


Utopian and Dystopian Literature: A Review Article of New Work by Fokkema; Prakash; Gordin, Tilley, Prakash; and Meisig

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## **Bernita BAGCHI**

### **Utopian and Dystopian Literature: A Review Article of New Work by Fokkema; Prakash; Gordin, Tilley, Prakash; and Meisig**

In the book review article at hand I discuss Douwe Fokkema's 2011 *Perfect Worlds: Utopian Fiction in China and the West* and the collected volumes *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City* (2010) edited by Gyan Prakash, *Utopia/ Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility* (2010) edited by Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash, and *Utopias from Asia* (2012) edited by Konrad Meisig. The human imagination delights in envisioning and attempting to put into practice possible worlds although what is utopia from one standpoint may be dystopia from another. The origin of the term "utopia" goes back to Thomas More who coined it in 1516 and the term "dystopia" was coined by John Stuart Mill in 1868. As an imaginative mode, utopia creates possible worlds, but understands the fictiveness and the perpetual state of incompleteness that such worlds enshrine. Although utopia as a term and genre of writing is European in origin, how do we recognize utopia in a non-European context: must it have that element of irony that we find in More's work? Is utopia always part of an impulse to secularize a religion or criticize an oppressive regime? Is there a distinction to be made between the fictional, ironic imagination and more grounded utopian socio-political movements? Asking how we should theorize the relationship between aesthetics and social, political, and economic aspects of utopia remains an urgent task for scholars. Readers of the books under review will be able to evolve their own answers with reference to the specific phenomena in utopian imagination they are interested in. Paradoxically, one of the messages one carries away from the wide-ranging books reviewed here is that paying close attention to the micro-specificities of a particular utopian phenomenon is indispensable. At the same time, all the books work with the welcome assumption that the scholar of utopia can compare phenomena across regions, cultures, and disciplinary fields. All the works under review are, perhaps understandably, interested in increasing the breadth and range of the scholarly corpus of utopian and dystopian texts and this includes analyzing utopian and dystopian works from cultures across the world, notably from Asia, analyzing films as expressions of utopian and dystopian modes, and incorporating a wide range of historical, economic, and political phenomena ranging from energy politics to nuclear power to millenarian movements to contemporary global supermarkets to communication technologies.

In *Possible Worlds: Utopian Fiction in China and the West* Fokkema compares centuries of utopian writing in China and in the "West" (i.e., Europe), but also with some analysis of North American English-language utopian literature. Completed shortly before Fokkema's death, the book encapsulates the research of a scholar who had spent many years in the Dutch Embassy in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution. Fokkema hypothesizes that writers resort to sketching what they see as better worlds in times of crisis when dominant ideologies can no longer answer the needs of the day and he considers early sixteenth-century Europe and nineteenth-century China as his primary examples. Fokkema discusses how cultural differences between China and Europe produced different patterns of utopian imagination. For Fokkema, Confucianism is the main driver of Chinese utopianism until the nineteenth century and he argues that this utopia was based on virtuous practices with a sense of precedents from history and nostalgia. Fokkema posits that while China is a "continental" culture, Europe is more dominated by the imaginary of seas. The typical Chinese utopia is a secluded rural retreat in the heart of the neighboring country, while the island far away from the known European lands is more typical of European utopian imaginaries. Some of the highlights in Fokkema's include analyses of Emile Souvestre's dystopian 1846 *Le Monde tel qu'il sera* (a narrative about the importance of Rousseau's work in utopian fiction), Dostoyevsky as dystopian writer and the significance of the parable of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Yevgeni Zamyatin's dystopian *We* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and H.G. Wells's meeting with Stalin. Fokkema argues that utopian writers such as Wells deserve to be taken seriously even if their political beliefs were sometimes naïve. With regard to Chinese utopian literature, Fokkema analyzed the *Analects* of Confucius as utopian text, shows how the Tai Ping revolt of 1850-1864 manifested a new kind of utopianism blending Christian and Chinese influences, how the Chinese American writer Lin Yutang wrote his own kind of utopias, how China is described as a dystopian country in Sheng Lao's 1932 *Cat Country*, how Ruzhen Li's 1827 novel *Desti-*

*ny of Flowers in the Mirror* evokes complex utopian visions including accounts of lands ruled by women and how Li's flowers also resonate in Mao's romantic, utopian idiom encapsulated in his slogan "Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom."

