Utopia and Anti-Utopia in the Twentieth Century

The Form of Utopia

The strength of utopia has always lain in its literary form. Various other forms—utopian social theory, millenarianism, the experimental community—can for a time substitute for the literary utopia; but if it languishes for too long, so too does utopia. The question of utopia in the twentieth century therefore turns on the fate of the literary utopia.

Recall what happened in the nineteenth century. It opened with the blaze of the French Revolution, and the idea that humans were now able to construct the good society not just in the air but on the ground, in real societies with real people. Writers such as Saint-Simon, Fourier, Owen, and Comte elaborated schemes for the perfection of humanity. Social science was to provide the theoretical tools for the construction of the new world; socialism was to be its practical form.

What room in all this was there for utopia? In the writing of the socialists, especially the Marxists, utopia was consigned to the dustbin of history, as the wish-fulfillment of ages that could only dream of the good society. Now nineteenth-century science, nineteenth-century technology, and the power of the common people were delivering up what could only exist in the imagination of former times. “I do not write cook-books for the kitchens of the future,” was Marx’s crushing riposte to requests that he provide a detailed portrait of the future Communist society.

In the face of this, the literary utopia went into abeyance. A form of writing that had flourished throughout Europe in the wake of Thomas More’s Utopia (1516), reaching something of a climax in the eighteenth century, virtually disappeared in the first half of the nineteenth century. Utopian social theory, and the experimental utopian community, not the literary utopia, became all the rage.

The failure of revolutionary politics, and the obstinate refusal of socialism to realize itself in any other way than as isolated experimental communities, might well have spelled the end of the whole utopian project. But it was socialism itself that led the renaissance of the literary utopia. Despite the strictures of its founders, later socialists became only too well aware of the need to provide “speaking pictures” of the socialist future if socialism were to break out of the coterie of intellectuals and appeal to ordinary people. Socialism needed its “religion,” and the socialist utopia was to be its bible. From the 1880s to the early years of the twentieth century, a striking series of works,
mostly of a socialist character, renewed the literary utopia and kept alive the hope of a socialist future. Key among these was the utopia *Looking Backward* (1888) by the American Edward Bellamy. The enormous success of Bellamy’s book both showed the appeal of this kind of thinking and stimulated a large number of works by way of imitation, criticism, or refutation. Among these were Theodor Hertzka’s *Freeland* (1890), William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890) – an indignant retort to Bellamy’s version of socialism – and H. G. Wells’s *A Modern Utopia* (1905). Together these ensured that not just the socialist vision but the literary form of utopia would be carried into the twentieth century.

What makes the literary utopia superior to other ways of promoting the good society? Why were Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* and Morris’s *News from Nowhere*, whose theoretical pretensions are modest by comparison with Marx’s *Capital* or even the *Communist Manifesto*, nevertheless infinitely more successful than those works in turning men and women toward socialism? There are the obvious attractions of a story or abstract analysis. But Bertrand de Jouvenel makes the additional point that utopia allows us to make a more honest test of theory than do merely abstract formulations, however profound. The utopian mode of persuasion is “to paint pleasing pictures of daily life,” such that we are impelled to want to make the world that is thus portrayed. He considers this feature to be so essential to utopian writing that he is prepared to argue that “the designation of ‘Utopia’ should be denied to any exposition of a ‘New Model’ of Society which is bereft of pictures concerning daily life.” But this mode is not merely concerned with persuasion, it is also a method of analysis. Unlike the abstract theoretician, who asks us to accept as it were on trust that the desirable consequences will follow from the application of the relevant theoretical principles – that happiness will, indeed, follow upon the “expropriation of the expropriators,” for instance – the utopian writer is under an obligation to present a fully developed and detailed picture of the happy world that is expected to result from the application of particular principles. We see people at work and at play, at home and in the public spaces of society, in their personal and in their political lives. We experience, through involvement with characters and events, as well as through the description of the scenes and settings of everyday life, a “good day” in the new society. We can therefore judge of both the plausibility and the desirability of the life so presented. Does Bellamy’s form of socialism attract us, or Morris’s? Which is more likely to follow from the fundamental act of the abolition of private property, seen by both alike as the source of the disorder and discontent of modern society? While in the end this may come down to a matter of temperament, both Bellamy and Morris in their very way of depicting the future society give us the materials by which to judge the likely outcome of their socialist principles, and the extent to which we may feel we want to live in their societies.

It is these qualities of the literary utopia that make it the benchmark for the fate of utopia as such. However vivid and original the speculations of the theoretist might be, unless he or she “fixes” it in the mind of the reader by presenting it in the form of a portrait of a living society, the chances are that the vision of the good or future society will lose its force. We remember Bellamy’s and Morris’s and Wells’s worlds when the ideas of the socialists have become hazy or blurred. They may all draw upon the same storehouse of general ideas, but their manner of representing them is quite different. The *Fabian Essays* or the Erfurt Program of the German Social Democratic Party is not *Looking Backward* or *A Modern Utopia*.

The same is true of the other face of utopia, the anti-utopia. No theory of totalitarianism, no conscientious warning of scientific hubris or the technological threat, has stamped itself on the twentieth-century imagination as has *Nineteen Eighty-four* or *Brave New World*. As much as utopia, anti-utopia needs the literary imagination to proclaim its message. Here, too, the nineteenth century points the way. The revival of the literary utopia was accompanied by a powerful resurgence of its alter ego, the dystopia or anti-utopia. Richard Jefferies’s apocalyptic *After London* (1885) was followed by several anti-utopias critical of this century, the dystopian hopes of Bellamy, Morris, and others. Prominent among these were Ignatius Donnelly’s *Caesar’s Column* (1880), Eugene Richter’s *Pictures of a Socialistic Future* (1893), and Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (1907). At the same time there was a fresh outpouring of the Gothic imagination that fed the modern anti-utopia some of its enduring archetypes, in such works as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897).

The contest of utopia and anti-utopia was undoubtedly good for the health of both. Response followed challenge, becoming itself
a fresh challenge that demanded further response. Nor was this simply a question of utopia’s being matched by anti-utopia. Since one man’s utopia could be another man’s nightmare, the pattern of challenge and response could take place within the utopian tradition itself. In Looking Backward, provoked News from Nowhere, which in turn provoked A Modern Utopia. What George Orwell called “the chain of utopias” was strengthened with every addition of a link, whether this took strictly a utopian or an anti-utopian form.

The nineteenth-century story is important not simply because these works of its last years set the terms for much of the twentieth-century debate of future possibilities. It also establishes the pattern of utopia and anti-utopia, and the conditions for their mutual flourishing. Utopia and anti-utopia support each other; they are two sides of the same literary genre. They gain sustenance from each other’s energy and power. The one paints the future in glowing tones; the other colors it black. But the imagination of whole societies and the techniques of representing them in all their particularities are features that they share in common. Both deal in perfected societies, the only difference being whether they attach a plus or a minus sign. The fate of utopia in the twentieth century turns partly on the extent to which this dialectic of utopia and anti-utopia continues.

