Dystopia and Political Imagination in the Twentieth Century

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Political Science in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

My dissertation offers an interpretation of twentieth century political thought which emphasizes the influence of dystopian images, themes, and anxieties. Drawing examples from philosophy, literature, and social science, I show how negative visions of future society have played an important critical function in our contemporary understanding of freedom, power, and responsibility. In contrast to those who associate dystopia with cynicism or despair, I aim to provide a more nuanced and sympathetic account of a mode of thinking which gives twentieth century political thought much of its distinctiveness and vitality, and continues to inform ethical and political judgment in our time. Throughout the dissertation, I offer commentaries on the emergence and decline of modern utopianism (Chapter 1); Huxley’s and Orwell’s seminal dystopian novels (Chapter 2); the role of paradigmatic dystopian images related to totalitarianism, mass society, and technocracy in post-war political discourse (Chapter 3) and the innovative contributions to these discourses made by Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and Michel Foucault (Chapter 4).
Dedication

For all of my teachers, with gratitude
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Introduction

We frequently hear the complaint that political thinking in our times suffers from a lack of imagination, leaving us stranded, in Roberto Unger’s words, “between dreams that seem unrealizable and prospects that hardly seem to matter.” And yet when it comes to producing images of the future which to frighten and torment ourselves, who could accuse the twenty-first century of lacking ingenuity? Aside from apocalypses of the nuclear and ecological varieties, pressing enough to say the least, we routinely imagine futures in which human life ceases not on account of life being rendered impossible but on account of life losing its human character. Eugenic caste systems and “designer children,” the dissolution of the self under constant surveillance, a paranoid geo-politics in which state and corporate power become indistinguishable – these and far stranger possibilities now pervade political discourse and popular culture. From social criticism and literary fiction to young adult novels and their inevitable cinematic adaptations, it seems that every future fit to depict now has a bit of Brave New World or 1984 about it.

Why do such images occur so readily in our times?

Dystopia is one of the twentieth century political imagination’s most distinctive and unsettling innovations. Its ancient ancestor, the utopia, had thrived in the

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philosophy, literature, and even the real social life of the preceding century. But in the
wake of the First World War, and with the emergence of the first totalitarian regimes,
European writers were inclined to adopt a bleaker view of the human prospect. They
began to imagine future societies of an altogether different sort: "negative utopias,”
ingenious cages for the human spirit. This tendency finds paradigmatic expression in
Zamyatin's *We* (1921), and with Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931) and Orwell's *1984*
(1949), it yields two of the century’s most influential novels. However, the dystopian
impulse is by no means confined to the field of speculative fiction. Particularly in the
post-war era, dire predictions about the likely course of social evolution can be found in
the works of philosophers, sociologists, economists, and theologians. Like the novels
which are more familiarly described as a dystopian, these works depict future societies
in which freedom has been eliminated and warn that the makings of such a world are
already underway.

This dissertation advances a distinctive interpretation of 20th century political
thought, one which emphasizes the pervasiveness of dystopian images, themes, and
anxieties in the most searching and original works of the post-war era. Though the
dystopian outlook of the 20th century is often contrasted with the utopian horizons of the
19th, and despite the great significance attached to works like Huxley’s *Brave New World*
and Orwell’s *1984* in our cultural and political discourse at large, there has yet to be a
systematic treatment of dystopia with respect to political theory, nor have the dystopian
overtones in the century’s most influential thinkers been addressed in any detail. Those political theorists who acknowledge dystopia tend to invoke a simplistic contrast between utopian and dystopian reflection while shortchanging the more complex and dynamic interplay between the two modes of thought, or else dismiss dystopia as a product of apolitical pessimism. By contrast, I argue that dystopian thinking represents an innovative mode of political thought in its own right, one which provides a way of surveying modern society’s possible futures and diagnosing those developmental tendencies which would lead to an unfree and inhuman mode of social organization. Far from implying fatalism, dystopian thinking only emerges at the close of the 19th century, as the certitudes of teleology and the inevitabilities of historicism are displaced by an appreciation of historical contingency. Dystopian visions occur only to late moderns who confront meaningful, because underdetermined, choices about the future shape of society.

In the following chapters, I reflect on the dystopian turn as the site of emergence for a new paradigm of social thought, one which remains influential throughout the twentieth century, and continues to structure our own sense of historical and political possibility. Dystopia represents a characteristically modern anxiety about the future of society - the nightmare of a dehumanized existence subject to an all-encompassing system of social control. Amid the diverse products of the dystopian imagination lies the fear that in the future the characteristically human capacities to think and act will be
tightly constrained, if not entirely suppressed, by technical and organizational means. The traumas of the early twentieth century must be given credit for allowing this perspective to become pervasive. However, the origins of dystopian thinking can be traced back to an earlier series of reversal in the modern historical consciousness. I therefore begin my dissertation by situating the dystopian imagination in the wider context of modern social thought, showing how anticipations of a dystopian future society emerge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries before becoming widespread in the post-war era.

Chapter 1, “The Modern Space of Possibilities,” surveys the visions of future society and future humanity which have animated modern thought since the Enlightenment. There, I characterize modern historical consciousness in terms of the relationship between “futurity” – the sense of existing within a dynamic and open-ended historical process – and “mastery” – the extension of human control over the natural and social environment. The dystopian imagination presupposes a sense of openness with regards to the future, and this perspective, at least insofar as it extends to the material and social conditions of human existence, is itself a relatively recent innovation. This sense of futurity develops over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as the novel possibility of lasting, cumulative, and human-driven change of the natural and social environment is affirmed by breakthroughs in science, technology, industry, and politics. The future becomes an open prospect, though for the
progressive thinkers of the Late Enlightenment and their nineteenth century utopian
successors, its possibilities are still contained by the tendency to interpret history in
terms of the continuous development of human powers. Only in the late nineteenth
century, as confidence in the unity of technical and human progress falters, and the
contingency of historical change is asserted by thinkers like Darwin, Nietzsche, and
Wells, does the society of the future come to be seen in the foreboding light of the
dystopian imagination. Dystopian thinkers see the malleability of human nature and the
contingency of social evolution as exposing an ontological vulnerability in our species;
the society of the future may bring the human essence to full realization, or deform it
beyond recognition. Chapter one concludes with two short studies which demonstrate
how the dystopian imagination coalesces out of these tensions. First, I take up an
exemplary instance of dystopian social thinking, namely, Max Weber’s influential
diagnosis of modern society as the outcome of a “rationalization” process which has
furthered the project of mastery, but at great cost to the integrity of the self and its
cultural milieu. Weber fears that a society dominated by bureaucratic organizations will
yield a new “type of humanity”: pathologically dependent on the social order and
incapable of free and responsible self-direction. I read Weber’s account of the future
society alongside Yevgeny Zamyatin’s searing dystopian novel, We, a seminal work of
modern fiction, and arguably the paradigmatic literary dystopia, in which a massive
apparatus of social engineering brings about the complete objectification and control of
humanity. Both Weber and Zamyatin warn against the onset of a social order wherein rationality consists principally in the relentless efficacy of domination.

While the beginning of my dissertation is concerned primarily with the broad cultural and philosophical currents which led to the initial formation of a dystopian political imagination, Chapter 2, “Utopia and its Negative,” considers dystopia in relation to lineages of utopian and anti-utopian thought. The decline, end, or death of utopianism in the twentieth century is one of the major themes of post-war political thought, from the classic statements by Isaiah Berlin, Judith Shklar, and George Kateb to the ongoing revival of avowedly anti-utopian “realisms” in political theory today. Even so, political theorists have said little about utopia’s successor, with scattered remarks on the works of Huxley or Orwell constituting most of the effort to process this remarkable shift in our horizon of expectations. Insofar as dystopia has been considered relevant to political theory, it has largely been subsumed to the anti-utopian consensus, clarifying the link between utopian ideals and totalitarian realities. After reconstructing this critique, I consider *Brave New World* and *1984* against the backdrop of the anti-utopian turn, and in doing so, indicate the limitations of a generic opposition between utopia and dystopia. Though each work exhibits a distinct critical orientation toward utopia, neither, I will maintain, is anti-utopian as such. Rather, I characterize Huxley and Orwell’s sensibility as one of negative utopianism. Not only do their dystopias project undesirable imaginary societies, but, if my argument is correct, then Huxley and
Orwell’s enduring acts of political imagination must be understood in terms of their orientation toward an absent utopia. Which is to say that both wrote to underscore the urgent need for an alternative vision of society that could secure the freedom and dignity of each individual – a vision they felt compelled to call for even as they could not provide it.

Even so, Huxley and Orwell left the twentieth century with something more useful than yet another addition to the catalog of unrealized utopias. Their bold thought experiments gave an age which had grown justifiably skeptical of such visions an alternative method for orienting itself toward the future. In Chapter 3, “Paradigms of Dystopian Thinking,” I attend to some of the specific social and political problems which provoked dystopian thinking throughout the twentieth century. Specifically, I identify three contexts of concern where discussion revolved around the *summum malum* of a closed future society in which individuality and democracy have been rendered meaningless. The first focal point for this discussion is the debate over *totalitarianism* which gripped European and American intellectuals in the lead-up to and aftermath of the Second World War. In trying to make sense of the massive state tyrannies whose power and violence threatened to liquidate not only the political freedoms of their subjects, but much of their moral and intellectual autonomy as well, writers such as Orwell, Arendt, and the first generation Frankfurt School theorists were forced to consider the future of Western civilization without reference to comforting narratives of
progress. Even so, the experience of totalitarianism led to the projection of dystopias which were readily identifiable (if not always preventable) at the institutional level – but might it be possible that equally dismal futures awaited even those modern societies whose institutions were formally liberal and democratic? In the debates over the nature of mass society, which has roots as far back as Tocqueville but was debated with new urgency during the 1940s and 1950s, and the possibility of a fully technocratic or technological society, which became a major concern during the 1960s, dystopian thinkers confronted menaces that could in no way be diagnosed as regressions to premodern forms of tyranny or barbarism. The utopian potential of egalitarian democracy and technological progress, according to thinkers as varied as Fromm, Mills, Riesman, Ellul, Mumford, and Marcuse, among others, may blind the citizens of capitalist democracies to the subtle and pervasive forms of domination operative in their own societies.

By synthesizing the recurring ideas and arguments from each of these contexts, I aim to clarify the consistent methodology and purpose which gives dystopian thinking its specificity as a mode of social thought. In doing so, I attempt to dissociate dystopia from the specific experiences of the early twentieth century – particularly the horrors of technological warfare, eugenics, and totalitarianism – and characterize it as a philosophical hypothesis about the future of modern society. It has been suggested by Erich Fromm that the literary dystopia poses the “philosophical, anthropological, and psychological” question “can human nature be changed in such a way that man will
forget his longing for freedom, for dignity, for integrity, for love – that is to say, can man forget that he is human?" Dystopian thinking begins when this outcome is admitted into the realm of possibility, if not probability. The exact extent to which this dehumanization of humanity is possible, and the means that would be required to bring it about, provide much of the subject matter for dystopian speculation. What makes dystopia a distinctively modern phenomenon is that the means in question – whether conceived of as primarily political, social, or technological – are recent innovations: bureaucratic and corporate organizations, techniques of mass communication and psychological manipulation, mass society with its pressures toward conformism and consumerism. In depicting possible, if not probable, futures in which the characteristically human capacities for free thought and action have been suppressed or eliminated, dystopias alert us to the potentially drastic changes in the human condition which may yet emerge from political, economic, and technological processes operative in the present. This is not to say that they deny the benefits of progress in these spheres. Rather, they try to reckon with consequences that may be difficult to recognize precisely because they are the subtle and long-term results of processes which yield immediate and obvious gains. But the dystopian thinker aims to show how these processes have nonetheless diminished the space for self-determination, subjecting individuals and

groups to bureaucratic authority, routinized work, and narrowly specialized social functions.

The final chapter of my dissertation consider how dystopian thinking continues to influence political thought in the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Chapter 4, “Theorizing Freedom and Domination,” draws out the dystopian visions of domination in works by Arendt, Habermas, and Foucault, and explains how such possibilities structure each thinkers account of freedom. In doing so, I show how each thinker extends and modifies the dystopian motifs discussed in Chapter 3 while attempting to come to terms with modern society and its prospects. I choose to focus on Arendt, Habermas, and Foucault in particular because of their considerable influence on contemporary social thought, and because they converge in depicting a society dominated by impersonal forces, in which omnipresent threats to freedom emerge out of rational forms of technology, industry, and social organization. They suspect that the development of such means, and their extension into nearly every facet of social life, yields a uniquely modern form of domination which is both all-encompassing and apparently irreversible. Among the tendencies which suggest a dystopian outcome for modern society are the relentlessness of cyclical production and consumption, pervasiveness of state and corporate power, the domination of the public sphere by commercial media, the anonymous rule of bureaucrats and experts, and the pressure to conform which is imposed by disciplinary institutions even as it arises
endogenously from the tendencies of mass society. Each of these tendencies makes humans into the passive objects of an indifferent and uncontrollable social process.

Dystopian thinking is not, however, exhausted by the intention to criticize the worst tendencies of modern societies. The overwhelming negativity of dystopia belies a positive project, an attempt to become articulate about the nature of human freedom and the conditions which sustain it. In dramatizing the outcomes which humanity must be certain to avoid, dystopian thinking also directs our attention to those aspects of our social and political life which must be preserved at all costs. By reading Arendt, Habermas, and Foucault as dystopian thinkers, I intend to show how serious consideration of dystopian possibilities structures their original and challenging accounts of freedom – accounts which must do justice to the novel and ubiquitous forces which threaten it in the modern world. For freedom to exist, individuals must be able to develop into unique personalities rather than being treated as interchangeable members of a species (individuality), social groups must be able to exercise shared power over economic and political institutions rather than being subordinated to their impersonal forces (democracy), and the future must be seen as an open horizon in which new possibilities are not foreclosed by an unchanging present (openness). Dystopian thought makes us aware of all of this by describing in detail how each of these conditions could be altered. It underscores the importance of developing new practices of ethical
reflection and political action which can provide the basis for individual and collective self-determination, while helping to bring futures other than dystopia into view.
1. The Modern Space of Possibilities

With the early triumphs of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the modern world confronted its future from within a horizon of expectations that was being radically redrawn. The novel possibility of long-term, cumulative, and human-caused change in the basic structures of social life meant that the future appeared, for the first time, as an open prospect. None were more eager to embrace this prospect than the Late Enlightenment thinkers and their utopian successors, who celebrated the world-transformative forces of science, technology, and industry as the means by which humankind would seize control of its destiny. Seen from the perspective of the early twentieth century, however, the future appears less as an entrancing horizon and more as a dizzying abyss. Indicative of this mood is a tendency to imagine the society of the future as site of existential peril. I refer to this tendency, variously expressed in philosophy, literature, and even the nascent social sciences, as the dystopian imagination, and in this chapter I argue that it emerges as a response to shifts in the modern space of possibilities which bring new contingencies and vulnerabilities to light, and with them, new anxieties about the future of humanity. As I explain in the first part of this chapter, the modern strands of utopianism by which thinkers from Turgot to Marx oriented themselves toward the future becomes less persuasive in the course of the nineteenth century because their underlying conceptions of history and human agency are thrown into doubt. When the future appears not merely open but unknowable, when progress can no longer be guaranteed or readily distinguished from decline, and humanity must contend with potentially dehumanizing social and historical forces,
then utopian visions must surrender any pretense of inevitability. The dystopian imagination forms in response to this predicament, as European intellectuals contend with an uncertain future in which even the most enduring features of the human condition can no longer be assumed to persist. In the second part of this chapter, I elaborate on the nature of the dystopian imagination by considering two of its archetypal expressions – Max Weber’s premonitions of a tightening bureaucratic “cage” and the totalitarian future depicted in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s influential novel, *We*.

**Futurity, Mastery, and Modern Utopianism**

To describe modernity in terms of its space of possibilities is to emphasize its unique framework of expectations regarding historical change and continuity.¹ In every era, our

¹ In putting forward this concept of a “space of possibilities,” I follow those social theorists who foreground the way that socially shared expectations and imaginings structure our experience of the world. Foremost among these is Charles Taylor, whose *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 23 discusses “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.” But whereas Taylor emphasizes the expectations that people have of one another, my own emphasis is on the expectations that people have about the future – their future, society’s, and even humanity’s. Though I have deployed it with a different explanatory purpose in mind, the concept of a “space of possibilities” most nearly resembles Reinhard Koelleck’s notion of a “horizon of expectations,” which I invoke here and particularly in my discussion of futurity. In Reinhard Koelleck, *Futures Past: On The Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 260, Koelleck writes: “at once person-specific and interpersonal, expectation also takes place in the today; it is the future made present; it directs itself to the not-yet, to the nonexperienced, to that which is to be revealed. Hope and fear, wishes and desires, cares and rational analysis, receptive display and curiosity, all enter into expectation and constitute it.” But whereas Koelleck describes the horizon of expectations as a “metahistorical category,” my inquiry concerns the specific ways in which this horizon is imaginatively filled out with more or less concrete descriptions of the future. In this respect, my inquiry resembles Fred Polak’s massive, sweeping examination of the interplay between our visions of the future and our ethical commitments in the present, as well as Robert Heilbroner’s concise, but also sweeping, investigation of the same subject. See Fred Polak, *The Image of the Future*, trans. Elise Boulding (Amsterdam: Elsevier Scientific Publishing, 1973) and Robert Heilbroner, *Visions of the Future: The Distant Past, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
interface with the world is shaped by socially shared expectations, both implicit and explicit, about what is possible, likely, or certain, about what can and cannot be accomplished through human action, and about the extent to which the social and natural world will persist between generations. At the most abstract and general level, we even form expectations concerning the future of humanity as a whole, considering which fundamental features of the human condition are liable to change over time. The general tendency of modernity’s space of possibilities is expansion, such that more possibilities come into view and initially remote possibilities become, if not likely, then at least worthy of consideration. By the height of the Enlightenment, even utopian futures seem to fall within the bounds of possibility, but the confidence of modern utopian thinkers is dependent, I argue, on an understanding of history and human nature which contains the possible within a narrative of humanity’s progressive self-realization. As the intellectual scaffolding of modern utopianism is corroded by skeptical and pessimistic dissents during the nineteenth century, visions of the future which emphasize the precariousness of human freedom and dignity begin to emerge. In order to explain more clearly how the shifting contours of the modern space of possibilities eventually bring dystopian anxieties to the fore, I attend to two dimensions along which modernity’s expectations are decisively constituted: its sense of futurity and its project of mastery. Each these features initially contributes to the confidence of modern utopians, but later, in radicalized form, undermines their optimistic projections.

