

Article

Post-Utopia: The Long View

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Abstract: The present article is divided into three parts. The first discusses the nature of utopias and their hypothetical anti-type, dystopias, and also disaster scenarios that are sometimes assimilated to dystopias, with reference also to the idea of post-utopia. An argument is made for the continuity of the utopian impulse, even in an age when brutal wars and forms of oppression have caused many to lose faith in any form of collectivity. Representations of social breakdown and its apparent opposite, totalitarian rigidity, tend to privilege the very individualism that the utopian vision aspires to overcome. The second part looks at examples of each of these types drawn from classical Greek and Roman literature, with a view to seeing how utopias were conceived at a time before the emergence of the modern ideology of the pre-social self. Finally, the third part examines several stories from the collection *A People's Future of the United States* which imagine life in the near future. While most illustrate the failure of confidence in the social that has encouraged the intuition that a utopian future is passé, one, it is suggested, reconceives the relation between the individual and the social in a way that points to the renewed possibility of the utopian.

Keywords: Aristophanes; Lucian; Lucretius; Plato; science fiction



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“A utopia is a society that has abolished the difference between public and private life”. (Wenglinsky 2020)¹

“L'utopiste rêve en effet d'une coïncidence parfaite entre individu et collectivité—d'où le contrôle exercé sur la famille, susceptible de saper la solidarité communautaire, et sur la culture livresque, ferment d'individualisme.”. (Jouanno 2008, p. 19)²

1. Introduction

The present article is divided into three parts. In the first, I sketch the nature of utopias and their hypothetical anti-type, dystopias, as well as disaster scenarios, that is, representations of the total collapse of social order that are sometimes assimilated to dystopias or to post-utopian fictions. In the process, I cast a critical glance at the concept of a post-utopia itself. In an issue devoted to post-utopias, this may seem an unduly subversive maneuver. My argument takes the form of a defense of the social, and hence the continuity of the utopian impulse, even in an age when brutal wars and various forms of oppression have caused many to lose faith in any form of collectivity, for representations of social breakdown and its apparent opposite, totalitarian rigidity, tend to privilege (or so I argue) the very kind of individualism that the utopian vision aspires to overcome. In the second part, I look at examples of each of these types drawn from classical Greek and Roman literature, both the ecological catastrophe situation and the utopian systems that imagine maximum solidarity among citizens. This glance at earlier visions of an ideal world is intended to see how utopias are conceived at a time before the emergence of the

¹ (Wenglinsky 2020); I dedicate this article to Marty Wenglinsky, a dear friend and unfailing source of wisdom. I wish also to thank the three anonymous referees for thoughtful comments.

² (Jouanno 2008); it is worth consulting the entire special issue, which is devoted to “L'imaginaire utopique, de ses sources dans le monde grec à la Renaissance.”

modern ideology of the pre-social self. Finally, in the third part, I examine several stories from a recent collection, titled *A People's Future of the United States*, that extrapolate from current conditions to imagine life in the near future³. Here, I illustrate the kind of failure of confidence in the social that has encouraged the intuition that a utopian future is passé. But one of these stories, I will suggest, reconceives the relation between the individual and the social in a way that, in my view, points to the renewed possibility of the utopian. The comparison between these stories and the utopian fantasies of the classical world, I hope, will tell us something about the historical determination of the social and its abiding value.

A word about the nature of this essay is in order. The core thesis, again, is that, in modern utopian literature, the tendency of utopias to represent a complete harmony between the social and the private runs up against a deep-seated current or ideology of individualism, often represented in the form of romantic attachment, that is, a bond between two people that sets them off, in some fashion, from the collective. Romance, is, of course, a loaded term. Love and desire are perennial, to be sure, but mutual love becomes a marked element in modern narratives, though it has antecedents especially in the ancient Greek novels⁴. This feature stands in contrast to earlier utopias (those of classical Greece and Rome are singled out here), where the dissonance between personal passion and social conformity was not ideologically salient in the same way as it is in modern society. A rigorous demonstration of this claim, assuming it is possible, would require citation of a wide variety of texts, along with some attempt to relate them in detail to their social context. Such a case can scarcely be made in a single article. Today's global capitalism bears little resemblance to the Athenian city-state or the imperial Roman republic. Nor again is this the place to attempt a comprehensive typology of utopias and their negations, and to indicate to what extent modern categories are applicable to ancient forms⁵. The approach here is rather by way of illustrative examples, which to some extent are left to speak for themselves. This accounts too for the style of the paper, in particular the extensive use of quotations and the relative paucity of bibliography on each of the texts and periods discussed. The heart of this essay is the second part, dealing with classical antiquity: it is here that works that are potentially less familiar to readers are adduced, and just for this reason they are quoted and described at greater length than modern versions of utopia. If it is true that one of the most characteristic features of the modern genre is absent in the ancient, then we may be able to draw some lessons from the contrast as to the nature of utopias as such.

2. Background

As I have indicated, I wish to question the supposition that the modern world has done away with the possibility of utopia, and that ours is a post-utopian imaginary. More specifically, I argue that the two major forms that post-utopian fictions assume—ecological disaster scenarios and so-called dystopias—are not so much challenges to the utopian as reversions to a romantic myth of individualism, embodied principally in the character of the loner or the rebel⁶. The values that these genres endorse end up being our own: no new images of human possibilities emerge. The harsh environment, whether natural or man-made, serves to set in relief and reaffirm conventional ideals, which are embodied in the protagonists—for protagonists there always are. While this conservative tendency has sometimes been remarked upon in connection with disaster movies such as *Mad Max*

³ (Anders 2019); the title recalls Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, published in 1980.

⁴ See (Konstan 1994).

⁵ The binary contrast between utopia and dystopia is not absolute, and intermediate or alternative types have been identified by theorists of the form. For the distinction between dystopias and anti-utopias, the latter construed as "representations which do not restrict themselves to an 'internal' critique of Utopian visions but which move to a rejection of Utopianism from a position allegedly outside it", see (Balasopoulos 2006) (quotation from p. 60); (Blaim 2017, pp. 11–22).

