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AN ATLAS OF UTOPIAS

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Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World,* Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979, pp. 896.

There have always been two ways of considering utopias: as literary artifacts and as political projections. In the practice of writing utopias the two functions — of presenting a convincing artistic structure and of working out a convincing pattern of thought — have tended less to complement than to conflict with each other, so that an openly didactic intention will often spoil a utopian novel as fiction, while excessive attention to verbal form will weaken it as the delineation of a political proposition. The utopia is in fact the literary genre in which the difference between creative imagination and plausible invention is most clearly exemplified.

In most utopias it is the inventiveness that is paramount; there is a need in this genre for socio-political neologisms that is quite different from the avant-garde artist's need for new verbal forms, and utopias are rarely experimental in a literary sense because easy comprehensibility demands a clear expository style. The best utopists — those who present an intellectually provocative invention in satisfying prose — are precisely the writers who have striven, as Orwell said, after "prose like a window pane"; it is hard to imagine a Joycean or a Jamesian utopia! And the best of all have, ironically been anti-utopians or dystopians, like Orwell, Zamiatin and Swift, whose satirical intent allowed them to manipulate their content in imaginative ways closed to the writer of an "affirmative" utopia. When Aldous Huxley followed his dystopia, *Brave New World,* with *Island* — a utopia presenting his views of the requirements of an ideal society the result was not merely less satisfying artistically; it was less true to modern social and scientific realities.

The special quality of More's *Utopia*, the model for the whole genre, lies in its inescapable ambiguity; we never know how far this brave saint and ferocious burner of rival believers accepted his own utopian inventions as *desiderata*, and how far he saw himself engaged in Erasmian play.

But even when we have counted in More and Orwell and the Marquis de Sade and William Morris and Bulwer Lytton and the dozens of other well-

known writers who in one way or another have floated into the vast seine of Frank and Fritzie Manuel's *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, we still find that none of the major figures in world literature has undertaken as a leading task the construction of a utopia. Balzac, Dostoevsky, Dickens, Stendhal, Austen, Eliot, James are all missing from the roster; even Tolstoy, for all his later dedication to Christian anarchism, never confined his social and moral theories within the frame of a utopia. And the other major writers who have actually touched on the utopian theme have done so lightly and most often ironically, as Shakespeare did when he gave Gonzago a score or so of lines to sketch out a primitive communism in *The Tempest*; or Cervantes when he chose Sancho Panza to preside over a peasant utopia on the island of Barataria; or Rabelais when he lightly sketched his libertarian utopia of Thelème into the scatological jungle of his vast comic masterpiece; or E. M. Forster when he made a short story out of his chilling dystopia, *The Machine Stops*, which inexplicably, like Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, goes unmentioned by the Manuels.

It is this fact of being somewhat apart from the wider field of imaginative literature, of being judgeable by criteria of socio-political invention rather than of verbal form, that probably explains why there have been so few studies — and none of them major in intent — of the utopia as a literary genre. All the good books on utopias, which the Manuels used as the foundations for their massive work, have been concerned with the ideas and inventions of the utopists, not with the way they write. None of the authors of such books has in fact been a literary critic or a literary historian; all of them — Lewis Mumford in *The Story of Utopias*, Martin Buber in *Paths in Utopia*, Marie Louise Berneri in *Journey through Utopia*, have been concerned primarily with the moral, social and political aspects of the utopias they described. They only notice the formal aspects of the books they discuss when the deficiencies of structure and presentation interfere with the plausibility in the narrative that is necessary for the ideas to be effectively projected. And, given the limited structural variations that are possible within the utopian form, it is hard to imagine a comprehensive literary study of utopias that would be other than tediously repetitious.

It has always, indeed, been more interesting and more intellectually profitable to make the study of utopias a branch of the history of ideas. This accords with the fact that most people read utopias for what they say rather than for how they say it, and find it a bonus when a utopist entices one into his or her vision with the art of a good writer. It is because they have deliberately concerned themselves with "utopian thought in the western world," rather than with the forms of utopian fiction, that the Manuels are able to sustain one's interest so well through their very long book.

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Utopian Thought in the Western World is certainly the most impressive book I have yet read on the utopian cast of mind and its products. With the Manuel's earlier collection, *French Utopias: An Anthology of Ideal Societies* (1966), and Frank Manuel's *The Prophets of Paris* (1962) and his anthology of *Utopias and Utopian Thought* (1966), it comprises a very useful series of works on utopianism.