2 I do not mean to imply that a description of these two dimensions exhausts the ways in which the modern space of possibilities can be characterized. But they allow me to explain the changed cultural and intellectual conditions which give rise to modern utopianism and ultimately to the dystopian imagination as well.
By futurity, I indicate modernity’s awareness of existing within a dynamic and open-ended historical process. Because of this awareness, modern thinkers tend to expect more change and less continuity in history, and to orient themselves toward a future which is expected to differ radically from the past or present. Reinhardt Koselleck has suggested that designations such as “the modern age” or “the new age” (Neuzeit) indicate an altered state of historical consciousness in which the contents of our “space of experience” are no longer adequate to fill out our “horizon of expectations.” As a result, the present comes to be considered as a time of transition, and the future can be filled out with utopian expectations. But even as this sense of futurity becomes pronounced during the Enlightenment, most modern thinkers do not see the future as entirely undetermined. The future is, to a considerable degree, open, but this openness is bounded by notions of historical law. It is the radicalized sense of futurity, which emphasizes contingency and indeterminacy over patterned transition, which supports dystopian projections. Mastery, on the other hand, refers to the modern aspiration to control nature and society through rational means. The mere possibility of change would not signify an open future in the absence of some capacity for human beings to intervene in and direct its course. But modernity’s space of possibilities is so expansive precisely because this period sees humanity becoming more confident in its ability to know, to predict, and to act, and

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3 Koselleck, Futures Past, 276. See also Habermas’ development of this concept in his lecture on modern time-consciousness, the first chapter in The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, trans. Fredrick G. Lawerence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 5-16.

4 The designation “project of mastery” is used by Richard Kennington to characterize Descartes’ philosophical ambitions in History of Political Philosophy, 3rd, ed., Eds. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 434. The term currently enjoys wide currency among critics of modernity, whether their perspective is rooted in post-modernism or neo-Aristotelianism. For examples, see, respectively, William Connolly, The Ethos of Pluralization (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), Ch. 1, and Michael Sandel, The Case Against Perfection (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), Ch.5.
in doing so to reshape its natural and social environment. The assertion of control comes at a price, however, particularly when the object of control is society as a whole or the behavior of its individual inhabitants. Thus, the radicalized program of mastery is vulnerable to critics who emphasize the dehumanizing character of modern society. The familiar concerns that modern society is ordered in a way that reduces its members to numbers, to objects, to components of a machine or members of a herd, are all variations on this concern.

The sense of futurity and the project of mastery are interrelated in many respects. They both trace back to the early modernity, reflecting the accomplishments of Renaissance humanism and the ambitions of the Scientific Revolution, appear to peak during the Enlightenment, and become increasingly radicalized – and contested – during the nineteenth century. The distinctiveness of the modern sense of futurity as a whole stands out all the more starkly when compared with the historical consciousness of preceding eras. Prior to the seventeenth century, attempts to envision the “earthly future” were contained within a narrow frame of expectations.\(^5\) This does not mean that the future of humanity was not a live topic, but rather that it was addressed by religious and theological doctrines whose vision of the “future life” played out in an altogether separate order of reality. Changes in the material and social conditions of life were both infrequent and impermanent, while the course of human history was

\(^{5}\) Heilbroner, *Visions of the Future*; Ch. 3. I do not mean to endorse the view, which Robert Nisbet rightly calls into doubt, that progress of any kind was unthinkable prior to modernity, but rather the more limited claim that the modern agencies of social change open up a distinctive perspective with regard to the type of progress that can be expected – namely (and here again I am following Heilbroner) a continuous and relatively permanent transformation of material and social conditions. See Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994). See also J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Origins and Growth* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1921).
situated within cosmological visions which emphasized the fixity of nature and the cyclical passage of time. Ancient and medieval thinkers had understood change predominantly in terms of degeneration and decay, a temperament which persisted through the Renaissance and into the early modern period. Medieval Christians, for their part, contributed an eschatological view of history as progress toward an apocalyptic Final Judgment. This is undoubtedly an important point in the genealogy of the modern idea of progress, but modern progressivism and utopianism nonetheless depart from the eschatological scheme in ways that are obscured by the influential “secularization thesis.” Consider the dimensions of futurity and mastery, which I argued above were distinctive in the modern orientation toward the future. With respect to the former, moderns, even the modern utopians orient themselves toward an indefinite expanse of time; Condorcet, for example looks out on an “ocean of futurity,” with no limitations, let alone “Last Things,” on the horizon. And with the respect to the latter, the realization of a utopian future is a matter of human activity on an immanent plane – the unfolding of mundane rather than divine powers and intentions. Understood against this backdrop, the triumph of the Enlightenment conception of progress reveals itself not only in the normative appreciation of

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6 Nisbet, History of the Idea of Progress, Ch. 3.
7 I am referring of course, to Karl Lowith’s influential reading of modern utopianism, as well as Eric Voegelin’s somewhat similar cautions against “immanentizing the eschaton.” Norman Cohn also belongs to the family of intellectuals who seen an apocalyptic dimension to the modern idea of progress and particularly its manifestation in thinkers such as Marx. See Karl Lowith, Meaning in History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949); Eric Voegelin, The New Science of Politics: An Introduction (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987); Norman Cohn Pursuit of the Millennium (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970). I believe the most persuasive response to these criticisms is made by Hans Blumenberg, whose account of modern progress I draw on in my discussion of futurity. See Hans Blumenberg, The Legitimacy of the Modern Age (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), esp. Chs. 3-6. The best overlay of this contested terrain is Robert Wallace, “Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Lowith-Blumenberg Debate,” New German Critique, 22: 1981. pp. 63-79.
change signified by the modern enthusiasm for improvement, but, more basically, in the thoroughness with which the static and fatalistic interpretations of history are deposed. How might modernity have accomplished this feat?

More than a century before Turgot and Condorcet gave systematic accounts of progress, the accumulation of scientific knowledge and its application to industry and social organization presented evidence of the growing human capacity to affect change in the material and institutional conditions of society. But change is not only expected, it is desired. Developments in the arts and sciences find the modern age becoming conscious of its capacity to improve the store of human knowledge and culture. As Hans Blumenberg has indicated, the modern idea of progress as begins to take shape as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler articulate an intergenerational program of research in astronomy which perfects its knowledge through the accumulation and comparison of observations over centuries. At the end of the seventeenth century, a no less revolutionary change in sensibility takes place in the field of art and literature. There, the “quarrel of the ancients and the moderns” (or as we know it from Swift, “the battle of the books”) sees the defenders of modern culture arguing against the grain of Renaissance thinking that the outstanding art, scholarship, and inventions of their times may rival or surpass the accomplishments of the Ancient world. Out of the twin streams of science and culture, a powerful and general concept of progress begins to emerge, and along with it, the modern

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10 See Chapter 3 in Heilbroner, *Visions of the Future*.
equation of change and invention with improvement.\textsuperscript{11} This can be illustrated, as Hans Jonas has suggested, by the fact that only in the course of the seventeenth century does it become common for “new” to be deployed as a term of praise in intellectual discourse.\textsuperscript{12} From this point on, the modern world can be interpreted as a perpetual advance into a future that is both different from and superior to what has preceded it.

As dynamism becomes a defining aspect of modern life, a new mode of reflection concerned with anticipating and directing the total course of social and historical change begins to emerge. At the threshold of the modern era, Machiavelli declared that even the shrewdest of princes could only best Fortune half of the time; to a significant extent, the future must always remain unpredictable, frustrating our attempts to know, plan, and act. With the philosophies of Bacon and Hobbes, however, the modern project of mastery begins to take shape. By rejecting the classical doctrine of ends-in-nature, Bacon inaugurates a new understanding of knowledge which is oriented toward mastery of efficient causes, that is, toward prediction and control. In doing so, Bacon not only articulates the program which will bring science into the modern age, he inaugurates modernity’s characteristic conception of nature as available for human ends precisely by virtue of lacking any innate ends of its own.\textsuperscript{13} The promise of scientific inquiry is that it renders the processes of nature amenable to understanding and prediction, eventually

\textsuperscript{11} See Chapter 3 in Blumenberg, \textit{Legitimacy of the Modern Age}.


replication, modification, and control. Descartes also avers that a properly scientific conception of knowledge will make humanity “masters and possessors of nature.”

In *New Atlantis*, a utopian fragment inspired by More, Bacon imagined a polity constructed entirely in the service of science; Hobbes is the first to envision a science dedicated to the aims of politics. Though he suggests that science may furnish predictive knowledge to be deployed in political decision-making, his conception of politics as a scientific enterprise remains limited, for the most part, to the establishment of foundational truths about human conduct. His *Leviathan* provides a basis for determining the right order of the commonwealth, but no program for the extension of scientific control to politics and society as such. Nonetheless, it would fall to Hobbes successors to develop such a program, and many of them – Condorcet, Saint-Simon, and Comte in one line of descent, Bentham in a rather different one – take up the mantle of scientific politics with enthusiasm. By the end of the Enlightenment, progressive and utopian thinkers are better positioned to appreciate the transformative potential of science, particularly in its application to industry and social organization. These possibilities had to be won through the Enlightenment philosophers’ assault on the authority of tradition, and their insistence that the spheres of society hitherto governed by custom, including scientific inquiry itself nut also trade, production, politics and administration, instead be conducted by rational means.

It is in this sense that the group of thinkers who I refer to as the modern utopians, namely the Enlightenment progressives and their more colloquially “utopian” socialist

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successors can be seen as articulating an early and remarkable confluence of futurity and
mastery, with the result that the future becomes a screen onto which any number of triumphal
schemes can be projected. Turgot’s reflections on the advancement of the human mind stop
short of envisioning the future, but his claim that history could be understood as the ongoing
perfection of the human race as a whole gave plenty of cause for optimism. On Turgot’s
account, and in Condorcet’s more well-known elaboration, progress is an innate law of
historical development which guides the transition between historical phases in much the same
way that the laws discovered by Galileo and Newton guide the motion of physical bodies.
Principally, progress is the accumulation of knowledge, which can be applied through the arts
and sciences toward the reconstruction of the natural and social environment. With the
suggestion that such a process is underway, modern thinkers begin to look upon the present as
a site of transition. Who could resist wanting to know what lay beyond the veil? At the height of
the Enlightenment, the society of the future becomes a topic of great curiosity, and philosophers
and novelists begin to consider the possible forms it might take. Louis Sebastien Mercier’s novel
_L’ann 2440_ was a late eighteenth century bestseller and one of the first widely read novels of the
future. By extrapolating a nearly perfect future society from the Enlightenment program of
reform (the Paris of the 25th century has no kings, priests, castes, slaves, nor any other marker of
hierarchy, and is free from vice and corruption of all kinds), Mercier introduced a subtle
variation into tradition of utopian speculation. Whereas Plato had Socrates and his interlocutors
found their ideal polity in speech, and More sent Hythloday across oceans to find Utopia,
Mercier was the first to suggest that utopia lay ahead in time, to be realized through human
efforts. Decades later Condorcet would issue his own influential vision of the future, similarly egalitarian, virtuous, and in a continuous state of self-perfection. “The perfectibility of man is truly indefinite,” writes Condorcet; “nature has fixed no limits to our hopes.”

High among Condorcet’s own hopes was the perfection of what he called the “social art,” a probabilistic science of society which would allow for institutions to be calibrated with mathematical accuracy and thereby to erode the “dominion of chance.” His vision of a future society emancipated by science is amplified by Saint-Simon and Comte, his nineteenth century followers. Comte in particular argued that given a properly scientific approach to politics, it would be possible to ascertain the shape of the future society that lay ahead of the present instability, and to expedite its realization. The forces of science and industry, which had nearly succeeded in destroying the old social order, would become the basis for the “positive” or “scientific” polity, a technocratic-socialist regime in which an elite of scientists, engineers, and managers would preside over a centrally planned economy. Comte understood this form of social organization to be the inevitable outcome of historical progress. The only question was whether it would come about as the result of a managed transition or a blind and chaotic series

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15 And thus, as scholars of utopian thought have argued, it is at this juncture that “utopia” becomes “euchronia,” not only the good place but the good time. See Krishan Kumar, Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Thought (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 38-42, and the introduction to Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, Utopian Thought in the Western World (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979). Judith Shklar argues that it is the projection of utopias into the future as realizable goals which principally distinguishes modern utopianism from classical utopianism (a la More), which contains little in the way of “activism” or revolutionary optimism or future-directed hope.” See “The Political Theory of Utopia: From Melancholy to Nostalgia” in Political Thought and Political Thinkers, ed. Stanley Hoffman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 166.
17 Condorcet has been criticized for overstating the intellectual aspect of progress while downplaying the institutional side, as in Bury, The Idea of Progress. However, Condorcet’s advocacy for the development of institutions of moral and social science were serious and concerted, if misguided. See the uncommonly thoughtful treatment in Ian Hacking, The Taming of Chance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 38-45.
of upheavals. Either way, Comte maintained that only a society in which scientific knowledge was deployed systematically would make appropriate use of humanity’s distinctive intellectual capacities. “It is in this philosophical sense,” he writes, “that the most eminent civilization must be pronounced to be fully accordant with nature, since it is, in fact, only a more marked manifestation of the chief properties of our species – properties that latent at first, can come into play only in that advanced state of social life for which they are exclusively destined.”

Though Marx famously wielded the label of utopian as an epithet for socialists who thought the form of future society was a matter of choice rather than of historical law, he certainly belongs among the modern utopians in the sense that I have been using the term. For his thinking also blends a concern with the open prospect of humanity’s future existence with an ambition to master a social world that has become opaque and alienating. Nonetheless, Marx’s vision of the historical movement toward these goals is more complicated than the linear notions of progress espoused by his predecessors. Turgot and Condorcet judged their present the most advanced stage yet in a progressive sequence; Saint-Simon and Comte saw their time as a phase of disorderly transition; but Marx held that the industrializing world of the mid-nineteenth century was a context in which humanity’s powers had been simultaneously magnified and stripped away. The technological, economic, and political forces which emerge in modern society seemed to have turned against its members, imposing rigid demands on their patterns of work and interaction. As a result, the total shape of society, from its material form to its social institutions, acquires a phantasmal sense of self-sufficiency, of independence from

human activity both in its origins and in its ultimate direction. Marx writes that, “This fixation of social activity, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce an objective power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations, is one of the chief factors in historical development up until now.”

However, the autonomy of this “objective power” is an illusion, an effect produced by the division of labor in capitalist society:

The social power i.e., the multiplied productive force, which arises through the co-operation of different individuals as it is determined by the division of labor, appears to these individuals, since their co-operation is not voluntary but has come about naturally, not as their own united power, but as an alien force existing outside them, of the origin and goal of which they are ignorant, which they thus cannot control...

The condition, of being separated from and antagonized by one’s own powers is what Marx calls “alienation.” The paradigmatic instance of alienation in modern society is the work performed by the proletariat, whose survival depends on selling their labor into the privately owned system of industrial production. This type of labor is alienating insofar as the workers do not get to choose what to produce or how to produce it; insofar as their work consists in the repetition of meaningless tasks rather than in the development of useful skills; and insofar as they perform their work for a wage rather than for intrinsic satisfaction. Sacrificing their own initiative to the demands of the system, the workers experience “self-alienation,” a kind of psychological degradation or dehumanization which entails seeing themselves as objects or instruments of the production process. “This is the relationship of the worker to his own


20 Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, p.54.
activity as something alien and not belonging to him, activity as suffering (passivity), strength as powerlessness, creation as emasculation, the personal physical and mental energy of the worker, his personal life (for what is life but activity?) as an activity which is directed against himself, independent of him and not belonging to him.” 21 These conditions, however, also prepare the proletariat to perform their world-historical mission. The proletariat is “a sphere of society having universal character because of its universal suffering... a sphere, in short, that is the complete loss of humanity and can only redeem itself through the total redemption of humanity.” 22

Marx’s claim that the alienation faced by the proletariat is a “complete loss of humanity” is based on a philosophical anthropology in which free production is taken as the characteristically human form of activity. Labor, in Marx’s broad sense, refers to all of the activities by which human beings adapt nature to their purposes; production, to the activities by which human beings bring new objects into the world, including tools, buildings, and cities. Labor, particularly productive labor, is therefore the chief means by which we humanize an initially inhospitable nature, erecting the artificial world of civilization in which our human nature takes shape. This is what Marx means when he says that “the whole of what is called world history is nothing but the creation of man by human labor, and the emergence of nature for man.” 23 Also unique to humanity is the ability to guide labor consciously, to freely plan and execute the production of an object and, in doing so, to ever so slightly shape the world into

23 Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts.”
one’s preferred image. But for the alienated worker, production is not free, and indeed it is barely conscious, such that “labor, life activity, productive life, now appear to man only as means for the satisfaction of a need, the need to maintain his physical existence... Life itself appears only as a means of life.” The predicament of the proletariat presents in concentrated form the predicament of humanity under capitalism, wherein the productive activity of the species has ceased to humanize the world and instead brought an “alien objective world” into being.

The historical role of the proletariat is therefore to reclaim humanity’s productive powers and, in doing so, to bring civilization back under human control. The proletariat initiates the transition to the future form of society by seizing the means of production so that they can be operated in the interests of society, rather than for the profit of the capitalists. The capitalists, for their part, have performed the important function of guiding the means of production to the point where unprecedented surpluses of wealth and material provisions can be generated. Since initiating the collapse of the feudal-aristocratic order, the capitalists have been the revolutionary class in history, motivated by the pursuit of profit to innovate more efficient and productive industrial methods and technologies.