Wells: Utopia and Anti-Utopia

In this dialectic, H. G. Wells is critical. He straddles the late nineteenth-century revival of utopia and its apparent demise in the first half of the twentieth century. As one of the inventors of science fiction (a genre that increasingly absorbed utopia), a world-famous writer, and a thinker and publicist who played some part in the founding of both the League of Nations and the United Nations, he can justly claim to be not just the witness but one of the principal contributors to the evolving story of the hopes and fears of twentieth-century Western society.

Quixotically but resolutely, Wells swam against the tide. Though a socialist, in his early years he refused to side with such fellow-socialists as Bellamy and Morris in picturing mankind’s future in glowing terms. Quite to the contrary, he occupied himself with providing devastating critiques of socialist visions and hopes, their faith in science and the proletariat. In his first major work, The Time Machine (1895), he portrayed a future society in which the class war has led to a grotesque parody of socialism. In a sense the Morlocks, the underworld tenders of the machines, do rule, in that they terrorize and prey on the effete upper-world aristocracy of the Eloi. But these brutalized barbaric cannibals, the lineal descendants of the proletariat of old, can in no way be seen as the carriers of a higher form of civilization. Leaving this world, the time traveler journeys farther into the future, until finally he witnesses the death of the planet, as the sun dulls and darkness covers the earth. This is a fitting finale to a tale that has poured scorn on all hopes of future happiness – for, we are told, the time traveler, “thought but cheerlessly of the Advancement of Mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilization only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end.”

Others of Wells’s stories of these times sounded the same note of somber warning. The Island of Doctor Moreau (1896) and The Invisible Man (1897) questioned the hope placed in science and the scientists, with their depiction of scientists as perverted and power-mad intellectuals who put science to cruel and inhuman ends. The War of the Worlds (1898) and The First Men in the Moon (1901) also warned against the hypertrophy of the merely rational and scientific. The Martians of the first and the Selenites of the second are all brain and no feeling, and the consequence is power without compassion and efficiency without purpose.

But already in these later stories the utopian Wells is emerging from his anti-utopian shadow. The scientist Cavor admires the way Selenite science and technology have abolished waste and want, along with war and political strife. The Martians, the author of The War of the Worlds speculates, may be showing humankind the image of its own future, in which it accomplishes “the suppression of the animal side of the organism by the intelligence.” In the resistance to the Martians has arisen “the conception of the commonweal of mankind,” the common unity of the human race that must at some time – as Wells was later to hold – find expression in the World State. The tone of these novels is still critical and minatory. Neither the Martians nor the Selenites can be true utopian exemplars. But Wells is clearly feeling his way toward the utopian conception that was to dominate his later writing.

This burst upon the world in the form first of an exercise in social prophecy, Anticipations (1901) and later, in more formal utopian mode, in A Modern Utopia (1905). The latter delineated the main features of the Wellsian utopia: a World State founded upon science and under the benevolent direction of scientists. It is a socialist world because for Wells, science and socialism were two
A Dystopian Vision

H. G. Wells
The Time Machine: An Invention
New York: Random House, 1931
NYPL Rare Books Division

In this novel, first published in 1895, H. G. Wells’s time traveler visits the year 802,701 using a time machine that he has invented. One artist’s rendering of this contraption is shown on the title page of this 1931 edition. Wells’s vision of a dystopian future warns against continued industrialization and exploitation of the working class. The traveler continues on into the future, only to find in the year 30,000,000 that all life has disappeared from the surface of the earth, leaving only a barren landscape. An advocate for the working classes, and an outspoken critic of war and technology, Wells incorporated his social views into much of his fiction and nonfiction. In addition to The Time Machine, he is best known for The Invisible Man (1897), The War of the Worlds (1898), A Modern Utopia (1906), and The Shape of Things to Come (1903).
sides of the same coin: “just as science aims at a common organized body of knowledge, to which all its servants contribute, and in which they share, so Socialism insists upon its ideal of an organized social order which every man serves and by which every man benefits.” But the informing spirit is clearly science, and *A Modern Utopia* contains one of Wells's most celebrated panegyrics to science:

The plain message physical science has for the world at large is this, that were our political and social and moral devices only as well contrived to their ends as a linotype machine, an antisepctic operating plant, or an electric tram-car, there need now at the present moment be no appreciable toil in the world, and only the smallest fraction of the pain, the fear, and the anxiety that now makes human life so doubtful in its value.

For the rest of his long life, in novels and tracts, Wells tirelessly propagated this vision of a World State guided by the scientific outlook. The pattern of the stories was usually the same: a natural or man-made catastrophe destroys the old order on earth, allowing those who remain painfully to put together the structures of a lasting new world order. In *Men Like Gods* (1923), it is the civilization of another planet that earthlings are directed to as the utopian model; in *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), it is earth itself that goes through a series of cataclysmic convulsions resulting finally in the establishment of the World State. In the real world of politics, Wells put his hopes first in the League of Nations, as the germ of the World State. Its abject failure in the 1930s did not prevent him from contributing, in the last years of his life, to the work that led to the founding of another incipient world-state, the United Nations. It is a remarkable story of dedication to the utopian ideal. If utopia remained alive in the first half of the twentieth century, it did so largely through the powerful presence of H. G. Wells.

**Dystopian Times?**

Wells was one reason why anti-utopia did not overwhelm utopia, as many have thought it did, and as the way of the world seemed to suggest was the only possible outcome. It is true that the utopian Wells moved increasingly against the temper of the times, just as in his earlier anti-utopian phase he stood out against the mood of socialist optimism. For literary intellectuals and humanists in particular, World War I, the rise of Fascism, the descent of Soviet communism into Stalinism, the failure of Western capitalism in the 1930s: all these were mocking commentaries on utopian hopes. The more fitting responses seemed to be the crushing indictment of industrial civilization in the works of D. H. Lawrence, the icy pessimism of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), and the flight from the modern in the poetry of William Butler Yeats and Ezra Pound. So far as utopia itself was concerned, the dominant mood and mode seemed to be unequivocally dystopian. It was not the Wellsian utopia but, in the first half of the century, the anti-utopia that seemed to capture the public imagination. We read the fate of utopia in this period through such powerful and influential anti-utopias as Evgenii Zamiatin’s *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949).

But we should remember two things. First, as Zamiatin himself pointed out in some sparkling essays on Wells, it was Wells himself who supplied many of the themes and suggested many of the features of the twentieth-century anti-utopia: Zamiatin’s own anti-utopia, *We*, with its autocratic world-state ruled by the Benefactor, and his Guardians, is clearly indebted to Wells’s “A Story of the Days to Come” (1899) and *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899). Huxley’s *Brave New World* similarly draws on the graded hierarchy of the Selenite civilization of *The First Men in the Moon*, and Orwell considered Wells’s influence to be so pervasive in the early twentieth century that it would certainly not have surprised him to be told that the ground-plan of *Nineteen Eighty-four* can be found in a number of early Wells stories, notably *When the Sleeper Wakes*.

