

IN THE NAME OF GOD

THE REPERCUSSIONS OF RENAISSANCE
BRITISH UTOPIA IN THE 1920S-1930S
AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

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INTRODUCTION

This book proposes to study the utopian discourse established in sixteenth-century Britain by Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626), and Henry Neville's *The Isle of Pines* (1668) and, subsequently, to trace the discourse in the American science fiction of the 1920s and 1930s. The aim is to examine which aspects of the sixteenth-to-seventeenth-century utopian doctrine are reciprocated, naturalized, developed, or questioned by the science fiction writers and editors of the mentioned decades. In addition, we would like to show that, from among the utopian discourses belonging to the above authors, it was the Baconian discourse which the American 1920s and 1930s science fiction appropriated.

The sixteenth century opened a new chapter in history. The Renaissance actually was a rebirth, particularly of art and literature in much of Europe. This led to the production of utopias which envisaged such "rebirths" in future. These utopias had their roots in "prose

romance” rather than the “later form of the novel.”¹ Thus, the argument that “classical utopian fiction” generally depicted “homogenous worlds without a place for the individual” stemmed from the confusing application of the criteria of the novel to such fiction. However, utopia seemed a “relatively recent” and modern “literary institution,” and was born in Britain in 1516, when Thomas More’s *Utopia* was published.

It does not follow that golden societies did not exist before Thomas More (1478-1535). Examples of precedents are abundant: Plato’s *Republic* (c. 380 B.C.), golden age visions in the biblical book of Genesis, and Augustine’s *City of God* (c. 1470) to mention just a few. Further, More drew on some of these sources in the writing of *Utopia*. Inheriting different features from its past utopian traditions, More’s book, “set the template for subsequent work in the genre.”²

Plato denigrated the significance of technological progress as he had categorized craftsmen, artisans and experimenters as philistines. Even in his evaluation of knowledge, Plato had stipulated pure and abstract sciences such as mathematics to guardians who were elite statesmen. Plato’s great fear of technological misapplication led him to look at empirical knowledge with disfavor. In a dialogue with Phaedrus, Socrates recounts the story of Theuth who elaborates on the benefits of the

1. Phillip E. Wegner, “Utopia,” *A Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. David Seed (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) 80.

2. Wegner, “Utopia” 81.

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invention of writing for the people of Egypt. Thamous, however, who is not of the same opinion, contends that writing seems to heighten people's "intelligence," but it will actually "atrophy" their "memories:"

Your invention is a potion for jogging the memory, not for remembering.

You provide your students with the appearance of intelligence, not real intelligence. Because your students will be widely read, though without any contact with a teacher, they will seem to be men of wide knowledge, when they will usually be ignorant. And this spurious appearance of intelligence will make them difficult company.¹

Moreover, from the Platonic perspective, the craftsman's work was sanctioned only if he followed the "eternal model," that is, the natural "universe." If he imitated a "created" or an artificial model, his work would be "blasphemous."² Thus, in Plato's recommended ideal society, technology and empirical sciences were not esteemed.

Artisans and craftsmen, however, had a better fate in Thomas More's *Utopia*. They comprised the majority of the population of More's ideal territory as socio-economic progress depended on their handcraft. Later, the technologist and the scientist were celebrated in Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) as the only social class that could guarantee social welfare. After Bacon (1561-1626), Henry Neville (1620-1694) closely

1 Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Robin Waterfield (London: Oxford University, 2002) 68-69.

2. Plato, *Timaeus, Timaeus and Critias*, trans. Robin Waterfield (London: Oxford University, 2008) 17.

examined the process of populating the uninhabited realm of *The Isle of Pines* (1668) by the English newcomers. Here, nation-building occurred while no single technological tool was visible except for the Dutch's military machine for the subjugation of the rebels. If Plato had disparaged artisanship and empirical sciences, the sixteenth and seventeenth century utopists deployed science and technology as the essential components of their ideal cities.

Renaissance British utopian agendas—whether social, scientific, or libertarian—were aimed to construct ideal societies. They were sustained by the precepts of Humanism and Reformation, and looked forward to new forms of life in future. In these cities, institutions established systematic social life, controlled everything methodically, and promoted social plans for the purposes of invention, discovery, experimentation, organization, and even the exploration of exotic lands and languages. Whatever form these narrative utopias adopted, they demonstrated the diverse dimension of Humanism from the sixteenth century onward, though not all utopists had a unanimous vote on the meaning of the term.

The tradition of utopia underwent a “revolutionary ferment in Europe and elsewhere” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. So there was an “outpouring of Utopian writings” as well as the “establishment of experimental Utopian communities” called “intentional communities” in the “then recently founded USA and in the territories

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bordering it.”¹ An example would be “utopian Socialist” Friedrich Engels’s *Socialism: Utopia and Scientific* (1880). Such utopists argued for the formation of a “common European union” where “peaceful industrialization would be led by an enlightened scientific, philosophical, technical, and artistic elite.” Later in the nineteenth century, the “single most influential Utopia fiction” emerged in America. Here, Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1888) took man into a new and ideal time and place through a hypnotic slumber.² This attested to utopia’s adaptability in different eras and contexts. Thus, utopia was not merely a static description of a real or ideal place.

The narrative utopia was a medium through which social and cultural space and communal identity slowly took shape by means of “semiosis.”³ This, according to Wegner, is called the “performance of discourse” or “making the world through language.”⁴ Here, history plays a crucial role, because the narrative utopia builds up the “cognitive space” around which new types of “lived experience and theoretical perceptions form.” That is how the apprehension of narrative utopias of the past will have “real consequences” for living and perceiving “modernity in the new millennium.”⁵ For this reason, we cannot give credit only to More’s work,

1. Wegner, “Utopia” 85.

2. Wegner, “Utopia” 85-86.

3. Wegner, Introduction: The Reality of Imaginary Communities, *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2002) xviii.

4. Introduction xix.

5. Wegner, Introduction xx.

but we should rather consider the process of “re-authorings” of his utopia by his subsequent readers who established the “institutional being-in-the-world of this genre.”¹ Consequently, utopia has succeeded not only in forming a new cultural space but also in defining the vocation of the intellectual and self interpretation in general.²

This positive and constructive spirit of the narrative utopia may remind us of the British and American science fiction of the 1920s and 1930s. For instance, H. G. Wells’s *A Modern Utopia* (1905) drew “inspiration from Bacon’s *New Atlantis*” and presented a vision of a “clean, orderly, and effective society, a triumph of rational organization and centralized planning, directed by the Samurai, a voluntary scientific and bureaucratic elite.”³ Wells’s utopia evinced that the older form of the nation-state “as the container for Utopian speculation and experimentation” was no longer sufficient, and that new forms were required to meet the standards of a nascent science-related genre. Thus, the new genre of science fiction would do that in terms of the “planetary nation-state” on a “new global scale.”⁴ H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895) revealed the need for such a change by recounting the trans-temporal (trans-historical) and trans-spatial travel of an inventor who explored the culture and life conditions of living beings in other spatial and temporal dimensions.

1. Wegner, Introduction xxi.

2. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities* 4.

3. Wegner, “Utopia” 87.

4. Wegner, “Utopia” 88.