The forces of production, whose continual development is the true constant amid the dialectical reversals of Marx’s philosophy of history, have been incubating in alienated form; having reached an unprecedented level of potency, what remains is for these forces to be seized and re-directed.

24 Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts.”
25 Marx’s appreciation of the capitalists’ role in history largely corresponds to what Berman calls his “melting” imagination, that is, his tendency to describe the rapid change and development which is characteristic of industrial capitalist societies. Marshall Berman, All that Is Solid Melts Into Air (New York: Penguin, 1988), p.90-98.
toward the satisfaction of human necessities. Beyond this, Marx says little about the form of the future society, or what life will be like for its inhabitants. In certain passages, however, Marx offers some insight into the vision of human flourishing which can be realized once the alienating institutions of capitalist society are abolished:

... when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc., created through universal exchange? The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity's own nature? The absolute working-out of his creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development, i.e. the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a predetermined yardstick? Where he does not reproduce himself in one specificity, but produces his totality? Strives not to remain something he has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming?26

The society of the future is difficult to describe in part because it is characterized by unprecedented freedom from natural or artificial necessity. The only features on which Marx insists are those which are required to dismantle the alienating features of the capitalist system and, as such, may be understood as transitional. Early in his career, Marx described communism is this negative sense, as “the positive abolition of private property, of human self-alienation, and thus the real appropriation of human nature through and for man.”27 Later in the same manuscript, he adds that communism “is the necessary form and the dynamic principle of the immediate future, but communism is not itself the goal of human development – the form of human society.”28 Evidently, Marx hopes that the abolition of private property and the division of labor emancipate human activity from any external determination. The

27 Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts.”
28 Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts.”
productive activities with individuals fill their days may be chosen outside the context of specialized wage-labor, allowing for the emergence of a “fully developed individual … for whom the different social functions he performs are only so many modes of giving free scope to his own natural and acquired powers.” As to the form of social organization which would come into being, Marx’s vision is, again, more abolitionist than constructive. For example, he makes an approving reference to the anarchist doctrine that “In true democracy the political state disappears,” but never attempts to define the character of “true democracy” in a positive sense. No less than in their individual efforts, the inhabitants of the future society will be free to shape their natural and social environment, to produce new material and institutional conditions in which their nature finds expression.

The Future of Humanity as a Problem in Modern Thought

Locating the modern constellation of science, technology, industry, and politics within a wider narrative of human and social evolution, the modern utopians from Turgot to Marx argue that the transformations initiated by these forces tend toward a future society that is freer and more orderly, more rational and, ultimately, more fully human. In this respect, they contribute to a characteristically modern mode of political reflection which takes the transition to a fully human society as its major concern. Up until this point, political thinkers had concerned themselves only with the character of presently existing society. Insofar as the future

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30 Marx, “Critique of Hegel.”
was a consideration, as, for example, in Machiavelli, who emphasizes the future reputation of the Prince, or Hobbes, who emphasizes the endurance of the commonwealth over time, it is a future that is not expected to differ in any significant regards from the present. In particular, human psychology and human nature were presumed by these earlier thinkers to be immutable – they could be managed, but not decisively transformed in time as each of the modern utopians discussed above asserts.

In the modern world, the future is of preeminent concern, and the present attains its significance primarily as a site of transition. This view could be both exhilarating and terrifying. However, the first thinkers to give serious thought to the society of the future also tell a reassuring story about it. For one, they assert that the nature of the future society can be known in advance: the philosopher of history or the scientific observer of social change can discern the laws which govern the transition between social forms. The tendency to describe these laws as laws of human development – that is, of progressive mastery – guarantees that the future society is one ideally suited to human nature, and this remains true even as nineteenth century thinkers confront the disorder and alienation that accompany progress in their own times. It also follows from the existence of historical laws that the future is not in our hands. Despite the fact that they each describe a specific type of human activity which will be needed to realize their utopias - gradual improvement in Condorcet, comprehensive reorganization in Comte, revolution in Marx - the three are unanimous in thinking the outcome inevitable. Condorcet

argues that it would take a planetary cataclysm, something on the order of a meteor strike that knocks the earth from its orbit, to reverse the course of progress. Comte and Marx both declined to describe themselves as “utopians” because they associated the term with social reformers who viewed the form of future society as a matter of choice. While the deterministic view of history puts human agency in narrow confines, it also assures us that history inclines toward an improved, even ideal, form of social existence. Utopia is our destiny, and though its arrival can be delayed or expedited, we cannot ultimately be cheated of it. However, these visions of the future can only remain persuasive so long as the assumptions about the nature of social change which support them remain intact. Two such assumptions were subjected to intensifying doubt throughout the nineteenth century. First, the forces of change – the burgeoning technological, economic, and political means by which society was to be transformed – are increasingly viewed as obstructions to, rather than expressions of, human powers. Second, the idea that there is any discernible direction to history is challenged by Darwin and those he influences. The confluence of these two views renders the future of humanity uncertain, opening up radical possibilities for both ascent and descent – possibilities which we can see philosophers like Nietzsche and writers like H.G. Wells imaginatively filling out as the nineteenth century draws to a close.

In emphasizing that the utopian lineage that extends from Turgot to Marx is distinctly modern, I do not mean to imply that they it goes uncontested in modernity. Even at the height of its influence, the idea of progress does not command universal assent. Among Marx’s predecessors and contemporaries are numerous critics who share his view that modern society inflicts a peculiar state of spiritual or psychological sickness on its members, but not his
confidence that history provides a solution. As Bernard Yack observes, Marx's account of alienation under capitalism is just one development in a line of argument initiated by Rousseau, which holds that "modern man is not fully human, and to become human man must get beyond the debilitating spirit of social interaction." Those who have followed Rousseau in launching such criticisms have disagreed about which characteristics define humanity and which among them are suppressed or distorted in modernity, as well as about the sources of dehumanization. But the recurrence of this claim in modern thought indicates one of the ways in which the future of humanity can seem to be imperiled. This possibility is particularly disconcerting for progressive thinkers because it reveals that humanity's capacity for change, what Condorcet called perfectibility and Marx called self-creation, is a vulnerability as well as an asset. Rousseau had already noticed this, describing the "faculty of self-improvement" as "the source of all human misfortunes." Rousseau thought that humanity corrupts itself as soon as it undertakes to improve its natural condition through civilization, and "falls by this means lower than the brutes themselves." What Rousseau specifically loathed about modern civilization was the inauthenticity of social interactions, but in time his successors would target nearly every aspect of modern society as a potentially dehumanizing imposition.

During the nineteenth century, the technological, economic, and political currents in which modern utopians invested so much of their confidence were often criticized in precisely this fashion by opponents who depicted them as obstructions to, rather than expressions of,

human powers. For Romantics such as Schiller and Carlyle, modern society was dehumanizing insofar as it came to resemble the machines around which its economic life was increasingly organized. Carlyle, for example, argued that England was entering a “Mechanical Age,” an epithet which was meant not only to capture the increasing dependency on mechanical methods of production, but to describe the pervasive influence of mechanization on individual thought and behavior. In a Mechanical Age, individuals come to favor “rule and calculated contrivance” over creativity and initiative. Becoming “mechanical in head and heart, as well as in hand,” they internalize the virtues of the machine: routine, efficiency, hierarchy. Marx often used similar rhetoric to color his discussions of the industrial system, referring to it in the “scientific” Capital as a “mechanical monster whose body fills whole factories,” the laborers as its “countless working organs.” Alexis de Tocqueville feared that the paternalistic state would acquit its subjects, much like Carlyle’s machines, of their ability to think and act of their own volition. His account of democratic despotism remains an evocative entry in the early history of dystopian thinking. While cautiously supportive of the trend toward social equality as a whole, Tocqueville describes in detail the outcome he fears the most, wherein the relentless drive toward equality “levels” society such that the only source of social power is the state itself, which takes on the function of ensuring uniformity of opinion and behavior. Tocqueville’s remarkable prophecy of the despotism of the future, among the first modern dystopias, remains chillingly prescient:

35 Carlyle, Carlyle Reader, 37.
36 Marx, Capital, “The Development of Machinery.”
I want to imagine with what new features despotism could be produced in the world: I see an innumerable crowd of like and equal men who revolve on themselves without repose, procuring the small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls… Above these an immense tutelary power is elevated, which alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyments and watching over their fate. It is absolute, detailed, regular, far-seeing, and mild. It would resemble paternal power if, like that, it had for its object to prepare men for manhood; but on the contrary, it seeks only to keep them fixed irrevocably in childhood… Thus after taking each individual by turns in its powerful hands and kneading him as it likes, the sovereign extends its arms over society as a whole; it covers its surface with a network of small, complicated, painstaking, uniform rules through which the most original minds and the most vigorous souls cannot clear a way to surpass the crowd; it does not break wills, but it softens them, bends them, and directs them; it rarely forces one to act, but it constantly opposes itself to one’s acting; it does not destroy, it prevents things from being born; it does not tyrannize, it hinders compromises, enervates, distinguishes, dazes, and finally reduces each nation to being nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd.  

Social criticism rooted in a religious rejection of materialistic values provides another important precedent for the dystopian imagination. For critics such as Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, the hazards of modernity could not be localized to one particular domain of social interactions. It was not simply machinery or capitalism or bureaucracy which was dehumanizing, but something more diffuse, an orientation toward the world that was fundamentally awry. Dostoevsky’s novels probed the spiritual and psychological conditions of modern society, uncovering a sense of meaninglessness that was creeping into life and culture at large as rationalism and materialism drove religion to the margins. Precisely because of its confidence in the project of mastery, modern civilization banishes mystery from the world, and Dostoevsky feared that faith, and the transcendental purposes which it alone could anchor, must go with it. In *Notes from the Underground*, he depicts the spiritual atrophy which sets in

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when the world is understood entirely in terms of calculation, mechanism, and utility. The
novels’ protagonist lashes out against the specter of a world in which:

All human acts would then be mathematically computed according to nature’s laws, and
entered in tables of logarithms which extend to about the 108,000th degree, and can be
combined into a calendar… In a flash all possible questions, for the reason that to all
possible questions there will been compiled a store of all possible answers… Man will
become not a human being at all, but an organ-handle, or something of the kind.38

Phrased in the future tense, Tocqueville’s and Dostoevsky’s premonitions begin to fill
the gap between the critique of a dehumanizing modernity and the dystopian imagination to
which it eventually contributes. As similar lines of thought multiply and intersect, the utopians
begin to cede their early monopoly on depictions of the future society.

By the end of the nineteenth century, intellectuals had forecast an impressive range of
disastrous outcomes for civilization. Baudelaire imagined a dictatorship of the mechanics,
“universal ruin” under the auspices of universal progress; Burckhardt fears an era of “long and
voluntary subservience” to military-industrial tyranny; Proudhon anticipates “serfdom” under
the guise of mass democracy as well as “decay” and “dissolution” in social life.39 Such
anticipations would grow all the more persuasive as the notion of historical law which supports
modern utopianism from Turgot to Marx came into its own crisis. The redemptive assurances of
progressive philosophers confronted a new view of history which emphasized its essential

39 See the overviews of nineteenth century cultural pessimism in Lowith, Meaning in History, pp. 20-32 and 60-66; and
consider dystopic, but not all forms of pessimism qualify. I maintain that attempts to resuscitate historical fatalism
either in the sense of decline (a la Spengler) or cyclical history (a la Vico or Nietzsche) are important to distinguish
from the dystopian imagination since they do not accept the idea that the future is open, which I have argued is an
essential quality of the dystopian imagination. For more on theories of history as decline, see Arthur Herman, The
contingency. To describe history as contingent is to assert that it is fundamentally lacking in purpose or direction. Prior to the seventeenth century, the opposing view, that history proceeds toward a pre-determined end, had prevailed. It's most influential formulation is Aristotle's doctrine of final causes, which holds that all natural and human activity has to be understood in terms of the end toward which it is oriented. Whether the subject is the biological growth of an organism, the conduct of human life, or the structure of the city-state, Aristotle insists that a full explanation must include reference to an intrinsic goal. Aristotle’s account was embraced by the scholastic philosophers, for whom the idea of natural purposiveness complemented the Christian notion of a world created and directed by divine intentions. Bacon and Hobbes joined Descartes in attacking this synthesis, insisting that natural ends were chimerical and that scientific explanation could only make reference to efficient causes. Teleological explanation receded in the natural sciences, but philosophers of history like Kant and Hegel still attempted to discern natural ends in the development of human civilization. Nor had belief in Providence been rejected: it persists well into the nineteenth century among thinkers such as Smith, Tocqueville, and Acton. As far as Condorcet, Comte, and Marx understood their own works, they had rejected the idea of explaining history in terms of final ends and moved onto the more scientific enterprise of extrapolating its future course from laws. In one sense, this self-conception is accurate. None of these thinkers assert that there is a final end to history; rather, they all expect the society of the future to go on changing indefinitely, though perhaps not in its basic structure. For this reason, Isaiah Berlin’s claim that the main characteristic of utopias is
that they are static does not apply to modern utopianism. This dynamic view of history is one of important factors in distinguishing the innovative utopianism of the moderns from the eschatological doctrines which accompanied earlier, religious forms of utopianism. However, the laws of history which they purport to have discovered turn out to be, if not teleological, then at least unidirectional. They impute purposiveness to history insofar as they specify that history must progress in accord with an underlying and largely unvarying pattern: the accumulation of scientific knowledge in Turgot, Condorcet, and Comte, and the continual heightening of productive powers in Marx. It cannot be known in advance how far humanity will progress along its historical course, but the course itself is consistent.

As this brief review suggests, the teleological idea of history is not one that is conclusively disproven or defeated at any particular juncture. Rather, it weakens in the course of the Scientific Revolution and throughout the succeeding centuries. Even so, no single blow to the doctrine was as great as the one delivered by Charles Darwin. Darwin’s theory of evolution describes the emergence of distinct biological species, including the human species, as the outcome of a blind, mechanical and purposeless process called natural selection. Natural selection operates insofar as organisms which successfully adapt themselves to their environments pass their traits on to future generations. In this way, a species which is optimally adjusted to the shifting pressures of its environment can emerge without there ever having been an intention, divine or natural, to achieve the end result. Rather, species are formed through a massive experiment in random variation and adaptation. In the wake of Darwin’s discovery,

intellectuals found it difficult to endorse theories which imputed a single direction to human history, or even to explain how random change could still be understood in terms of a movement from lower to higher forms of organization. Marx, for his part, believed he had already accounted for Darwin’s conception of history, even claiming that natural selection provided a “basis in natural science” for historical materialism in part because it refuted teleology so decisively. 41 But a historical law of progress like the one Marx invokes with respect to the forces of production is precisely the sort of antecedent causal force that history does not need and, in any event, cannot support. A Darwinian understanding of evolution also deepens the concern with dehumanization discussed above, for the contingencies it introduces into natural history extend to human nature as well. The doctrine of natural selection displaces the understanding of species as fixities, showing instead how they can be seen as unstable entities in an endless flux. The notion that human nature sets parameters beyond which historical change cannot depart cannot withstand this view of the species.

The writings of Nietzsche and H.G. Wells present two attempts to wrestle with the possibilities which Darwin’s discovery brings into view. Nietzsche’s interpretation of history as will-to-power follows Darwin’s analogous idea of the struggle for existence, an influence Nietzsche acknowledged even as he took pains to distinguish the two. 42 Contingency is the


42 Daniel Dennett highlights the parallels between Nietzsche and Darwin in Darwin’s Dangerous Idea (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), pp. 461-467, while maintaining that Nietzsche did not understand Darwin’s main ideas and probably never read his work directly. Cf. Dirk R. Johnson, Nietzsche’s Anti-Darwinism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), which gives a sympathetic account of Nietzsche’s critique of Darwin.
upshot of both perspectives. As Nietzsche argues, to inquire into the evolution of “a ‘thing’, an organ, a tradition” is to discover “a continuous chain of signs, continually revealing new interpretations and adaption. The 'development' of a thing, a tradition, an organ is therefore certainly not its progressus towards a goal... instead it is a succession of more or less profound, more or less mutually independent processes of subjugation exacted on the thing.” Nietzsche’s point is that descriptions of change as “progress,” “decline,” or “development” always encode a value judgment about the trajectory of change. Directionality is imparted from the perspective of the evaluator, it is not a natural quality of historical change. Change itself is purposeless, and while certain tendencies may manage to impose themselves for a period of time, they in no way express an orderly sequence to history.

Nietzsche finds the idea of history as progress to be particularly pernicious as it is applied in modern Europe, because he rejects the entire range of values with reference to which the democratizing, rationalizing, and humanizing project of the Enlightenment has unfolded. As far Nietzsche is concerned, these tendencies tamp down the vital energies of individuals, diminishing their power and reducing “the beast of prey ‘man’ to a tame and civilized animal, a domestic animal.” All of this is necessary if human beings are to live within the confines of reason and morality. Nietzsche is unable to see this process as anything but a long diminution of our most vital capacities. Most notable among these, as Nietzsche claims in works like Thus Spake Zarathustra and Beyond Good and Evil, is the capacity to create new gods, or, put otherwise, to create new values. Instead, moderns only supplicate themselves to restrictive moral codes.

The uninhibited expression of one’s will to power and the type of aesthetic, amoral sensibility which would be required to create oneself and one’s values anew are deemed evil and are suppressed. And in the age of democracy, every institution which privileges strength, vitality, and power is under attack in the name of equality. What makes Nietzsche’s critique unique among reactionaries is that he views these tendencies in terms of their physical consequences for the “evolving European”:

Whatever term is used to these days to try to mark what is distinctive about the European, whether it is ‘civilization’ or ‘humanization’ or ‘progress’ (or whether, without implying praise or censure, it simply labeled Europe’s democratic movement); behind all the moral and political foregrounds that are indicated by formulas like these, an immense physiological process is taking place and constantly gaining ground – the process of increasing similarity of Europeans.44

Nietzsche believes that most Europeans are fated to succumb to this movement and all it entails: “a leveling and mediocratization of man.” Though there is another alternative. In Zarathustra, Nietzsche envisions a bifurcation between the animalistic “Last Men” and a heroic “Overman” whose coming is foretold but not depicted. Nietzsche believes that those who manage to cultivate their inner strength and break with the herd morality of modern Europe will be the forgers of a new future: visionaries, part artist and part tyrant, who stamp their values onto the world and in doing so open up new vistas for human experience – perhaps even beyond it. For Nietzsche, humanity is “a rope over an abyss,” linking a subhuman past with a superhuman future. When emphasizing the possibilities for redemption, Nietzsche can sound like Marx, anticipating the moment at which humanity steps decisively out of prehistory.

