UTOPIAN IDENTITY AND DYSTOPIAN ALTERITY – THE DUAL FACE OF THE UTOPIAN TRADITION IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract: *Utopias are a well-established part of the European imaginary, while dystopias first became known in the twentieth century. The dystopias start out as a possible utopia, focusing on a certain aspect of their contemporary society, but then they slide into a realm in which the improvements brought to that society are perceived negatively. While most of the characters in the dystopias perceive them as utopias, the exception are the outcasts who have either lived in a different society or who can see beyond the control exerted over the citizens. The focus of the paper is on the transformation of the utopia in a dystopia through the lens provided by such outcast protagonists in Aldous Huxley's* Brave New World.

Keywords: *utopia, dystopia, outsider/outcast.*

Introduction

Utopias have existed in the European imaginary, before there was even a term to denote them. Plato's *Republic*, the Garden of Eden and the Promised Land in the *Bible*, the medieval Cockaigne, King Arthur's Camelot, Eldorado, Tolkien's Lothlorien are all examples of such utopias, but it was only in the twentieth century that the discordant voices were heard and that dystopias made an appearance. Scholars call the dystopia "utopia's twentieth century doppelgänger" (Gordon, Tilley, Prakash, 2010: 1); thus, the idea of identity and alterity is found in this double valence. The outsider or outcast constitutes the *alter* and identifies the discordant note present in the seeming harmony of the utopian society.

The term utopia was already ambivalent when it was coined by Thomas More with two Greek prefixes "eu" and "ou". (Sisk, 1997: 3) The positive meaning is there, as is the strong imaginary component since this perfect place does not exist in reality. (Gordin, Tilley, Prakash, *ibidem*) The anti-, counter- or negative- utopia, as a dystopia is alternatively defined is in actuality a utopia that goes wrong. Thus, in the initial stages the reader deals with an apparently perfect place that seems to offer answers and solutions to questions and problems from the real world. It is only with the advent of an outsider/outcast who has either experienced a different way of life or who hopes for a distinct way of life which would fit him better that the negative facets of the dystopia are revealed. The dichotomy between utopia and dystopia is at times blurred; however, the one between identity and alterity is usually clearly delineated.

This paper will focus on the outsider/outcast who wishes to be included in the mainstream, but whose attempts to join those on the inside fail as well as on the outsider who resists the system with all his might, but still fails. The moment the dissonance is assumed by such outsiders, it is clear they live in a dystopian reality while those who conform and identify with the world order live in a utopia. The paper will investigate the role of the outsider as the principle that distinguishes between utopia and dystopia in Huxley's *Brave New World.*

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The creation of the utopia/dystopia and the salience of the outsider/outcast

The design of the futuristic societies of utopias/dystopias is meant to make them perfect, but the future setting is also meant to emphasize the underlying problems of our own society: "Projecting a better world into the future renders present-day problems more clearly." (Gordin, Tilley and Prakash, *ibidem*) These perfect communities from the future present developments in technology and a different way of organizing societies: "Utopian fiction explores the perfectibility of human society through hypothetical advancements in technology, philosophy, and social structures, resulting in perfect or near-perfect communities located in distant lands or in the future." (Sisk, *op. cit.*: 2) They point to the flaws of our own system, yet they are revealed to be imperfect themselves through the outcast, who seems to be stuck on the outside looking in.

It is worth considering that while "dystopia is not simply the opposite of utopia" since that would imply a completely unplanned world or a world "planned to be deliberately terrifying and awful," the two are contrary in the way they are perceived. (Gordin, Tilley, Prakash, *ibidem*) Thus, it is in the eye of the beholder that the difference lies: "Dystopia (…) is a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society." (Gordin, Tilley, Prakash, *ibidem*) An onlooker who has no vested interest in the outcome will have a neutral reaction. An observer living outside of the dystopia/utopia and on whom the tenets of the World State have no influence can afford to be dispassionate about it. Nevertheless, an outsider living in the utopia can perceive it as a dystopia, setting himself up as the other to the utopia's identity. He can simultaneously wish to be a part of this society and yet be aware of its shortcomings. For him, the utopia may turn into a dystopia, an *alter*. An outsider who is in fact part of the system but whose position sets him apart from others in his world will still perceive the utopia as a utopia. None of the above, however, can measure up to the outlook provided by an outsider by virtue of not being part of the utopia from the outset. In this case, having lived in a different society gives credence to the perspective offered.

