It is nearly five hundred years since Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) was first published, inaugurating a literary genre that continues to provoke new thinking and sometimes-virulent argument. *Utopia* originally appeared in Latin (the first English translation was published in 1551), More building into its title a pun in Greek on ‘ou’ (meaning ‘no’) and ‘eu’ (meaning ‘good’) compounded with ‘topos’, or place. From the outset, then, ‘Utopia’ was a paradox, a good place that is no place. To add to the literary knowingness of the text, More himself appears as a character, as does his friend Peter Giles, both of whom engage in extended discussion with Raphael Hythloday, a traveller claiming to have visited Utopia. Hythloday reports enthusiastically on Utopia’s superiority to Europe. But while Hythloday says that he has voyaged with the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci to the New World, his name is another comic hybrid, as Robert M. Adams explains:

> The first root of ‘Hythloday’ is surely Greek *huthlos*, meaning nonsense; the second part of the name may suggest *daien*, to distribute, i.e., a nonsense-peddler. A fantastical trilingual pun could make the whole name mean ‘God heals [Heb., *Raphael*] through the nonsense [Gr. *huthlos*] of God [lat., *dei*]’ (More, 1992: fn 9, 5).

This intellectual playfulness extends well beyond linguistic jokes into a serious critique of prevailing social norms and structures. In the context in which it first appeared, *Utopia*’s validation of communal ownership, social equality, a form of representative democracy, a six-hour working day (based on everyone working) and the renunciation of materialism presented a confronting thought experiment on how societies might organise themselves—it still does. But More also included more obviously problematic elements in the fictional good/no place: slavery; mercenaries; euthanasia; a non-Christian religion; no gambling or taverns, and no privacy: ‘[there are] no hiding places, no spots for secret meetings. Because they live in the full view of all, they are bound to be either working at their usual trades, or enjoying their leisure in a respectable way’ (More, 1992: 45).

There is a potential undertone of coercion built into this compulsively public existence, worrying enough to cause some readers then and now to pause. Would we be willing to give up privacy for a supposedly better society? Could we live communally? Is euthanasia acceptable? We might wonder where More, a devout and learned man, stood on such matters, but the text provides no easy answers. As Gregory Claeys notes: ‘More’s “real” intentions . . . are left in some doubt, and many a reader emerges from the text uncertain as to what has been recommended and what has been satirised’ (Claeys, 2011: 60). *Utopia*’s continuing ability to unsettle, to prompt and to inspire relies at least in part on five hundred years of productive uncertainty.

This quality in the original text remains a crucial aspect of the genre’s subsequent appeal and longevity. For the literary theorist Darko Suvin, utopias and the related genre of science fiction create ‘an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment’ (Suvin, 1979: 7-8). These texts generate what Suvin describes as ‘cognitive estrangement’, a state that requires readers to compare their own societies to otherwise unconsidered options. Through these other worlds the reader’s reality is ‘made strange’, resulting in liberating new thoughts. Fredric Jameson sees utopias similarly, contending that they provide ‘an object of meditation . . . whose function is to provoke a fruitful bewilderment and to jar the mind into some heightened but unconceptualisable consciousness of its own powers, functions, aims and structural limits’ (Jameson, 1988: 87-88). From a more overtly political angle, Tom Moylan has described the utopian genre as presenting a ‘manifesto of otherness’ (Moylan, 1986: 37), judging that ‘in the estranged vision of another world lie the seeds for changing the present society’ (Moylan, 1986: 35). Utopias, in Moylan’s view, not only generate imaginative critical thinking, but also potentially offer the basis for radical action, with real world consequences. Writing in the 1980s, Moylan was
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conscious that the utopian writing in the 1960s and 1970s more regularly had adopted the form of the 'critical utopia', a central concern of which were 'the limitations of the utopian tradition'. This development involved rejecting the utopia as blueprint while preserving it as a dream. Furthermore, the novels dwell on the conflict between the originary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of change is more directly articulated. Finally the novels focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within the utopian society itself and render more recognizable and dynamic alternatives. (Moylan, 1986: 11–12)

The recognition of imperfect utopias registers that the imagined worlds are rarely presented as faultless (there is still crime, punishment and war in Hythloday's account of Utopia). Utopias more usually present radical improvements on contemporaneous societies, rather than ideal (and therefore probably unattainable) visions.

