

“The Role of Dystopia: Isaiah Berlin and the Novels of Huxley and Zamyatin”
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Stephen Toulmin's *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* describes the modern use of theoretical and instrumental reason to transform the self and world into a unified rational order. Such a goal guided the Russian intelligentsia whose historical mission was the political redemption of Russia and the world through the rational application of scientific laws to unite the world, society, and the self in a perfect harmony based on scientific principles. (Berlin *Russian Thinkers*) In 1920 Evgeny Zamyatin, a trained engineer and older Bolshevik, wrote *We*, a satiric account of a utopian society that becomes one more dystopian no place when human nature reasserts itself. After a brief discussion of Toulmin's account of modernity's hidden agenda I will first discuss Zamyatin's revolutionary political utopia in relation to Isaiah Berlin's critique of utopian thought and then contrast it with Aldous Huxley's stable consumer utopia in *Brave New World*. This comparison will provide the basis for a brief conclusion about why dystopian writing is a necessary part of modern and, for that matter, postmodern culture.

In *Cosmopolis* Stephen Toulmin argues that the modern faith in historical progress has caused us to misunderstand the origins and nature of the modern, making us oblivious to the 17th century turn to totalizing reason. The popular self-narrative of the Enlightenment, intensified by the industrial and technological success of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, created an unexamined image of an ever more confident modern humanity moving from superstition to reason and gaining an ever greater mastery over natural and social life with each new innovation. Toulmin argues that the 17th century was actually a period of great strife and anxious uncertainty. The prestige of science rested on modern thought's

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promise to discover an underlying rational pattern linking nature and society that could provide people with the certainty they sought. Given the topic of this conference, one could assert that there is a utopian element at the core of the modern faith in reason, science, and technology. Toulmin notes that the oft-repeated revolutionary gestures of wiping the slate clean and starting over from a new scratch point are fundamental tropes in modern thought and political rhetoric. (Toulmin 175-179) He also notes that the Cartesian dichotomy became the common sense of the European bourgeoisie and served to reconcile the contradictory goals of the modern: perfect social order in harmony with natural law and freedom for individuals. In its 17th century form the dichotomy rested on an absolute split between the necessary, law-governed world of matter (nature) and the free world of mind. The natural world could become the object of scientific study, because of these laws, while the world of mind and human agency could only be the object of rational moral thought, because it was fundamentally free. The optimism of this world rested on their belief that reason was universal, meaning that everyone would reach the same, ideal conclusions if free to reason about the good and the best forms of social organization. (Toulmin 108-117) Thinkers, such as Arendt, Heidegger, Adorno, and Horkheimer, have famously noted that this dichotomy collapsed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the objects of scientific investigation expanded and human actions and social organization began to be treated as objects of the same laws and manipulation as the natural world.

My study of the novels of Zamyatin and Huxley argues that they are dystopian works depicting the dehumanizing effects and social chaos caused by

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creating societies based on the modern utopian quest for rational certainty and managed order. Because Zamyatin and Huxley lived in different societies, they created different novels and imagined different worlds. Taken together, those worlds reveal the two poles of the twentieth century version of modernity: Zamyatin’s world is one in which a rational state attempts to develop a perfectly rational people to live in a perfectly rational society; Huxley’s world is one in which corporate managers attempt to perfect a consumer society inhabited by consumers whose functions and desires are perfectly matched to their economic roles. My discussion of the two novels will attempt to describe this content while also linking it to the form of each work. I will begin with Zamyatin’s OneState.

Zamyatin presents different aspects of his OneState’s core belief: human happiness can be maximized by meeting our biological needs and satisfying our aesthetic desire for a total, harmonious order. This belief has three aspects: 1) people are rational beings whose innate love for rational order shapes our sense of beauty and makes us value membership in a rational group over individual autonomy; 2) people’s basic biological needs can be quantified; 3) there is a maximally efficient social organization that best meets those needs. The society therefore employs mathematical ethics, its form of utilitarian calculus, to solve moral problems and organize life. The best procedures meet the biological needs of the most people; an act is moral if it increases overall happiness, even if it drastically decreases the happiness of particular individuals.