People have always dreamed of a better world where they would not be constantly threatened by war, disease, violence and social instability, where they would exist as a united community pursuing the same goals, where they would be happy, where society would not be divided along the lines of wealth, where a tyranny of the few would not threaten the freedom of the many. Humans have always hoped for a better place, and they always thought that the future would fulfill our wishes: a better place, a utopia – an ideal or perfect community. The question still remains – how to go about achieving such a perfect society? The answer Aldous Huxley provides sours our perspective: mind control, manipulation, conditioning and eugenics.

The dystopian misuse of science in *Brave New World*

The idea of eugenics was contained in Plato's *Republic*, but the modern concept started from the social Darwinist catchphrases "struggle for existence" and "survival of the fittest" – which, when applied to human society, actually suggested that the rich were better endowed than the poor and hence more successful in life – the same thing was suggested by predestination in Protestant religions, but in that case the rich were endowed with God's Grace. Historically there existed two aspects in the eugenics movement: "positive eugenics, concentrating on the means to increase the breeding potential of especially 'fit' individuals, and negative eugenics, emphasizing the

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restriction on breeding for particularly 'unfit' types." (Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia) Both of these aspects are emphasized in a *Brave New World*: the Alphas were considered fit, while the Betas, Gammas, Deltas and Epsilons unfit for reproduction. The state was the one to decide who should produce offspring (not viviparous, but only the ova to be used in decanting) and who should not. Only a few members of the female population were allowed to produce ova and they had to use a Malthusian belt as a mandatory birth-control measure regulating the growth of population. No woman was allowed to become pregnant because nobody was actually born; only decanted from a bottle as the ova of the few fertile women are harvested. Eugenics was used by Huxley in his novel by referring to the artificial breeding of prescribed numbers of humans for specific professions.

In a *Brave New World*, we also encounter Neo-Pavlovian conditioning – Pavlov had discovered the conditioned and unconditioned reflexes in dogs and he showed that animals can be trained through a system of rewards and punishments. This type of conditioning was used on the babies in order to make them like and dislike certain objects depending on the caste to which they belonged. Every human being in the new world was conditioned to fit society's needs – to like the work he would have to do, leading to stability. Biological or physiological conditioning consisted of adding chemicals in the bottles in order to prepare the embryos for the levels of strength, intelligence, and aptitude required for given jobs and castes. After "decanting" the babies from the bottles, they were psychologically conditioned, mainly by hypnopædia or sleep-teaching. Psychology was misused in this society as there was no stopping the sleep-teaching that pre-programmed people. It might be said that at every stage the society brainwashed its citizens. According to the director of the London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre the conditioning applied to children when young could never be undone: "What man has joined, nature is powerless to put asunder." (Huxley, 1945: 23) Thus science made man more powerful than nature. This conditioning combined with a powerful drug such as soma was able to control the minds of the citizens of the brave new world.

By the time Huxley was writing a *Brave New World*, the economic developments meant more and bigger factories, more manufactured goods and the advent of mass-produced automobiles; thus, there was the need for purchasers of all these products. Industry used the individual which became important as producer and consumer. Huxley took consumerism one step further in his novel – the citizens' chief importance was their ability to produce and consume manufactured goods – the Neo-Pavlovian conditioning and hypnopædia made sure of that: "The more stitches the less riches; the more stitches the less riches (…) Ending is better than mending; ending is better than mending (…) I love new clothes, I love new clothes, I love new clothes." (Huxley, *op. cit.*: 60-61) While the lower castes worked at producing new things everyone could buy (everything had to be new in this world – not only things, even people who were forever kept young), the higher castes worked at producing the lower castes: even man could be mass-produced in this brave new world: "The principle of mass production at last applied to biology." (Huxley, *op. cit.*: 7) The citizens became consumers in terms of human relationships as well.

For Huxley, the utopia became a dystopia despite the achievement of world peace. War was indeed no longer a threat in *Brave New World*, but only because all violent desires and feelings in humans were abolished – there was no passionate love, art in all its forms had been obliterated, religion and family were removed from the picture. Illness and old age were cured in the sense that there were no visible signs of

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them, and death was considered natural – the painful emotions of grief and loss, and the spiritual significance of death were eliminated through conditioning in this new society. Stability implied producing great numbers of identical twins through the Bokanovsky Process because people who are exactly the same will not be at variance. It also meant reducing conflict – easily done through conditioning the members of each caste into being happy with their position in society and with their work. When a person had a depression their lack of happiness was easily solved by the use of drugs. Stability could be attained when everyone was happy and the use of soma ensured that: it eliminated any painful emotion, but also every feeling. Feelings such as love and jealousy would lead to neurotic passions and the establishment of family life, both of which would interfere with community and stability. What was called an oligarchy of Ten World Controllers was really a totalitarian regime, but its tyranny was wanted and sought by the people whose minds, hazed by soma and by Neo-Pavlovian conditioning did not allow them to see its negative parts.

