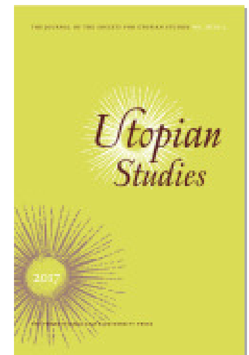
Utopian Literature and Science: From the Scientific Revolution to "Brave New World" and Beyond by Patrick Parrinder (review)



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Notes

1. Candy Gunther Brown, "Introduction," in *The Future of Evangelicalism in America*, ed. Candy Gunther Brown and Mark Silk (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 1.

2. Chris R. Armstrong, "Sound, Style, Substance: New Directions in Evangelical Spirituality," in *The Future of Evangelicalism in America*, ed. Candy Gunther Brown and Mark Silk (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 63.

3. Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 162.

Patrick Parrinder. *Utopian Literature and Science: From the Scientific Revolution to "Brave New World" and Beyond.*

New York: Palgrave, 2015. 222 pp. Cloth, $90.00, ISBN 9781137456779

Reviewed by Musab Bajaber, King Saud University

Utopian Literature and Science by Patrick Parrinder is an elaborate addition to the discussion about the connection between science and utopianism. It traces the complex relationship between the two from Bacon's *New Atlantis* to twentieth-century utopian science fiction. The book argues that in classical utopias, science is either unnecessary or precarious and, thus, usually censored and controlled. In modern utopias, however, the connection between the two is complex. While science is essential to the formation of any modern utopia, its presence within this form of utopia remains unsettling and illustrates utopian contradictions, imperfections, and undesirability. The book proves this argument by pointing out the connection and the effects of different scientific discoveries (e.g., the telescope and microscope) and theories (e.g., eugenics and Darwinism) on utopian literature. This book is most beneficial to readers interested in utopian studies more so than in the idea of science or its history in literature. It is also beneficial to researchers looking for condensed material on a subject that has been lightly touched upon in scattered critical texts.

Parrinder's book is divided into an introduction, three parts, and a conclusion. Each part has three to four chapters. Each chapter discusses the

development of a common scientific theme and its connection to and influence on a variety of utopian texts. The first part, "Sciences of Observation and Intervention," lays out the discrepancy between two forms of science—the science of observation and the science of intervention—and their influence on utopian literature. This part argues that the perception of science and scientists fuels utopian fantasy; however, science and scientists' presence *within* utopia undermines utopian desirability and perfection.

The second part of the book, "The Human Animal," discusses the biology of human beings in utopia. It argues that, as much as we wish to ignore it, the perfect physical shape of utopian citizens is a result of liberal (i.e., encouraged) or authoritarian (i.e., enforced) eugenics. Though the perfection of the human form is a desirable trait in utopia, the means of achieving it (i.e., eugenics) is a major perpetuator of dystopia. In relation to this, this part also discusses the presence of the human-animal border in scientific romance (i.e., the line that also divides civilization from savagery and utopia from reality) and illustrates its elusiveness in prehistory and futuristic literature.

The final part of the book, "Modern Utopias and Post-human Worlds," digs further into the nature of utopian citizens. It questions whether utopia can be constructed on "scientific" lines to accommodate present-day human societies or whether it requires a new brand of a posthuman society. The answer is complex. Though many modern utopias entertain the idea of a posthuman society achieved through evolution or through induced technological and social transformation, the mere idea of achieving this stage is elusive and "forever unsatisfied."

Like all of Parrinder's writings, *Utopian Literature and Science* does not disappoint utopian literature critics. The book is well situated within the boundaries of utopian scholarly discourse; it builds on Kumar's, Claeys's, and others' discussion of the topic, and it depends on less disputed ideas about utopia. The book also contains excellent textual analysis, and—as expected—it adds juicy content to the field.

What is perhaps unique about this book, however, is that while its theoretical platform is well situated within the utopian scholarly discourse, the book nevertheless pushes the boundaries of this discourse to some unsettling limits. This push is apparent in the issue of scope and definition of both utopia and science. The subtitle of the book promises the reader to cover science in utopian literature "from the Scientific Revolution to *Brave New World* and beyond." This promise is partially fulfilled as the book discusses a variety

of very well-known and not so well-known utopian and dystopian works (e.g., *Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy, *The Crystal Age* by W. H. Hudson, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin, *Erewhon* by Samuel Butler, *The Coming Race* by Edward Bulwer Lytton, *Kantsaywhere* by Francis Galton, and *The Clockwork Man* by E. V. Odle). However, not all the works in the book are within the standard utopian literature canon, and many important utopian works are lightly discussed; some works, such as Thomas More's *Utopia*, are overlooked altogether. Furthermore, many works discussed are hardly connected to the genre (e.g., H. G. Wells's "The Grisly Folk," William Golding's *The Inheritors*, and Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*). In addition, despite the wide array of works covered, the book's subtitle, and the brief mention of some late twentieth-century utopian works in the context of dystopian settings (e.g., Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Ursula Le Guin's *Dispossessed*, and Margret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*), the book hardly covers the influence of science on hard and soft science fiction from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s that incorporates substantial scientific and utopian themes. While the choice of material to include in a book is forever challenging, I would have loved to see the book tackle the presence of science and its influence on these two forms of late twentieth-century science fiction more so than discussing works that are vaguely connected to either utopia or science (e.g., Kafka's *Metamorphosis*).