⁶ (Kumar 2010) writes: "while it is true that the dystopia uses many of the same literary devices as the utopia, the unwillingness to essay the literary utopia suggests a distinct lack of confidence in its capacity to be effective, as well perhaps as a failure of the utopian imagination... [F]ictional accounts of ecological disasters abound. Once more it seems far easier to imagine dystopia than utopia" (p. 550). Kumar does not remark, however, on the ideology of individualism that underwrites the resistance both to dystopias and disaster scenarios.

or *The Road*, where the similarity to classic westerns is evident, it has been overlooked, I believe, in the case of dystopias such as *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, or *The Handmaid's Tale*. The ratification of an ethic of personal autonomy has as its necessary other the image of a repressive society that crushes the individual and abolishes freedom. This oppositional model is projected onto fictional regimes, which reproduce the tensions, as they are perceived, that mark contemporary society. But that polarized conception is itself historically conditioned, and underlies the distinction between utopias, which simply erase the tension by ignoring politics entirely, and dystopias, where the friction between state and individual is intensified to the point of incompatibility. Reinstalling the social as the fundamental element in an ideal community opens the way to deconstructing the contrast between utopia and dystopia—and to rescuing the utopian aspiration.

In the conclusion to his book, *Utopia*, bearing the title, “Afterword: The Death of Utopia?” Merlin Coverley writes: “Since the end of the Second World War the idea of Utopia has been on the retreat. How, after the gas chambers, could one maintain a belief in human perfectibility or in the promise of an ideal society?”⁷ Coverley’s dark view recalls the idea, bruited by George Steiner in his lugubrious lament, *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* (1971), and many works since, that the Holocaust may have marked the end of civilized values as such, or at least their association with the so-called Western tradition. But does an ideal society depend on human perfectibility, with its implication of individual moral excellence—of the kind that we are given to believe ceased to obtain even as an ideal after the horrors committed by modern totalitarian regimes? If we look to social rather than to individual values, then the utopian ideal might be better understood as a vision of the solidarity of the whole rather than in an image of human goodness. If, then, we take a perfect social order as one in which everyone is content or, to use a recently more fashionable term, flourishing, the question in turn arises of what counts as fulfillment, and who is to stipulate the conditions for it. Of course, individual desires may conflict, and thus endanger the cohesion of the community as a whole. This is just the tension that animates most dystopian narratives, where opposition is embodied in a visionary few. It also serves to invite the reader, who stands outside the utopian state, to judge the happiness of its citizens by values extrinsic to it, whether freedom or, as we shall see, the principal instantiation of freedom in the bourgeois imaginary, that is, romantic love. In a utopia, acquiescence may be managed in various ways, but the crucial point is that it is sincere, for it is this that ensures social solidarity and the absence of discord. But what about brainwashing or genetic alteration or the use of drugs, not to mention the full panoply of propaganda tools that are only marginally less invasive? If social harmony and the absence of conflict are the defining criteria of a utopia, it would appear that utopias do not inherently differ from dystopias. That dystopias somehow violate the personal desires of their inhabitants, the individual “pursuit of happiness” enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence, presupposes a conception of human nature as pre-social, as though the conception of happiness were not itself in large measure constituted by society, however liberal. Post-utopian visions of the disaster type, in turn, implicitly reject the social foundation of the achieved life. Rather than expressing a despairing sensibility, they project, through the resourcefulness of the hero, an image of self-sufficiency onto a backdrop of desolation that is itself imaginary (recall again the typical terrain of the wild west in the cinema).

Frauke Uhlenbruch, in *The Nowhere Bible: Utopia, Dystopia, Science Fiction*, remarks: “Whereas utopias often describe a homogeneous society which is so harmonious that there is simply no need for dissent, dystopias frequently contain a theme of rebellion, dissent, and a search for an alternative to the totalitarian system”. Uhlenbruch cites as examples Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as well as Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, and Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games*. As she goes on note: “Instances in which rebellion is absent from a dystopian novel can seem

⁷ (Coverley 2010, p. 161).

especially haunting (e.g., *Only Ever Yours* and *Never Let Me Go*), because no character exists who would take on the task of rebellion on behalf of the reader⁸. But to what are we committing ourselves when we side with the dissidents? Even in novels as grim as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or Aldous Huxley's more insidious *Brave New World*, might we not see such mavericks rather as uncooperative misfits, who defy and disrupt a well-functioning polity? The plots of novels are built on tension and resolution, and they privilege the perspective of the lone protagonist who resists or subverts social norms that are represented as constraining individual desire. Novels lend themselves readily to dystopian narratives, appealing as they do to the reader's sense of a distinctive self that occupies a separate space not subject to the control of the state—the home as one's castle, or the independent locus of the mind, with its private desires. And what is the desire that does not violate some socially prescribed or forbidden rule? In a society where all desires are in concord, there is no longer a tension between internal wishes and collective order. In the words of Martin Wenglinsky cited in the headnote to this essay, "A utopia is a society that has abolished the difference between public and private life".

There are various needs that an ideal society may be imagined as satisfying, in ways that actual regimes may fail to do. One is for security, both from foreign enemies and in respect to internal dissension or civil war, or again, from predations by one's neighbors or fellow citizens. Another is the need for the elementary means of sustaining life, that is, sufficient food, drink, and shelter. There are also less tangible needs, such as a perceived sense of fairness in social arrangements and the distribution of goods. Utopias and dystopias are in general good at meeting these requirements, even that of fairness, insofar as all citizens are conditioned to know and accept their place. But if one may eat one's fill, feel safe in one's home, and be free of envy for those who are seemingly better off, what is missing from societies like *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and so many others? One answer, at least in large part, is love, or rather, what might better be called romance.

Take George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, still among the most haunting descriptions of a future world, even if the date is now nearly four decades in the past. Perhaps the most famous line is that which O'Brien, who represents the ruling party in the totalitarian state, tells Winston: "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever". This horrific image suggests anything but social concord, as though resistance were permanently built into the social structure and needed always to be crushed by greater power. But the fuller context of the quotation reveals another sense:

There will be no curiosity, no enjoyment of the process of life. All competing pleasures will be destroyed. But always—do not forget this, Winston—always there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler. Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever.

It is Winston, the would-be rebel, who will participate and share in "the thrill of victory", and delight in overcoming a defeated enemy. He will, in the end, cheer on his own armies as they march against hostile states, sitting in a café and watching on a giant screen the abstract arrows that represent the opposing forces. What motivates his earlier rebellion is his love for his girlfriend, which is subversive precisely because it is personal; it is the kind of "competing pleasure" that will, according to O'Brien, be eradicated. In the end, Winston will no longer need to hide from the cameras that are installed in every home, to spy on one's most private acts and desires. But this desire is basically sentimental. To be sure, he was cured of his passion by a brutal process of brainwashing, which induced him to betray the woman he loves. But that torture was required because the systematic indoctrination to which everyone in the state is subjected somehow failed to take completely in Winston's case. Winston represents the implied

⁸ (Uhlenbruch 2015, p. 9).

reader's revulsion at the tyrannical and one-dimensional regime, which endures, unlike Winston's, beyond the conclusion of the novel. But is romantic love, with its fixation on privacy, on shared secrets, on the uniqueness of self, one's own and that of the beloved, where freedom and happiness primarily reside? Do we wish to judge a society by the extent to which it facilitates such an obsession?