44 Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, eds. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). p. 133.
Nietzsche thus looks to his superior caste “to teach humanity its future as its will” and “to put an end to the gruesome rule of chance and nonsense that has passed for ‘history’ so far.” In order to preserve any civilization worthy of the name, humanity must reach beyond its present form of existence. Here the comparison with Rousseau is instructive. In spite of the similarities in their critiques of dehumanization, Nietzsche does not feel any nostalgia for humanity’s primitive nature. If indeed we are to discover our nature at all, he asserts, we will have to go up, not back.

H.G. Wells’ contributions to the dystopian imagination also display the influence of Darwin’s thinking. Wells absorbed Darwin’s teachings from T.H. Huxley, with whom he studied biology, and for all of the technological contrivances which show up in his works, his most enduring insights into the age of science are rooted in an evolutionary vision of humanity. In The Time Machine, one of his most memorable thought experiments, Wells’ time traveler fears the changes that time and evolution will have introduced into humanity, wondering as he steps out of his vessel, “What might not have happened to men? What if cruelty had grown into a common passion? What if in this interval the race had lost its manliness and had developed into something inhuman, unsympathetic, and overwhelmingly powerful?” But what the traveler in fact witnesses is a bifurcation of the species similar to what Nietzsche envisioned. As The Time Machine confronts the possibility that depicts a future in which humanity has diverged over time into two successor races: the Eloi, rendered weak and childish by a civilization devoid of risk and discomfort, and the Morlock, a subterranean people who have become animalistic in

45 Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil.
temperament and intellect. In this instance, Wells was extrapolating from the class divisions which had become an inescapable feature of life, posing the question of where they might lead and arriving at an answer far from the classless utopia envisioned by Marx. In all of his works, Wells acts a surveyor of the possible futures which lie before the modern world, vacillating between utopian and dystopian visions.

In his utopian mode, Wells hailed science and reason triumphant much as the Enlighteners had, though the end-states he gravitated toward often resembled the intricate technocratic schemes of the utopian socialists. Wells more than once took up the challenge of envisioning a utopia for the modern age, producing images of techno-scientific paradises which pursued constant innovation. A Wellsian utopia is not a “permanent state” but an evolutionary process, “a hopeful state, leading to a long ascent of stages.”47 This, Wells wrote, was the nature of utopian speculation now that “Darwin had quickened the thought of the world.” Occasionally, Wells’ utopian projects even spilled into real life, as his tireless campaigning on behalf of the League of Nations shows (indeed a highly efficient world state is an important aspect of Wells’ utopias). The failure of the League of Nations to prevent the Second World War was a major blow to all of its supporters, and Wells’ estimation of the human prospect in particular plummeted to depths unmatched by even his darkest scientific fantasies. In one of his final works, Mind at the End of Its Tether, Wells dispenses a pessimism that borders on the apocalyptic, brooding over the possibility of humanity’s auto-annihilation. The major argument of the book is that change has accelerated to the point of incoherence and all attempts to impute

a narrative to the flux of history have proven inadequate. Wells looks back even on his own attempts to envision the future with scorn:

Of everything he asks: ‘to what will this lead?’ And it was natural for him to assume that there was a limit set to change, that new things and events would appear, but that they would appear consistently, preserving the natural sequence of life. So that in the present vast confusion of our world, there was always the assumption of an ultimate restoration of rationality, an adaptation and a resumption. It was merely a question, the fascinating question, of what forms the new rational phase would assume, what Over-man, Erewhon or what not, would break through the transitory clouds and turmoil…

The limit to the orderly secular development of life had seemed to be a definitely fixed one, so that it was possible to sketch out the pattern of things to come. But that limit was reached and passed into a hitherto incredible chaos… Distance had been abolished, events had become practically simultaneous throughout the planet, life had to adapt itself to that or perish, and with the presentation of that ultimatum, the Pattern of Things to Come faded away.  

But by the time Wells wrote this rebuke to optimism, the chaos of total war and totalitarian rule had brought despair out of the margins of European culture and into the intellectual and cultural mainstream. As doubts about the purposiveness of history and the essential humanity of the technological, industrial, and organizational forms of modern society come to the fore throughout the nineteenth century, the guarantee that all will turn out well for the humanity of tomorrow ceases to be convincing. By the turn of the century, the modern world has once again adopted a fundamentally new attitude toward the future. Unbound by fatalism and unsupported by the reassuring doctrines of inevitable progress, the future is now truly open, and humanity is left to face the question of what it is to become. On this matter, Wells ventured the following guess, “That new animal may be an entirely alien strain, or it may arise as a new modification of the hominidae, and even as a direct continuation of the human

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phylum, but it will certainly not be human. There is no way out for Man but steeply up or steeply down. Adapt or perish, now as ever, is Nature’s inexorable imperative.”

**Rational Society in the Dystopian Imagination: Weber and Zamyatin**

As concerns about the contingency of history and the dehumanizing character of modern society become more widespread, the political imagination of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries begins to take on a darker hue, reflecting the extent to which the future of humanity has become a matter of anxiety. The intellectuals who contribute to the dystopian imagination project future societies in which human freedom is suppressed, if not eliminated, and alienation is not overcome but consummated. In this respect they invert the predictions of the modern utopians, though the societies they imagine also bear an eerie resemblance to their utopian predecessors. In dystopian societies, humanity succeeds in developing the technological and organizational means for mastering society, imposing a rigid grid of institutional controls on the actions and interactions of individuals. The success of the project of mastery means that humanity can predict and control its environment with perfect certainty, but the same process gives cause for even greater uncertainty about the future of humanity itself.

Among the earliest and most penetrating accounts of this transformation and its likely outcome is Max Weber’s analysis of European rationalism. Weber traces a non-linear path from the Protestant Revolution, which, he argues, creates some of the important cultural preconditions for the project of mastery, to the modern institutions of science, industrial
capitalism, and the administrative state. The confluence of these institutions creates a world in which "one can, in principle, master all things by calculation."49 For all of his confidence that this process would continue uninterrupted for the foreseeable future, Weber nonetheless maintained that the human future had fallen behind a veil of uncertainty. Though the material and institutional conditions of the future society could be deduced from present tendencies, the type of human beings who would inhabit these conditions remained a mystery. To an underappreciated extent, Weber's body of work is meant to illuminate the future of humanity with respect to this question. A human science such as political economy, Weber argues, "investigates above all else the quality of human beings who are brought up in those social and economic conditions of existence."50 Thus, Weber closes his study of modern capitalism not only with a description of the bureaucratic "iron cage" to which Europeans are subjected, but also with a question: "who will inhabit this cage in the future?"51

Weber's description of a future in which humanity is pressed in upon by its own rationality resonates with many of his contemporaries, including the Russian novelist Yevgeny Zamyatin. Zamyatin's We, which laid the foundation for later dystopian novels such as Brave New World and 1984, depicts a future which resembles that of Weber's predictions in several aspects: in the rigid, bureaucratic institutions which organize labor and social life for maximum efficiency; in the breakdown of the individual personality under a regime of stifling conformity;

and in the expression of a fundamental anxiety that such a life-order would constitute a radical break with the continuity of human experience. Despite the similarity of their concerns, Weber and Zamyatin reach different conclusions about the future of humanity. Whereas Weber's inquiries and even his polemics are put forward in a spirit of sober realism, Zamyatin is skeptical that self-consciously realist depictions of the future can adequately map the modern space of possibilities, in which changes are often rapid, revolutionary, and unpredictable. "All realistic forms are projections along the fixed plane coordinates of Euclid's world. These coordinates do not exist in nature." A truly realistic realism, then, must project "along speeding, curved surfaces" embracing "displacement, distortion, curvature, nonobjectivity." Thus, while Weber and Zamyatin depict substantively similar futures, they nonetheless represent differing employments of the dystopian imagination. Weber's dismissal of utopian and revolutionary expectations, no less than his campaigning against impending bureaucratic serfdom, show how dystopian projections can be used to narrow the space of the possible, focusing attention on plausible extrapolations and the means available for coping with them. Such a perspective comes at the expense of any grounds for optimism. Confident that subjection is the only future available to humanity, Weber offers no sense of what humanity might aim for instead.

Zamyatin, by contrast, emphasizes the essential continuity of utopian and dystopian imaginings. What matters most is not the content of the projection but the fact that it opens up a domain of hitherto unrecognized possibilities - some of which we will want to avoid and others which we may try to achieve. Zamyatin's dystopia, then, is intended to show one of the

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outcomes which humanity might face, and in doing so, to raise the question of what alternative course might yet be plotted. Though he sees little cause for optimism in twentieth century Europe, Zamyatin calls on artists and intellectuals, and in particular the writers of literature, to open up "vast philosophic horizons" and to pursue "the most ultimate, the most fearsome, the most fearless, 'why' and 'what next'?"53

Bureaucratic Society and the Dissolution of the Self: Weber’s “Iron Cage”

Overwhelmingly, what is produced by the economic, social, and political endeavours of the present benefits future generations rather than the present one. If our work is to have any meaning it lies, and can only lie, in providing for the future, for our descendants. But there can be now work in political economy on the basis of optimistic hopes of happiness. As far as the dream of peace and human happiness is concerned, the words written over the portal into the unknown future of human history are: 'lasciate ogni speranza'. The question which stirs us as we think beyond the grave of our own generation is not the well-being human beings will enjoy in the future but what kind of people they will be... We do not want to breed well-being in people, but rather those characteristics which we think of as constituting the human greatness and nobility of our nature.54

In the address quoted above, Weber confronts his audience with the possibility of a future society inhabited by an unrecognizable “strain of humanity” (Menschentum).55 Unlike Condorcet, Comte, and Marx, Weber does not claim to know with certainty what the future of humanity will hold. And despite the moralistic tone of his rhetoric, his concern is not with

53 Zamyatin, Soviet Heretic, p. 110.
55 The significance of this concept for Weber’s thinking is elaborated by Wilhelm Hennis in Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction, trans. Keith Tribe (London: Allen & Unwin, 1988). Hennis argues that Weber conceptualized his work in terms of the “central question” of the development of humanity, and the various personality types which are enabled or constrained by specific “life-orders.”
whether future generations will share a particular set of values, but with whether it would be possible to acknowledge the succeeding generations as descendants at all, as inhabitants of a distinctive and shared “mode of life.” Specifically, Weber fears that the type of human being who has thrived in the modern West since the Protestant Reformation – the free and responsible agent, which conducts itself rationally in the pursuit of its values – will have no place in the emerging social order. The same concern with the way that the social order structures and delimits the possible modes of personhood is present throughout Weber’s empirical studies of modern and pre-modern social forms. “Every order of social relations,” he explains, “is ultimately to be examined in terms of the human type which it, by way of external or internal selection, provides the optimal chances of becoming the dominant type.”

The type which interests Weber both historically and normatively is defined by a structure of personality which has emerged in the recent course of European history. The defining characteristic of personality, as Weber understands it, is the direction of one’s conduct in accord with a consistent and unifying value. “Personality is a concept that finds its ‘essence’ in the constancy of its inner relation to specific ultimate ‘values’ and life ‘meanings,” Weber explains, “which it stamps into purposes in its activities and this translates into teleological-rational action.” The development of personality is also closely tied to Weber’s understanding of freedom. Unlike the romantic individualists who Weber’s critique of modernity sometimes

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resembles, Weber’s notion of freedom is not concerned with the opposition between spontaneity and routine behavior. In fact, Weber maintains that to the extent that one has developed a personality, one’s action will tend more reliably toward the realization of one’s values, and in that sense display a distinctive pattern. Nonetheless, Weber’s conception of personality is strongly individualistic. The values to which one commits must be one’s own, “undistorted by outer compulsion or irresistible affects.” Freedom is therefore signified by a relationship of integrity and self-constancy. Of course, a personality so constituted does not exist by nature. According to Weber, the natural self, which is inchoate and undefined, has to be shaped into a personality through ascetic practices of self-discipline. In this sense, we should understand the personality less as something individual humans have than as something they attempt to become.

Weber thinks that European culture since the Protestant Reformation has proven uniquely hospitable to the cultivation of personality. By comparison, many cultures and eras have supported conceptions of the self which de-emphasized worldly accomplishments and thus made the realization of values in action a secondary concern. Weber argues, for example, that Confucianism and other Eastern religions have encouraged individuals to adapt to their circumstances rather than bending circumstances to their own ends. For Weber, such an individual fails to constitute itself as an autonomous personality: "An optimally adjusted human subject, rationalized only in the degree of adaptation required by a particular Lebensführung, has no systematic unity but is rather composed of a combination of useful
individual qualities.” As we shall see, this adaptive self is in many ways similar to the structure of personality, or more aptly the lack thereof, which Weber fears that bureaucratic society increasingly inflicts on its members.

The Occidental personality is therefore only one among many human type which emerges in the course of history, and insofar as it has enjoyed a brief period of predominance in modern Europe, this is mostly taken by Weber to be an accidental outgrowth of the Protestant Reformation and its associated practices of self-discipline, what Weber called “asceticism.” He explains that, “The Puritan - like every 'rational' - asceticism worked to enable man to maintain and realize his 'constant motives,' especially those that it itself 'trained' in him against the 'affects': thereby educating him, therefore, into a 'personality' in this formal-psychological sense of the word.” Weber sees the Protestant Reformation as such an important event in the history of the West because it leads certain Protestants, particularly Calvinists and Puritans, to infuse their worldly pursuits with ethical significance by orienting asceticism toward economic life. Weber famously argues in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that whereas Catholicism had left asceticism to the monasteries in the conviction that worldly deeds were irrelevant to the salvation of the soul, the Protestants establish a connection between work and salvation. Commitment to one’s “calling” or “vocation” becomes an ascetic practice in its own right. A personality committed, above all else, to the spheres of business turns out to be a fortuitous development in European history, since the infusion of ethical significance into material concerns allows the acquisition of wealth to become a legitimate and pressing concern

and thereby provides a major impetus to the development of modern capitalist society. The ethical reorientation which takes place during the Reformation is therefore doubly significant in Weber’s narrative of modernity. On the one hand, it contributes a strong ethical foundation to the individualistic values of modernity by giving rise to “the type of attitude which sees and judges the world consciously in terms of the worldly interests of the individual ego.”\(^{61}\) This attitude, which Weber calls “practical rationality,” obtains a new ethical warrant after the Reformation for the reasons discussed above. On the other hand, this massive infusion of energies into the economic sphere contributes to the emergence of a new institutional order whose characteristic modes of organization obstruct the development of personality and the pursuit of ethical values.

In contrast to the utopian thinkers who preceded him in the field of sociology, Weber’s account of history emphasizes contingencies, reversals, and unexpected transformations. Even Weber’s notion of “rationalization,” which can easily be misconstrued as a stand-in for progress, indicates a complex and even conflictual set of processes.\(^{62}\) At various points in his body of work, Weber applies the concept of rationalization to developments in the spheres of law, religion and culture, to emergence of a scientific worldview (which he also calls “intellectualization”), and to the expansion of bureaucratic forms of social organization. And we have already encountered the “practical” rationalization of individual life-conduct which is

\(^{61}\) Weber, Protestant Ethic, pp. 77-78 – this corresponds to what Weber refers to elsewhere as “inner-worldly asceticism.”

accomplished through asceticism. Analytically, these various processes can be grouped together because each attempts a systematization of its subject domain, moving in the direction of predictability and control. But historically speaking, these processes bear no necessary relationship to one another, and indeed often conflict. In a way that reflects his absorption of Nietzsche’s perspectivism, Weber held that, “the history of rationalism shows a development which by no means follows parallel lines in the various departments of life,” and indeed each of these can be said to “rationalize life from fundamentally different basic points of view and in very different directions.” 63 In this case, the rationalization of life conduct prompted by the Protestant Reformation played a major role in the rationalization of society as a whole. That is, it is a major boost to the development of capitalism, which represents one of the most powerful “rationalizing” tendencies in history. Protestantism therefore “did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order” including “the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all individuals who are born into this mechanism.” 64

Weber characterizes the modern economic order principally by its demand for predictability in social and economic life. Capitalists seeking to maximize their profits must be able to make an accurate calculation of their costs and revenues. Weber looks to the accounting practices that accompany the expansion of capitalism as one of the major means by which profits can be reliably acquired. Such methods can only be useful, however, when business is conducted under relatively stable conditions. This includes the economic aspects of production,

63 Weber, Protestant Ethic, pp. 77-78.
64 Weber, Protestant Ethic, p. 181.
distribution, and exchange, but also the institutional conditions under which economic activities unfold. As a result, Weber alleges, capitalism turns out to be one of the major forces contributing to the development of the modern political order: “The main inner foundation of the modern capitalist business is calculation. In order to exist, it requires a system of justice and administration which, in principle, at any rate, function in a rationally calculable manner according to stable, general norms, just as one calculates the predictable performance of a machine.”\(^65\) The “special virtue” of bureaucracy for capitalism is its predictability. “The peculiarity of modern culture, and specifically of its technical and economic basis, demands this very ‘calculability’ of results.”\(^66\) However, the bureaucracy is not the only institution which serves to expand the realm of the calculable. The organization of the factory is also based on “rational calculation,” such that “the performance of each individual is mathematically measured, each man becomes a little cog in the machine...”\(^67\) Below, elaborate on how each of these modern institutions organizes social life in the interests of calculation, and the problem that this poses for freedom.