Moylan's use of the term 'critical utopia' points to attempts by scholars of utopias to distinguish between the diverse subgenres that have emerged since More. Lyman Tower Sargent offers one typology under the general term of 'Utopianism', which he glosses as 'social dreaming'. Sargent begins with a capacious definition of a Utopia as 'a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space' (Sargent, 2005: 172). He uses this basic formula as the starting point of his definition of a 'Utopia' or 'positive utopia' that being 'a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which the reader lived' (172). By contrast, the 'Dystopia' or 'negative utopia' is a society 'that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived' (172). Another type, the 'Utopian satire', is one in which 'the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as criticism of that contemporary society' (172). The 'Critical utopia' presents a society 'that the author intended a contemporaneouse reader to view as better than contemporary society but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a critical view of the utopian genre' (172). This essentially accords with Moylan's sense of a critical utopia. Not surprisingly, the 'Critical dystopia' represents a society worse than the reader's contemporary society 'but that normally includes at least eutopian enclave or holds out the hope that the dystopia can be overcome and

replaced by a eutopia' (172). Rafaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan understand critical dystopias as those works that initially represent bad places, but which are open-ended works that resist closure in the negative. 'In fact', they argue by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those collective 'ex-centric' subjects whose class, gender, race, sexuality, and other positions are not empowered by hegemonic rule (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003: 6).

In the same way that the utopia need not be entirely perfect to activate thinking among its readers, the dystopia need not be entirely imperfect. These types register the enormous variety of works that might conceivably be understood as 'social dreaming', and suggest that readers need to pay attention to subtleties and complexities not acknowledged in a simple utopia/dystopia binary.

Sargent also distinguishes a related form, the 'anti-utopia', a 'non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as criticism of utopianism or of some particular eutopia' (172). The anti-utopia for Sargent and for others is an attack upon the very idea of utopianism, rather than merely another bad place. An example might seem to be one of most celebrated speculative works of the last century, Aldous Huxley's Brave New World (1932). That novel carries an epigraph from Nicolas Berdiaeff that translates roughly as

Utopias appear to be much more realisable than we used to think. We are finding ourselves face to face with a far more awful questions: how can we avoid their actualisation? . . . For they can be made actual. Life is marching towards them. And perhaps a new period is beginning, a period when intelligent men will be wondering how they can avoid these utopias, and return to a society non-utopian, less perfect, but more free.

Krishan Kumar confidently places Brave New World in the anti-utopian category in his chapter 'Science and Anti-Utopia: Aldous Huxley and Brave New World' (Kumar, 1987: 224–287). But we might read in the epigraph an encouragement—perhaps even a demand—for readers to consider another future, 'non-utopian, less perfect, but more free'. In other words, while the world presented in Brave New World is certainly dystopian in many respects, the novel is in part a prompt for readers to think about what aspects are wholly negative and what are merely excessive. Take for instance, the endless orgies, drug taking and 'feelies' indulged in by so many of the inhabitants of the future. In some ways they are simply
an extension of Huxley’s contemporaneous world. He had visited the United States in the 1920s and had been appalled by the materialism and hyper-consumption he saw. In Jesting Pilate (1926), David Bradshaw notes, Huxley writes: ‘The thing that is happening in America is a revaluation of values, a radical alteration (for the worse) of established standards’ (Bradshaw, 1994). Bradshaw comments that it was soon after visiting the United States that Huxley conceived the idea of writing a satire on what he had encountered. Brave New World may be read as Huxley’s contribution to the widespread fear of Americanisation which had been current in Europe since the mid-nineteenth century, but this humorous, disturbing and curiously ambivalent novel offers much more than a straight travesty (Bradshaw, 1994: unpaginated).