Considered merely as a pattern of developing ideas, the story of utopian thought has its own kind of drama that stands outside any literary construct. The roots of utopian ideas go far back into the antique myths of the golden age and the Middle Eastern myths of paradise, and the utopian concept itself belongs to the splendid opening centuries of western civilization in the eastern Mediterranean. It interweaves with the great religious movements, the social and political changes, that have characterized the western world since Christianity climbed out of the catacombs to assume power in partnership with the dying Roman Empire. Almost every heresy, political or theological, projected its own vision of an ideal commonwealth in which principles would congeal into practice.

But utopias were created by individuals, and while some of the utopists were anonymous, or, like the eighteenth-century French writer Morelly, are mere names with no remembered attributes, others lived public lives that were well recorded, often in the sad chronicles of law courts and inquisitions. The lives and the characters of these people provide important clues to our understanding of their inventions and proposals and of the kind of society in which they imagined human beings would achieve fulfilment. The fashionable critical hostility to the study of intentions, dubious as it may be in other literary fields, is completely inapplicable in the case of utopias, where the intention lives at the very heart of the work. And to understand the intention we have to know as much as we can discover about the intender. Thus one of the most valuable aspects of *Utopian Thought in the Western World* is that, where anything is known of them, the utopists do not appear as names and nothing more; enough of their biography is given to help us understand those elements in their lives and their relationships that led them to envision alternative worlds. It is not merely an amusing fact, for example, that Restif de la Bretonne was a shoe-fetishist; it reflects the revolt against normality which is a strong motivating force in many utopian visions.

The Manuels have chosen their title with a proper caution. Earlier writers on the subject tended to limit themselves to fictional visions of ideal commonwealths, and had this example been followed many of the thinkers who figure in *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, such as Comenius and Marx and Giordano Bruno and Kropotkin and the Leveller prophets of the English civil war, could not have found a place. Even Saint-Simon and Fourier, though we think of them as utopian socialists, would not have fitted into the pattern.

Yet all the writers I have named imagined and wrote about different arrangements of society where something approaching the long-lost happiness of paradise and the golden age could be reconstituted, and one can hardly describe such thought as anything other than Utopian. Even the avowed anti-utopians, like Proudhon and Marx, made plans for social orders that did not exist in their time and may in fact never exist. There is a case, and a good one, for regarding as utopian any social or political proposal that envisages a total remaking of society. Piecemeal reforms are not utopian, and one can illustrate the difference by comparing the compromise politics of the Fabians with William Morris's vision of a world redeemed by revolution. Though Sidney Webb and William Morris both called themselves socialists, the ways of thinking expressed in *Industrial Democracy* and *News from Nowhere* are remote from each other. One is evolutionary, the other revolutionary, and in some sense or other every utopian is a revolutionist even if he does not propose to achieve his aims by violent means; conversely, every true revolutionist, every world-transformer, is a utopian, and so the wide scope of *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, where the emphasis is on the *thought* and not on the fictional projection, is not only justified but also extremely enlightening in enabling us to locate the fictional utopias within their context of intellectual history.

Yet *Utopian Thought in the Western World* has its limitations, which are brought about by the concentration on the utopian idea. We are really involved in utopian plans, not utopian achievements, and the Manuels are undoubtedly correct in remarking that many of the classical utopists created their imaginary commonwealths as intellectual exercises and would have deplored any attempt to realize them in actuality. Can we imagine Saint Thomas More as a happy citizen of his own Utopia? There were other utopists whose visions were obviously compensations for their personal inadequacies; the physically fulfilled passions that flourish in Fourier's phalansterian proposals may well, as the Manuels suggest, have helped to compensate psychologically for his impoverished life and his probable sexual impotence.

At the same time a surprising number of utopists did toy with the idea of realizing their utopias. Only a few in the earlier period were willing, like Thomas Müntzer, to risk their lives to put a new social order into being. But Thomas Campanella was involved in a plot against the Spanish rulers of Calabria and hoped its success might give some flesh to his utopian visions; even Plato was tempted to adapt his visions to the real political world of Magna Graecia; and Fourier stayed in his room at a set hour every day waiting for a capitalist to appear who would finance his first phalanstery until one afternoon death kept the appointment. And if Fourier did not found any phalansteries, his followers did, in France and in the United States. The Manuels have certainly done all they proposed in restricting themselves

mainly to utopian ideas and paying little attention to attempts at realizing them, but the fact remains that utopian action is in its own way a notable critique of utopian thought. If we had been given something more about Plato's experiences with Dionysius in Syracuse, or about the fate of the Digger communes, or about the actual communities which the Owenites, the Icarians and the Phalansterians established, we would have had another viewpoint from which to consider the validity of utopian plans. For a piece of utopian writing is never merely a literary artifact; it is a proposal for action and has to be judged as such.