Thomas More's *Utopia* gave the world the word, and it is worth recalling how it is constructed. "Every house has a front door to the street and a backdoor to the garden. The double doors, which open easily with a push of the hand and close again automatically, let anyone come in—so there is nothing private anywhere⁹". Love is not construed as a subversive emotion, and since universal concord is presumed to reign, there is no need for privacy, no reason why one's most intimate thoughts, if not necessarily one's most intimate acts, must be concealed. As Wenglinsky says, his definition of utopia as "a society that has abolished the difference between public and private life ... does away with the need to distinguish between utopias and dystopias".

Or take Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which, like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is marked by a hierarchical class structure. Here, however, all citizens are conditioned to accept their role by means of biological and psychological engineering, supplemented by the euphoria-inducing drug, soma. Once more, there are a few misfits who insist on "the right to be unhappy" (no doubt they believe they'll really be happier that way). They afford the novel its dramatic tension (for a novel is not a novel without this), and they simultaneously represent the implied reader's rejection—our rejection—of the absolute conformity that prevails in this partially lobotomized society. Again, it is romance that motivates the characters. And while romantic love is not a primary driving force in Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*, it is nevertheless the repression of the free choice of sexual partner that lends the novel its atmosphere of horror and motivates the reader's, as well as Offred's, desire to escape the Commander's household and the land of Gilead (aka the United States). Ayn Rand's novel, *Anthem*, imagines a world in which the first-person singular pronoun has been excised from the language, and people can express themselves only in the plural, "we". The discovery of the word "I" enables the rebellious couple—as usual, there are nonconformists, who are motivated at least in part by sex—to express their love for each other as individuals. The breakdown of the ideal society is signaled by the eruption of private desires, the "competing pleasures" that undermine its perfect concord.

Let us turn, then, to some examples of utopia drawn from classical antiquity, to see how they manage the tension between private desire and public order.

3. Yesterday

I begin with a dark image of the state of the world, conjured up by a poet who lived during the final decades of the Roman Republic, before the change of regime brought about by Octavian, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, that resulted in what we call the Roman Empire.

The walls of the mighty world will be stormed all around, and will collapse into crumbling ruin. For food must repair all things by renewing them, food must support, must sustain everything—but in vain, since the veins cannot contain enough and nature does not supply as much as is necessary. Even now, indeed, the power of life is broken, and the earth, exhausted, scarcely produces tiny creatures, the earth that once produced all kinds and gave birth to the huge bodies of wild beasts... She of her own accord first made for mortals the bright corn and the luxuriant vineyards, of herself she gave forth sweet fruits and luxuriant pasturage, which now hardly grow great when increased by our labor. We exhaust our oxen and the strength of our farmers, we wear out the ploughshare, and then are barely fed by our fields: that is how much they begrudge their fruits and increase our toil. Now the aged ploughman shakes

⁹ (More 1989, p. 46).

his head and sighs again and again, that his great labor has come to naught. Comparing times present with times past, he often praises the fortunes of his father. Sadly, too, the cultivator of the degenerate and shriveled vine rails at the advance of time and continually criticizes his own era, and grumbles about how the old world, full of piety, supported life with great ease on a narrow domain, though the man's portion of land was formerly much smaller than it is now. He does not comprehend that all things gradually decay, and crash against the reef of destruction, outworn by the age-old lapse of years.

This mournful description of a declining world to come, indeed one already present, when the earth can no longer produce food or sustain wildlife and seems to be on the verge of total collapse, may sound like a scene from a climate disaster story or a movie such as *Interstellar* or *The Road*, apart from the somewhat stilted language. In fact, however, it comes from the conclusion to the second book of Lucretius' didactic poem, *On the Nature of Things* (*De rerum natura*), composed over two thousand years ago¹⁰. This same poem concludes with a harrowing description of the plague that afflicted Athens during the Peloponnesian War, in the year 429 BC. Was Lucretius eerily anticipating the combination of pandemic and ecological crisis that seems to afflict our own time? And if so, were conditions then in some way analogous to what we are experiencing now, which seem to have given rise to catastrophic visions of the near future¹¹?

Yet Lucretius' poem is not pessimistic. It is an exposition of Epicureanism, a philosophical doctrine that preached tranquility of mind as the highest good, one that could be achieved even in conditions of environmental deterioration and the ravages of disease. Nor was it a backward looking vision, pining for a happier, bygone age. On the contrary, such tranquility is possible precisely because of the resources that modern civilization has made available (6.9–10). But this same civilization has propagated false ideas and values that have resulted in an endless struggle for wealth and power, which in turn is the cause of wars and civil unrest. For Epicureanism, the most injurious of these empty beliefs, as they called them, was the fear of death and punishment in the afterlife, which they sought to combat by propounding a radically materialist account of nature. For those who could free themselves from such deleterious superstitions, a life of bliss equal to that of the gods was attainable in the here and now, and such liberated souls were encouraged to form small communities, where they could practice a life of imperturbability.

The Epicureans, then, were critical of the society of their time, which they blamed for all kinds of ills—but not for the corrosion of the environment or for the spread of disease. These were aspects of nature that were beyond human control, as they saw it. In this way they differed from modern visions of ecological collapse, which tend to moralize the devastation of the landscape, regarding it as retribution for our abuse of the earth. Lucretius was not delivering a comeuppance tale. No doubt his dark vision of the present was indebted to traditional myths of decline from a former state of grace, like Hesiod's five ages of mankind, which descend from gold to iron (*Works and Days* 109–201). But Lucretius had witnessed ravages enough in his time, wars both foreign and civil, and he was far from believing the any substantial number of humans beings in his own time were likely to achieve the wisdom he preached. Nevertheless, the Epicureans maintained that this disastrous condition was not incompatible with complete felicity. It is not clear whether they envisioned a worldwide solution to the ills of modern life, or simply a collection of small communes where the few who devoted themselves to instruction in the school's doctrines might insulate themselves, to some degree, from the harm and chaos resulting from wars and oppression. Such local associations were little utopian bubbles, encysted within the society at large. Despite the specter of environmental decay, there is nothing post-utopian about Epicureanism.