As for definition, the book does not provide a satisfactory definition that allows us to see the method of incorporating many works into the fold of utopian literature. It seems that the author implies that any work with a trace of hope or hopelessness and success or failure is classified as utopian literature. As a matter of fact, the choice of some works even defies the basic definition of modern utopia emphasized at the beginning of the book. In the introduction, modern utopia is defined as kinetic, futuristic, overtly political, and heavily dependent upon scientific discoveries and technological advancement. Although a lot of works discussed fulfill these characteristics, some works don't. *News from Nowhere*, for example, is not technologically driven, and *Looking Backward* is hardly kinetic. The lack of definition also haunts the concept of science in the book. The book articulates the idea of science along the lines of observation and intervention and constantly reminds us that the unrealistic idealization of science and scientists has put the two in an uncomfortable position within utopian discourse (i.e., science is ideal, and scientists are perpetuators of idealism; hence, both are firmly situated within utopia). However, the book

does not provide a satisfactory definition of science that dispels the idealization of the field. It, rather, affirms that this idealized definition is indispensable and harmless to a certain extent; the only issue is that this definition puts science in an uncomfortable position within the utopian discourse.

In order to showcase how the issues of scope and definition push the boundaries of utopian discourse to unsettling limits, one can look into chapter 8 as an example. In this chapter, the author juxtaposes Wells's *The Time Machine* with Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and argues that these works demonstrate the failure of the utopian metamorphosis of the human condition: "The future Golden Age of *The Time Machine* is a fleeting mirage, while Gregor's transformation into an insect leads only to his social withdrawal and death" (16). To the author, these works are milestones because utopias after them "had in effect lost their innocence at the very moment when modern science seemed to be making them realizable" (17). As mentioned, the textual analysis of the two works is meaty. However, treating these two works as milestones of utopian literature with scientific undertones unsettles the definition of utopian literature, to say the least.[1] It has to be mentioned though that the author acknowledges that the inclusion of these works in utopian literature connected to science—particularly Kafka's—is debatable. However, the author overlooks the controversy and relies on Richard Gerber's affirmation on the matter in *Utopian Fantasy: A Study of English Utopian Fiction Since the End of the Nineteenth Century*, which was first published in 1955 and later in 1973. Parrinder's argument is that the metamorphosis of a person into an insect in Kafka's work is "deeply dystopian in its effects" (116) and that this dystopian effect is sufficient to grant the work a role in the genre: a role that deserves a chapter in the book. The issue with this argument is that while both *The Time Machine* and *Metamorphosis* do carry undertones of hopelessness, social deterioration, and dystopian themes, many contemporary utopian scholars do not consider these works entrenched in "utopian literature." To argue that they are requires discussion and counterargument for contemporary critics who beg to differ. A thorough discussion of definition and scope—though a nuisance—would have resolved the issue or at least provided justification for including these works in the genre and the book. Alternatively, since the book discusses utopian themes more so than utopian literature, perhaps changing the title to *Utopianism and Science*" rather than *Utopian Literature and Science* would have resolved the issue.

In conclusion and despite Parrinder's light address of definition and scope that led to my discomfort, I can say—beyond doubt—that *Utopian Literature and*

Science does break new ground for debate and discussion within the utopian scholarly discourse and, hence, it is worth the read. It does strike the right notes, and it ignites passionate engagement. I believe that the stimulating nature of the book makes it a valuable addition to any utopian literary critic's library.

Note

1. For additional discussion on the definition of utopia, see Lyman Sargent, "Utopia—The Problem of Definition," *Extrapolation* 16, no. 2 (May 1, 1975): 137; Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Oxford: Peter Lang International Academic, 2011); James Davis, *Utopia and the Ideal Society: A Study of English Utopian Writing 1516–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Roland Schaer, Gregory Claeys, and Lyman Sargent, eds., *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Verena Kirchner. *Im Bann der Utopie. Ernst Blochs Hoffnungsphilosophie in der DDR-Literatur*.

Beiträge zur neueren Literaturgeschichte. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2002. 272 pp. Paperback, €36.00, ISBN 3-8253-1305-0

Reviewed by Sonja Fritzsche, Michigan State University

Unlike the man, Ernst Bloch's philosophy of hope continued to influence select East German cultural intellectuals significantly long after his departure in 1961. Bloch himself left for West Germany following the construction of the Berlin Wall. After the end of World War II, he had returned from his New York exile by invitation in 1948 to accept the chair of philosophy at the University of Leipzig. While in exile, this friend of Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno had written the multivolume work entitled *The Principle of Hope* (*Das Prinzip Hoffnung*). In support of his return, the newly founded German Democratic Republic subsequently published it between 1954 and 1959. But Bloch's open-ended, dynamic utopian visions based on the "not-yet-conscious" and the concept of "possibility" soon ran up against the