Soma had the effect of calming people and getting them high at the same time, but without hangovers or undesirable side effects. Huxley believed in the possibility of a drug that would enable people to escape from themselves and help them achieve knowledge of God, but he made soma a parody and degradation of that possibility. Soma, not nuclear bombs, was the weapon of choice for the World Controllers in Brave New World – they do not use force, but their brains: "Government's an affair of sitting, not hitting. You rule with the brains and the buttocks, never with the fists." (Huxley, *op. cit.*: 57) Fear and intimidation have limited power; after all, these tactics simply build up resentment in the minds of the oppressed. Subconscious persuasion and mind-altering drugs, on the other hand, appear to have no side effects: "force was no good. The slower but infinitely surer methods of ectogenesis, neo-Pavlovian conditioning and hypnopædia" were used. (Huxley, *op. cit.*: 59)

In this utopian society power was held by the few – the Ten World Controllers. Their power was characterized by knowledge because they were the only ones who knew what came before Ford. They did no use force but more insidious persuasion such as mind-control. But this was not true power as the citizens of the World State could not choose for themselves – they were not free, they were in chains although those were not visible chains. They were not controlled through force, which would have left visible marks on the minds of the oppressed, they were controlled in a far more subtle way, thus without leaving traces: the narcotic, soma, was the weapon used to control them, this and the mind conditioning to which the citizens were submitted ever since they were children. The Ten World Controllers did not have to bully citizens into doing their jobs as they did them happily because of the conditioning – they simply decided how many men were necessary in each caste for all the jobs to be done, they only needed to structure the citizens' field of action. But were the citizens of the World State really free – truly they were not, how could anyone thus conditioned and drugged be anything but a slave? They did not have multiple choices: those people knew how to behave only in one way – the way they were taught during their sleep through hypnopædia. In Foucault's words:

> To govern (...) is to structure the possible field of action of others. The relationship proper to power would not, therefore, be sought on the side of violence or of struggle (...) Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realized. Where the

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> determining factors saturate the whole, there is no relationship of power; slavery is not a power relationship when man is in chains. (Foucault, 1982: 220)

In addition, Foucault goes on to discuss the idea of government, not in terms of confrontation, but of various types of government that are not necessarily in the realm of politics: "'Government' did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed: the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick." (Foucault, *op. cit.*: 221) The Ten World Controllers had learned this lesson well.

The outsider/outcast in *Brave New World*

In *Brave New World* there are various characters who are outsiders: Bernard Marx, Helmholtz Watson, Mustapha Mond and John Savage. The first three are part of the World State, while the third although a citizen of it was not conditioned to live in it. John Savage is the real outsider and the only one who can truly see the flaws of this society which seem to be invisible to the eyes of those who have grown up in it. He sees that the citizens of this Utopia must give up love, family, science, art, religion, and history. The price of this brave new world is fatally high. Bernard is an outsider only because he does not meet the standard of the Alpha Plus, while Helmholtz is an Alpha Plus from every point of view, but he knows he is too good for the job he has to do.

Mustapha Mond is different – he is one of the Ten World Controllers and he has had access to the culture previous to the World State. He knows what came before and after Ford, his mind is not controlled by the drug or the conditioning – he is an individual, not one of the herd. He introduces the World State to the reader in the third chapter – with both before and after – he uses smutty, filthy words such as mother, father, viviparous, home, Christianity, God: "The world was full of fathers–was therefore full of misery; full of mothers–therefore of every kind of perversion from sadism to chastity; full of brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts–full of madness and suicide." (Huxley, *op. cit.*: 43-44)

The world before the World State was characterized by instability due to strong feelings and the existence of the family: "Family, monogamy, romance (...) a narrow channeling of impulse and energy." (Huxley, *op. cit.*: 45) In Mustapha's opinion there is no civilization without social stability (Huxley, *op. cit.*: 48), so civilization was born only after the disappearance of Christianity, the idea of Heaven, Soul and Immortality (Huxley, *op. cit.*: 52) and after a campaign to erase the past with all its art. Before people used alcohol, morphine and cocaine (Huxley, *op. cit.*: 62) as drugs – these drugs were not as effective as soma which has in fact "all the advantages of Christianity and alcohol; none of their defects." (Huxley, *op. cit.*: 63) Mond believes that the World State has sacrificed freedom for happiness, but that is not true because he mistakes lack of pain for happiness – only the Savage is capable of making this distinction because he has known real happiness in his life, not the one induced by soma. Mond knows both worlds but is incapable of seeing how the past was better than the future awaiting a society dedicated to eradicating those things that make us human.