The second point is that even when Wells was the target rather than the inspiration of the anti-utopia, it clearly implied that he was worth attacking, that his influence was indeed thought to be so dominating as well as pernicious that the anti-utopian writer felt the need to answer him. E. M. Forster’s anti-utopian fable, “When the Machine Stops” (1909), an account of a dehumanized machine civilization based on a world state, was described by its author as “a counterblast to one of the heavens of H. G. Wells.” For Huxley it was clear that Wells was the enemy. *Brave New World*, he said, was “a novel about the future on the horror of the Wellsian utopia and a revolt against it.” Orwell too inveighed against Wells’s influence, cruelly speaking in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) of “the by now familiar Wellsian utopia, aptly caricatured in *Brave New World*, the paradise of little fat men.” During World War II he went so far as to see Hitler’s National Socialist state as the perverted
but clearly recognizable offspring of Wells’s scientific utopia; and in Nineteen Eighty-four he completed the case against Wells by presenting his own nightmare vision of the world-state—a picture no less powerful and frightening for owing many of its key images and ideas to Wells’s own earlier novels.

As with the nineteenth century, we see the importance of the dialogue between utopia and anti-utopia, even if the dialogue becomes on occasion an unseemly shouting match. Utopia survived, even in such unpropitious circumstances, partly because it became the object of a fierce struggle. As before, utopia and anti-utopia sustained each other. Moreover, the anti-utopia does not emerge out of nothing. It draws its energies, to a good extent, from the strength of utopia. It is possible that utopia could thrive without the stimulus of anti-utopia, but it is impossible for the anti-utopia to do so on its own. Its life-blood is its utopian antagonist. The force of Huxley’s and Orwell’s anti-utopias is the measure of the continuing vitality of utopia.

The evidence, partly from the very presence and urgency of these anti-utopias, is that utopia maintained a strong showing in the first half of the twentieth century; and that in this Wells’s contribution was critical. This suggests that we should reconsider the traditional view that utopia died in the twentieth century, that it simply could not stand up to the battering that it received from the enormities of twentieth-century history. We read the history of utopia in the first half of the twentieth century too much through the prism of Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-four. This chimes well with the received view of the shock administered to Western ideas of progress and reason by the horrors of the trench warfare of World War I, the Nazi attempt at genocide, the purges and gulags of Stalinist Russia, the atomic bombardment of Hiroshima. Unquestionably these provided rich fuel for the anti-utopia. But so too did the continuing presence of the utopia, in both literary and nonliterary forms. Utopian writing has always turned as much on the utopian tradition itself as on the events of the always non-utopian world. In the first half of the twentieth century, the anti-utopia confronted and drew sustenance from its traditional other face, the utopia.

\textbf{Utopia for Dystopian Times}

The predominance of the themes and images of anti-utopia in the standard accounts of twentieth-century developments hides and suppresses many other features that are apparent as soon as they are brought to mind. We remember, thanks to Huxley, test-tube babies, life-time conditioning, mindless conformity, the feelies, and soma; thanks to Orwell, we also remember Big Brother, the Thought Police, round-the-clock surveillance, and the corruptions and degradation of language in the modern totalitarian state. In that sense the anti-utopian imagery of Huxley and Orwell clearly seems more persuasive, to a later age at least, than the utopian pictures of A Modern Utopia or The Shape of Things to Come.

But why have we forgotten Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City, Frank Lloyd Wright’s Broadacre City, and Le Corbusier’s Radiant City? Why have we forgotten the whole movement in architecture and town planning in the first half of our century that sustained the Wellsian faith in science and reason? If the literary utopia did not inspire the imagination or command the attention as it had in an earlier time, its leading ideas found plenty of support in other forms and disciplines. Many of them too were expressed in the utopian mode, though for various reasons their authors eschewed the literary utopia. Ebenezer Howard was indeed directly inspired by Bellamy’s Looking Backward and, paradoxical as it sometimes seems, much of the work of the Bauhaus and of other pioneers of modern design was indebted to the utopian ideas and practical example of that great utopian, William Morris. But even if there are no great literary utopias in the manner of Campanella’s City of the Sun (1623), with its depiction of the ideal city of the Renaissance, the high priests of modern architecture and urbanism produced strikingly utopian works in such writings as Howard’s Garden Cities of Tomorrow (1902) and Le Corbusier’s La Ville Radieuse (1935). All renounced nostalgic or neo-romantic views of the city and the countryside with strong declarations of faith in industrialism and the capacity of modern science, technology, and rational planning to make fit habitations for humanity.

Even stronger support for the Wellsian utopia was to be found in another quarter: the “science and society” movement that developed in the 1920s and 1930s around such British scientists and mathematicians as J.B.S. Haldane, Lancelot Hogben, J. D. Bernal, Joseph Needham, and Hyman Levy. While the literary intellectuals were wringing their hands in despair, these scientists, together with their counterparts on the Continent and in America, were confidently looking to science for the realization of mankind’s age-old dreams of freedom, peace, and plenty. In Daedalus, or Science and the Future (1914), Haldane aspired to outbid Wells—
“the very mention of the future suggests him” — in imagining the dizzying heights to which science could raise mankind. Haldane’s far-reaching projection of a world transformed by the applications of science was in its turn outbid by J. D. Bernal’s dazzling *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1929), the most sparkling and provocative of the products of the science and society movement. In this work Bernal confronted “the three enemies of the Rational Soul” and sought to rout them once and for all with science. Physics would tame “the massive, unintelligent forces of nature”; biology would cure the problems of the human body; and psychology would control man’s “desires and fears, his imagination and stupidities.” But this modest prospectus gives little clue to the lengths to which Bernal was prepared to put the scientific imagination. Physics enables mankind to colonize the planets and to turn the stars into “efficient heat engines”; biology enables humans to get rid of their inefficient bodies and to experiment with forms of life such as “dual or multiple organisms,” leading eventually to a complete “dematerialization” and spiritualization of humanity in which the human intelligence takes control of all life forms in the universe, while “psychology” is interpreted, in a somewhat Machiavellian way, as a scheme whereby scientists as the nucleus of a new disembodied species take over the direction of the universe and, ensconced in their “celestial spheres,” treat the remnants of the old unreconstructed humanity on earth as “a human zoo,” “a zoo so intelligently managed that its inhabitants are not aware that they are there merely for the purposes of observation and experiment.”

Bernal’s extraordinary and extravagant vision was all of a piece with the confidence with which the scientists confronted the future. Rather like the socialists of the early nineteenth century, they felt that the time for literary utopias was past: science could deliver utopia in real life and in real time. But their scientific speculations were couched in a manner only one remove from utopia. *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* could easily have been presented as a formal utopia — indeed, it did no more than continue the spirit and intent of Wells’s *A Modern Utopia*. The closeness of these two forms was made manifest when Aldous Huxley combined elements of both works — together with other contributions from the scientists — and turned them against their authors in his anti-science anti-utopia *Brave New World*.