¹⁰ Lucretius 2.1144-74, with omission; translated by Martin Ferguson Smith, slightly modified.

¹¹ For possible connections with apocalyptic literature of the time, including Jewish pseudepigrapha, see (Schiesaro 2020).

There were other voices in antiquity that explained the agricultural crisis by less cosmic causes. For example, Columella, writing in the first century AD, composed a book on agriculture (*De re rustica*), in which he expostulated:

Again and again I hear leading men of our state condemning now the unfruitfulness of the soil, now the inclemency of the climate for some seasons past, as harmful to crops. And some I hear reconciling the aforesaid complaints, as if on well-founded reasoning, on the ground that, in their opinion, the soil was worn out and exhausted by the over-production of earlier days and can no longer furnish sustenance to mortals with its old-time benevolence. Such reasons, Publius Silvinus, I am convinced are far from the truth. For it is a sin to suppose that Nature, endowed with perennial fertility by the creator of the universe, is affected with barrenness as though with some disease. And it is unbecoming to a man of good judgment to believe that Earth, to whose lot was assigned a divine and everlasting youth, and who is called the common mother of all things—because she has always brought forth all things and is destined to bring them forth continuously—has grown old in mortal fashion. And, furthermore, I do not believe that such misfortunes come upon us as a result of the fury of the elements, but rather because of our own fault. For the matter of husbandry, which all the best of our ancestors had treated with the best of care, we have delivered over to all the worst of our slaves, as if to a hangman for punishment”.

(Preface to Book 1.1-3, trans. E. S. Forster and E. Heffner)

This passage, which looks very much like a direct riposte to Lucretius, denies that the earth is exhausted, and interprets the decline in fertility a consequence of poor methods of exploiting of the land. Columella sets out to instruct his readers on proper husbandry, which he assumes will bring the land back to its original fruitfulness. His solution is in part technical, in part political. He does not envision a desolate world populated by demented individuals and lone survivors, the stock in trade of modern eco-disaster scenarios.

But poverty there was in classical antiquity, and also scarcity, and imagination could offer fantasy solutions. One of these is the comedy called *Wealth* (*Ploutos* in Greek: cf. “plutocracy”), the last surviving play composed by Aristophanes, produced after his death by his son in 388 BC¹². The play constructs a utopia on the premise of limitless affluence that is magically conjured up thanks to the beneficence of the god of wealth himself. The plot is straightforward enough. The protagonist, Chremylus, seeks a solution to the pervasive corruption of Athenian society, in which the evil prosper and the few who are decent and honest dwell in miserable poverty. He consults the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, which instructs him to follow the first person he sees as he leaves the precinct. This turns out to be a decrepit old sightless man, who, as it happens, is Ploutos himself, blinded by Zeus because, he says, Zeus resented human beings (87), and because Ploutos visited only those who were just, wise, and well behaved. Chremylus comes up with the bold plan of restoring Ploutos’ sight, which will not only allow him to distinguish again between the righteous and the wrongdoers, and so reward only the deserving, but also to regain his original power and replace Zeus as the ruling deity. With this, he will bring limitless bounty to the world—after all, he is wealth personified—and poverty will be driven out once and for all.

There is a certain inconsistency in the way Aristophanes represents the economic problem in Athens¹³. On the one hand, Chremylus sees it as the unfair distribution of wealth, with the result that that only the corrupt are rich (though they are taken to be very numerous). Once Ploutos recovers his sight, this injustice will be remedied, since he is, by his own account, a morally responsible deity, unlike Zeus, and will only visit the homes of good people. On the other hand, Ploutos’ blindness is also a symbol of his defeat at Zeus’

¹² For a survey of “the world upside-down” motif in Greek comedy, see (Farioli 2002). On the motif more generally in classical literature, see (Pellegrino 2007).

¹³ See (Konstan 1995, pp. 75–90).

hands, and once he can see again, he regains his former station. With this, there is not just a fairer distribution of existing resources but a limitless profusion of everything. In the first scenario, in which the condition of decent and crooked citizens is simply inverted, one can see why some, who had flourished in the old order, might have grounds for complaint in the new regime. But if everyone will be affluent, why would anyone protest¹⁴? In a series of scenes that conclude the comedy, we see why. First, a just citizen enters, whose fortunes have taken a sudden turn for the better. Immediately thereafter comes a sycophant, which is to say, a citizen who takes it on himself to denounce and bring to trial evildoers, as he perceives them. This kind of officious busybody was a natural butt for satire, but he has a new kind of problem: since universal abundance will do away with crime, a professional snitch is out of work. “Haven’t I suffered something criminal? I have lost my entire home thanks to this god. He’ll go blind again, if there’s any justice” (856–59). The just man and Chremylus’ slave, Cario, decide at once that he deserves his misery, but in fact, the sycophant has another argument in his defense. When the just citizen says, “But wouldn’t you want to live in leisure, enjoying peace and quiet?” the sycophant responds, “But you’re describing a sheep’s life, where there’ll be no occupation in life”. The just man continues: “Won’t you change your mind?” To which the sycophant answers, “Not if you should give me Wealth himself and all the silphium in Cyrene”—an expression equivalent to “all the tea in China” (921–25). The idle life, where no one works and everything is freely available, appalls the sycophant. The sycophant is duly stripped and humiliated, and sent packing.

Next comes an old woman, who has a particular grievance: a poor but handsome young man who had cozied up to her for her gifts has abandoned her now that he, like everyone else, is in the money. Even where material needs are provided for, love may be lacking, or unequally bestowed. When the young gigolo himself appears, he insults the old lady cruelly. The old woman turns up again, just a few verses from the end of the play. To her worried query, Chremylus replies: “It will all work out. The young man will come to you this evening” (1200–01). Out of earshot, Chremylus cracks one more nasty joke at her expense (ridicule of the sexuality of old women was a staple of ancient humor), but the new dispensation, it seems, will guarantee (we are not told how) that no one’s erotic needs will lack fulfillment.

