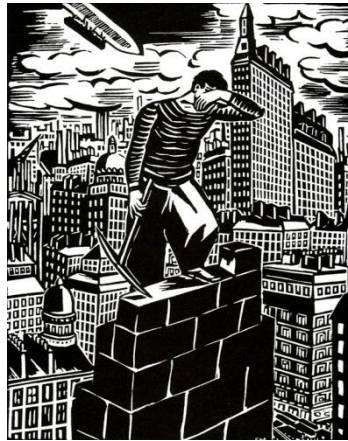


THE REALITY OF CAPITALIST DYSTOPIA



Google images, Calenda: Bé(vue) du future

We've already had occasion to analyze the critical potential of the crime novel.¹ Another literary genre, which has spread graphically, in cinema, and now in television series, also largely displays this critical potential: dystopia, or, in other words, the counter.

*"The word "dystopia" is derived from the Greek word $\delta\upsilon\varsigma$ meaning "bad, abnormal" and the word $\tau\omicron\pi\omicron\varsigma$ meaning "place." Although there is no clear definition of this literary genre, there are common characteristics found in all dystopias. First, we can see that the society imagined by the authors of dystopian works is set in the future or in an unidentifiable time and is systematically governed by a totalitarian regime." (...) "In a New York Times article about Ray **Bradbury** and his work *Fahrenheit 451*, it is written that dystopian authors "know what the future will be like: louder, faster, stupider, meaner, increasingly inept and violent." Dystopian authors seem to have the power to predict a bleak future, but one that often seems close to reality."*²

Dystopia is, therefore, a relevant tool for social critique, and today the line separating dystopias from capitalist catastrophes is increasingly blurred and permeable. The catastrophic and dictatorial future of capital is already present in our societies. The dystopian analytical tool is used to highlight the main flaws and threats concentrated in the MPC. The objective is to show the real chaos into which capitalism is plunging us into and the major catastrophes that threaten us, attempting to present us with the image of a post-apocalyptic society. The alarmist character is clearly stated, as in concrete revolutionary propaganda that harbors no illusions. On the contrary, creating or reinforcing illusions about democracy, libertarianism, individualism, etc., necessarily leads to disillusionment and disenchantment. The communist movement does not live by hope, but by will, political analysis, and programming "invariance." Just as proletarian "autonomy" cannot exist without political organization, *"This organization of the proletariat into a class, and consequently into a political party, is constantly destroyed by competition between workers."* K. Marx & F. Engels: Manifesto du Parti Communiste, éditions Science Marxiste, p. 29, Paris, 1999.

There's no point in lamenting or wishfully reassuring ourselves; the time has come to be fully aware of the catastrophic situation of the capitalist system and, therefore, of the proletariat as

¹The «polar» révélateur des contradictions du capital : Matériaux Critiques N°4, April 2022, and on our site : <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes>

²A.J: «What is the role of dystopies in society? » text not published.

well. It is in this sense that certain counter-utopias offer a glimpse into the capitalist future and its many follies, negatively opposing the need to destroy this system from top to bottom. The labor movement has already seen utopias that presented a radiant future and other alternative projects for society that influenced not only "utopian" socialists but also Marx and Engels.

«It is fair to say that the utopians posed the same question as Marxism, but they could only answer it with the means provided to them by the development of the productive forces of their time. This is evident as soon as they moved on to the practical implementation of their communist intuitions: the materials they used were the same ones they found before them in their own time. Fourier, for example, lived in an era when agriculture was dominant and industry was still in limbo. He was, therefore, the socialist of the physiocratic era, and his projects were realized on the agrarian plane.»³

Marx always stressed his theoretical debt to socialist utopias. *“In this sense, then, Marx is the most utopian of utopians, seemingly unconcerned with future society; his main concern is the destruction of present society, but he elevates this revolution to the level of a demand that compromises the whole being of the modern slave.”* M. Rubel, *Avant-propos des pages choisies: Karl Marx, Révolution et socialisme*, p. 12, Payot & Rivage, Paris, 2008.

There are also revolutionary dystopias, the most famous of which is probably Jack London's *The Iron Heel*, which describes the Chicago Commune of 1908, crushed by counterrevolution and the precursor to three centuries of fascist dictatorship. Commenting on this extraordinary work of foresight, Trotsky wrote:

“The important thing here is not Jack London's pessimism, but his passionate tendency to shake up those who allow themselves to be lulled by routine, to force them to open their eyes, to see what is and what is in the making (...). (...) “He uses the centuries to measure the tyrannical will of the exploiters and the treacherous role of the workers' bureaucracy. His most romantic hyperboles are, in the end, infinitely more exact than the accounting calculations of the so-called ‘realist’ politicians.”⁴

For our part, we have already referred to a "utopia/counter-utopia" to indicate certain problems that could be foreseen during the period of transition to full communism.⁵

«Such is the case with Ursula K. Le Guin's (1974) recent anarchist utopia, The Dispossessed. In it, she describes a libertarian society, “Anarres,” contrasted with the typically capitalist society of “Urras.” Anarres is located on an inhospitable planet (formerly a mining planet) and suffers from endemic scarcity. Throughout the book, this scarcity explains and illustrates the problems facing this libertarian but sad, boring, prudish, and alienated society. This egalitarian situation, however, involves rationing, routine... and forced labor. It is further reinforced by the contrast with the “unfettered” exuberance and enjoyment (though, obviously, strictly reserved for the ruling class) that reign on Urras. One of the attractions of the author's description is that she does not foresee miraculous, concrete solutions to the problems described, but rather leaves the reader free to reflect on and discuss them.»