The collected volume *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility* and *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City* are the results from research projects Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University. The volume's objective is to inquire into what historical conditions, in the now/here, produce the "nowhere" of utopia. The allusion is part of the utopian political and narrative tradition, found, for example, in late nineteenth-century British utopian narratives such as William Morris's 1890 *News from Nowhere*. The utopian country of Nowhere is also the country of Now-here as utopia propelled by historical and political conditions in Morris's England. *Utopia/ Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility* is divided into sections on "Anima" related to utopia as related to human life and "Artifice" related to utopian thinking as artificial including concerns with science and technology. Jennifer Wenzel examines two kinds of millennial dreaming involving the Xhosa people of southern Africa's Eastern Cape: one was a movement led by prophecy known as the Xhosa cattle killing of 1856-57 and the other was the white colonial domination-subjugation and evangelization of the Xhosa during the same period. Dipesh Chakrabarty writes of how the Indian historian Jadunath Sarkar attempted, in a way that can be characterized as utopian, to construct public archives of historical documents in India only to find that the imperatives of the colonial state were different from Sarkar's own interest in constructing a preserved, accessible set of historical records, in the way that bourgeois societies such as that of the United Kingdom had done. Timothy Mitchell looks at energy politics and the limits of energy politics. He argues that the methods of extraction and distribution of coal gave, between ~1850 and 1920 much political power to those working in the coal mines and those working in railways and ships and docks to transport coal: such workers could disrupt the flow of coal at a time when it was the key source of energy. But with the switch to oil as a dominant source of energy, the situation changed: the countries producing oil, notably those in the Middle East, exert authoritarian rule while the countries consuming the bulk of the oil are democratic and this constitutes a paradox which Western countries are trying to adjust by instituting environmental policies. This is a fascinating re-examination of the relationship between energy and politics and invites us to conceptualize a utopian future where true democracy results from a new relationship between energy and politics.

In the section entitled "Artifice" of *Utopia/ Dystopia* John Krige discusses the 1955 Geneva conference organized by the Atoms for Peace program. He shows how, to act as counterweight to Soviet conceptualizations around nuclear energy, countries such as India were sought to be persuaded that atomic energy harnessed and dominated by the United States as gatekeeper could be a way towards peaceful nation-building. David Pinder writes about the street as a utopian space in modernism, discussing such themes as the critique of Corbusier's verticality by the Situationists, the Situationists' notion of *dérive*, and the politics of street protest. Further, Pinder analyses Guy Debord's Situationist maps which sought new alternative pathways by recording past and present and offering utopian blueprints. Marci Shore's study is on cosmopolitanism, lost innocence, and Central Europe as a utopian cultural space in the years between World Wars I and II. Internationalism, often Marxist in nature, and cosmopolitanism went hand in hand in these optimistic literary encounters. Xavis Kalandra, Stefan Zweig, André Breton, Paul Eluard, Edmund Husserl—the cosmopolitan encounters between avant-garde figures such as these who bridged different regions and cultures of Europe. In Igal Halfin's analysis of discourse in the Soviet People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) we see that many of the accused confessed, surprisingly, to crimes they were accused of. Halfin suggests that this happened because the accused believed in the utopian promise of communism. Moving to postcolonial India, Aditya Nigam analyses Dalit heterotopias, the utopias of the here-and-now by the lower castes some of whom in recent years advanced to affluence but whose centuries of poverty and oppression is expressed in utopian literature.

In *Noir Urbanisms* Ranjani Mazumdar does a thoroughly persuasive analysis of three noir fringe movies on Bombay/Mumbai: *Being Cyrus*, *Dombivli Fast*, and *No Smoking* are, Mazumdar argues, dystopic fragments of cinema about urbanity. Gritty aesthetics of different urban contexts including the city and suburban railway provide frameworks for films such as *Dombivli Fast*, while the pastoral placidity of the exclusive town of Panchgani hides dystopian family dynamics in *Being Cyrus*. Japanese

cinema is also full of dystopia and more specifically apocalyptic images (this corpus is analyzed in *Utopias from Asia* as well). William Tsutsui looks at what he terms "recreational apocalypse" in Japanese films and argues that there is a register, paradoxical it sounds, of jocularity in such representations. Many of the writers in this volume, such as Ravi Sundaram, acknowledge their debt to and also critique the foundational work of Mike Davis, who critiqued the neoliberal urban order as a planet of slums. Sundaram argues that we need to move further than this and explore the order-in-chaos and aesthetics of Delhi as it mutates and changes.