While Weber does have a particular concern with the workings of the administrative state, his concept of bureaucracy actually refers to a mass organizational structure of which the state “agency” and the private “enterprise” are both sub-types.\(^68\) Bureaucracies are specialized institutions for translating knowledge into action. Each of their essential aspects – their

\(^68\) Weber, Economy and Society, p. 956.
hierarchical organization, their strict specialization of roles, and their use of general decision-making rules – facilitates the efficient application of available knowledge to politics and industry. Weber’s understanding of bureaucracy is informed by his studies of ancient civilizations and he seems to have been fascinated and disturbed by the massive bureaucracy of the Egyptians and its resemblance to the emerging bureaucratic order. Bureaucracy, then, is not peculiar to modernity, but Weber nonetheless maintains that the economic, cultural, and technology “complexity” of modern civilization makes bureaucracy necessary to an unprecedented extent. Moreover, when compared to its ancient predecessors, modern bureaucracy “is distinguished by a characteristic which makes its inescapability far greater… namely rational, technical specialization and training.” And the bureaucracy has become so inextricably caught up in provision of social services, the organization of communication, the policing of society, and other modern social functions that the “entire organization of providing even the most basic needs in life” would falter without it. For all of these reasons, Weber concludes that the modern bureaucracy is “unbreakable.”

Despite the many advantages which it poses as an organizational method, Weber takes the expansion of bureaucracy to be the greatest threat to freedom in modern society, and to exert a generally destructive influence on the character of social interactions. The rigid administration of duties which bureaucracy sets out to accomplish means that it “develops more perfectly, the more it is ‘dehumanized,’ the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements

which escape calculation.”

This includes the ethical commitments which the individuals who comprise a given bureaucracy happen to hold. It is an aspect of bureaucratic professionalism to suspend one’s own personal convictions about what ought to be done in a given situation in order to dispense the rules of the organization in a dispassionate manner. The impersonal quality of modern social relations also extends to the way that individuals understand their social roles. The “class of proprietors” who direct economic life at the most general level do so anonymously and from behind the scenes, so to speak, substituting an unknown, invisible and intangible power in the place of personal subordination” and ” removing in this way the possibility of comprehending the relation of ruling to ruled in ethical and religious terms.” Instead, the relations between loan recipients or debtors and their banks, employees and their employers, and all other economically rationalized social relations must be handled in accord with strict rules, with “economic ruin” being the likely outcome of deviation. Thus, one of the major tendencies of modern society is the gradual displacement of ethical orientations as a basis for action, and the predominance of instrumental considerations.

What Weber ultimately finds most disconcerting about the institutional order of modern society is the way that it conditions individuals to act in accord with such instrumental considerations in a way that bypasses their own ethical commitments. This is the phenomenon that Weber refers to as discipline, “the consistently rationalized, methodically prepared and exact execution of the received order, in which all personal criticism is unconditionally unconditionally

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suspended and the actor is unswervingly and exclusively set for carrying out the command.”

The discipline that accompanies participation in bureaucratic organizations is therefore diametrically opposed to the self-discipline which is characteristic of the autonomous personality. One either comes to identify solely with the purposes of the organization, or learns to compartmentalize one’s ethical commitments and personal dispositions so as to avoid their interfering with the tasks of the organization on a day-to-day basis. In either case, the disciplinary aspect of the mass organization means distancing oneself from internally-generated motives and acting on the basis of pre-given rules as though they were one’s own: “to execute conscientiously the order of the superior authorities exactly as if the order agreed with his own conviction.” At best, the specialist can cultivate an ethical conception of duty or obedience which justifies this subordination.

A similar merging of the individual and the mass organization takes place under the auspices of discipline in the factory setting. Compared with the management of plantations in the pre-industrial world,

... the organizational discipline in the factory has a completely rational basis. With the help of suitable methods of measurement, the optimal profitability of the individual worker is calculated like that of any means of material production. On this basis, the American system of ‘scientific management’ triumphantly proceeds with its rational conditioning and training of work performances, thus drawing the ultimate conclusions from the mechanization and discipline of the plant. The psycho-physical apparatus of man is completely adjusted to the demands of the outer world, the tools, the machines – in short, is functionalized and the individual is shorn of his natural rhythm as determined by his organism; in line with the demands of the work procedure, he is


To an even greater extent than the bureaucracy, the factory imposes an inflexible regime of disciplinary training on the operations of the body and the mind. In this analysis, Weber echoes Marx’s account of alienated labor, and indeed it is possible to read such passages from Weber as expressing a complementary account of alienation.\footnote{Lowith Weber’s critique of capitalism echoes this point – like the bureaucratic organization, capitalism exhibits a high – in fact, a historically unprecedented – degree of “formal rationality,” but it is substantively irrational in that its means do not serve any particular end. *Weber*: “The fact that the maximum of formal rationality in capital accounting is possible only provided that the workers are subjected to domination by the entrepreneurs is a further specific case of the substantive irrationality of the capitalist economic system” (E&S 138).} But whereas Marx takes alienation to be a function of the displacement of one’s power to produce in accord with one’s own desires, Weber emphasizes the ethical component, the displacement of one’s convictions and the structure of personality to which they contribute. Everywhere that uniformity and predictability are required, this sort of rationalization advances, reducing individuals to “uniformly conditioned masses” and restricting the importance of “individually differentiated conduct.”\footnote{Weber, *Economy and Society*, pp. 1150, 1156.} In one particularly dismal passage, Weber describes the factory as a “lifeless machine” and the bureaucracy as a “living machine”; the former has “the power to force men to serve it and thus to rule and determine their daily working lives” while the latter imposes discipline through “its specialization of trained technical work, its delimitation of areas of responsibility its regulations, and its graduated hierarchy of relations of obedience.”\footnote{Weber, “Parliament and Government,” p. 158.} Together,
Weber claims, the two machines are “manufacturing the housing of future serfdom.”

Despite these affinities with Marx, Weber sees the subjection manifest in these modern institutions as being too deeply engrained in modern society to be excised by revolutionary means. The fact that the alienation of the laborer is not a privileged instance of alienation in his thinking as it is in Marx’s contributes to this difficulty. The participants in any mass organization with disciplinary measures experience alienation, and Weber sees socialism as offering no alternative to this predicament. Indeed, since Weber argues that these institutions are consequences of the complexity of modern societies, he can only foresee that they will grow more entrenched as time goes on. To nationalize or socialize industry would not fundamentally resolve the “expropriation” of the workers, but would only extend the bureaucracy and facilitate the expropriation of the property-owning classes as well. As far as Weber was concerned, the benevolent feudalism of the United States, the welfare institutions” of Germany and the factory system of Russia all presented variations on the same underlying structure of domination, a structure that was built into modern industrial society whether it was conceived of as socialistic or capitalistic. For this reason, Weber dismisses the prophetic claims of the socialism, particularly the Messianic expectation that socialism will shatter the iron cage of the modern industrial world. Weber sounds a similar note in the conclusion to his lecture on “Politics as a Vocation,” warning the youth that once the intoxication of revolutionary politics has passed they will come to see the future for what it is: an “icy night of polar darkness.”

Once all utopian horizons are closed off, the inhabitants of the modern world must peer into a future which is devoid of redemptive possibilities, and in which a disturbing evolutionary tendency is underway. Weber feared that the pervasive disciplinary pressures of modern society would subordinate the initiative of the individual to the imperatives of order and calculability. As more of society falls under the management of bureaucratic organizations, the space in which individuals can pursue their own voluntarily chosen values and act in accord with their own ethical personalities diminishes, with the ultimate result being the dissolution of the personality. The regimentation of modern society produces a human type that is not capable of generating its own ethical commitments because it has been so thoroughly conditioned to obey. Weber laments this trajectory, and the complacency with which his contemporaries accepted the trade-off between freedom and efficiency:

It is as if in politics the spectre of timidity—which has in any case always been rather a good standby for the German—were to stand alone at the helm; as if we were deliberately to become men who need ‘order’ and nothing but order, who become nervous and cowardly if for one moment this order wavers, and helpless if they are torn away from their total incorporation in it. That the world should know no men but these: it is in such an evolution that we are already caught up, and the great question is therefore not how we can promote and hasten it, but what can we oppose to this machinery in order to keep a portion of mankind free from this parceling-out of the soul, from this supreme mastery of the bureaucratic way of life... The problem which besets us now is not: how can this evolution be changed? – for that is impossible, but what will come of it?”  

The Mathematically Perfect Life of the One State: Zamyatin’s We

We (1921) expresses similar suspicions about the dehumanizing reign of calculative reason, and the same imaginative concern with the future of humanity. Zamyatin, a satirist and

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82 82 ”Max Weber on Bureaucratization in 1909; the term Weber uses to describe this personality type is the *ordnungsmensch* (person of order), as opposed to the *berufsmensch* (person of vocation).
novelist, is able to venture a guess about precisely those existential concerns regarding which
Weber could only raise questions: the qualitative dimensions of human life in the iron cage of
rationality. Today, We is best known for setting in motion the sequence of “negative utopias”
which includes Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World (1931), Ayn Rand’s Anthem (1938), George
Orwell’s 1984 (1949) Kurt Vonnegut’s Player Piano (1952), and Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451
(1953). Each book gives an inside view of a future society which totally negates individual
freedom and identity in the interest of social control. Zamyatin’s seminal novel created this
genre with nearly all of its defining tropes in place, by crystalizing elements of anti-utopian
satire, Wellsian science fiction, and modernist literature.

Literary and philosophical attacks on utopianism have been as common in modern
thought as the utopias to which they respond. Machiavelli’s dismissal of ideal commonwealths
and Burke’s critique of revolutionary politics are two of the best-know calls for politics to turn
away from utopian illusions and engage the human world in all its uncertainty - or to face the
disastrous consequences. In general, anti-utopian thought warns that utopian aspirations are
unattainable, undesirable, or too costly to implement. As More’s Utopia and its many imitators
became touchstones of modern thought, these anti-utopian sentiments, particularly the latter
two, get amplified in a new form of satire. Books like Jonathan Swifit’s Gulliver’s Travels (1726)
and Samuel Butler’s Erewhon (1872) depicted societies that initially appear to be utopias, while
slyly suggesting that utopia would be no place for humanity even if it could be found.
Zamyatin seems to have been strongly influenced by Dostoevsky, not only the revolt against
rationalism dramatized in Notes from the Underground, but also the saga of revolution gone awry
in Demons (1872) and above all the parable of the Grand Inquisitor, with its scathing
condemnation of a humanity that trades freedom and spiritual nobility for comfort. As industrialization and revolutionary forms of socialism and anarchism bring utopia tantalizingly within reach, the anti-utopian protest becomes louder and the contrast it insists on becomes more stark: we may live an imperfect life as human beings, or a perfect life as numbers, machines, or animals, free from strife but devoid of will or personality. Zamyatin saw the danger of utopian radicalism firsthand, watching the Bolsheviks he had once supported grow increasingly authoritarian and dogmatic in the wake of the October Revolution. *We*, which satirizes the idea of a "final revolution," was the first book to be banned by Soviet censors, a sign that the totalitarian future depicted in the novel was already coming into being. But it would be simplistic to read *We* only as a reaction to the utopian ambitions of certain socialists. *We* presents Zamyatin's vision of the future of modern society, and in that respect it concerns the future of socialism and the future of capitalism. Zamyatin seems to have shared Weber's suspicion that both economic systems support variations on the same regimented and repressive industrial society.

In trying to extrapolate the features of the future society from the present, Zamyatin drew heavily on Wells. The overall character of Zamyatin's One State, a regimented, urban-industrial dictatorship with global reach, as well as many of its details, such as the apartment blocks, walls against nature, and the strange remnants of antiquity, resemble Wells darker tales of the future, particularly "A Story of the Days to Come" (1897) and *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1910), works which Zamyatin described as "utopias with a negative sign." Whereas later dystopian writers, notably Aldous Huxley, would describe their works as a satires of the Wellsian utopia, Zamyatin was more attentive to the pessimism that punctuated Wells' early
work, and thus he read Wells as much as a social critic as a prophet of triumphant rationalism. What Zamyatin found appealing about Wells’ "socio-fantastic" tales was their capacity to depict the strangeness and wonder of the modern world. To a large extent, the urban-industrial world of Wells’ London still lay ahead of Russia, and so there was a real sense in which Wells offered dispatches from the future. By refracting the tendencies of a rapidly changing society through an imaginative prism, Wells created works that many read as pure entertainment but which Zamyatin saw as a kind of myth or fairy tale for the modern age. Zamyatin himself frequently lobbied for an infusion of such fantastic sensibilities into modern Russian fiction, arguing against what he saw as the oppressive sterility of realist literature. In a world whose wonders and terrors routinely outstripped the novelist's wildest imaginings, only the boldest visions stood even a chance of capturing the new reality.

The reality that Zamyatin is most concerned to invoke, however, is not principally sociological. *We* dramatizes a psychological and even spiritual predicament, showing how the self breaks down under the pressures of an all-encompassing system of social control. Thus, Zamyatin deploys a narrative technique which foregrounds the subjective experience of the future society: the entire novel is related via dispatches from the diary of its protagonist, D-503. This technique is replicated in important passages of Rand's *Anthem* and Orwell's *1984*, both of which echo Zamyatin's insight that writing becomes the last refuge of consciousness and self-

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reflection in a society organized by unthinking obedience. Stylistically, D-503’s writings are terse, teleagrammatic, largely devoid of wit or inventive expression, reflecting the extent to which he has internalized the dictates of the One State, wherein art, no less than engineering, is governed by virtues of efficiency and rationality. As the novel progresses and D-503 comes into conflict with the One State, his ability to translate his thoughts and feelings into words diminishes, and thus the narrative point of view grows strained, even fragmented. What Zamyatin’s novel depicts is not only an individual in conflict with the social order, but a consciousness in conflict with itself, a mind straining against its psychological fetters. The novel’s attentiveness to the subjective dimension of experience shows its affinity with the modernist novels which were emerging in Europe and the United States during the early twentieth century, but Zamyatin’s novel is one of only a few that couples this sense of interiority with concerns that are essentially social and historical. D-503 crisis is a result of his attempt to live a human life under inhuman conditions. This attempt is not the result of romantic protest but of something which the protagonist, no less than the authorities with whom he comes into conflict, view as a birth defect. D-503 has been born with a soul, the evidence of this is that he dreams. Ironically, it is the totalizing demand for rationality that pushes the self past the limits of sanity.

We begins with a dispatch from D-503 that informs us of the One State’s intention to extend its rationalizing mission beyond the confines of the Earth: he is an engineer, at work on the spaceship Integral, the means by which the One State will abolish “the primitive condition of
freedom” and subjugate the known universe to “the beneficent yoke of reason.” Simply by recording his thought, D-503 experiences a level of self-awareness that seems to distance him from the collective. He resolves to produce a record of “what we think,” but finds himself in conversation with something else: “it is I, but at the same time not I.” As the plot develops, D-503’s burgeoning self-consciousness increasingly interferes with his ability to function within the constraints of the One State. First, however, he must introduce the reader to the “mathematically perfect life” which the One State makes possible, and its characteristic institutions. The defining feature of the One State, as with Weber’s bureaucratic society, is that calculation rules every aspect of social life. Zamyatin also joins Weber in extrapolating a dehumanizing organization of labor from the scientific management of the modern factory, describing a regimented system of “Taylor exercises” which govern work performed “in million-headed unison.” Though D-503 maintains that “Taylor was unquestionably the greatest genius of the ancients” (whereas Kant, Dostoevsky, and Shakespeare, among others, are held in contempt), he notes that Taylor failed to extend his method “to all of life, to every step, to the twenty four hours of every day.” In the One State, this can be accomplished through the Table of Hours, which organizes the daily life of its subjects with relentless efficiency, down to their Personal Hours and even their sexual relationships. At one point, D-503 insinuates that these aspects of life, which seem to indicate a stratum of personality which

86 Zamyatin, We, p. 2.
87 Zamyatin, We, p. 12.
88 Zamyatin, We, p. 33.
exists apart from the needs and wants of the collective, would have been abolished entirely if there was an effective means of doing so.

It is after engaging in a scheduled liaison with I-330 that D-503 finds himself succumbing to his atavistic emotional longings. D-503 recognizes that his attraction to I-330 is irrational and that his willingness to transgress the rules of the One State in order to see her again puts him in danger. By this point it has already been established that when something “unforeseen” or “uncalculated” transpires, the penalty is execution – or as it is called in the euphemistic lingo of the One State, “a celebration of Justice.” The mathematically minded D-503 also shows a strong personal attachment to the rituals and strictures of his society, which keep his natural fear of what he cannot comprehend through formulae in check. One of the many dreams and reminiscences to which D-503 will become increasingly vulnerable after meeting I-330 includes a reflection on his early education in mathematics. D-503 recalls learning that the square root of a negative one is an irrational number, a discovery which unsettles his faith in mathematical certainty. “The irrational number had grown into something foreign, alien, terrifying. It devoured me – it was impossible to conceive, to render harmless, because it was outside ratio.” Despite his trepidation about the irrational forces within his own mind and body, D-503 finds that his passion for I-330 makes it increasingly difficult for him to conform. His first small act of defiance is to fake sick so he can meet up with I-330, but he also has his secret dreams, his writings – the symptoms of having a soul. D-503 undergoes a transformation which makes him an outsider to the great mass of the One State. When he tries to return to

89 Zamyatin, We, p. 24.
90 Zamyatin, We, p. 39.
work, for example, he can only observe with detachment: “I watched the men below me move in regular, rapid rhythm, according to the Taylor system, bending, unbending, turning like the levers of a single huge machine.”91 D-503 longs to join them, “shoulder to shoulder, welded together,” but he fears that he has already distanced himself from the group too extensively. “Never again would I merge into the regular, precise, mechanical rhythm, never again float on the mirrorlike, untroubled sea.”