Wells was even more evidently present in another form that kept alive the spirit of utopia: the new genre of science fiction. Science fiction is too vast and heterogeneous a field, and to some extent too restricted in its appeal, to carry the cause of either utopia or anti-utopia on its own. At any one time one might find scores of examples of both without being clear in what way either was being advanced or held back. Utopias and anti-utopias really have to break through the genre of science fiction, as Wells’s *A Modern Utopia*, Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-four did, to command wide public attention. But that does not mean that science fiction cannot contribute its own measure, in its own way, to the fate of utopia. And here it is clear that the genre that Wells pioneered and did so much to promote returned the compliment by being for much of its earliest years an ardent supporter of the Wellsian philosophy. Both the two leading science fiction magazines, Hugo Gernsback’s *Amazing Stories* (launched in the United States in 1926) and *Astounding Stories* (started in 1930), throughout the Depression and war years maintained a resolutely optimistic stance, portraying societies on earth and on distant planets in which science and technology have performed miracles of economic advancement and social engineering. Right up to the end of World War II — when the dropping of the atom bomb gave it pause for thought — technological utopianism was the dominant strain in science fiction.

Technology in the optimistic vein was also the hallmark of the Technocracy movement that flourished on both sides of the Atlantic, but especially in America, in the interwar period. Inspired by Thorstein Veblen’s idea of a “Soviet of Technicians,” the movement adopted the conventional aim of the scientific utopia, of banishing want and waste through science and technology. Its principal literary statement, Harold Loeb’s *Life in a Technocracy: What It Might be Like* (1933), made clear the derivativeness of Technocracy’s ideas and its dependence on earlier forms of technological utopianism, especially that of Bellamy. But as with science fiction, this popular form of faith in science, held as it was by an influential group of scientists and engineers, gave added strength to the scientific utopia. Something similar can be said, but in a looser way, of the great world’s fairs of the 1930s in various American cities, culminating in the World of Tomorrow fair in New York in 1939. These were based on the real achievements of industrial designers such as Raymond Loewy and Norman Bel Geddes, and reflected their technological optimism. The fairs, with their vivid futuristic urban panoramas, aspired to promote the idea that technology was on the point
of realizing utopia – the World of Tomorrow actually set the date at 1960. 3

There is one further thing to be said about popular utopianism in the first half of the twentieth century. The dystopian temper of the times has often been noted. But precisely the gloomy tenor of world events might give rise to a counter-movement of culture to lighten the oppressiveness. Such, at any rate, seems the reasonable interpretation of the heady and hedonistic “Jazz Age” of the 1920s, the crowds that flocked to the fantastically decorated and ornate picture palaces to see films that took them out of their everyday lives and made them forget their cares, and the success of such old-fashioned, Shangri-La utopias as James Hilton’s Lost Horizon (1933). People were in need of dreams, and Hollywood and other purveyors of mass culture were there to provide them in abundance. We may call it escapism, and certainly it was no substitute for the serious presentation of utopia in literary form (briefly, because it presented utopia in too accessible and easily acquired a form – as quickly forgotten as enjoyed). But along with other forms of popular utopianism it undoubtedly contributed in some measure to keeping alive the utopian spirit.

Finally, it is important to stress an often overlooked aspect of the utopian story in the earlier part of the century. We are accustomed to see the deformations of Fascism and Communism as central to the assault on utopia – as, indeed, the building blocks of such anti-utopias as We and Nineteen Eighty-four. There is no need to deny that, in essence. But we should also remember that, in conception at least, these were utopian schemes. It may be more difficult to see this in the case of Fascism – Mein Kampf is not easily read as a utopia – but even here the utopian elements are apparent in Mussolini’s grandiose projects for a redesigned Rome and Albert Speer’s plans for an architectural expression of the spirit of Fascism in Berlin and elsewhere. Fascist philosophy celebrated the body and the modern machine, aiming to make the former work with the strength and efficiency of the latter (Leni Riefenstahl’s 1938 film Olympia lyrically celebrates this, as much as her Triumph of the Will, a 1934 documentary about the Nuremberg Rallies, celebrates the power of collective emotion and striving). At the same time, especially in its Nazi variety, it contained strong elements of nature-worship, looking to the fields, forests, and mountains to regenerate the soul of modern man. Out of this contradictory mix was fashioned a fascist utopia that had an appeal well beyond the confines of its Italian and German heartlands.

With communism or socialism the utopian dimension is clearer – we could almost say, unavoidable. Socialism was the utopia of the nineteenth century, and its disfigurement in twentieth-century social experiments never entirely removed the utopian promise. This was paradoxically even truer of the greatest experiment of all, Soviet communism. It is obvious that the excesses of Stalinism and the many other ways in which Soviet communism failed to live up to its self-professed principles supplied some of the central ingredients of the anti-utopia (Orwell’s Animal Farm [1945] proclaimed this even more than his Nineteen Eighty-four, an equally brilliant rendering, though not formally an anti-utopia, was Arthur Koestler’s Darkness at Noon [1940]). But at the same time, what was just as important for many people was the fact that the Soviet Union existed at all, that socialism was being attempted on the grandest scale, and not in some small Third World country but in the largest country in the world, not far from the center of Europe. The young Arthur Koestler was only one of many intellectuals who thought that “the new star of Bethlehem had risen in the East”; for André Gide the Soviet Union was “a land where I imagined Utopia was in the process of becoming reality.” Both Koestler and Gide later became famous recanters; but it would be a mistake to see in this disillusionment of certain celebrated intellectuals a general abandonment of faith in the socialist utopia. So long as the Soviet Union remained in being, so long as socialism maintained an actual existence in some real societies, the hope remained that the defects and deficiencies of socialist practice could be remedied at some point in the future. Only when the Soviet Union faltered and fell were these hopes threatened at their very foundation.

In 1948, the year in which Orwell wrote his Nineteen Eighty-four, the American psychologist B. F. Skinner produced his Walden Two. It was provocative and revealing in almost equal degrees. It was provocative in that, in a world struggling to emerge from the devastation of World War I and trying to come to terms with the revelations of the Nazi and Stalinist horrors, Skinner proposed a utopia that seemed to borrow to an uncomfortable extent from some of the practices of those very societies that had perpetrated those atrocities. This utopia of “behavioral engineering” proclaimed a confidence in science, and in the ability of scientific experts to manipulate and re-shape human behavior, that was strongly reminiscent of fascist and communist principles. Aldous Huxley, in Brave New World, had
already produced a damning satire on behavioral conditioning as the solution to individual and social ills; now here was Skinner cheerfully taking up the challenge and throwing behaviorism straight back in Huxley’s face.⁴

But *Walden Two* was significant for other reasons than this flying in the face of the anti-utopia. We are accustomed to dwelling on the somber aspects of the post-1945 world. The apocalyptic scenes, in Dresden, Hamburg, Berlin, that ended World War II; the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the massive expulsion and resettlement of peoples in Central and Eastern Europe; the devastated European economies; the beginnings of the Cold War: these were not, it seems, propitious times for utopia. *Nineteen Eighty-four* was surely their appropriate image; even more perhaps Aldous Huxley’s savage post-holocaust anti-utopia *Ape and Essence* (1948).