But a study of utopian thought put into practice — and of the ways in which many details of past utopias have been realized in the modern world — would obviously extend the present book in quite impractical ways. Its present length is the maximum a publisher could easily handle, and there is very little in *Utopian Thought* one would wish to see omitted in favour of new material. What we do need is a complementary volume to illustrate Oscar Wilde's point that "Progress is the realization of Utopias." In such a volume, I believe, the imbalance of the final chapters of *Utopian Thought in the Western World* might be corrected.

It is clear that the Manuels are more at home with antique, renaissance and eighteenth-century utopias than they are with those of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They deal far too summarily with works by writers like Wells and Huxley and Zamiatin which in terms of writing and imaginative fantasy are superior to those of many predecessors. Seldom, for example, did earlier utopian romancers create the kind of convincing characters who populate the scientific-utopian fantasies of H. G. Wells. And seldom did they create settings that were as plausible as that of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

There has been a profound change in the nature and aims of utopian writing during recent decades as science and technology have fulfilled many old utopian proposals and totalitarian politics have made us see others in a more critical light. Utopian writing has ceased to be a matter of ideal proposals; it has become rather a matter of projecting the trends created by the partial realization of utopias, and the result of the projection, from Wells onward, has often been negative as modern writers suggest that the realization of the utopian dream may in fact be nightmare. Whether, as in some science fiction utopias, the results are benign, or whether they are malign or at best ambivalent, modern utopian writings have become prophetic rather than programmatic, and frequently minatory in both tone and content.

A further change is that now utopia has almost completely passed into fiction, and mostly into the fiction of fantasy and escape. Utopian political proposals have become frozen into the ideologies of totalitarian governments, and the abundance of utopian schemes that seminal thinkers devised in past

generations has declined to a trickle as political idealists, established in power, have betrayed their pasts.

The Manuels are correct when, towards the end of their book, they remark that: "Once there are sufficiencies of food and jobs, the problem of human happiness becomes linked to psychic needs." Utopian writing today is largely concerned with the psychological and even parapsychological dimensions of human existence; it plays with ideas of mutational transformation that may produce different kinds of men, often in distant times and places, more frequently than it does with transformations of existing human society carried out by man as he is today.

Because they are so attuned to the classic utopian cast of mind, the Manuels find it difficult to deal with such shifts in utopian thinking — or utopian fantasizing as it has largely become. The political and technological developments of the twentieth century have made us profoundly distrustful of utopian proposals, and we are back almost to where Wordsworth stood almost two centuries ago when, in full retreat from Godwinian euphoria, he wrote:

> Not in Utopia — subterranean fields —
> Or in some secret island, Heaven knows where!
> But in this very world, which is the world
> Of all of us — the place where, in the end,
> We find our happiness, or not at all!

But utopia had not invaded Wordsworth's "very world" as it has ours, with the result that the people who in the past would have been thinking of utopias, are now anti-utopian in the literal sense that they fear further technological and political developments, and call for simplification, decentralization, a return to organic social forms, to the natural living of the past. Books like *The Greening of America* and *Small is Beautiful*, ignored by the Manuels, perhaps represent the new Utopian thought, with Luddites in the cellars of the City of the Sun. If that is the case, it seems even more evident that a complementary book to *Utopian Thought in the Western World* is needed, one that not only discusses how utopian proposals have been realized in our lives, but also the disillusionment that has diminished the utopian succession and divided it into the three streams of minatory dystopia, Luddite anti-utopia and escapist fantasy utopia.

My suggestion of a complementary study in no way detracts from the achievement of *Utopian Thought in the Western World*. It is the best survey of the classic utopian tradition yet written, well-presented, penetrating in its analyses, never dull, and as nearly comprehensive as we are ever likely to have. But one's doubts about the future of utopian thought give the book something

more than the monumentalism of mere size; it reads often like a threnody for a great lost cause.

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