So Brave New World can be read not as an attack upon the idea of utopia but as, in part at least, an evisceration of endless and mindless pleasure-seeking that Huxley had observed in the United States, part of the Americanisation of western culture that we experience today. Huxley, then, was not necessarily against the idea of utopias per se. Indeed his last published novel, Island (1962), is just that, what Kumar recognises as ‘a fully realised portrait of a utopian society’. Kumar sees Island as the endpoint of a ‘movement from anti-utopia to utopia’ (Kumar, 1987: 226). Not that the novel escaped criticism, Frank Kermode describing Island as ‘one of the worst novels ever written’ (Kermode, 1962: 472).

Brave New World offers an instructive case study to which I will return, but if it is not an example of anti-utopian thinking, there are others that qualify. John Gray’s Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia (2007) is a recent addition. Gray is a political philosopher, not a novelist, and his book is an extended nonfiction argument against the idea of, and the impulses he sees behind, utopia. Black Mass allows us to make the necessary distinction between utopianism as a literary genre and as a form of thinking. (That said, the distinction could be ambiguous: while the island of Utopia is a fiction, the text of Utopia, especially in the first book, incorporates examples and arguments taken from the real world). The anti-utopian stance is often associated with conservative political views, where gradual change (if any at all) based on experience and consensus is preferred to the more radical or apocalyptic change sometimes advocated by utopians. As the subtitle of Gray’s book indicates, he closely associates utopian thinking and writing generally with a dangerous fanaticism linked to religious notions of apocalypse. He argues that ‘the pursuit of a condition of harmony defines utopian thought and discloses its basic unreality’ (Gray, 2007: 17), continuing that

Conflict is a universal feature of human . . .
A conflict-free existence is impossible for humans, and wherever it is attempted the result is intolerable to them. If human dreams were achieved, the result would be worse than any aborted Utopia. Luckily the visions of the ideal are never realized . . . Utopias are collective dreams that in waking life are found to be nightmares (Gray, 2007: 17).

Gray sees the roots of utopian thinking in ancient religious notions of apocalypse, a catastrophic event that brings history to an end and that justifies those who believe in it remaking the world by force. For Gray, this attitude cuts across the political spectrum, from Nazism and Communism in the twentieth century to the utopian right of this century, with its confidence that ‘in future only one kind of regime would be legitimate: American-style democratic capitalism—the final form of human government’ (Gray, 2007: 29). After September 11, Gray argues, ‘utopian thinking came to shape foreign policy in the world’s pre-eminent democracy’, adding: ‘Universal
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democracy and the “war on terror” have proved to be dangerous delusions. Like utopian regimes in the past, governments will not admit that they are attempting the impossible’ (Gray, 2007: 29). He prosecutes this trenchant case for over 200 pages, examining the relationship of utopian thinking to the real world and showing (if we accept his argument) the consequences of this thinking.

Gray’s linking of traditional religious terminology to contemporary utopian thinking underscores the fact that although More’s text gives him naming rights to the literary genre, utopian thinking far predates *Utopia* itself. Gregory Claeys observes that the ‘prehistory of the concept is chiefly religious, consisting of creation myths and a prospective afterlife, but may contain a speculative historical dimension’ (Claeys, 2011: 7). He then gives an account of the classical age of utopias, with figures such as Hesiod writing of Golden Ages, or philosophers such as Plato, who in The Republic proposed wise philosopher kings to rule over a caste-based, but essentially communal, state. Claeys devotes another chapter to ‘Christian Archetypes’, noting that Western utopianism is ‘rooted firmly in Christianity as well as classical thought,’ and commenting that the ‘most famous Christian utopian of course Jesus Christ’ (Claeys, 2011: 29). Given that More’s Utopia is not itself a Christian place, Claeys’s view is somewhat debatable, but it does indicate the intricacies and flexibility of the term and the form. The possibility that aspects of Christianity might be dystopian is dealt with provocatively in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). There, the takeover of the United States by a fundamentalist Christian group who impose adulterated ideas from the Bible to create a totalitarian state that oppresses women suggests the darker possibilities of religious teachings that employ utopian ideas. While *The Handmaid’s Tale* uses Christianity as the form of religious belief most likely to take control in the United States, it should be obvious that the warning it raises might equally apply to other religions. And because the ruling regime borrows its slogans and methods from political groups and ideologies, the critique broadens beyond Christianity. Atwood indicates that part of the success of the new regime stems from a wider social backlash against second wave feminism. One quotation—‘From each according to her ability, to each according to his needs’— is presented to the handmaids as coming from ‘St Paul again, in Acts’ (Atwood, 1985: 127), when in fact it derives from Karl Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Program* (Marx, 1972: 388). More importantly, the regime changes Marx’s gender neutral ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his need’ to satisfy its sexist program that makes women subservient to men.