The larger part of *Utopias from Asia* contains revised papers presented at an international symposium held at the real-life utopian community of Santiniketan in India that Rabindranath Tagore led. This event was also organized in memory of Momoyo Okura, a patron of the arts and whose father, industrialist and philanthropist Kunihiko Okura had been in close contact with Tagore. From among the many interesting articles in the volume, I like in particular Swati Ganguly's and Kumkum Bhattacharya's on Tagore's utopian community of Santiniketan (abodes of peace) and Sriniketan (abodes of prosperity) seen beyond nationalist frames and in terms of rural reconstruction. Ganguly shows how critical cosmopolitanism evolved in Tagore's pedagogical thinking in the Santiniketan school and university twinned with highly practical rural economic reconstruction. Bhattacharya terms Tagore's rural reconstruction activities utopia in praxis. Udaya Narayana Singh writes analyses Tagore's poetry and imagination as utopian, poised constantly between yearning, fulfilment, pain, and a continuous sense of process in which moments of transcendence come and go. Soumik Nandy Majumdar's article on Tagore's visual art and utopia corresponds to Ganguly's larger argument that Tagore, although he was critical of colonialism, worked beyond nationalist frames. Uncanny and familiar at the same time, Tagore's visual art does not abide by any orthodoxy, nationalist or even any of the established avant-garde art styles of the first half of the twentieth century. Masako Sato describes Tagore's encounter with the Okuras in 1929, when he stayed with the family in Japan. In 1959, Okura became President and Managing Director of the Rabindranath Tagore Memorial Association in Japan, which organized lectures about the poet and Bengali language courses. Meisig has two studies in the volume: one is a position paper on the definition of utopia which he sees as something mundane that is unachievable, but nevertheless sought after. Rightly going well beyond the notion of a futuristic society, his view of utopia encompasses approaches such as theology, history of religion, art, cinematography, architecture, politics, and sociology. His second study is about Buddhist utopias and he present a historical account of the genre. Kasturi Dadhe's article is about the South Asian Bengali Muslim writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), a utopian feminist writer. Lương Văn Kế's study is from the perspective of an insider in Vietnam about the Vietnamese nation's journey from communist utopia to market reality since the 1990s. Marion Meisig analyses the utopian unity of politics and nature in representations of the mythical beast Qilin in China. Ivo Ritzer analyses Japanese *ninkyō eiga* chivalric films as aesthetic texts in the mode of nostalgic utopia. Marcus Stiglegger analyses Japanese monster films, *Kaijū eiga*, and shows that the Godzilla-type monster can mutate from being represented in dystopic mode to become a utopian guardian angel for Japan to be called when danger threatens Japan. Sonja Wengoborski explores the space between utopia and reality in her analysis of snippets from Sri Lankan and Indian literature. *Utopias from Asia* contains also a supplementary section on myths from Asia which in my opinion fits awkwardly with the rest of the volume and hence I do not review the studies presented in said section.

Last but not least, I must note that while the above books contain important and valuable scholarship, there is a lack of discussion on gender and utopia and as the editor of a volume precisely on this I find this disappointing (see Bagchi, Barnita, ed. *The Politics of the (Im)Possible: Utopia and Dystopia Reconsidered* [2012]).

Reviewer's Profile: Barnita Bagchi teaches comparative literature at Utrecht University. Her areas of scholarship include South Asian literature and culture and the study of utopia. In addition to numerous articles, Bagchi's book publications include the edited volumes *Connecting Histories of Education: Transnational and Cross-cultural Exchanges in (Post)colonial Education* (with Eckhardt Fuchs and Kate Rousmanire, 2014) and *The Politics of the (Im)possible: Utopia and Dystopia Reconsidered* (2012). E-mail: <[b.bagchi@uu.nl](mailto:b.bagchi@uu.nl)>