But out of World War II came the United Nations, and the germ of the European Community. To restore the European economies came the Marshall Plan. Democracy was established in Germany and Japan. In Britain a new Labour Government aspired to lay the foundations for a new kind of welfare society, and elsewhere in Europe socialist parties, buoyed by the prestige of the Soviet Union, seemed poised to take the initiative. At the same time, a powerful United States stood as a check against the imperial ambitions of the Soviet Union, in Europe and elsewhere in the world. In the *kibbutzim* of the newly instituted state of Israel, the religious philosopher Martin Buber, in his influential *Path in Utopia* (1945), discerned a renewal of the communitarian tradition of the utopian socialism of Owen and Fourier, and offered it to the world as an alternative to Soviet communism. Utopia – in other words, the imagination of the good society – was not wholly out of keeping with the times. *Walden Two* was not such an aberration, any more than was Robert Graves’s pastoral utopia of the same time, *Seven Days in New Crete* (1949). As earlier in the century, utopia accompanied anti-utopia and remained its necessary partner as well as natural antagonist. This pattern was to persist in the second half of the century as well. But the new thing was the changing position of the literary utopia – and therefore a new condition of utopia.

**Utopianism Without Utopia?**

The pattern of utopian thought in the second half of the twentieth century seems to be as follows. There is a strong revival of utopianism – in popular writing, in social theory, even in certain forms of politics. At the same time, there is no continuation or revival of the utopian utopia – not, at any rate, in a form that commands a wide or general audience. Put another way, there is no Wells for the second part of the century. This means that, compared with the first part, and despite the greater degree of optimism generally prevalent, utopia is weaker and its fate less certain than at any other time in the century – perhaps in any other century.

The peculiarity of this situation needs to be noted. There have been periods in the past when the literary utopia weakened or almost disappeared – the early nineteenth century, we have suggested, was one of them. Utopia has been sustained in those lean periods by other forms of utopianism – utopian social theory and the experimental community being common substitutes. But generally the literary utopia has revived and in the process reinvigorated the utopian tradition. It is almost as if without the literary utopia there would be no striking images, no concrete pictures, by which to remember and fix in the mind the utopian vision. What would utopia be like in the first half of the twentieth century without Wells’s *Samurai* and the *World State?* What comparable images are there for the second half of the century? Nor has the anti-utopia been much more persuasive. There is really nothing – bar stale repetitions – to put beside Huxley’s decanted babies and Orwell’s Big Brother.

Why this should be we will consider later. The first thing to remark is the powerful groundswell of optimism that swept over Western nations in the 1950s and 1960s. Typically this took the form – as in the first half of the nineteenth century – of the repudiation of utopias, as obsolete and fanciful devices. “The age of utopias is past. An age of realism has taken its place....” So declared the authors of *Industrialism and Industrial Man* (1960), a widely read and much-quoted work of social science. But in the same breath they went on to resurrect utopia in a new form: as the whole system of industrialism and industrial society. Industrial civilization itself, it seemed, could be the fit object of utopian strivings. In the twentieth century, they proclaimed, industrialism as developed by Western societies had become “the goal of mankind and the essence of national aspiration.”

In the decades following World War II, there were many statements of this kind. Ideological conflicts, it was claimed, were now obsolete. Whether a society took a socialist or a capitalist form was not in the end a matter of great moment. What
mattered was that both forms were industrial: that is, that they were dedicated to economic growth and to the fullest realization of the potentialities of science and technology. The old bogeys of the anti-utopia, the fears bred by science and technology, were blown away, at least for the time. It was the scientists, said Sir Charles Snow in The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution (1959), who "had the future in their bones." Literary intellectuals were "natural Luddites" whose complaints about industrial civilization had to be seen for the feeble and self-indulgent whinnings that they were. It was the titans of MIT and the Soviet Academy of Sciences who were ending want in the world and putting men into space.

This strong echo of the "science and society" movement of the 1920s and 1930s found a parallel in the rehabilitation of two of the principal enemies of utopia, Darwin and Freud. Darwin—despite the misunderstandings or misrepresentations of some of his followers—had shown evolution to be blind and utterly lacking in moral principle. Freud had pitted the forces of the "death instinct" (Thanatos) against those of the "life instinct" (Eros), and the whole of his social philosophy showed civilization to be the weakest and most vulnerable of defenses against the destructive impulses of the unconscious. Together, Darwin and Freud presented the most serious obstacle to any idea of progress; together theirs were the discordant voices that threatened to drown forever what Freud contemptuously called "lullabies about Heaven."

In the 1950s, biologists such as Sir Julian Huxley, confounding the views of his eminent grandfather Thomas Henry Huxley and his brother Aldous (not to mention his own earlier work), sought to rescue Darwin from the pessimists and to see in him the apostle of progress. Far from evolution being—as Julian Huxley himself had once put it—a "series of blind alleys," it was now seen as a cosmic process leading to a general increase in the all-around efficiency, organizational complexity, and intelligence of living matter. Evolution demonstrated that "progress is inevitable as a general fact." Such a conclusion was also presented by an ambitious work that synthesized Christian theology and evolutionary biology: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's The Phenomenon of Man (1959), fittingly introduced to the English-speaking world by Huxley. In Chardin's account, evolution culminates in the advent of human consciousness and the ascent to the "noosphere," the sphere of pure mind in which bodily existence disappears and the noo-

sphere, like Hegel's Spirit, "closes in upon itself." With this transcendental vision we reach the "Omega point" of all life and all matter, a resolution of all the conflict and disharmony that has been the universal story thus far.

Darwin having been pointed in the right progressive direction, it was Freud's turn. This was the accomplishment largely of a brilliant school of "Freudo-Marxists," starting with Wilhelm Reich and continuing with Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse. What they attempted to show was that Freud's pessimism was based on an over-biologized view of the instincts, that what he thought of in particular as possessive or aggressive instincts were fundamentally the implants of society, specifically of capitalist society. They were not therefore insurmountable obstacles to the achievement of a peaceful and harmonious socialist society. In works such as Eros and Civilization (1955), One Dimensional Man (1964), and An Essay on Liberation (1969), Marcuse proposed the transformation of the libidinal instincts into forces for cooperative production and the creation of aesthetic objects. Society itself would become "a work of art." Given the right social and political changes, the "pleasure principle" could overcome the recalcitrant "reality principle," Eros tamed Thanatos.