The utopian fantasy of the *Ploutos* has been interpreted as a protest against the class divisions that emerged in the wake of Athens’ defeat in the Peloponnesian War, and it is certainly possible that such a social agenda is implicit in the comedy¹⁵. In a radical democracy like Athens, where an ideal of political equality co-existed with real differences in wealth within the citizen class, a dream of universal prosperity might have some appeal, however impractical. Indeed Xenophon, a companion of Socrates and a generation younger than Aristophanes, in a brief essay called the *Poroi* or, as it is sometimes translated, the *Ways and Means*, proposed that all Athenians might receive an economic subsidy from the profits of the silver mines at Laurion, which were manned by as many as 20,000 public slaves. Whether the redistribution of this and other slave-based revenues from farming and manufacture could enable the transition from property-based individualism to a communal way of life may of course be doubted. But that such a scheme could be entertained seriously by an experienced military man like Xenophon tells us something about the context for Aristophanes’ fantasy.

Aristophanes’ *Wealth* is not precisely a utopia, since it does not offer a picture of a new society or regime. It is more like an anti-type or reverse image of the modern fictions of climatological catastrophe: in place of a despairing vision of the collapse of social order in conditions of scarcity, yielding a deadly competition for resources, Aristophanes’ comedy

¹⁴ Where scarcity is a result of the unequal distribution of resources, in which one class monopolizes all the wealth, it is illusory: there is already enough to go around, and what is required is a revolution. But even where class differences have been leveled, not everyone may agree to the new regime. Some may want more than their allotted share, even if it is enough for what most regard as satisfactory for a good life. Others may stubbornly insist on withdrawing from the collective process, even if it means having less, or less easily, out of pique (Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* comes to mind) or a sense of injured individuality.

¹⁵ See (Sommerstein 1984). For a possible cult of Ploutos at the time of Aristophanes, see (Barrenechea 2018).

offers an Edenic image of a peaceful kingdom, a golden age of universal bounty. It simply eliminates the shortages and imagines that everyone, or almost everyone, will be content: a kind of post-utopia with a positive valence. Not that scarcity in itself necessarily gives rise to anarchy; on the contrary, it may also promote social solidarity, insofar as a failure to share resources compromises the ability of the community to survive¹⁶. Such a view underlies, for example, the Marxist conception of primitive communism. Nevertheless, as we have seen, all is not perfect under the new dispensation: the sycophant or informer laments the change, and his reaction is in fact anticipated earlier in the play, when Ploutos' rival, Penia or Poverty, puts in an appearance and argues that, if everyone is wealthy and no one has to work, there will be universal starvation. Penia's case depends on reducing the notion of wealth to gold, like the myth of the touch of Midas. Had she described wealth as the abundance of all things, her objection to the new condition would fall flat. The sycophant, for his part, has so fully internalized a conception of a world where theft and crime are profitable that his very identity depends on it.

The case is different, however, with the other malcontent, that is, the woman who used to purchase the sexual favors of a young gigolo. In a society marked by the uneven distribution of wealth, the rich have their privileges. She is assured that she won't miss out under the aegis of Ploutos, though it is not clear just how. Here, then, is a scenario that would seem akin to the pattern of modern dystopias noted by Frauke Uhlenbruch, who observed as we have seen, that they "frequently contain a theme of rebellion, dissent, and a search for an alternative to the totalitarian system". The difference is that in the case of Aristophanes' *Wealth*, the sycophant is simply sent packing, whereas the frustrated woman is appeased and reintegrated into the group. She does not run off with a loyal lover to find freedom outside the limits of the miraculously prosperous Athens. She wants sex, and there is no reason why she cannot have it, with Ploutos in charge. True, this is a fairy-tale world, where rebellion is out of place. Opposition is not ignored entirely, whether on the part of the goddess Poverty or mortal malcontents. But these are not motivated by a romantic ideal of a self that seeks a private kind of freedom. There is reason to think that such a notion was foreign to the ideology of the classical city-state.

Four years before the production of the *Ploutos*, Aristophanes staged the comedy, *Ecclesiasusae* or *Assemblywomen*. In this remarkable play, women take over the government of Athens and install a radical communist regime—a genuine utopia. The comedy opens with a gathering of the women of Athens, at the summons of the heroine, Praxagora, who leads the chorus of complaint over the inefficient way in which things are being run. Women, they insist, are more economical, more concerned with the welfare of their families, more dependable, and less easily attracted to novelty; on the contrary, they stick to tried and true ways. They decide to pack the Assembly with women disguised as men, and propose that all power be handed over to them (women were excluded from voting or holding office in classical Athens). Remarkably, they convince a majority of the men, and so come to power. At this point, they announce the rules of the new regime, which are anything but conservative. From now on, all property will be shared, and meals will be served in common refectories. In one scene, men are shown bringing their household goods to the joint stock, although one reluctant citizen prefers to hold out rather than commit his items. What is more, henceforward sex too will be in common, no longer restricted to married couples. Of course, men had other outlets, via prostitution or with household slaves. Such behavior in citizen women, however, was frowned upon. But the women's regime will abolish the private family, just as it has done away with the individual household or estate. When Praxagora's husband expresses his worry that, if sex is permitted indiscriminately, those who are old or ill-favored will lose out to the young and handsome—a version of the old woman's anxiety in the *Wealth*—Praxagora explains

¹⁶ As Sheldon Wolin has observed, the central problematic of governing has always been "how to render politics compatible with the requirements of order, so as to reconcile the conflicts created by competition under conditions of scarcity with the demands of public tranquility" (Wolin 2004, pp. 10–11).

that she has anticipated that problem. In the new system, the least attractive will always have first dibs, to be followed by those who are better looking.

Why should the women have come up with such a radical scheme? They had hitherto been disenfranchised, and so had no special stake in the dominant order, whether political or domestic, since each household was headed by a male guardian or *kurios* who alone had legal standing. The distinctions that mark the patriarchal order are foreign to them, and when given a chance, they do away with them entirely. By satisfying all the basic needs of citizens, not only economic but also sexual, the new community can hope to eliminate internal strife and promote the solidarity of its members. There will be no theft, Praxagora proclaims, because all will be provided. But all is not entirely well in Eden. Individual preferences will remain, as we see in the final and most hilarious scene in the play. Here, a handsome boy enters the stage, in search of a pretty young girl with whom he has an assignation. The girl is equally eager, contrary to approved behavior for citizen women in Athens, but before they can enjoy each other, an old woman arrives and declares her right to have first go with the lad. As she is tugging him away, to the great frustration of both youngsters, a second old woman enters, uglier than the first, and asserts her prior claim. At which point still a third old woman enters, even more repulsive (as the play characterizes her) than the first two. They end up hauling the boy inside for their fun, over his loud protestations and those of the girl he desires. Not everyone, it seems, ends up happy.