As D-503 spends more time with I-330, he learns that she is part of a rebellion against the One State, though he himself is too fearful take any part (or even real interest) in the cause. Despite his best efforts to maintain self-discipline, however, D-503’s stirring passions result in his own infinitesimal revolt. During a mandated daily walk, he notices one woman has broken ranks with the group. Initially, D-503 is stunned – he likens this trivial deviation from routine to a meteor strike in order to register his surprise. But he realizes that his overseers are moving in to whip the woman for her breach of order, and in that moment he believes that the woman is I-330, and so he leaps in front of her: “without reasoning – is it allowed, forbidden, rational, absurd? – I flung myself toward that point.”92 D-503 fears that his action have made him conspicuous to the One State, but he is allowed to continue working on the Integral. But all the while I-330’s rebellion is growing stronger, even having the temerity to disrupt the “Unanimity Day” ceremony, which celebrates the, naturally, unanimous re-election of the Benefactor. Fatefully, for D-503, the rebellion also has designs on the Integral. I-330 and her comrades fear the completion of the Benefactor’s project, which would reduce the entire universe to

91 Zamyatin, We, p.82.
92 Zamyatin, We, p.127.
“uniformity” and “psychological entropy.” 93 Earlier in the book, D-503 had declared that the One State was only a few steps away from “the ideal,” a social condition “where nothing happens anymore.” 95 I-330, however, wants to prove that things can still happen. She assures D-503 that, “No one knows what tomorrow will be... Now all things will be new, unprecedented, inconceivable.” 96 She also assures D-503 that there is no “final revolution” beyond which a perfect order can be enjoyed, for “revolutions are infinite.” 97

But whereas I-330 finds this injection of uncertainty exhilarating, D-503 is frightened of what he cannot predict. All he can do is worry: “What will happen tomorrow? What will I turn into tomorrow?” 98 Eventually, D-503 agrees to undergo a “Great Operation” that will cure him of his affliction. This procedure involves that amputation of the imagination. Once the procedure is complete, D-503 is free of the hopes and fears that made his life so unbearably uncertain. At that point, D-503 is able to return to his normal life in the One State. Before long he is meeting with the Benefactor himself to discuss plans for the Integral. In a conversation evidently modeled on Dostoevsky’s parable of the Grand Inquisitor, the Benefactor lays out the rationale for his social order and strips away what is left of D-503’s faith in the rebellion. Anticipating all of D-503’s arguments, the Benefactor positions himself as the true lover of humanity, it is just that “true algebraic love of humanity is always inhuman.” 99 The Benefactor

93 Zamyatin, We, p.175.
94 Zamyatin, We, p.147.
95 Zamyatin, We, p.24.
96 Zamyatin, We, p.146.
97 Zamyatin, We, p.174-175.
98 Zamyatin, We, p.147.
99 Zamyatin, We, p. 213.
can only live up to his name if he can presume that people want and need the same things, with all differences ignored. Then it becomes possible to make everyone happy. According to the Benefactor, this kind of slavery is all that his subjects, and indeed any human beings, have ever wanted. “I ask you: what did people – from their very infancy – pray for, dream about, long for? They longed for someone to tell them, once and for all, the meaning of happiness, and then to bind them to it with a chain.” Unable to reply to the Benefactor’s challenges, D-503 acquiesces to complete the Integral and return to his daily life. Before long he has forgotten about his strange internal awakening, about I-330, and about the rebellion. He once again inhabits a world where, “Everything is finite, everything is simple, everything is calculable.” At the end of the book, the One State is eliminating all trace of the rebellion: its leaders are being subjected to the same Great Operation that D-503 underwent, the damage they did to the city walls on Unanimity Day is gradually repaired. This is the only way forward for D-503 now. “I am certain that we shall conquer,” he writes by way of bringing his diary to a close. “Because Reason must prevail.”

100 Zamyatin, We, p. 214.
101 Zamyatin, We, p.230.
102 Zamyatin, We, p.232.
2. Utopia and its Negative

The pessimism of the early dystopian thinkers surveyed in the last chapter stood out sharply against the fervent idealism that characterized their era. As the modern political imagination stretched to encompass the utopian possibilities opened up by the rational mastery of nature and society, the deep anxiety over the future of humanity expressed by the likes of Wells and Zamyatin in fiction, or by the likes of Nietzsche and Weber in social thought, did little to deflate expectations of continual progress. Within a few decades, however, this confident estimation of the human prospect would be all but discredited. The series of calamitous global events that began with the outbreak of the First World War decisively refuted utopian expectations, turning progressive into cynics and revolutionaries into chastened realists. Likewise, the years of total war, economic recession, and totalitarian rule, in which the world first witnessed the horrors of industrial-scale genocide and atomic warfare, provide ample material for dystopian visions of the future, which quickly eclipsed the utopian imagination in both literature and social-political thought. Images of the dystopian society soon moved from the margins of speculative fiction to become dominant motifs of intellectual life, with the grim tidings of dystopian novels echoing through works of philosophy, social science, and social criticism.

Two dystopias in particular, the hi-tech social engineering experiment of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1927) and the paranoid police state of George Orwell’s *1984* (1949), stamped themselves into popular consciousness more vividly than any others. In writing these novels, Huxley and Orwell boldly reshaped the twentieth century political imagination,
articulating the latent fears of technological and totalitarian domination so forcefully that generations of intellectuals would nervously monitor their societies' progress toward each pole. Like Zamyatin before them, Huxley and Orwell fashioned the image of the future into a powerful instrument of social criticism, representing the dangers that lay ahead of the present and urging a change of course. The pervasive influence of the dystopian novels, and more so the dramatic fashion in which they eclipsed any twentieth century utopia in significance, has often been invoked as a stand-in for the epochal shift in mood precipitated by the events of the early twentieth century. If the end of utopia is one of the underlying conditions of twentieth century political thought, then dystopia suggests an alternative method for orienting thought toward the future, one based on the avoidance of a *summum malum* rather than realization of an ideal society. But even as dystopian thinkers challenge the confidence and complacency of utopian thought, their dire warnings seem to demand an alternative way forward, and in this respect may be seen as incitements to imagine new futures worth striving towards.

The purpose of this chapter is to further examine the relationship between utopia and dystopia, considering dystopia both as a critical counterpoint to the utopian imagination and as an extension thereof. In the first part of the chapter, I consider some of the intellectual currents which contributed to the rejection of utopianism during the twentieth century. During the post-war era, the intellectual consensus was one of skepticism, not only toward the feasibility or likelihood of utopian schemes, but toward their suitability as guiding ideals as well. These modern anti-utopians argued that attempts to realize any utopian scheme proceeded from a fundamental misunderstanding of the human condition, overestimating our knowledge and overextending our power. Thus, the skepticism toward utopian ideals which realist and
conservative thought had counseled for centuries becomes the conventional wisdom of the twentieth century, particularly as intellectuals interpreted the modern totalitarian regimes as byproducts of utopian programs. Liberal and conservative critics of utopianism converged in this diagnosis, and in their view that the dystopian novels were best read as indictments of utopianism. From this vantage point, what the dystopian imagination portended was not just any dismal fate, but one precipitated by attempts to transform the world in accord with a utopian plan. The dystopias depicted a demiurgic humanity who destroys the world in order to remake it, and offered warnings against technological and political hubris in a Faustian key.

In the second part of this chapter, I consider Huxley’s and Orwell’s canonical dystopias in light of this anti-utopian turn, in part to indicate the limitations of a generic opposition between utopia and dystopia. *Brave New World* and *1984* each exhibit a distinct critical orientation toward utopia, disclosing futures which challenge any simplistic optimism about the future, and yet neither work, I will maintain, is anti-utopian as such. I propose to treat each novel as an *act of political imagination*,

1 meant to reorient their readers’ horizon of expectations by foregrounding certain negative possibilities while also gesturing, albeit indirectly, toward a field of alternatives. While

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1 For the formulation itself I am indebted to George Kateb, who has described *1984* as “one of the most successful acts of political imagination ever made.” George Kateb, “The Road to *1984*,” *Political Science Quarterly* 81, (1966): pp. Though elsewhere Kateb has written at length on the concept of political imagination, and the uses and abuses to which it is liable, I wish to develop this concept in a direction which he has not. Up until now, I have been describing the political imagination primarily as a symbolic context in which individual thinkers are enmeshed and in relation to which they are never fully conscious – in keeping with the sense of the social or political “imaginary” deployed by Castoriadis and Taylor, among others. But in this chapter I wish to discuss not only the broader *dystopian imagination* whose coalescence I traced in the preceding chapter, but also the specific instances of *dystopian thinking* which draw on this symbolic repository and leverage it in order to generate new critical insights.

Dystopian thinking is therefore an act of political imagination in the sense that Sheldon Wolin has used the term. Wolin’s usage clarifies that individual acts of political imagination can contribute to a pre-existing political
Brave New World attacks the dominant strands of modern utopian thought, Huxley offers his critique in order to vindicate the more encompassing humanistic values which he fears the utopia of the modern rationalists will exclude. The body of social criticism which Huxley produced prior to and especially after writing Brave New World was largely concerned with charting a path away from the engineered society by reorganizing society on just such a humanistic basis. On the other hand, the dystopian society which Orwell depicts in 1984 cannot be considered any kind of utopia, even a satirical one, as it lacks even the superficially humanitarian foundations of Huxley’s dystopia. Perhaps overburdened by the context of the Cold War, too few of Orwell’s readers have noted that the totalitarian world of Oceania is not the product of a revolution based on utopian principles, but a counter-revolution meant to avert the realization of an egalitarian society. As a result, the consummation of the dystopian social order is premised on the eradication of utopian ideals from historical consciousness. Both Huxley and Orwell wrote to underscore the urgent need for an alternative vision of society which would secure the freedom and dignity of each individual, a vision they felt compelled to call for though neither writer proved capable of providing. Instead, they confronted their readers with images of what lay ahead should such ideals be surrendered to the worship of imaginary, such that one person’s act of political imagination may even shape the dominant political imaginary of succeeding writers or thinkers. Describing a thought experiment not so remote from Orwell’s, Wolin remarks that the “political imaginary” is the “product” of political imagination. At that point, there is the potential that “a particular political imaginary gains a hold on ruling groups and becomes a staple of the general culture” and further that “political actors and even the citizens become habituated to that imaginary, identified with it.” Perhaps underthematized here is the ways in which individual acts of political imagination always enlist or draw on prior figurations inasmuch – probably more so – than they innovate. Thus, Huxley and Orwell, I will argue, could produce their acts of political imagination in part because they were able to draw upon a register of cultural discourse which had been sedimented into the literary and political imagination over the last few decades. See Sheldon Wolin, Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 17-18.
power, efficiency, and organization: societies which are only “perfect” in the completeness with which they seal their subjects into the closed circuitry of domination.

The Case Against Utopia

If the modern space of possibilities could be defined, from the Enlightenment era onward, by the confluence of futurity and mastery which brought utopian futures into view, then the shattering of those expectations by the years of total war and totalitarian rule seemed to inaugurate a new chapter of modernity. That such global horrors could have originated in the industrialized, democratic nations which supposedly stood at the forefront of Enlightenment, indeed that they seemed to have been made possible by precisely the economic, political, and technological conditions which earlier generations of progressives had strived to bring about, left no doubt that the triumphalism of modern utopian thinking had been premature. As indicated by the numerous commentaries on the "end," "death," "decline," or "exhaustion" of utopia that proliferated during post-war era, the exclusion of utopias from the modern space of possibilities emerged as one of the underlying conditions of political thought in the twentieth century. Even so, the apparent agreement that utopian ideas had, for better or worse, lost their hold on the political imagination belied a variety of competing interpretations, both of what

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utopia had meant to modernity and in how to understand its decline. Far from relating this news with despair, the consensus position among the Western intellectuals who penned eulogies to utopia – a diverse cadre of liberals, conservatives, and disillusioned socialists – was that this grand lowering of expectations was a salutary development. These critics saw the extremes of totalitarian rule as a direct consequence of utopian ideologies which justified violence and coercion as necessary steps toward the realization of ideal societies. While a few dissenters voiced their concern that the loss of a utopian horizon would result in a politics of passivity and despair, the mainstream position in post-war political theory was that the renunciation of utopia was a necessary maturation process following an era when the political imagination had turned dangerously megalomaniacal. Not only would political action prove less prone to extremism with utopian fantasies laid to rest, political thought and judgment could likewise be brought back to the rough ground of human affairs, focusing on the preservation of presently-existing goods and the pursuit of achievable short-term goals. This is, at least, to distill a programmatic statement from what was in reality a wide range of anti-utopian positions. In some cases, the experiences of total war, totalitarianism, and genocide amplified realist and conservative critiques of utopianism which had been staked out centuries earlier, while in others they generated new lines of criticism which emphasized the drastically altered modern economies of technical and political power. Taken together, these critiques indicated a central contradiction of modern historical experience: that while the goals of the modern utopians seemed further than ever from realization, the means which were to have brought them and perhaps even the pursuit of utopian ideals themselves now contributed to violence and repression on an unprecedented scale.
Perhaps the easiest task for the anti-utopian was to show that, given the recent course of world events, a utopian future could no longer be considered likely, let alone inevitable. The progressive and teleological vision of history which had animated modern utopianism may have withstood the pessimism of the fin-de-siècle intellectuals, but it was no match for the historical record of the twentieth century. Arthur Schlessinger captured this irrevocable shift in expectations when he wrote that, “Nineteen hundred looked forward to the irresistible expansion of freedom, democracy, and abundance; 1950 will look back to totalitarianism, to concentration camps, to atomic war.”3 As a result, utopia could be seen as one casualty of the loss of confidence in progress, deprived of relevance insofar as its underlying philosophy of history had been discredited by a world whose modernity fell drastically short of the standards projected by the visionary descendants of the Enlightenment. Judith Shklar prefaced her own post-mortem on utopianism by asserting that “no reasonable person can today believe in any ‘law’ of progress. In the age of two world wars, totalitarian dictatorship, and mass murder this faith can be regarded only as simple-minded, or even worse, as a contemptible form of complacency.”4

Taken on its own, the critique of progress need not have spelled out a complete rejection of political utopianism. That is to say that the type of utopianism which Marx rejected precisely for its voluntarism, the type which projects utopias as possibilities which can be alternately realized or deferred in practice rather than as the predetermined outcomes of historical law, could in theory remain viable even after the modern utopian conception of progress had been

4 Shklar, After Utopia, vii.
refuted. Naturally, some of the most powerful criticisms of utopianism went much further than the claim that utopia was not inevitable, and argued further that utopia was incoherent as a philosophical or political ideal. This line of argument, influentially developed by critics of Marxism like Isaiah Berlin and Jacob Talmon, targeted the metaphysical and epistemological underpinnings of utopianism, confronting the ambition to rationally order society with what they took to be the insuperable limitations of human nature and human knowledge. For Berlin, utopia signified the “idea of a perfect society,” formed in response to the ills of human history: a static and harmonious society free from danger, insecurity, injustice, violence, even want and physical toil, “in which all natural human wishes are fulfilled.”

Berlin maintained that the various manifestations of utopian thought and politics shared not only thus underlying structure, but also a common assumption that all human problems could be solved, once and for all, by the construction of an adequately rational social order. “Absolute faith in rational solutions” had given rise to utopianism in contexts as diverse as classical Athens, the Italian Renaissance, and the French Enlightenment, “the notion that there exist universal truths, true for all men, everywhere, at all times, and that these truths are expressed in universal rules… defiance of which alone leads to vice, misery, and chaos.” Likewise, for Talmon, utopianism meant “that one assumes as possible (or even expects as inevitable) an ultimate condition of absolute harmony in which individual self-expression and social cohesion, though seemingly incompatible, will be combined.”

As per Berlin’s genealogy, Talmon believed that such

5 Berlin, Crooked Timber, 21.
6 Berlin, Crooked Timber, 31.
“harmonious reconciliation of all interests” was only comprehensible if one assumed “that man was by nature good, or at least perfectible” and the structure of the universe cohesive.8

Berlin argued that this worldview had received its most recent and significant stimulus from the Scientific Revolution, which suggested to the modern utopians, as I discussed in the preceding chapter, the possibility of a scientific approach to politics, wherein “a single, coherent, perfectly orderly system” might be achieved through the rational mastery of human affairs.9 According to Talmon, the sine qua non of modern utopianism was not scientism, but a form of political rationalism based on the application of “abstract principles of reason” to society.10 Thus, the radicalism of the French Revolution, expressed most prominently by the Jacobins, represented the dangerous allure of utopianism, and Burke’s critique the starting point for a redemption of practical politics from the excesses of rationalism. Talmon bid those who would engage in politics to turn away from perfectionist programs and concern themselves instead with what he took to be the proper subject matter of political life: the “intractable material” of human nature, the “concrete data of experience,” and “the limitations inherent in any historical situation.”11 For his part, Berlin credited the Romantic critique of rationalism and its “interpretation of the world as a battle of perpetually new and ceaselessly conflicting wills, individual or collective,” with dislodging the utopian ideal.12 “If some ends recognized as fully human are at the same time ultimate and mutually incompatible,” he wrote,

8 Talmon, “Utopianism and Politics,” 94.
9 Berlin, Crooked Timber, 35.
10 Talmon, “Utopianism and Politics,” 98.
12 Berlin, Crooked Timber, 46.
“then the idea of a golden age, a perfect society compounded of a synthesis of all the correct solutions to all the problems of human life, is shown to be incoherent in principle.”

With the possibility of utopia called so radically into question, it might nonetheless fall to defenders of utopia to articulate their visions in the spirit of regulative ideals – not so much blueprints to be implemented as expressions of longed-for social conditions which could productively orient political reform even in the knowledge that they can only be approximated within the parameters of real political life. But the anti-utopian turn was more than a shift in modernity’s horizon of expectations. The case against utopia also entailed a deeply critical view of what utopian enthusiasm had wrought in practice, including arguments to the effect that the means by which utopias might be pursued, even in a partial and piecemeal fashion, had proven as dangerous as the utopian ideals themselves. Berlin suggested that utopianism was ultimately incompatible with human freedom, and saw the profusion of negative utopias during the first half of the twentieth century as an expression of revolt against the coercion implicit in the ideal of utopian harmony:

From this time onward, believers in the possibility of social perfection to be accused by their opponents of trying to foist an artificial order on a reluctant humanity, of trying to fit human beings, like bricks, into a preconceived structure, force them into Prucrustean beds, and vivisect living men in the pursuit of some fanatically held schema. Hence the protests – and anti-Utopias – of Aldous Huxley, or Orwell, or Zamytatin (in Russia in the early 1920s), who paint a horrifying picture of a frictionless society in which differences between human beings are, as far as possible, eliminated, or at least reduced, and the multi-coloured pattern of the variety of human temperaments, inclinations, ideals – in short, the follow of life – is brutally reduced to uniformity, pressed into a social and political straitjacket which hurts and maims and ends by crushing men in the name of a monistic theory, a dream of a perfect, static order.