However, the absolute reference in this field remains George Orwell's 1984. This dystopia is the product of a political rejection of both Hitlerian Nazism and Stalinism, of "real socialism," which he had concrete experience of through the fierce repression in the "republican camp," fighting in the militia of the "POUM: Workers' Party of Marxist Unification."

³R. Dangeville, introduction to F. Engels, K. Marx, *Utopisme & communauté de l'avenir*, p.12, Maspero, Paris, 1976.

⁴L. Trotsky's 1937 preface to J. London's *Girl: in Le talon de fer*, p, 23-24, 10/18, Paris, 1973.

⁵“Some thoughts on the transition period” in *Matériaux Critiques* No. 1, October 2020, or on our website: <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsie/textes>

«Many people know 1984 from having read the novel or seen the film made about it. Few know that its main inspiration was Orwell's involvement in the Spanish Civil War and the Stalinist terror he discovered there. (...) Far fewer books deal with the origins of 1984 and Animal Farm. Even fewer give importance to Orwell's involvement in the Spanish Civil War when identifying these origins. » L. Gill ⁶.

Orwell confirmed this dystopian method in his work *Animal Farm*, an animal fable about the tragedy of the involution of the October Revolution. It was in 1984 that he invented a political Newspeak consisting of political oxymorons from the "age of doublethink," such as "Freedom is slavery," "War is peace," "Truth is a lie," and "Ignorance is strength." Orwell himself went so far as to define the "principles of Newspeak" in the appendix to his 1984:

«The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought -- that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc -- should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever. (...) No word in the B vocabulary was ideologically neutral. A great many were euphemisms. Such words, for instance, as joycamp (forced-labour camp) or Minipax (Ministry of Peace, i.e. Ministry of War) meant almost the exact opposite of what they appeared to mean. Some words, on the other hand, displayed a frank and contemptuous understanding of the real nature of Oceanic society. An example was prolefeed, meaning the rubbishy entertainment and spurious news which the Party handed out to the masses. Other words, again, were ambivalent, having the connotation 'good' when applied to the Party and 'bad' when applied to its enemies. But in addition there were great numbers of words which at first sight appeared to be mere abbreviations and which derived their ideological colour not from their meaning, but from their structure.»⁷

This new language and the constant rewriting of history are effective tools of domination because they induce an inverted understanding of reality in the image of the mythical socialist paradise of the USSR. In Orwell's words: *"In my opinion, nothing has done more to corrupt the original ideal of socialism than the belief that Russia is a socialist country and that every initiative of its leaders must be excused, if not imitated. I am convinced that destroying the Soviet myth is essential if we are to revive the socialist movement."*⁸ Today, in many ways, capitalist reality surpasses Orwellian fiction, including that of the new political languages, making 1984 a completely relevant work for understanding what we are experiencing. "Big Brother" and the "thought police" are externalized and "self-managed" by the internet and the political correctness of both the left and the right. Jaime Semprun usefully completed this analysis of the Newspeak in 2005 in his book *Défense et illustration de la novo-langue française*, published by Éditions de l'Encyclopédie des nuisances. Dystopias can also be concrete weapons in the emancipatory struggle.

«To understand the real impact of dystopias on society, we can take as an example some of the movements that have used dystopias to champion their cause and show that people find themselves in

⁶L. Gill, *Georges Orwell de la guerre civile espagnole à 1984*, lux, Canada, 2011. This is fully confirmed by his excellent book on his own experience: *«Hommage à la Catalogne (1936-1937)»*, 10/18, Paris, 2000.

⁷On the website: <https://www.librairie.org/wiki/GeorgeOrwell:1984-Appendice-LesPrincipesduNovlangue>

⁸Cited by Simon Leys, *Orwell ou l'horreur de la politique*, p.90, Champs/essais, 2014.

these stories. For example, 1984, as we've seen, is very reminiscent of the way Russia is evolving. And the number of copies sold of Orwell's novel has increased in recent months since the declaration of war on Ukraine. A man was recently arrested for distributing this book for free near Moscow, which shows the power it represents and how frightening it is for new authoritarian regimes.» AJ Already cited.