Is it perhaps that the outsider has a case of 'sour grapes' syndrome and manages to sour things for the reader as well since his wishes to be welcomed are not met? I believe this to be the case in *Brave New World*, for Bernard Marx, at least. Bernard Marx is an Alpha, but a minus might need to be attached to his caste

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classification, since he seems to be less than the standard. He is not tall enough – this single fact sours his outlook on the perfect society of the World State. Helmholtz Watson's position, however, is quite different – he is an Alpha Plus who is very much aware of his talents and intellect and who does not feel fulfilled in his position. He finds it is limiting, therefore leading to dissatisfaction in a society where you are supposed to be happy at all times. Being an Alpha Plus means that most conditioning has been eliminated, as a result those ingrained mechanisms that are supposed to keep the populace happy are not part of the make-up of Helmholtz Watson.

Mustapha Mond is a third possible outsider in *Brave New World*, yet his position is vastly different. As an Alpha Plus, he too lacks the conditioning that would make him a cog in the clockwork mechanism of the World State. But in his position as one of the ten World Controllers, he believes this society to be as it should be and he is ready to enforce his beliefs, having the power to do so. He is an outsider in terms of his knowledge of the world as it used to be and as it is now, and in terms of his leadership position that sets him apart. Yet, he feels no dissatisfaction and he fanatically believes in the tenets of the World State.

Finally, the true outsider in the World State is John Savage, hailing from the Reservation – Malpais. It is interesting to consider that the name the citizens of the world state give the Reservation actually means Bad Country in Spanish. Thus, they clearly set up the Reservation as an opposite to their own world. In terms of family, human feelings, health, wealth, and technological development, Malpais is indeed an opposite of the World State. Since it is set up as the Other for the utopia of the World State, the people who dwell there have a distinct outlook on what life is like. John Savage, however, is a product of the Reservation in so much as he was born there. However, both his parents were citizens of the World State and his mother had been left behind, pregnant, in the Reservation. Linda is also an outsider, but only in Malpais. After being left behind, Linda acted in Malpais as she would have in the World State. Her promiscuousness – which was the norm for the citizens of the utopia, but anathema for those of Malpais – marked her as an outsider.

John Savage experienced the society in Malpais yet had knowledge of the World State provided by the nostalgic stories his mother, Linda, had told him. John Savage is in a unique position because of his parentage and his upbringing. However, he was seen as an outsider by the dwellers of Malpais as well. Growing up, John read Shakespeare and he was inspired by his writings, thus he believes in love and family and art. His mother's stories made him long for the World State, since Linda's conditioning did not allow her to see the World State in any other way but through rose tinted glasses. However, once they are discovered and brought back to the World State they both remain outsiders and curiosities: Linda due to her premature aging and John the Savage due to his different customs.

The first contact with the World State has John exclaiming: 'Oh, brave new world', quoting Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. His exclamation is one of admiration and awe at the possibilities this new world offers him. In the World State, John makes the rounds of all the social events, with Bernard Marx by his side, thus increasing the latter's standing. Soon enough, John becomes disillusioned with this world and clearly sees its flaws. In a conversation with Mustapha Monday he praises Shakespeare and the freedom to feel, yet his concerns are dismissed by the World Controller. Towards the end, even John's self-flagellation becomes a spectacle in this world focused on the pursuit of pleasure and entertainment. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel the readers, outsiders in their own right, understand that the novel's title becomes a criticism and the

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connotation received by it is no longer one of possibilities, but one of debilitating limitations.

Conclusion

Science was misused in this society to the end of eliminating feelings that could lead to violent outbursts such as wars – the goal of this society to obliterate violence is not a negative goal, but the means used in order to achieve it have eliminated other things which are rather valuable to a normal human being: the citizens of this Utopia gave up love, family, art, religion, and history – was it all worth it? Some say the end justifies the means, but in such a case I do not think it does. Some things are too precious to be sacrificed. The outsiders reveal the flaws of this view and problematize the initial tenet that setting up a utopia as an ideal community would lead to happiness. The happiness in *Brave New World* is only due a lack of knowledge and the conditioning applied to its citizens since ignorance is bliss. Thus, dystopia "turns human perfectibility on its head by pessimistically extrapolating contemporary social trends into oppressive and terrifying societies." (Sisk, *op. cit.*: 2) The opposition set up is that between hope and disillusion, dream and nightmare, liberator and threat. Alterity is always included in the identity: "every utopia always comes with its implied dystopia—whether the dystopia of the status quo, which the utopia is engineered to address, or a dystopia found in the way this specific utopia corrupts itself in practice. (…) Thus the dialectic between the two imaginaries, the dream and the nightmare, also beg for inclusion together." (Gordin, Tilley, Prakash, *op. cit.*: 2)

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