The rulers and loyal citizens of OneState believe perfect social order conditions human behavior and thoughts so that people act in unison to achieve

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rational harmony and attain maximum productive efficiency. Such order requires institutions to shape the population and a leadership with the will to use even the harshest measures if they are mathematically justifiable. Public policy reduces people to their parts (genetic material, basic drives, reason), then reengineers, and reassembles them into perfectly functioning individuals and groups. Since science will eventually solve all problems, utopia is inevitable, if some individual, The Benefactor, takes responsibility for doing what has to be done. The OneState claims to be a technocracy, not a dictatorship, because power is not exercised willfully, for self-gain, but according to scientific principles, for the benefit of all. Group rituals combine Foucault’s transparent power (The narrator’s favorite phrase is: “It’s clear.”) with the opaque power of manifest sovereignty. The Benefactor presents himself as acting on scientific principles verified by the institutions of whose power he is only the visible instrument. Transparency applies both to the ideal society, ruled by rational and biological laws, not by human will, and to the ideal self, governed by the same laws, not by the caprices of individual will. The OneState is a totalitarian system in which the microcosm of the self must correspond to the macrocosm of society. It seeks not external obedience, but the transformation of the self into a clear particle in a homogenous, transparent social order. The free, human part of the modern dichotomy has been absorbed into the clear certainty of a *cosmopolis* that presents itself as, and believes itself to be, a manifestation of a mathematically necessary cosmic order.

Public rituals and spaces are visible symbols of that order. Individuals have numbers instead of names. On the Day of Unanimity everyone votes in public. They

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march in ranks with synchronized movements. They are educated in schools by robot lecturers. Remnants of the past are there only for instructive purposes to sustain a narrative of historical progress. Public lectures provide proof of the superiority of their present. Their music follows mathematical principles. Their day is lived according to Taylor’s Table of Hours. Sex is determined by a scientific analysis of their biological needs; a system allows them to choose any number as a sexual partner. Walls are made of transparent glass. Letters are read by the Guardians. The wall keeps all organic life outside of the city. When city order is threatened, everyone undergoes an operation to remove the imagination. The threat that causes the surgical removal of human agency emerges gradually as the literary form of the work reveals that neither the state, nor the people who live in it are what they claim to be.

The text we read is the journal of one of the heroes of the society: the builder of the Integral, a spaceship designed to integrate the entire universe. He includes everything he experiences, asserting that since he is a perfect member of a perfect society, everything will be useful. He is confident the rational will overcome the biological as all life evolves toward its ultimate end, and the OneState unites all humanity, indeed all possible living beings, in a single, peaceful, rational space. However, as the novel develops, he loses his confidence, his sanity, and, as a result of the operation, his imagination.

Isaiah Berlin said of utopias like OneState: “Utopias have their value-nothing so wonderfully expands the imaginative horizons of human potentialities-but as guides to conduct they can prove literally fatal.” (*Crooked* 15) Utopianism changed

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with the Enlightenment-derived belief that progress in the sciences can be matched by social progress, allowing us to create a perfectly just society by applying a true science of society to the management of people. Berlin breaks all utopian faith down into a set of smaller assumptions necessary if everyone is to be permanently happy: 1) All genuine questions have one and only one true answer; 2) There is a dependable path to these truths, a universal method; and 3) All true answers must be compatible; society is a cosmic jigsaw puzzle which can be assembled by someone who has the key. (*Crooked* 24-25) He objects to each of these assumptions: 1) Genuine questions might have more than one true answer; the human cost of assuming otherwise is totalitarianism; 2) There are various methods, each of which limits possible questions and answers; and 3) Human life is tragic in the Greek and Hegelian sense: Goods do conflict; choices with real consequences are unavoidable. Any attempt to build a utopia through political action and social institutions will therefore lead to disastrous results. (*Crooked* 25-48) The OneState is an example of what happens when a group assumes it has the status of a perfect observer who knows everything from a point located outside history and culture. History suggests such beliefs are fatal illusions.

The form of Zamyatin’s work dispels such illusions. *We* is a series of first-person journal entries. The lack of a third-person voice creates a fragmentary narration that undermines the moral order and disrupts the didactic message of the OneState’s revolutionary fiction as a gap arises between readers and the narrator. We perceive him perceiving the world and doubt his knowledge of others, the world, and himself. This process undercuts the utopian assumptions by creating multiple

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perspectives and contradictory explanations of the events, people, and ideas he thinks have only one universal explanation. As the narrator himself becomes aware of these uncertainties, he fears he is losing control of himself. We make sense of his world as it loses sense for him, constructing our image of his world as that world and his image of it are falling apart. By the time we read the calm entries written by his post-operation self, who no longer has an imagination, we experience his triumph as a loss and do not trust his claim that reason should prevail. The language and his reactions are so flat that we perceive them as inhuman. Consider his reaction to the execution of the woman he once loved:

They brought in that woman. In my presence she was supposed to give her testimony. This woman stubbornly said nothing and was smiling. I noticed that she had sharp and white teeth and that this was beautiful.