Had Aristophanes been disposed to introduce an element of romance, he might have taken this opportunity to have the young couple flee this repressive regime, where personal affections are subordinated to arbitrary rules that take no account of love. But it is not clear that love has anything to do with the erotic passion of the handsome boy and girl. In classical Athens no young maiden of citizen status would have been as forward and immodest as the girl in the *Assemblywomen*. Of course, there is now a new social order, and things have changed. There is also reason to believe that an Athenian audience would have perceived the girl as a budding hetaira or courtesan, hence of foreign extraction rather than a citizen. However that may be, the attraction between the two is clearly sexual, and does not look to a long-term relationship, of the sort that might motivate them to risk exile. In the end, there is a brief reprise in which a slave emerges from the central mess hall to invite everyone inside, including Praxagora's husband, who has arrived late for the feast, and the entire audience. In a final flourish, the chorus does a high kick dance, and on this festive note the drama concludes.

Unlike the *Wealth*, the *Assemblywomen* represents a genuine utopia: not just a dream of universal prosperity, but an actual change of regime, with new laws governing social and private life—or rather, social and private life combined, since the distinction between the two has effectively collapsed in the new communal order. This dissolution was facilitated, no doubt, by the tendency to view the city-state or polis as a household on a large scale, but there is no mistaking the novelty of the state established by the women; as Praxagora declares, “I will make the city a single household” (673–74). Commentators on the play have remarked the similarity between the women's government and the ideal state sketched by Plato in his *Republic*¹⁷. There too, we see a system in which private property and the sexual exclusiveness of the household are abolished, but with this difference, that the new regulations apply only to the elite class of governors and, perhaps, the military, while the productive population of farmers and craftsmen continue to live as before (Plato pays little attention to the life style of the lowest classes, so it is difficult to be certain of what arrangement he had in mind for them). Plato's regime is thus clearly hierarchical, although access to the ruling stratum is based not on wealth or power but on successful completion of a rigorous course of education, designed to elevate the minds of the students so as to achieve a transcendental kind of wisdom. The several levels of the state—basically, the governing philosophers, the military auxiliaries, and the laboring population—are kept happy, and in line, by a process of indoctrination that involves the rigid censorship of

¹⁷ Critical studies on the topic abound; see, for example, (Zumbrunnen 2006, pp. 319–33); more technically, (Sheppard 2016).

drama and literature and, perhaps most alarmingly, the inculcation in all three classes of a mythic conception of the soul, according to which some are constituted of gold, others of silver, and the lowest of all of bronze or iron. Plato himself refers to this fiction as a “noble lie” or “noble falsehood” (*gennaion pseudos*, 441C). The passage is familiar, but bears quoting:

While all of you, in the city, are brothers, we will say in our tale, yet god, in fashioning those of you who are fitted to hold rule, mingled gold in their generation, for which reason they are the most precious—but in the helpers, silver, and iron and brass in the farmers and other craftsmen. And, as you are all akin, though for the most part you will breed after your kinds, it may sometimes happen that a golden father would beget a silver son, and that a golden offspring would come from a silver sire, and that the rest would, in like manner, be born of one another. So that the first and chief injunction that the god lays upon the rulers is that of nothing else are they to be such careful guardians, and so intently observant as of the intermixture of these metals in the souls of their offspring, and if sons are born to them with an infusion of brass or iron they shall by no means give way to pity in their treatment of them, but shall assign to each the status due to his nature and thrust them out among the artisans or the farmers. And again, if from these there is born a son with unexpected gold or silver in his composition they shall honor such and bid them go up higher, some to the office of guardian, some to the assistanceship, alleging that there is an oracle that the city shall then be overthrown when the man of iron or brass is its guardian. (Book 3, 414E–415C, trans. Paul Shorey)

The similarity of this conception to Huxley’s *Brave New World* has not escaped critics, and Karl Popper saw in this scheme the prototype of modern totalitarianism¹⁸.

Is Plato’s state then a kind of dystopia, as opposed to the utopian society of the *Assemblywomen*? He envisions no real resistance to the regime, once it is fully installed, no “theme of rebellion, dissent, and a search for an alternative to the totalitarian system”, as Frauke Uhlenbruch notes are characteristic of modern dystopias. Plato’s account is part of a philosophical exposition, not a novelistic narrative, and so he was free to ignore dissident voices, although he does believe that his ideal state is subject to decay, for rather abstruse astrological reasons. It is worth recalling, however, that the entire exercise of describing a model society is intended to provide a large-scale analogy to the composition of the individual soul, which also consists of three parts, hierarchically stacked. The ruling class is analogous to the rational mind in the psyche, the guardians or military caste to that part of the soul concerned with honor, and the laborers to the lowest stratum, that of the appetites. In a rightly disposed soul, the appetitive desires are duly submissive to the rational element. With passions thus domesticated, there is no motive for personal defiance of the intellectually perceived good, on which all agree. Plato has thus eliminated the role of *erôs* in advance, save for that special, noetic passion that aspires to a knowledge of the divine forms.

The plays of Aristophanes and the philosophical dialogues of Plato were produced in Athens, a relative small state which, like many other such city-states (approximately 1500 have been identified in the Greater Greece region), experienced almost constant warfare as well as civil strife so violent as to have cost the lives of even more of Athens’ citizens than campaigns abroad or in defense of its own territory. What is more, it was civic dissension that most often led to the capture of a state by its enemies, who allied themselves with one or another of the internal factions. Utopian visions looked simultaneously to eliminating class conflict and securing the safety of the city, at a time when defeat in battle could well mean the slaughter or enslavement of the entire population. The image of the community

¹⁸ See (Popper 1945). Discussion in (Dombrowski 1997; Schofield 2007). See also (Meital and Joseph 2007) for a defense of Popper’s critique of Plato. For Plato’s *Republic* in relation to Orwell’s and Huxley’s dystopias, see (Panagopoulos 2020).

as a household came naturally in such a context, and the ideal of the loner who pretended to self-sufficiency was most often identified with the antisocial misanthrope.