Other works are part of the Orwellian project and, without wishing to be exhaustive, we can mention, in addition to *Brave New World* by Aldous **Huxley** who precedes him (1931): *Unbearable Happiness* by Ira **Levin** (1970), which Mitterrand made his bedside book. This book presents a dictatorial and totalitarian society, run by a computer (aptly named "novnom") that selects its ruling class from among its opponents. *"A Clockwork Orange"* by A. **Burgess**, made famous by Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation, also had its own *novom*, "lumpen of the future." Norman **Spinrad** has written several powerful books, including a spectacular critique of society in *"Jack Baron et l'éternité,"* an original biography of Hitler in *"Rêve de fer,"* a searing critique of the world of cults in *"Les miroirs de l'esprit,"* and a nightmarish revolution in *"Le chaos final."* In *"Malevil,"* R. **Merle** accurately analyzes a post-apocalyptic society organized between primitive agrarian communism and a dictatorial theocracy. More recently, B. **Fogel** presented *"Transparency Selon Irina"* (Transparency according to Irina) and a prequel titled *"Le silence selon Manon"* (Silence according to Manon), which foresees the total visibility of citizens with a kind of «universal income», but for those who wish to maintain their anonymity and their residual «private life», marginality, the difficulties of a social nonexistence and police surveillance are their destiny.

"The Scarlet Handmaid", by Margaret Atwood criticizes the sexual slavery of "still fertile" women from the lower classes. Other books include *"The Penultimate Truth"* by Philip K. **Dick**, *"Globalia"* by J.C. **Ruffin**, *"L'obscur"* by P. **Testa**, and **Ruffin**, *"L'obscur"* by P. **Testa**, and Alan Moore's graphic novel *"V for Vendetta,"* to name just a few. It was television series and platforms like Netflix that made this style essential. Series like *"The Walking Dead"* presents a post-apocalyptic world in which no lessons seem to have been learned from its catastrophic end. The survivors simply reproduce, in various ways, the models of modern bourgeois society of the fascist organization of *"The Governor"* or *"Negan"* before their conversion into the democratic religion of permanent repentance.

The limit and the only horizon for the evocation of a future society remain, therefore, a more or less radical and local democracy, according to a Proudhonian "utopia," with market exchanges, social classes, and the State. All the categories tolerated and managed by postmodern capitalist society—women, homosexuals, blacks, Asians, overweight people, the disabled, police, military personnel, Hispanics, children, the elderly, priests, veiled women, etc.—have their place, provided they are admitted into one of the communities, always led by a charismatic leader. This leader clearly demonstrates the tendency of democracy, in delicate situations, to quickly impose itself as a dictatorship to meet the demands of the situation. As Marx would say, this is capitalism reproduced on the scale of a *"Robinsonade,"* referring to Robinson Crusoe, who reproduced on his island the totality of capitalism of his time, down to the slavery of *"Friday."*

«Experience teaches this to our Robinson, and he, having saved his watch, his account book,

his ink, and his pen from shipwreck, soon, like a good Englishman, begins to keep accounts for himself. His inventory includes a list of the objects of use he owns, the various operations necessary to produce them, and the average labor time required for certain quantities of these different products. The relationships between Robinson and the things that make up the wealth he has created for himself are all so simple and transparent that even Herr Wirth should be able to understand them without any particular intellectual effort. And yet, they contain all the essential determinations of value.» K. Marx, Le Capital, Le caractère fétiche de la marchandise et son secret , p. 88, éditions messidor/sociales, Paris, 1983.

“The Walking Dead” is not the only series that reflects this reproduction of society, although some of its features are more pronounced than others. We find them in other creations such as “The 100”, “Black Mirror”, “The Rain”, “Trepalium” (Arte), “Le Transperceneige”, “Squid Games” or in films like «Metropolis» (1927), «The Matrix», «Battle Royale», «Blade Runner», «Mad Max», «La planète des singes», «Soleil vert»... It is worth noting that John **Carpenter**’s now cult film “Los Angeles Invasion” is an excellent denunciation of the “spectacular-commercial” society and subliminal propaganda. Uchronias are a variant of counter-utopias, in which history is rewritten based on proven facts to highlight what the future could have been like if history had been hijacked. Napoleon in America, Hitler winning World War II, the Bolsheviks still in power... are examples of uchronias made or yet to be made. “The Master of the High Castle” by Philip K. **Dick**, “Peace of Fools” by P. **Kerr** and “Homeland” by Robert **Harris** are some of the most striking examples.

We have thus presented the critical nature of certain dystopias and their inherent limitations. That is why, after all, a critic as relevant as Mike Davis, who recently passed away, was able to use the dystopia of Blade Runner to reveal the chaotic future just around the corner.⁹ However, nothing can replace Marxist criticism in this field, when it asserts its radical and revolutionary essence.¹⁰

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Translated by ICR.

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⁹Further reading: Mike Davis, Beyond Blade Runner, Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster, Allia, Paris, 2006.

¹⁰To be read in Matériaux Critiques N°5: “Introduction to the question of material dialectics” April 2022.