The relationship between *The Handmaid’s Tale* and social issues current at the time of its publication also extends the impact of utopian thinking beyond the literary. Claeys make the important point that the ‘study of utopias focuses on three main domains: utopian thought; the narrower genre of utopian fiction; and practical attempts to found improved communities’ (Claeys, 2011: 11). The last of these are often called ‘intentional communities’. Sargent defines these as ‘a group of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some mutually agreed upon purpose’ (Sargent, 2005: 172). The term ‘intentional communities’ perhaps calls to mind the ‘communes’ of the 1960s and 1970s, groups based on anti-materialism, sexual liberation, and sometimes a ‘back to the land’ philosophy. But, as Gregory Claeys explains, such communities have a much longer lineage, and even what he terms the ‘modern communitarian movement’ is over two centuries old. The most important developments of this he sees as having ‘taken place in the United States, often as part of a program of religious and later political settlement to escape persecution in Europe’. These communities, he adds, ‘have been regarded as an integral aspect of the development not only of the frontier of the United States, but of the society itself’ (Claeys, 2011: 129). They included the Mennonites, the Shakers and various German Protestant groups, along with others such as Amish and Mormons. A brief but important secular flourishing of utopianism was seeded by Edward Bellamy’s novel *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888) which envisaged the United States in 2000 as a stable, prosperous socialist society, one that had overcome the flaws and inequities of the nineteenth century in which it was published. An instant international bestseller, the book spawned scores of Bellamy clubs that debated his ideas and tried to apply them to the real world. As Claeys reveals: ‘Based on the principles outlined in Bellamy’s text, societies were founded throughout Europe and South Africa, Indonesia and New Zealand’ (Claeys, 2011: 129). In Europe itself, schemes such as Robert Owen’s New Lanark, a model industrial factory village (1800-1825) proved popular and successful (see Claeys, 2011: 132–4). The kibbutz system of ‘collective labour, shared produce and economic self-sufficiency’ (Claeys,
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2011: 138) was a highly successful system in Israel for more than half a century before its decline after the 1950s. The broader western counter-culture movement of the 1960s and 1970s coincided with a revival of utopian thinking and action after the ravages of war and the conformism of the 1950s, but this declined in the 1980s. How we understand today’s world is debatable. The undoubted ease, convenience and comfort enjoyed by the privileged few would count as utopian in historical terms. But even within prosperous nations such as Australia prosperity is unevenly spread and the prevailing ethos tends towards individuality rather than broader social improvement. It could be—and is—argued that increases in life expectancy, improvements in health and standards of living in many parts of the world point to a better future for all. But, there is a real problem with the notion that such improvements can go on indefinitely. As John Lanchester notes in a recent article:

The whole world wants to have a First World bourgeois lifestyle, and the whole world can see what it looks like by glancing at a television set, but the world can’t have it, because we will burn through its resources before we get there (Lanchester, 2012: 10)

The planet sets finite limits on what is possible given the needs of a consumerist society, and a temporary utopia for some might well result in a permanent dystopia for all. Or will it be that those who enjoy ‘utopian’ lives will be unwilling to give up their advantages? What might be the consequences of that unwillingness: conflicts in which those relegated to regional dystopias refuse to accept their excluded status? gated communities on a national scale where privileged groups protect their privileges? new forms of social hierarchy that create stability at the expense of freedom? Utopias and dystopias as yet unwritten might well tackle these questions.