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In articulating the connection between utopian perfection and dystopian domination, Berlin spoke for the great many political thinkers of his era who believed that the most significant consequences of Western utopianism had been the totalitarian experiments of Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and particularly in Soviet Russia, where the revolutionary movement was most overtly utopian in its aims, and precisely for that reason, more sympathetic to Western intellectuals. The repressive and brutal nature of Stalinist rule provided the major impetus for liberals and disillusioned socialists to turn against utopianism, with the Russian Revolution and its aftermath coming to play a role in liberal anti-utopian thought analogous to the critique of the French Revolution in conservative thought. Thus, the most important contention raised by anti-utopian thinkers on the left, right, and center was that the harshness of the totalitarian regimes directly reflected the utopian ambitions of their ideological programs. These cases seem to confirm two suspicions regarding utopianism.

First, that the degree of coordination required to actualize a wholesale program of social transformation, let alone to impose the uniform standards of conduct characteristic of any utopias, demands an extreme centralization of power and a disregard for individual liberty. This type of argument is developed most extensively by liberal critics of utopia, with one prominent example being Karl Popper’s argument against “utopian engineering,” which highlights the dangers of pursuing social transformation on a massive scale, even in pursuit of

\[15\] Which is not to say that conservative thinkers were unconcerned with these developments, but that they were less surprised by them, and better positioned to subsume them to a pre-existing critique of the dangers of radical social change in the name of abstract ideals.
admirable goods.\textsuperscript{16} Popper alleged that “the Utopian attempt to realize an ideal state, using a blueprint of society as a whole, is one which demands a strong centralized rule of a few, and which therefore is likely to lead to a dictatorship.”\textsuperscript{17} Friedrich Hayek’s argument concerning the link between the centralization of the economy and the emergence of a totalitarian state also belongs to this family of concerns.\textsuperscript{18}

The second major criticism is that utopianism invites fanaticism on a scale which more modest political programs do not: as an ultimate end, utopia seems to justify all means, including the sacrifice of extant goods for remote possibilities, of the few for the many, of the present for the future. Berlin reasoned that for those who accept the possibility of utopia, “then surely no price is too heavy to pay for it; no amount of oppression, cruelty, repression, coercion will be too high if this, and this alone, is the price for ultimate salvation.”\textsuperscript{19} A variation on this argument also developed from the premises of conservative anti-radicalism. Talmon, among, alleged that the roots of “totalitarian coercion” lay in “that type of Messianic revolutionary experience, in which the past is viewed as a completely dominated by the forces of evil, and the future – which will come after a violent break – as a guaranteeing a world of harmonious perfection.”\textsuperscript{20} Among the most striking inquiries into this ethical and psychological terrain are works by the disillusioned socialists who witnessed firsthand as their revolution gave rise to

\textsuperscript{16} Karl Popper, \textit{The Open Society and Its Enemies} (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1945/2013), p. 148. In this respect, Popper embodies what George Kateb has called the anti-utopianism of means, ie., he presents objections to the “mals needed to attain power and to commence the work of reorganizing society in accordance with the utopian plan.” See George Kateb, \textit{Utopia and Its Enemies} (Glencoe: Free Prees, 1963), p. 19.

\textsuperscript{17} Popper, \textit{Open Society and its Enemies}, 149.

\textsuperscript{18} Friedrich Hayek, \textit{The Road to Serfdom} (London: Routledge, 1944/2001).

\textsuperscript{19} Berlin, \textit{Crooked Timber}, 49.

\textsuperscript{20} The critique of political Messianism, which overlaps with anti-utopianism, particularly in its conservative varieties, also received important contributions from the likes of Karl Lowith, Norm Cohn, and Eric Voegelin.
terror and repression. Zamyatin’s cautioning against the quixotic longing for a “final revolution” in *We* falls under this heading, as does Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness At Noon*, which documented the guilt and anxiety of revolutionaries-turned-inquisitors who “felt in ourselves the whole weight of responsibility for the superindividual life to come.”

Decisive as the totalitarian phenomenon was for provoking this anti-utopian turn, it is important to note that antipathy toward utopianism was not reserved for those who feared a totalitarian future. Many writers saw the destructive and dehumanizing applications of modern technical and social rationality in the World Wars and under the totalitarian regimes gave as but one pathway to dystopia, and anticipated the more subtle and insidious means by which they might infiltrate the progressive ideologies of the industrialized, democratic West. In Shklar’s diagnosis, for example, rational political optimism had been all-but defeated by the onset of a neo-Romantic cultural fatalism: the loss of “utopian faith,” which she defined as “the urge to construct grand designs for the political future of mankind,” was just one manifestation of a changed historical predicament which made it “next to impossible to believe strongly that the power of human reason expressing itself in political action is capable of achieving its ends.”

Whereas political action and technological innovation had appeared to earlier generations as means for the rational reconstruction of society, the anti-utopians of the twentieth century joined the cultural pessimists of the nineteenth in interpreting their inner logic as one of mechanical regimentation and depersonalization – such that even where they did not give rise


\[\text{22 Shklar, After Utopia, ix.}\]
to overt totalitarian rule, they pushed modern societies in the direction of increasing uniformity and domination. This sentiment, which Shklar termed, “the romanticism of defeat,” rejected the distinctive social conditions of modern societies as profound sources of alienation experienced at the level of the individual:

The great tragedy of the present age is that history, society, and politics, for all their significance to our real self, press upon us unavoidably. The outer world is crushing the unique individual. Society is depriving us of our selfhood. The entire social universe today is totalitarian, not just some political movements and some states. Technology and the masses are the conditions of life everywhere today, and these, forming the very essence of totalitarianism, are the epitome of all the forces in society that have always threatened the individual personality.

While relatively few anti-utopians were so thorough-going in their anti-modernism, least of all those political thinkers who remained committed to the liberal and egalitarian principles of the Enlightenment, this sense of malaise is important to understanding how deeply Western culture had been permeated by disenchantment with progress and its manifestations. Beyond the visceral and immediate fear of totalitarianism lay a much more profound disquiet with the conditions of social life in “mass” or “technological” societies. Thus, skepticism toward the means proposed for achieving utopia bleeds over into the ends promised by the modern utopians – if the progress of modern rationality has yielded an increase in alienation, then what could justify the assumption that further progress would lead

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23 Shklar, After Utopia, 270-273. Even those anti-utopians who, like Shklar, wished to rebuke the fatalism and despair of their contemporaries, offered little more than a defensive political skepticism in their place. Though she remained a critic of utopianism throughout her career, Shklar would eventually sharpen her political skepticism into a constructive, albeit minimal and largely negative, political theory which she referred to as “the liberalism of fear.” On this account, the best and perhaps the only reasonable goal of politics was to oppose the concentrations of power which gave rise to political evil. See Judith Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear” in Political Thought and Political Thinkers, ed. Stanley Hoffman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

24 Shklar, After Utopia, 17-18.

25 Each of these dystopian outcomes, and their intersections, will be considered in the next chapter.
to a solution? Might not the industrial and technological basis of capitalism, with its concomitant “cult of efficiency” and its accompanying technical ideals of perfection, eventually prove to be as rigid and dehumanizing as the political ideals animating totalitarian movements?²⁶ Part of what made totalitarianism so fearful to the Western intellectual was the suspicion that it merely intensified and exaggerated social pathologies to which every modern society was fundamentally susceptible. And to the extent that these tendencies were cheered along by would-be utopians, an anti-utopian mindset might prove wholly necessary even for those whose political lives were relatively insulated from the radical upheavals that gave rise to totalitarianism.

With such a variety of cutting arguments posed against utopianism, could anything be said in defense of the once robust tradition? Defenders of utopianism were few and far between during the twentieth century, but two German intellectuals, Ernst Bloch and Karl Mannheim, stand out for their insistence on the centrality of utopianism to the cultural and political consciousness of the West. But neither Bloch’s nor Mannheim’s defense of utopianism truly meets the critics of utopia head-on: neither conceives of utopianism as a static, harmonious, or perfect social order, and neither argues in favor of a centralized transformative program or revolutionary movement to implement one utopian scheme or another. For that matter, neither defends the specific political or technological manifestations of utopianism which distinguished modern utopianism from it Ancient and Renaissance ancestors. Rather, they both move to

²⁶ See, respectively, Bell, The End of Ideology, 227-274, for the critique of efficiency, and Passmore, Perfectibility of Man, for the critique of technical perfection, which Passmore associates with dystopians like Zamyatin and Huxley (and, to a lesser extent, Orwell).
submerge utopia as it was known to its critics within a wider body of cultural expression encompassing art, literature, myth, and religion, in addition to social and political thought. From this vantage point, it is possible to separate the critical and imaginative potential of utopianism, what Bloch called “the spirit of utopia” and Mannheim “the utopian mentality,” from the particular aspirations of utopian thinkers, writers, and movements.27 What mattered to Bloch and Mannheim was how utopian visions served to orient thought and action beyond purely empirical world, holding open a space of possibilities capacious enough to sustain hope for a better, though never truly perfect, world. In Bloch’s interpretation, utopia signifies the imagination of what is “Not-Yet,” a method for anticipating future possibilities that reach beyond what is achievable or even comprehensible given present realities. It is less important to insist on the realization of such possibilities than to affirm the vitality of intellectual, political, and artistic works which bring them into view. Utopia then becomes a “principle of hope” and a perpetually “unfinished forward dream” – not a static program, but a dynamic horizon of expectations in which anticipation and achievement are related dialectically.28 The same could be said for Mannheim, who defined utopia as a “mentality” which “transcends reality” and “breaks beyond the existing order,” in contrast to the stabilizing ideologies which aim to close off the future in the name of the past and present.29

29 Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia, 173.
Out of such arguments emerges a distinctive picture of human activity as an unending dialectic between the real and the imaginary, one in which the pursuit of utopia importantly structures the values and aspirations of reformers even as its definitive realization is continually deferred. The loss of utopia would then designate a dramatic restriction of human possibilities, and would risk the erasure of the gap between the real and the ideal which is the source of both frustration and hope in political life. Whereas anti-utopians like Berlin feared that utopianism could only culminate in the imposition of a static order on history and society, Mannheim believed that such an outcome was more likely to emerge from the loss of the utopian horizon which would consign humanity to a passive role in history:

The disappearance of utopia brings about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes no more than a thing. We would be faced then with the greatest paradox imaginable, namely, that man, who has achieved the highest degree of rational mastery of existence, left without any ideals, becomes a mere creature of impulses. Thus, after a long tortuous, but heroic development, just at the highest stage of awareness, when history is ceasing to be blind fate, and is becoming more and more man’s own creation, with the relinquishment of utopias, man would lose his will to shape history and therewith his ability to understand it.30

Frederik Polak’s wide-ranging study on the shifting vision of the future in Western thought concluded with a similar lament, that, “When man’s utopian aspirations to develop his own humanity die out, then man himself dies.”31 What Polak argued was that our speculative views of the future, those grounded in prediction in extrapolation, are closely bound up with our normative view of the future, our desires and wishes for the type of future we would like to make possible. Therefore, losing the ability to imagine a better future also means losing the

30 Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia, 236.
ability to create one, even to articulate our displeasure with society as it exists and our longing for something better:

It is a main thesis of this work that for the first time in the three thousand years of Western civilization there has been a massive loss of capacity, or even will, for renewal of images of the future. There are few signs of constructive images, and no generally accepted idealistic images, forthcoming today. There is a contraction of time-consciousness to the momentary present and a blurring of a specific sense of the future. The dualistic mental structure that is essential for eschatological and utopian thinking about the future has been severely crippled…

Bloch, Mannheim, and Polak thus voice a powerful dissent against the anti-utopian consensus, mourning for the loss of utopianism and the concomitant closure of the political imagination where so many of their contemporaries advocated a politics of realism and responsibility in its place. For all of the grief which utopian politics had visited on the twentieth century, there were still those who believed in salvaging the spirit of utopia – and feared the barren future to which humanity would be consigned in its absence.

The Negative Utopianism of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell

In terms of political thought, we have seen that anti-utopianism corresponded to a wide range of grievances against the underlying social theories of modern utopianism, including, but not limited to the rejection of historical progress, of the coherence of utopian ideals, of the cost of pursuing utopian ideals, both in terms of the means and ends, and finally of the desirability of a utopian condition even to the extent that it could be achieved or approximated. Though this may seem nearly exhaustive, there is one important aspect of the “death of utopia” which I have

yet to consider. At the same time that utopias were so decisively discredited in social thought, utopia also disappeared from literature. After Bellamy and Wells, no utopian vision, fictional or theoretical, has captured the political imagination at large. For many anti-utopian thinkers, this was their case in point: utopias now seemed too remote from reality to be worth considering – and if the gap between the ideal and the real could be overcome, it could only be at an unconscionable cost. When novels such as *We*, *Brave New World*, and *1984* came to notoriety, it was easy enough for them to be subsumed to this anti-utopian consensus: here were visions which could speak to the anti-utopian age, works that formally resembled their utopian forebears while spelling out the consequences of utopian hubris.

Given the widespread power of anti-utopian thought in the post-war era, it is little surprise that this generation of intellectuals greeted the first important products of the dystopian imagination as confirmation of their suspicions regarding the dangers of utopianism. Many writers followed Berlin in referring to these works simply as “anti-utopias,” though “negative utopia” and “inverted utopia” were also common coinages. Despite the terminological inconsistencies, everyone who engaged with these works seemed to recognize their structural and thematic similarities, as well as their status as an important turning point – or, as some suggested, an end point – with respect to the tradition of utopian literature.

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33 The first study on utopias to propose the “dystopia” term be used in order to distinguish works which depicted negative fictional societies from those “anti-utopias” which criticized some or all utopian ideals was Negley and Patrick’s *The Quest for Utopia* in 1952. See Glenn Negley and J. Max Patrick, *The Quest for Utopia: An Anthology of Imaginary Societies* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1952), p. However, dystopia is only of passing concern in their work. Chad Walsh’s in-depth study on dystopia, the first of its kind, used this term when it appeared in 1962, but only much later did this become the default term. See Chad Walsh, *From Utopia to Nightmare* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).
In his early study of the “negative utopia,” George Woodcock, a friend and correspondent of Orwell, described the concept of utopia in terms similar to those used by Berlin, Talmon, and Popper, emphasizing its static character: “a society permanently constituted and rigidly regulated according to a plan which its founders believe will serve the best interests of the people as a whole.” Thus, Woodcock sees the new form of literature as emerging in response to a paradox, namely, that societies are becoming more utopian to the extent that they are increasingly planned and centrally controlled, but that this has not succeeded in making their inhabitants happier. Writers like Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell, aimed to intervene in this context with socially informed novels that are at once satirical, that is, critically engaged with their present circumstances, and prophetic, that is, concerned with the shape of future society. But Woodcock sees these interventions as being closely tied to an anti-utopian agenda, “written by men who have looked closely at the reality which congeals out of the fantasies of the past, and who have rejected what they see.” Likewise for historian Eugen Weber, who interpreted We, Brave New World, and 1984 as instances of “the anti-utopian novel, which uses the familiar utopian convention to express a mood of dread and despair occasioned by the results or the implications of utopian dreams.” From the reticence of their authors to depict their own

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35 Woodcock, “Utopias in Negative,” 85.
utopian alternatives, Weber concluded that they were “not just opponents of one utopian pattern, but opponents of the utopian heresy itself.”

This equation of dystopia with anti-utopia weakened in the course of the twentieth century, as the dystopian imagination and its products became increasingly familiar fixtures of intellectual and political discourse. On Shklar’s reading, the dystopian novels signified a reinvigoration of the utopian tradition rather than its morbidity. Because Shklar values the utopia for its critical function, as a critique of the present, rather than a program for the future, she judges much of the modern utopian tradition sterile and unimaginative in contrast to its classical predecessors. “It is not until we come to the dystopias of the present that the imaginary society, now seen as a nightmare, regains some of its original literary verve. They too are protests, like the classical utopia novels.”

Though their visceral reckoning with the future allows dystopian works to fulfil the critical potential of utopian literature, they do not do the same of work orienting the political imagination toward constructive alternatives. “These are works of the political imagination that can and do awaken and warn and sometimes desolate us, but they do not prescribe or tell us what to do.” As an observation on novels like We, Brave New World, and 1984, Shklar’s point stands, though the place of such novels within the wider oeuvre of their respective writers complicates the matter. In what remains the most encompassing study of utopian and anti-utopian thought, Krishan Kumar distinguishes

38 The terminological shift from anti-utopia to dystopia captures this re-interpretation, emphasizing the critical vision of the future over the intention to dismantle the utopian tradition. The term dystopia is popularized in some of the first works to grant its specificity rather than subsuming it to anti-utopianism.
between the anti-utopian temperament (what I have referred to simply as anti-utopianism) and “the modern anti-utopia” or else “the formal literary anti-utopia” (which corresponds to what I have referred to simply as the dystopian novel). Kumar writes that “the modern anti-utopia is in an important sense also less then – even opposed to – temperamental anti-utopianism of this kind,” noting Wells, Huxley, and Orwell, as examples of writers “who had at least as much of the utopian as the anti-utopian temperament in their make-up… We might even say, stretching the point only a little, that the anti-utopia is largely the creation of men for whom it represented the dark obverse of their own profound and passionate utopian temperament… born of a sense of frustrated and thwarted utopianism.”