Marcuse was one of the heroes of the "counterculture" of the 1960s, and here too utopian currents flowed freely. The criticism of industrial society was converted into a vision that differed from traditional socialist alternatives in the emphasis put on play and the pleasures of recreation. The problem, as the sixties radicals saw it, was not production but the uses of production: its concentration in mind-numbing and body-stunting consumerism. In the "May Events" of Paris, 1968—the high point of the student radicalism of the 1960s—the French students mixed Karl Marx with Groucho Marx, Freud with Fourier, de Sade with Dali and the Surrealists to produce a heady utopia that turned the traditional socialist program on its head and proclaimed the preeminence of spontaneity and the power of imaginative thought. The graffiti that covered the walls of Paris in these months were replete with these utopian sentiments: "Be realistic—demand the impossible," "All power to the imagination," "It's the dream that's real."

Ecotopia

Utopian as the sixties were, they produced no striking literary utopia. The works that caught the public imagination were works of cultural and social criti-
cism, especially as popularized in such celebratory accounts as Charles Reich's *The Greening of America* (1970). Literature as such remained in a grimly dystopian mood. The successes of these years were novels such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), both of which dealt with the potential for violence and savagery inherent in the human condition. Science fiction too was chiefly full of foreboding, as it had been since Hiroshima. Under the slogan of the writer J. G. Ballard, "the only true alien planet is earth," science fiction writers portrayed worlds devastated by overpopulation and ecological catastrophe. Journeys into space increasingly ended in hell, especially the inner hell of the psyche.¹

But out of anti-utopian science fiction, out of the social criticism of the counter-culture, a new utopia was in the making. A new view of society appeared, drawing on the abundant recent critique of technology, economic growth, capitalism, and consumerism. This was the ecological utopia or "ecotopia," a vision of society organized along ecological lines. Ecology — along with feminism — was the main inheritor of sixties radicalism; in the 1970s and 1980s, it was the driving force of alternative accounts of modern society. Overwhelmingly, as was the fashion, most of these accounts were expressed in scientific and social-scientific terms, even when these carried messages of urgency and high drama. Such were Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968), the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* (1972), *The Ecologist* magazine's "Blueprint for Survival" (1972), and Fred Hirsch's *Social Limits to Growth* (1977).

But the ecotopia, unlike the countercultural critique, also achieved literary form. The great model here was William Morris's arcadian News from Nowhere (1890), an ecotopia before the name and to a good extent before its time. More immediately, and symbolically in many ways more important, there was the genial utopia of the aging Aldous Huxley, *Island* (1962). In this reversal of his anti-utopian *Brave New World*, Huxley deployed many of the ingredients of his former satire, such as drugs and scientific conditioning, to present a portrait of a gentle, ecologically conscious society that has married Western science with Eastern religion. Electricity plus Buddhism equals the good society, say the Palines. Western science gives the means; Eastern philosophy shapes the ends, in the direction of a nonaggressive, cooperative, ecologically balanced society.

Non-Western philosophy of a more immediately available kind — drawn in this case from the native Indians of North America — was partly the inspiration behind Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975), the literary utopia from America's West Coast that seems to have given the ecotopia its name, though in most other respects it drew on standard ecological ideas. Ecotopia, a breakaway republic of the U.S. Pacific Northwest, incorporates the "small is beautiful" philosophy of the economist E. F. Schumacher together with recycling technologies and the careful, quasi-religious, attitude to the environment advocated by "deep" ecologists. There is much fun and frolicking in saunas and steam baths: the Ecotopians have been able to reduce the work week to twenty hours and take their leisure and pleasure seriously, in good Californian style. But the most important thing is the love and respect of nature. Here Ecotopians borrow much from the tribal lore of the Indians. The visitor Will Weston notes in his diary:

Some Ecotopian articles — clothing and baskets and personal ornamentation — perhaps directly Indian in inspiration. But what matters most is the aspiration to live in balance with nature, "walk lightly on the land," treat the earth as mother. No surprise that to such a morality most industrial processes, work schedules, and products are suspect! Who would use an earthmover on his own mother?

North American Indian culture was also an important influence — through her father, the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber — on Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), the most complex and interesting of the contemporary ecotopias. But there is no simple primitivism here, nor indeed any simple utopianism. The use of the science fiction mode allows Le Guin to complicate the presentation of utopia. She describes two contrasting civilizations on two planets — Urras, a thinly disguised Earth that has entered the high technological phase, and Anarres, formerly a mining colony of Urras, which has gone its own way and become a largely self-sufficient community organized on anarchistic and ecological principles. Urras is rich and beautiful but marked by inequality and exploitation. Anarres is arid and materially poor but rich in its egalitarian and cooperative spirit. Le Guin does not remain impartial between the two. She clearly favors Anarres, and at the end her protagonist Shevek, the physicist who moves between the two cultures, chooses to return to Anarres despite the tempting offers made to him on Urras. He has seen the poverty and misery on Urras, he has been caught up in a failed rebellion, and he reflects:
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There is no freedom. It is a box – Urras is a box, a package, with all the beautiful wrapping of blue sky and meadows and forests and great cities. And you open the box and, what inside it? A black cellar full of dust, and a dead man.

But Le Guin does not wish us to be comfortable with this choice. She originally subtitled her story “An Ambiguous Utopia,” and ambiguity, or perhaps more properly ambivalence, is its hallmark. Anàrrés is not all good, and Urras not all bad. The former is bleak and inhospitable, and its revolution has reached an only too predictable point of doc-trinaire rigidity that is inhibiting the research of scientists such as Shevek. On Urras, for its part, Shevek feels a liberating sense of ease and opulence, and is attracted by its respect for privacy and the opportunities it offers for the exercise of individual initiative and talent. The line between utopia and anti-utopia is blurred; the possibility seems to exist for utopia to degenerate into anti-utopia and, correspondingly, for anti-utopia to modulate into utopia. This ambivalence is perhaps a fair reflection of the state of ecotopia. For some it is the only future, if we are to escape the trap of vanishing resources and a spoilt and polluted world; for others, it threatens an authoritarian and conformist order, perhaps even some kind of “eco-fascist” regime.

**Feminist Utopias**

*The Dispossessed* is almost as much a feminist utopia as it is – or contains – an ecotopia. The revolutionary founder of Anarres is a female prophet, Odo, and Anarres is scrupulously egalitarian between the sexes. The ecotopia overlies the feminist utopia, just as the feminist utopia overlies the ecotopia, almost unconsciously, it seems, adopts an ecological perspective. Since both ecology and feminism share common roots in the culture of the 1960s – and even further back – this is hardly surprising. But it seems worth adding a note on the feminist utopia, as perhaps the most thriving form of utopia at the present time.

It was perhaps inevitable that women should take to utopia. Where else would they be free and equal? No known society in history has allowed them material or symbolic equality with men. Even in past utopias they have been firmly subordinated to men. One of the earliest feminist utopias was indeed a spirited response to the portrayal of women in Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*. In *Herland* (1915), Charlotte Perkins Gilman redressed the balance in her presentation of a gentle matriarchal society in which men have been abolished and women give birth in an ecstatic act of parthenogenesis.