In the wake of the conquests of Alexander the Great and the subsequent expansion of the Roman Empire, there emerged new visions of a world community. Plutarch penned a highly idealized image of Alexander's reign, a utopian picture of the harmony of all cultures. In a rhetorical showpiece called *On the Fortune of Alexander*, Plutarch attributes to Alexander the conscious intention of forming a harmonious world polity (329A–329C, trans. Babbitt 1936):

The much-admired *Republic* of Zeno, the founder of the Stoic sect, may be summed up in this one main principle: that all the inhabitants of this world of ours should not live differentiated by their respective rules of justice into separate cities and communities, but that we should consider all men to be of one community and one polity, and that we should have a common life and an order common to us all, even as a herd that feeds together and shares the pasturage of a common field. This Zeno wrote, giving shape to a dream or, as it were, shadowy picture of a well-ordered and philosophic commonwealth; but it was Alexander who gave effect to the idea... He brought together into one body all men everywhere, uniting and mixing in one great loving-cup, as it were, men's lives, their characters, their marriages, their very habits of life. He bade them all consider as their fatherland the whole inhabited earth, as their stronghold and protection his camp, as akin to them all good men, and as foreigners only the wicked.

Plutarch (329D–330A) treats Alexander's decision to adopt Persian garb, and to promote the intermarriage of Greeks and foreigners, as part of a grand plan to unite all peoples in kinship. And he explains (330C–D): "Alexander desired to render all upon earth subject to one law of reason and one form of government and to reveal all men as one people, and to this purpose he made himself conform". But Plutarch's vision of a single, homogeneous world under Alexander's leadership treats local customs as impediments to international harmony, or at best as superficial phenomena that a wise ruler like Alexander will either ignore or attempt to blend into a uniform mixture. Thus, Alexander had a civilizing mission, replacing barbarous traditions with practices based on reason:

He educated the Hyrcanians to respect the marriage bond, and taught the Arachosians to till the soil, and persuaded the Sogdians to support their parents, not to kill them, and the Persians to revere their mothers and not to take them in wedlock. O wondrous power of Philosophic Instruction, that brought the Indians to worship Greek gods... [T]he children of the Persians, of the Susianians, and of the Gedrosians learned to chant the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides... [T]hrough Alexander Bactria and the Caucasus learned to revere the gods of the Greeks... Alexander established more than seventy cities among savage tribes, and sowed all Asia with Grecian magistracies, and thus overcame its uncivilized and brutish manner of living.

The harmony of all cultures ends up being reduced to the dominance of one.

One way of imagining the co-existence of specific cultures with universal rule, like that of the Roman Empire (under which Plutarch himself composed his essays), was to imagine a kind of double allegiance, partly to one's own nation, partly to a theoretical community of all mankind. Thus, the Stoic philosopher Seneca wrote (*On Leisure* 8.4): "We embrace two republics in our soul, one great and truly public, in which gods and men are contained, in which we do not have regard for this corner or that but measure the limits of our polity by the sun, the other to which the condition of our birth has assigned us. This latter will be that of the Athenians or Carthaginians or some other city which belongs not to all human beings but only to some". But the schizophrenic nature of this division becomes apparent in Seneca's qualification: "Some devote their energies to both republics at the same time, the greater and the lesser, some only to the lesser, some only

to the greater". We may compare Paul's Letter to the Ephesians (2:19): "You are, then, no longer strangers and resident aliens, but you are fellow citizens of the saints and members of God's household". Centuries later, this ideal would inspire Saint Augustine's vision of a City of God, as opposed to the city of mankind.

In Lucian's dialogue *Hermotimus*, we may see a kind of compromise formation, an ideal city on the hill that takes the form of a classical polis or city-state nested within an imperial world order. In the essay, a character named Lucinus, who is plainly a stand-in for Lucian himself, challenges Hermotimus' blind faith in the Stoic sect. Pressed to offer his own definition of virtue, Lucinus defines it as a city inhabited by happy, wise, just, and temperate citizens (22). In such a polis, he goes on to say,

all are immigrants and foreigners, and no one is a native, but many barbarians and slaves are citizens of it and also ugly and short and poor people, and in general anyone who wants to participate in the city...; for someone to become a citizen, intelligence and a desire for what is noble and hard work suffice... Superior and inferior and noble and commoner and slave and free neither exist nor are spoken of in this city (24).

In this utopian community, there is no discrimination on the basis of origins, and the only criterion for citizenship is virtue. It is thus assumed that there will be no conflict of wills, no personal desires that impinge on the needs of others. All citizens are temperate, which is to say, their passions are subordinate to reason, which in turn reflects the rational order of the whole. This structured conception of the self, already fully developed by Plato, imagines a natural coordination of wills, in which the private and the public necessarily coincide. Under such a dispensation, under the sign of virtue, those who do not fit are marked as vicious.

4. Today and Tomorrow

In the collection of short stories called *A People's Future of the United States*, the majority, as is increasingly common these days, depict one or another kind of disaster scenario, whether ecological (including epidemics) or social, in which machines go berserk or race and gender conflicts are hugely amplified. The first tale, by Charlie Jane Anders, bears the title, "The Bookstore at the End of America", an echo of *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, the second volume of Douglas Adams' series, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. The bookstore straddles the frontier between California, which is now a breakaway nation where a loose kind of hippy tolerance reigns, and the rest of America, or just America, now a conservative religious state, a bit like the Basel airport, which exits on one side to Switzerland and on the other to Germany.

The president of California wished the president of America a "good spring solstice" instead of "happy Easter", and the president of America called a news conference to discuss this unforgivable insult. America's secretary of morality, Wallace Dawson, called California's gay attorney general an offensive term. California moved some troops up to the border and performed some "routine exercises"... America sent some fighter craft and UAVs along the border, sundering the air. (p. 16)

War breaks out, and the bookstore serves as a bomb shelter, where citizens from both sides temporarily seek refuge. The owner, Molly, maintains that she is neutral, but she refuses to carry a racist book requested by an American. But her daughter Phoebe is the one who tempers the increasingly hostile atmosphere by suggesting that they all read a book together. That a child's intuition of a harmonious republic of letters might counteract the culture war that is taking place outside is a sweet notion, but does not displace Molly's and Phoebe's sympathy for Californian tolerance (both are Californians), which stands as Atwood's Canada in relation to her repressive USA. Yet the space they occupy is open to both sides, and Phoebe's split affections for Jon, a minister's son, and Zadie, daughter of Ugandan refugees, mark her as both a mediator and a double rebel.

The next story is “Our Aim is Not to Die”, by A. Merc Rustad. The opening paragraph conveys the dystopian atmosphere:

Sua’s phone chimes with a notification:

You are due for your mandatory Citizen Medical Evaluation in three days. Call your authorized health service center to schedule an appointment. Late responses will be fined and your record will show you are resistant to becoming an Ideal Citizen.

Sua stares at the full-screen decree, their hands shaking.

