental condition from the mid twentieth century onwards indicates that we are heading for a period of unprecedented warming (perhaps 3°C as early as 2050) which will result in the termination of many forms of life on earth, including, most likely, humanity. This is the most extreme dystopian scenario ever envisioned, though

⁴ Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, Boston, Ticknor & Co., 1888.

it bears some parallels to mid twentieth century depictions of life after extensive nuclear warfare. However, it is possible to envision a utopian solution to extreme environmental catastrophe, framed around ideas of sustainability, reduced consumption, and stability of population. Such a “stationary state” might offer compensation for decreased personal consumption in the form of enhanced public sociability, a universal basic wage, and other measures designed to sweeten the transition away from consumerism. This is a tall order, but in my view the only plausible alternative to an otherwise desperately dismal fate now looming just over our horizons. Fictional utopias can also portray such alternatives: a good recent example is Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry of the Future* (2020).

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