Gilman’s example seems to have been infectious. Among more recent feminist utopias, the utopian society of Whileaway in Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* (1975) also gets on happily without men; while in Sally Gearhart’s *The Wanderground* (1978), men are masters in their mechanized cities but in the countryside they are helpless in the face of women who have established all-female communities and have developed the powers of telepathy, telekinesis, and even flight. Men are present, as equals, in Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), but her future society has borrowed Brave New World techniques of laboratory reproduction, thereby not merely freeing women from childbirth but allowing men to experience the joys and cares of motherhood along with the women (“We all became mothers. Every child has three.”)

The energy that has inspired these visions has also, in characteristic fashion, stimulated their opposite: the feminist anti-utopia. In Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), women are enslaved to men, either as decorative spouses or as simple breeding machines. The anti-utopia, here as in general, tends to take the form of an intensification and projection of currently existing patterns. Hence the feminist utopia often contains an explicit anti-utopia to highlight the present position of women (thus reverting to the older pattern, found in More’s *Utopia* as well as Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, in which utopia and anti-utopia appear in the same work). Russ’s *The Female Man* plays with four alternative futures for women, at least two of which are dystopias of sexual inequality and female degradation. *Woman on the Edge of Time* also includes a glimpse of an alternative future: a paranoid, power-mad world of gross inequality and exploitation, in which women, continually remodelled by cosmetic surgery, exist simply as paid whores for the men. And in *The Dispossessed* the egalitarian position of women on Anarres is contrasted with their conventional role on Urras as the dependents and playthings of men.

The feminist utopia is one of the indications that the literary utopia is far from dead. Women writers – rather more than men – have explored its potential with force and imagination. Doris Lessing in her sequence *Canopus in Argos: Archives* (1979–83) is an outstanding recent example of a
writer who has turned to the utopian tradition, in its science-fiction guise, to explore possible future worlds. But the fate of Lessing’s work is instructive. Unlike her earlier novels, such as The Golden Notebook (1962), Canopus has been relegated to the science-fiction shelves of bookshops and libraries, and attracted a correspondingly restricted readership. This has in general been the fate of most utopian writing in the latter part of the twentieth century. Utopia has been “ghettoized.” For the most part it has been absorbed in the mass popular genre of science fiction, where it gets an enthusiastic but generally undiscriminating readership, but is largely ignored by critics and the public at large. When it breaks out of this circle, as it does occasionally with the ecotopia and the feminist utopia, it once more tends to speak to restricted and specialized constituencies. The Female Man and Woman on the Edge of Time are welcomed by feminists and their sympathizers, and energetically discussed among them; Ecotopia has a devoted following among ecological groups. But it would be no surprise to find that many educated people in Britain and America had never heard of them, nor would they feel particularly ashamed of their ignorance if such works were brought to their attention. It is difficult to imagine such a situation, in their own times and even since, with A Modern Utopia or Brave New World or Nineteen Eighty-four: “Speaking pictures” of the future, whether in the positive or negative vein, are out of fashion. Utopia has lost its audience.

**Utopia at the End of the Twentieth Century**

Utopia did not die in the twentieth century, despite frequent pronouncements to the effect. Wells alone would have been sufficient to keep it alive in the first half of the century. But in the second half it faltered, or was at best channelled in particular directions, toward specialized constituencies. There was, as we have seen, plenty of utopianism. But it remained largely in the realm of social and cultural theory – as indeed did its faithful partner, anti-utopia – rather than being expressed in the classic form of the literary utopia. If the argument of this essay is correct, this poses a problem for utopia, and its future health. What can we say about its condition in the closing years of the twentieth century, and at the opening of a new century and, indeed, a new millennium? Has the millennial pull worked in its favor?

Some novelities were certainly evident as the century drew to a close. The outstanding event has been the fall of the Soviet Union and the dissolu-
ideology. In a powerful contribution to the public debate in the wake of communism’s demise, the American political scientist Samuel Huntington argued that far from history’s coming to an end, it was about to restart with a vengeance. In the rise especially of religious fundamentalism in various parts of the world, Huntington discerned the still persisting and in many ways accentuated “fault lines” dividing the world’s great civilizations. Communism may have gone, but there was still Islam, now massively resurgent; and Russia remained the center of an Orthodox civilization that in many respects differed from the societies of Western Christianity. The future would be marked not by the worldwide victory of Fukuyama’s “universal homogeneous state” but by a disorderly and potentially violent “clash of civilizations.”

The end of the millennium sees a confused picture. Apocalypse wars with optimism, utopianism with an acute sense that a “new world disorder” is upon us. Perhaps that is why it seems to have been so difficult for anyone to produce a convincing utopia or anti-utopia in traditional literary form. The break-up of communism has not produced the clarity that some had earlier hoped it would; a world with only one superpower, far from having a stabilizing effect, seems instead to have set off a chain reaction of violent conflicts, many of them of an ethnic kind. The shape of the future world order remains cloudy and uncertain.

And yet there are opportunities, and reason enough, for utopia. More than at any other time in this century, the world seems to be struggling toward some kind of world government, with the United Nations the as yet uncertain but increasingly tested prototype. Visions of an “international civil society” and a “cosmopolitan democracy” have appeared in recent years, suggesting that while these are still only in the making and remain largely in ideal form, there are enough indications to make their realization more than wishful thinking. Economic and technological “globalization,” on an unprecedented scale, add to this sense that a new world order is struggling to be born. Wells would have been in his element: there are better prospects now for his “World-State” than at any time during his lifetime. The absence of an end-of-the-century Wells underscores the obvious point that social opportunity is not enough; creativity and imagination are also necessary ingredients of utopia.

In no other sphere does this pressure toward utopia show itself more than in that of electronic communication. While politically the world still remains a world of nation states, and even economically “globalization” is still patchy and uneven, in culture and communication the world is fast becoming one. Satellites and fiber-optic cable, computers and the World Wide Web, global media networks and corporations, have linked the world in one integrated information and communication grid. We are, many theorists tell us, in an Age of Information, one that marks off our age as decisively as the nineteenth-century industrial revolution separated us from the old agrarian world. Once more, Wells, with his idea of the encyclopedic “World Brain” and the “world-wide House of Salomon,” would have felt at home. Once more, unlike Wells, no one seems willing to step forward and clothe the idea in utopia’s vivid colors.