Then they led her under the Bell Jar. Her face became very white and since her eyes were dark and big, this was very beautiful. When they started to pump the air out from under the Bell Jar, she threw back her head, half-closed her eyes, and squeezed her lips—this reminded me of something. She was looking at me, strongly gripping the armrests of the chair and looking until her eyes closed completely. Then they dragged her out... (Zamyatin 203)

Zamyatin does not simply present the Mephi, the revolutionary group who plunge society into chaos, as a positive alternative. The Mephi assume the powerful drives and emotions essential to our humanity cannot and should not be controlled by reason and science. To regularize them would be to destroy our humanity since

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people need chaos and the unknown as much as the known. The two states of society, entropy and energy, are the poles of infinite revolution. Humanity can survive in neither for an extended period of time. The Mephi are violent anarchists, not an organic group living in a state of natural innocence, or a group of autonomous individuals respecting each other's rights. The motivations of I-, the lover whose torture was described above and who seduces D- into betraying the OneState, are not entirely clear. She may be using sexual desire to control D's behavior and gain access to the Integral. D-'s new passionate self nearly murders his neighbor; his jealousy causes him to attack his best friend in racist terms. The choice between Mephi and OneState reveals the tragic dimensions Berlin said utopian faith denies and raises serious questions: Does the attempt to create utopia or rationalize society destroy the traditional order, leaving groups with a choice between an empty mechanical order and chaos? Does the utopian use of instrumental reason discount the importance of historical continuity by using science to overcome history, culture, and biology? Is it dangerous to conceive scientific knowledge as objective, rational, and verified? Does the attempt to base a society on such a misuse of reason generate an equally extreme misuse of the emotions?

A comparison of Huxley and Zamyatin can deepen our understanding of the modern dystopia. Zamyatin's choice of narrative form followed the pattern established by Dostoevsky in *Notes from Underground* of creating a character whose speech patterns and questionable perception of the world undermine the cognitive and social certainty on which utopia rests. As we read the journal of the builder of the *Integral*, we construct the subjective reality of a male technocrat, a character

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whose limited perceptions cause us to question the representational value of his language. We become uncertain both about the nature of some events and the character and motivations of the actors in them. When the narrator changes after he undergoes the operation to remove his soul, we experience the splitting of his self through his flat language and inability to recognize those he loved in the past, leaving us in a state of uncertainty about the condition of his world. Huxley, on the other hand, uses a third-person narration whose representational accuracy is assumed. The possible exception is when the Controller for Western Europe is telling the young students about the purpose of educational practices. (Huxley 52-61) Huxley cross edits the conversations of adults who have been shaped by this education with the Controller’s narrative to raise early doubts about the society’s self-image. The rest of the novel follows a series of major characters providing an objective image of how the different social classes understand the world in which they live and of the nature of that world itself. In Huxley’s novel the dystopian criticism therefore comes from the depicted events and ideas not from the estranging effect of the narrative itself.

The different narrative structures suit the utopian states that are the object of each satire. The OneState is a revolutionary society using technology to transform humanity and nature in order to realize their full rational potential. The narrator views himself as equal to all other citizens and assumes the neutral objectivity of scientific language ensures perfect equality by assigning everyone the social function for which they are biologically suited. However, the narrator’s individualized language and its lack of representational adequacy reveal his false

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perception of his world. His personal dissolution is only part of a larger revolt of sex, passion, and emotion as the Mephi call for creative chaos rather than rational order. They replace a state revolution pursuing rational certainty with a carnivalesque revolt into group frenzy that unleashes a multitude of first-person worlds. The operation, designed to cure the society of those worlds, sterilizes his narration.

Huxley's World State's motto is Community, Identity, and Stability. It is not a revolutionary, future-oriented society but one that maintains a stable present by engineering human development to produce people who are unified within their social class and perfectly happy in their social roles. The OneState saw itself as pursuing the beauty of perfect rational truth; the World State has elevated happiness above truth and beauty and made itself into a society whose *telos* is consumption. The happiness the World State pursues is that of satisfying the preferences of people who have been developmentally engineered to have those preferences because they increase production and consumption in class-appropriate ways. Truth and moral judgments are reduced to properly conditioned responses. Reason has not been elevated above the passions, as the 17th century wanted, but put into instrumental service to shape and satisfy them. In *We* sex was a regulated biological function whose satisfaction removed the negative emotions that block rational happiness; in *Brave New World* sex is a source of pleasure that aids consumption and enhances social solidarity and physical satisfaction. The World State's ubiquitous use of the drug, soma, sustains a satisfied state of mind and endless consumption as ends in themselves. The citizens of OneState are taught to

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see themselves as struggling to create a perfect future; the consumers of the World State are conditioned to enjoy their condition and never know frustration.