The pronoun gives it away: Sua is queer, and will have to conceal this from the authorities. Sua has a friend, Maya, who is black, uses the pronoun set *ne, nir, nirs*, and is involved with an underground group fighting the thought control of the regime. The affection between the two gives Sua the courage to join the resistance.

The tone of the third story, “The Wall”, by Lizz Huerta, is illustrated by the following excerpt:

The difference between the now defunct United States of America and Mexico is that the USA started as a settler state, decimating the indigenous population. Spaniards made babies. Those babies made Mexico, fucked up but brown and proud. When shit went down, the Mexicans on either side of the wall collectively woke up to seeds planted by our ancestors. Survival. The long game. Mamita was one of the tenders, one of countless brujas who made hard choices to ensure we would survive what was coming.

Again, there is the lonely resistance, the underground struggle against a cruel and powerful state.

One more: in “Read after Burning”, by Maria Dahvana Headley, another bleak picture of alienation:

I don’t need to tell you the long version of what happened to America. It’s no kind of jawdrop. It was a tin-can-telephone apocalypse. Men hunched in their hideys pushing buttons, curfewing the country, and misunderstanding each other, getting more and more angry and more and more panicked, until everyone who wasn’t like them got declared illegal.

Here too, there are opponents, rising from the dust:

Here we stand in the dark now, and I’m old and you’re holding my hand and walking me from the bed to the window. We’re looking out at all of it, the wonder and the danger. There are voices and the sun blazes, and everything is bright enough that if I were reading the letters on your skin, I wouldn’t be able to parse them. Now look at your own hands and the wrinkles in them. Those wrinkles are what happen when you clench your fists. You were born for this resistance, for this preparation, for this life. You were born to fight.

These are genuine dystopias: the bleakness derives not from a ravaged nature but from brutal social systems that trample every sign of independence, difference, desire. The tendency to thought control, to “moral police” encroaching on every form of liberty, is already visible in our society. These stories, and others like them in this volume, are simply extrapolating from present conditions. But so too is the nature of the resistance. Readers may identify with these eccentrics, who continue to fight and stand up to power. A critic, however, may question the narrative structure that situates the implied reader—and me—as opponents of a malevolent collective, seeking to take away our rights and turn us into cogs of a great machine. There is more than one way to interpret the image of an armed band standing up for its rights against the ever increasing encroachments of the government.

What kind of narrative of a future world would escape this structure? There is one story in the collection which seems to me to point to a way out of the conventional dynamic.

It is by Hugh Howey, and has the rather enigmatic title, “No Algorithms in the World¹⁹”. It begins:

“Look at these damn commies”. I glance up from my holo to see what Dad’s cussing about this time. It could be anything from a concrete building with bland architecture to a queue of people outside an ice-cream shop. The older he gets, the wider the commie circle of ire and bile... Today it appears to be the Muslim couple crossing the street in front of our car, her with a hijab and him with his ghutra.

This might seem the lead-in to a typical doomsday set-up, with the world on the verge of all-out ethnic warfare, but in fact this is a decoy. The story continues:

“Not all Muslims are communists”, I say, even though it’s pointless. Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE were among the first to give universal basic income a go, and so for Dad, the Middle East is patient zero in what he calls “a plague of joblessness”. It’s been twelve years here in the States, and most Americans have come around to accept the new system, especially once the checks started arriving on schedule... And yet a solid 30-plus percent of the population is like my dad, cashing their checks and complaining about the world unfolding around them and vehemently opposed. Mostly, Dad gets annoyed by how other people spend their free time. Not working hard enough, he says. (p. 264)

The narrator has a secret, however, that he has been struggling to reveal to his father. He has decided to give up his well-paying job, which he regards as pointless, and his pregnant wife will be leaving hers as well. He explains: “We don’t need the money. We’re working just to work, and neither of us looks forward to going in”. To which his father replies: “That’s why it’s called work, son. You aren’t supposed to like it”. The narrator tries to comfort the recalcitrant old man: “We’re going to stay in Houston, at least for a while. So you and Mom can be around the baby. But we want to travel, to spend our time learning together and teaching her what we can. Spending every moment we can together” (p. 272).

The father’s resistance to the new world looming before him is based on values and a sense of self that have been the bedrock of our modern culture: work and responsibility as the condition for leisure, the fundamental complementarity of what the Romans called *otium* and *negotium*. Without work, the son’s life is rootless and indeterminate. True, there is the family, reduced to a nucleus of three, but it is no longer a node of privacy within the nexus of the wider economy, a locus of domesticity as opposed to the public world of labor and the marketplace²⁰. The world imagined here is more like that of Aristophanes’ *Wealth*, and the poor father, who cannot let go of his thoroughly noble commitment to a good old American work ethic, is not very different from the sycophant in that comedy, who cannot adapt to a society in which everything you could wish for is there for the taking. In the new world, machines can do the work, and the result is not a robotic takeover of society but the precondition for a new way of life. In this respect, the modern dream differs from the ancient, where human beings were needed to till the ground and man the mines. Aristophanes’ *Wealth*, as we have seen, imagines a fairy-tale reign of plenty. In the *Assemblywomen*, however, the question of where food will come from under the new dispensation is posed explicitly, as Praxagora’s husband pointedly asks: “But who will there be to till the land?” To which Praxagora replies in two words: “the slaves” (652–53)²¹.

Howey’s narrative strategy is clever: he renders the rebel, the man who refuses to assimilate to the new order, not as a hero but as a holdover from an antiquated system, in which labor was necessary for survival. In a brilliant move, Howey represents the nuclear couple as fleeing into the new order: their desire to travel, and hence to move outward, is simultaneously a gesture of integration into the new order. Howey thereby turns the

¹⁹ pp. 264–73.

²⁰ See (Richter 2015).

²¹ Fantasies of rebellious machines are rooted in anxieties about the uprising of an underclass.

romantic escapist fantasy on its head. By the same token, however, the social dimension is dispersed, and indeed barely visible. Who governs? How is fair distribution assured? How are resources obtained or recycled, and how is ecological exhaustion avoided? There are no answers in the story. But perhaps so nebulous a description is inevitable in a post-utopian fiction, if it is fair to apply this label to Howey's tale. For what would the social look like if there were "une coincidence parfaite entre individu et collectivité", where neither individual nor collective are what we imagine them to be today? What comes after utopia need not be a cry of despair, nor a nostalgic reversion to a prelapsarian past. It is perhaps best imagined by way of an intimation—for nothing more is possible—of the end of the reigning dialectic between the public and the private, and in this way transcending classical visions of "Nowhere".

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