It is not that the opportunities have not been exploited in other forms and ways. The very idea of the “Information Society” is replete with utopianism. Few of its exponents have been able to avoid a euphoric sense that the new possibilities opened up by the gigantic advances in information and communication will resolve most of our age-old problems of scarcity, ignorance, and inequality. The term “computopia” itself has been coined to express the wonderful world that the manifold applications of the computer are bringing into being. There has been much optimism around the idea of the “virtual community,” the re-creation of a new “electronic agora” through the agency of the world-wide democracy of the Internet. Some imaginative science fiction has developed to explore the idea of “cyberspace” and “virtual reality,” though where this has overlapped with utopian concerns it has generally taken dystopian form, as in William Gibson’s Neuromancer (1984). What has not been attempted, any more than with the idea of a new world society or world state, is a full-fledged utopian representation of the information age and the information society – this despite the abundance of resources available to any would-be utopian. It suggests that utopia does not have the appeal or command the attention that it once did – that the imaginative depiction of the good society is thought either misplaced or impossible. Utopianism, yes; and there are innumerable outlets, ranging from academic social theory to the popular culture of film and television, for its expression. But for the distinctive form of the literary utopia, as invented by Thomas More and practiced for more than three centuries, there no longer seems much call.
The End of Utopia?

We have seen that this is a condition that developed steadily throughout the second half of the twentieth century. There has been no successor to Wells, none even to Huxley or Orwell. Anti-utopia has fared almost as badly as utopia, though some novelists and science-fiction writers have drawn upon its modes and techniques to conjure up their particular nightmare visions of the future. Here they have continued in that vein of pessimism and nostalgia for past life that has characterized the literary intelligentsia for most of this century. In the high culture, at least, success usually turns more on pouring icy waters on our hopes than on raising them.

The fate of the novel itself might offer some explanation of utopia's plight. Utopia rose and fell with the novel. It was itself in its origins a kind of novel—a narrative of adventures in strange lands—and it was sustained by all the techniques later developed by the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel. The classic novel—the novel of Balzac, Dickens, and Tolstoy—took the whole of society as its object. It was panoramic in the way that utopia too aspired to comprehend the whole of social life. Not so the twentieth-century novel, the novel of Joyce, Woolf, and Kafka. The novel of our times has retreated to private worlds, to that "inner space" to which the best science fiction also takes us.

Psychology or psychoanalysis are its tools, not sociology or political science. Such a literary climate is profoundly hostile to utopia, which has always dwelt in the bracing spaces of politics and society.

Or is the decline of utopia to do with the decline of religion, specifically the decline of Christian belief, as some have suggested? It is true that though utopia is a secular form, Christian ideas of paradise and the millennium have provided it with some of its imagery and much of its emotional charge. If, as the utopian thinker Ernst Bloch believed, utopia is inextricably bound up with “the principle of hope,” then declining faith in religion might well undermine the wellsprings of utopia as well, since it is religion that has sustained the hope of the world. Against this, there is the obvious point that religion, even Christian religion, has not declined to the extent predicted by both its friends and enemies in the nineteenth century, and can even be said to be experiencing a marked revival today. More importantly, much of the emotional as well as the intellectual structure of Christianity passed over into secular social philosophies, such as Marxism, so that the principle of hope was carried on their shoulders into the twentieth century.

More to the point might be the declining faith in those secular philosophies themselves. When philosophers announce the "end of grand narratives," when it is said that there is no philosophical basis for Enlightenment beliefs in Truth, Reason, Science, and Progress, it is hard to see how utopia, which tends to believe in most of those things, can survive. Fortunately, such "postmodern" theories, in their strict form at least, are believed in by only a handful of intellectuals, and most people, including intellectuals, do not appear to be unduly influenced by them in their everyday lives. But this is a different matter from saying that secular philosophies still retain a hold on the imagination of the people, at least in the manner and to the extent that they once did. Clearly they do not. The decline of socialism is only the most spectacular instance of the change. There is abundant evidence, from the political life of most Western nations, not only that people have little faith in politicians (that is hardly new) but that they also give little credibility to political ideologies and political programs. Politics is reduced in their eyes to horse-trading and careerism; at best it offers better or worse teams of managers. This is not so much postmodernist skepticism and irony as it is a resigned sense of disappointment at the failure of ideologies to deliver what they promise. In any case, it is clearly not the stuff of utopia, or even of anti-utopia on any meaningful scale.

If this is an accurate perception of current realities, it suggests an "end of history" in a more profound sense than that intended by Fukuyama. Even liberal capitalism here loses its gloss. All aspirations toward the good society appear illusory. We might even say, with Jean Baudrillard, that we cannot even talk of the "end" of history, since that suggests some sort of consummation. History can now "only turn around or repeat itself." What one gets is endless recycling of the past, endless recovery and restoration. The millennium ends not with a bang but a whimper.

Karl Mannheim, a great student of utopias, thought that the elimination of the "reality-transcending power of utopia" would mean "the decay of the human will": "With the relinquishment of utopias, man would lose his will to shape history and therewith his ability to understand it." Even East European intellectuals, such as Czeslaw Milosz and Milan Simecka, who, feeling it has been tried on them, are passionately aware of the dangers of utopia, warn against the rejection of all visions along with that of Marxism. A world without
utopias, says Simecka, "would be a world without social hope, a world of resignation to the status quo and the devalued slogans of everyday political life." To inveigh against the disappearance of utopias when the conditions for their creation may have all but vanished might seem vain. But perhaps that is not the point. Utopia can probably take care of itself, in the long run at least. It is unlikely that so long as the human race continues the "principle of hope" will ever entirely disappear. Utopia will be reborn, even if in forms that we cannot anticipate. What seems important today is to understand why it is so difficult for us to contemplate utopia, and the consequences of failing to do so. That by itself might play some part in recovering this historic vehicle of mankind's hopes and desires.

1 See on this Krishan Kumar, Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), Chapter 2. It is probably correct to say that the revival of the literary utopia was inspired by a work that was not itself a formal utopia but that did not scorn a utopian picturing of the socialist future: August Bebel's Woman in the Fast, Present and Future (1879; 2nd ed. 1883). A similar accomplishment to the revival of the literary utopia can be found in writings that, though not formal utopias, have a distinctly utopian cast, such as Oscar Wilde's The Soul of Man Under Socialism (1891) and Ebenecet Howard's Tomorrow (1899).


4 For a full discussion of the Wellsian utopia, see my Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times, Chapter 6.


7 See, for example, Chad Walsh, From Utopia to Nightmare (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962).

8 I discuss these features of Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four in Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times, Chapters 7 and 8.


11 See on this movement Gary Worskey, The Visible College (London: Allen and Unwin, 1978); for their works, see my Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times, 230-42.


16 For the reaction to Skinner, and the general character of Walden Two, see my Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times, Chapter 9.


20 For further discussion of Marcuse and the “Freudo-Marxists,” see my Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times, 393–402.


23 For further discussion of the feminist utopia, see Tom Moylan, Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination (New York and London: Methuen, 1988) and Frances Bartkowski, Feminist Utopias (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).

24 The one work of this kind that seems to have broken out of the ghetto is Ursula Le Guin’s The Dispossessed. See, for instance, the appreciation in Raymond Williams, “Utopia and Science Fiction,” in His Problems in Materialism and Culture (London: Verso, 1980).


32 See, for example, Frank and Fritzie Manuel, Utopian Thought in the Western World (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 801 ff.