Revolutionary politics have been replaced by apolitical consumption. The revolt in Huxley’s novel is not that of a revolutionary group but of individuals who have become dissatisfied with their individual situations: Bernard has too little ability; Helmholtz has too much; the Savage is alienated from both the savages and the civilized because of his mixed, natural birth. Their individual revolts are simply incorporated into the system as Bernard and Helmholtz are sent to the islands where they are free to play with ideas, some of which may prove to have eventual uses in sustaining the World State, while the Savage is allowed to live alone, starting to serve as a tourist attraction (selling more consumer goods) until the suicide which ends the novel. Huxley uses his third-person narration to present these events as known dystopian realities.

The two utopian states represent an intensification of different aspects of the modern: OneState exemplifies faith in progress through the orderly control knowledge gives over human nature and the natural world while the World State believes happiness will increase through improved means of expressing and satisfying one’s own preferences. The ordered OneState emphasizes the role of science in rationalizing human behavior and thought. They teach history, science, and art, but only as aids in the engineering of a perfect society. The past is used as a bad example in a narrative of progress emphasizing the contrast between past absurdity and present rationality. The World State has elevated preference satisfaction over progress. Change is seen as inherently dangerous. Interiority and

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private life are avoided as threats to order. History, science, and art have all been rejected because their devotion to truth and beauty disrupts stability and consumer happiness. Their place has been taken by social and biological conditioning of the feelings through the senses. The OneState places its emphasis on the rational control of emotions; the World State turns them into physiological sensations, either the pleasure of the “feelies” or the pain and pleasure of physical conditioning that take the place of reasoning about moral and aesthetic judgments.

Returning to my earlier comments on Toulmin and Berlin, Toulmin argued the Cartesian dichotomy attempted to reconcile human desires for both freedom and order by separating the world of natural order from the world of human free agency and assuming reason would somehow unite them both. Berlin argued that the desire for utopia rests on a refusal to admit that some values, such as freedom and total certainty, are inherently incompatible and will probably never be understood in the same way by everyone. Each of these utopian states ignores the tragic nature of its fundamental choice to reject the human half of the Cartesian dichotomy, from which freedom and moral judgment derive, by refusing to acknowledge it was a choice: the OneState brought rational freedom under the control of universal laws of reason that are seen as analogous to necessary natural laws; the World State reduced humanity to senses and preferences that can be externally conditioned like those of any other animal. They both see no problem with accepting and applying the science of human psychology the early modern had rejected since they recognize neither the free rational moral agency the dichotomy

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had provided nor the free choice that would reveal the contradictions Isaiah Berlin saw in the very idea of rational utopia.

The object of Zamyatin’s satire is the Russian revolutionary tradition’s view of identity as linked to community and its belief it should lead society to a group vision of the good. Huxley’s satire is aimed at the class divisions of consumer society and its individualist view of identity as the attainment of personal goals, largely reduced to physical pleasure and sensation. His elite assumes its knowledge entitles it to administer the group membership and conditioned desires of its future members. Their purpose is to sustain an infinite process rather than attain a final goal.

Our brief comparison has shown each work has its own artistic merits. *We* explores the mind of a male technocrat as he faces challenges to his world view and fails to understand his society, his friends, women, and the surgical destruction of his own identity. It satirizes the elite’s tendency to use its own technologies to engineer the world into a better place and makes us aware of the limitations and hypocrisies of that effort to create perfect equality as we realize the limitations of its language and the narratives it uses. The subjective uncertainty in which we end any reading of the novel undermines the cognitive optimism on which utopian faith rests.

Brave New World depicts a world devoted to attaining communal stability through the satisfaction of individual preferences and the breeding and social conditioning of people to desire only the happiness appropriate for their class. Its

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language conveys a knowable world from different characters’ points of view and makes us reject the consequences of the happy inequality of its consumer utopia.

By comparing these two novels, we have seen the appropriateness of Berlin’s criticism of all utopias, in general, and of modern utopias, in particular. Utopias rest on assumptions about the knowability and universality of human nature and the natural world that do not survive the imaginative test of dystopian fiction and have proven literally fatal as political practice. In *Captive Mind*, Czeslaw Milosz’s extended essay on the ideological struggles at the center of the twentieth century, he described how ideas have profound effects on the lives of ordinary people who have no idea why certain practices are being implemented. In *Infoglut* Mark Andrejevic described our contemporary world as in the grip of a big-data-driven, technological utopianism that resembles both the state utopianism of *We* and the consumer utopianism of *Brave New World*. Dystopia remains an essential genre because it individualizes the contradictory ideas concealed beneath utopian dreams by depicting them as lived human experience and invites, indeed demands, us to engage in ethical reflection about them and their possible consequences.

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