To a large degree, of course, and in different ways, utopias and dystopias have long speculated on divided societies and planets, along with the fraught interactions between them. In Brave New World ultra-modern London is played off against the hardship and desolation of Malpais. Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake (2003) has protected Compounds for the technological and scientific elites bordered by rundown, urban pleeblands, where disease (some of it manufactured in the Compounds) and lawlessness prevails. Ridley Scott’s Bladeunner (1982) envisages dystopian ‘Offworld’ colonies separated from the Los Angeles of 2019, itself a distinctively dystopian site. The near future world depicted in Michael Winterbottom’s film Code 46 is divided into ‘First World’ enclaves whose inhabitants enjoy a high level of existence, protected by borders that screen them from those outside living in ‘Third World’ poverty, while in Alfonso Cuaron’s Children of Men Britain is a fortress island, protecting itself from invasion by refugees (‘fugees’) and others as the earth’s population inexorably dies out. Many more examples exist, but what is revealing about most of these imaginative works is how the territorial divisions between the spaces are overridden, or breached, with characters moving back and forth between them. Interestingly, too, this can lead to comparisons that do not always validate the supposed utopias. So, when Bernard Marx asks John Savage in Brave New World has he eaten ‘something that didn’t agree with you?’ John replies, ‘I ate civilisation’ (Huxley, 1994: 220), a clear refutation of that supposedly better world. The material superiority of the utopian spaces in Code 46 is undercut by a loss of freedom, people constantly being put under surveillance. A more invidious and invasive monitoring takes place in the utopian spaces of Andrew Niccol’s Gattaca, where bodily fluids and other human detritus are constantly being tested to ensure the social division between the genetically superior Valids and the supposedly inferior InValids. In Code 46 and Gattaca, those who apparently benefit from social hierarchies often suffer a fundamental lack of freedom, needing to construct and maintain inauthentic selves in order to survive.

The reference to social hierarchies remind us that utopias are less concerned with physical spaces, good, bad, or otherwise, as with social organization. Plato’s Republic has a three-tiered hierarchy based on ability and character, H.G. Wells’s A Modern Utopia (1905) a four level classification of Poetic, Kinetic, Dull and Base. These distinctions are determined by qualities of the mind, which Wells—the most creative and influential utopian thinker of the twentieth century (indeed, a Poietic mind in his own terms)—thought the best way to organise a modern utopia. In many ways Brave New World is Huxley’s highly critical response to Wells’s view that science and technology were central to the type of dynamic, creative utopia Wells thought not only possible but also essential to the full evolution of humanity. Significantly, where Wells demands constant creativity and change, and criticises the essentially static and perfected utopias of Plato, More and others, Huxley employed science to create a stable and perhaps stagnant utopia through genetic engineering. In doing this, Huxley addresses one of the most telling and repeated criticisms
of utopias and dystopias: that they inevitably involve standardisation and uniformity, so that individuality is crushed. This fear runs through many modern works, particularly in response to the modern rise of bureaucracy, mass production—with, initially at least, its ‘any colour as long as it is black’ mentality—and mass consumption, which mark out the last century or more. Two early cinematic versions are Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1929) and the opening scenes of Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936), where mass production eradicates individual identity.

Presciently, Huxley located a new danger in the capacity of science and technology either to reprogram us biologically, or to sort us genetically into the superior and the inferior, those destined to live utopian lives and those doomed to dystopian hells. In the imagined worlds or predetermined biology presented by *Brave New World* and *Gattaca*, does individual identity exist, let alone matter? The pertinence of questions such as these to contemporary society should be obvious. As are the questions the novel raises about hyper consumerism and the relentless pursuit of instant gratification. Huxley’s satirical mind brilliantly evoked the mindlessness of this state of being in slogans and sayings: ‘Take a holiday from reality whenever you like’; ‘Ending is better than mending’; ‘Never put off tomorrow the fun you can have today’. We might easily imagine these as part of a contemporary advertising campaign. Readers often forget that most of the novel’s characters see the world they inhabit as utopian, a clear sign that they are complicit and deluded.

Utopias and dystopias aim to wrench us from our own complicity and delusion. They require that we maintain an alert critical eye on the trends, potential, deficiencies and dangers in our own societies so that we can distinguish good place from bad place, now and in the future.

**Works Cited**