Thus we are left with two competing interpretations of dystopia: one which emphasizes its essential hostility toward utopianism, and another which draws out its continuity with utopianism. In the two sections that follow, I propose to further examine the relationship between utopia and its negative by taking up the most significant literary manifestations of the dystopian anxiety: Huxley’s Brave New World and Orwell’s 1984. As is well-known, each work follows the pattern of dystopian thinking insofar as it presents a future society that is "rational" only in the sophistication with which it induces conformity and domination. The totalitarian state, whose possibilities are explored by Orwell, represented the most brutal and obvious manifestation of these tendencies, while Huxkey’s earlier novel was concerned with subtler and more insidious variations which he took to be deeply entrenched in the culture and institutions of the purportedly free world. In addition to defining the archetypal “technical” and “political”

40 Kumar, Utopia and Anti-Utopia, 103-104.
dystopias, these two novels also demonstrate two differing relationships between the dystopian imagination and its utopian predecessor.

In the hands of skeptical satirists like Zamyatin, E.M. Forster, and Huxley, the dystopian novel provided a powerful method for criticizing the aims of utopians like H.G. Wells, whose blend of scientific rationalism, democratic socialism, and largely pacifist internationalism condensed the hopes and ambitions of political thinking since the Enlightenment into a progressive political mythology. “The Machine Stops,” We, and Brave New World do not reject this program outright, but instead attempt to demonstrate its inadequacy through a reductio ad absurdum. Each work depicts a society in which material insecurity and social conflict have been eliminated through comprehensive social engineering. The resulting societies are superficially utopian, but their fixation on technical criteria of perfection exclude humanistic values like individualism and democracy in the name of stability and efficiency. Their warnings about the future indict modern utopianism from the standpoint of human dignity, arguing that even a world of peace and plenty would be unacceptable if it did not leave room for individuals to make free and meaningful choices. As such, it might be fruitful to consider these works not as outright rejections of utopianism, but attempts to vindicate a humanistic utopianism oriented toward the free flourishing of individual persons from one premised on the elevation of organization and efficiency to self-sufficient ends.

This concern with the hazards of well-intentioned utopian schemes is nearly absent in dystopias such as Jack London’s The Iron Heel and especially Orwell’s 1984. The societies they warn against are not even superficially benign, but brutal and coercive, governed nakedly in the interests of a ruling cabal who care neither about the freedom nor the material well-being of the
masses. While the dystopian critics of utopia tended to be liberal humanists, London and Orwell were staunch socialists, and their anxieties about the future had less to do with utopianism gone awry than with the potential for a powerful elite to permanently entrench their domination of the many. Despite Orwell’s well-known anti-Stalinism, the Cold War reception of 1984 has left a distorted image of the book as an attack on utopian ideals and their revolutionary application. But the totalitarian society it depicts is explained as the outcome of a counter-revolution meant to avert the realization of an egalitarian society and, further, to eradicate all utopian strivings from history and consciousness. Insofar as they depict the destruction of utopian hopes as a necessary step in the consummation of the dystopian social order, these dystopian novels can be read as a qualified defense of utopianism – certainly, their grim tidings undercut the confidence of utopian reformers, but they nonetheless remain committed to the establishment of a society based on principles of freedom, equality, and decency, and they are more concerned with the possibility that we will fail to realize these values rather than the possibility that we will take them too far.

Though skepticism toward utopianism is a more than incidental feature of each writer’s worldview, I maintain that neither should be understood as rejecting utopianism as such, as even Huxley’s hostility toward the dominant strands of modern utopianism was but one movement in a larger inquiry which eventually led him to formulate his own utopian alternative. Rather than positing a simple opposition between utopia and dystopia, we would do better to take dystopia as a distinctly post- or counter-utopian mode of thought, one which critically counterpoints the confidence of utopian thinking while providing its own imaginative critique of modern society and its possible futures.
The Welfare Tyranny of Utopia: Huxley’s *Brave New World*

As we saw in the preceding chapter, the diverse constellation of modern utopian programs were united by their confidence in the project of mastery. They told a triumphant story about modernity in which humanity could gradually acquire the knowledge and technique necessary to create our own destiny, building a better future by continuously increasing the power of our technology, the efficiency of our production, and the rationality of our social organizations. At the core of Huxley’s objection to modern utopianism was his sense that these means of progress had gradually taken on the character of ends. Where science, industry, and organization ought to have served the cause of human freedom and fulfilment, they had amassed a nearly all-encompassing scale and gravity in modern societies such that claims of individual liberty seemed inconsequential by comparison. To make matters more difficult for critics such as Huxley, the vocabularies of materialism and utilitarianism which underpin so much of modern utopian thought defined human well-being in terms which largely excluded concepts such as freedom and meaning in favor of a more-or-less hedonistic construal of happiness. To object to material progress in the name of religious and humanistic values seemed irrational and even atavistic – what claim could such nebulous concepts of human flourishing have against the demonstrable improvements yielded by science and industry? As a result, the humanistic values on which a defense of the individual’s freedom might be mounted seem to be eroded at precisely the historical juncture where it was most urgent to articulate them.

This predicament provided the backdrop for Huxley’s most important interventions into the debate over the human prospect, which he treated in terms of an increasingly one-sided conflict between a future of freedom and a future of servitude. A man of letters and a critical
intellectual, Huxley defended a humanistic conception of freedom as self-cultivation, one which is radically individualistic even as it requires, in practice, specific cultural and social conditions to be anything more than a fantasy. *Brave New World*, Huxley’s most enduring work of social criticism, makes a wholly negative defense of these values. The novel’s lone defender of freedom is a man out of time, and his arguments are met with dismissal by the architects of the future society – indeed, the Savage, whose name indicates his anachronism, scarcely seems convinced of their merits himself. Instead, *Brave New World* leaves the reader to contemplate the horror of a world in which these values have been rendered meaningless, driven out of practice and very nearly out of consciousness because they can only interfere with the efficient planning and administration of a totally engineered society. Should the utopians succeed, Huxley warns – and he believed they would succeed barring a concerted effort to change course – culture will be reduced to a mechanism of mental control and the individual will be deprived of meaningful opportunities for self-development and self-direction. In keeping with this critical perspective on modern utopianism, Huxley makes his affinity with the anti-utopian outlook apparent from the outset of his novel. He chooses as his epigraph a missive from the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev which reads, “Utopias seem to be much more attainable than one would have believed in other times. And we currently find ourselves faced with a different kind of antagonizing question: How can one avoid their definitive attainment?”

41 Precisely because

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utopias have entered the realm of historical possibility, Berdyaev calls upon “the intellectuals and the cultivated classes” to imagine non-utopian futures, societies “less ‘perfect’ and more free.”

Huxley, like many other intellectuals of his generation, took Wells as the exemplar of modern utopianism. When Huxley described his early work on what would eventually become *Brave New World* as a satire concerning “the horror of the Wellsian Utopia and a revolt against it,” he of course did not mean the anxious, apocalyptic Wells of foreboding works like *The Time Machine* or *The Sleeper Awakes*. Instead it was the Wellsian amalgamation of scientific rationalism, Fabian socialism, and liberal internationalism which provoked Huxley’s opposition, the Wells who had synthesized nearly every significant strand of modern utopian thinking into his vision of the rationally administered World State. In taking Wells as the point of departure for his own fable of the future, one with strongly anti-Wellsian implications, Huxley followed earlier humanistic critics of utopianism like E. M. Forster and Yevgeny Zamyatin. George Kateb has remarked that their trilogy of dystopian fictions, Forster’s “The Machine Stops” along with *We* and *Brave New World*, “contain almost every fear that utopian ends arouse. These works show utopian ends when carried too far and try to expose some dangerous implications of utopian thought.” In each fiction, nearly all of humanity has been subjected to a vast socio-technical apparatus which sustains its subjects materially and predestines them socially in a way that bounds individual choice and expression within narrow

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parameters. The members of these societies are fulfilled, or at any rate believe themselves to be, insofar as they are socialized so as not to want anything which cannot be provided, or would be incompatible with the general order of society. While *We* presages *1984* in its material austerity and flashes of repressive violence – reflecting Zamyatin’s encounter with Russia’s nascent post-revolutionary dictatorship – Forster and Huxley both drew inspiration from the conditions of life in London and the United States. Their pseudo-utopias are stifling but benign. Their mass cultures offer abundant options for consumption and entertainment, while their means of control are subliminal and non-violent. Each person is free to behave as they want, because their wants have been thoroughly conditioned in advance. Though each works arrives at the unmistakable conclusion that such a life in a utopia so-conceived would be unworthy of humanity, Kateb is right to note that that these works “do not indict utopian ends as such.” Their argument is, instead, that utopian ends cannot be pursued at all costs. Material well-being, efficiency, organization, progress, peace – Zamyatin, Forster, and Huxley do not reject these rational and humanitarian objectives outright, as does, for example, Nietzsche, an anti-utopian *in extremis*, but they warn that these ideals are not sufficient to sustain human life with freedom and dignity. What they criticize is not utopianism in itself, but a certain kind of utopian idea, which is narrowly specified in its conception of human flourishing, and as a result, ends up strait-jacketing humanity in an effort to perfect it. The vision of the ideal society which emerges from Huxley’s humanistic commitments offers a more capacious reading of human potentialities:

The humanist is one who believes that our human nature can and should be developed harmoniously as a whole... For the humanist, then, the ideal society is one whose constituent members are all physically, intellectually, and morally of the best quality; a society so organized that no individual shall be unjustly treated or compelled to waste or
bury his talents; a society which gives its members the greatest possible amount of individual liberty, but at the same time provides them with the most satisfying incentives to altruistic effort; a society not static but deliberately progressive, consciously tending toward the realization of the highest human aspirations.45

For this reason, Huxley cautions skepticism of those who make their social ideals into unchanging absolutes. Utopians overstep their bounds when they promise not only improvement, but a final and permanent perfection of humanity. “This is why I disbelieve in the program of General Wells and the New Salvationists,” Huxley remarked in one essay published just prior to *Brave New World*. “In theory I am all for man living scientifically, creating his destiny and so forth. But in practice I doubt whether he can. I doubt whether any great scheme of human regeneration, of large-scale social Salvationism, can be carried through.”44 This is not say that Huxley had no use for utopian speculation—no one who disdained utopianism entirely would have spent so much of his career in conversation with the utopian tradition. But much as Zamyatin inveighed against the belief in a “final revolution,” Huxley believed that utopian thinking did the most good when it contributed to the patient pursuit of a better world, rather than indulging the perfectionist obsession. Utopias, he argued, “are really, and only, valuable as instruments of social change.”45 Great progress can be made as humanity moves from one vision of utopia to another, but when a utopia becomes an idée fixe the reflexive relationship between ideals and reality, means and ends, is cut off prematurely. A utopia that

never makes contact with reality is merely a daydream, while one which is imposed on reality in the manner of a blueprint may well become a nightmare.

However much the intellectual agenda of *Brave New World* was set by such philosophical questions, Huxley’s novel derives its urgency and owes its influence to far more proximate concerns. For the question of how the society of the future would be organized was being worked out not by philosophers or novelists but in the real social and material life of a rapidly changing world. Huxley’s target was not merely Wells, nor, for that matter, was it the modern utopians in general. His dystopian novel magnified aspects of society which had already come into being, and exaggerated the tendencies he wishes to criticize so that their adverse consequences would become more recognizable – the result being a vision of the future at once alien and instantly recognizable. Many details of *Brave New World* were inspired by Huxley’s visit to the United States, a visit which also motivated his first serious attempt at prophecy, an essay in which he tried to extrapolate the future toward which America was headed. “The future is the present projected,” he noted, and in doing so he revealed the methodology which would eventually guide his famous dystopian novel.46 Rather than simply reporting what he had seen in America, Huxley saw fit to deduce how “the great facts of contemporary life – machinery, political and social institutions, education” would shape human life in the near future, with a special interest in how such facts “affect and are likely to go on affecting the inner life of man.”47 Huxley believed that America provided the ideal specimen for such an inquiry because the characteristic material and social conditions of modernity were there most

46 “The Outlook for American Culture,” in *Complete Essays*, p. 185.
advanced, such that he could pronounce, “The future of America is the future of the world.”

Huxley’s observations evince a particular concern with democratic institutions and mechanized industrial production, the intersection of which defined American culture to many European observers, though he also remarks on the expansion of access to education, leisure, and travel. With respect to each, he sounds a deflationary note at odds with the extravagant predictions of the modern utopianisms. Where the modern utopians see in these arrangements the makings for continual improvement, even perfection, Huxley invokes a law of diminishing returns, taking American culture to illustrate the turning point at which industrial democracy and its products no longer better humanity, and even contribute to its regression. Though the advances of modern society ought in principle to yield new opportunities for self-cultivation, Huxley concluded from his observations on America that the conditions of culture, work, and governance would ultimately reinforce an unprecedented level of homogeneity and conformity.

Huxley had already expressed his disdain for the philosophies of perpetual progress expounded by “the prophets of Utopia.” He did not believe that humanity could be improved indefinitely, and instead invoked a principle of “Mendelian predestination,” by which he meant to indicate the natural limits of perfectibility. Beyond a certain point, he believed that humanity was helpless against its hereditary endowments, and as a result – rather like Wells before him – he evinced a disquieted fascination with the prospect of eugenics. Unlike Wells, Huxley stopped short of advocating a eugenic program, but he invoked the idea frequently in his essays to indicate the limitations of the Enlightenment philosophy of progress which asserted that

improvements in social and political institutions, particularly education, would allow humanity
to surpass its moral and intellectual limitations. Biology, he suspected, would continue to
impose stubborn limits on perfectionist aspirations. Thus, he concluded that the utopian hopes
of the Enlighteners would soon crash against the recalcitrance of their human materials, making
it necessary to envision the future anew:

Contemporary prophets have visions of future societies founded on the idea of natural
inequality, not natural equality; they look forward to the re-establishment, on anew and
much more realistic foundation, of the old hierarchies; they have visions of a ruling
aristocracy and of a race slowly improved, not by an improvement in the educational,
legal, or physical environment… but by deliberate eugenic breeding. Such is our present
future.

In the same essay, Huxley also mentioned the possibility of “a Machiavellian system of
education, designed to give the members of the lower castes only such instruction as it is
profitable for society at large and the upper castes in particular that they should have.” Clearly,
much in these passages presages the structure of his Brave New World, but in this case Huxley
does not seem especially perturbed by the vision of the future he is describing. Indeed, he seems
to take a kind of grim delight in upending utopian expectations. In this instance, however, his
aim is not to campaign for or against a particular future, only to more clearly articulate the
possibilities ahead. For good or ill, he takes such a future to be far more plausible than the
egalitarian and democratic societies which the modern utopians had endeavored to
realize.

For Huxley, the salient question to be posed about each new development was whether and
what extent they would conduce to “the acquisition of culture,” which possibilities for “higher
life,” they would open up.\(^{49}\) In his understanding, culture is the context of ideas and practices in which individuals can realize their potential, a repository of meanings and symbolic resources which the individual can draw on in order to add richness and complexity to his or her inner life. Rather than seeing material progress as an end in itself, Huxley insists that leisure, comfort, and prosperity are only good insofar as they provide individuals with opportunities for free self-cultivation. Whether or not these opportunities will be actualized depends on both the character of the individual and the wider social circumstances in which the individual’s cultural life is situated. True to his aristocratic and frequently elitist insistence on innate typological differences, Huxley asserts that significant portions of the population “do not wanted to be cultured, are not interested in the higher level. For these people, existence on the lower, animal levels is perfectly satisfactory. Given food, drink, the company of their fellows, sexual enjoyment, and plenty of noisy distractions from without, they are happy.”\(^{50}\) This sketch of the hedonism made possible by consumer society contains most of the significant details of the lifestyle of the lower castes in *Brave New World.* But in his novel, Huxley emphasizes the fact that the masses have to be conditioned to accept such a lifestyle, rather than attributing it to an innate defect in their characters. This is a significant insight for Huxley’s critique of culture: while he believes that there are minorities in every society who are either innately attracted or averse to culture, the “great mass of human beings” are somewhere in between, and their determinate nature will be shaped decisively by their social context.\(^{51}\)

\(^{50}\) Huxley, “Outlook for American Culture,” p. 187.
\(^{51}\) Huxley, “Outlook for American Culture,” p. 188.
As a result, Huxley’s most severe criticisms with respect to mass culture are not for the masses themselves, but instead for the progenitors of “mass-produced ideas and mass-produced art” who lower the overall level of culture. In a healthy society, Huxley believes that the “play–instinct” which human beings have the opportunity to indulge under conditions of leisure and material plenitude, that is, when they are not preoccupied with work and survival, can be a powerful motive to create and experience culture. But when the potentially challenging and rewarding contents of culture – which for Huxley inevitably means high culture – are supplanted by trivial amusements, culture loses its potential to instruct and emancipate. Huxley also fears that the ready availability of entertainment will reward passive consumption rather than encouraging active creation, resulting in a culture dominated by the interests of “uncreating, lazy, bored people.” Worst of all, because mass culture is most profitable when it can be consumed by the largest possible audience, the products of mass culture are infected with homogeneity – a homogeneity which they impress onto their consumers. This is what makes mass culture into the potent instrument of control that we see wielded in Brave New World: those who control the means of cultural production have the opportunity to “impose whatever ideas and art forms they please on the mass of humanity.” Though Huxley frequently let his distaste for “the haters of culture” overwhelm his more humanistic sensibilities, he ultimately concluded that the true vandals of civilization were not the consumers of mass culture, but the producers, who intentionally standardize and vulgarize culture in the pursuit of profit. It is as a result of their cynical exploitation of mass audiences

52 Huxley, “Outlook for American Culture,” p. 188.
that culture declines even as literacy rates rise and leisure time increases, and ultimately, that so much human potential goes unfulfilled amidst unprecedented opportunity for self-cultivation.

Similar conflicts between the economic criteria of efficiency, which demand stability and uniformity, and the humanistic values of self-cultivation, which are in principle oriented toward distinction and individuality, play out across the spheres of work and governance. In *Brave New World*, the society of the future is structured in accord with a totalizing philosophy of efficiency which Huxley calls “Fordism.” As a prophet of scientific management, “Our Ford” plays a role analogous to that of Taylor in Zamyatin’s *We*: the innovation of the future society is to make a comprehensive social philosophy out of the modern factory system. Just before *Brave New World* was completed, Huxley debuted his critical conception of Fordism in an essay characterizing what he took to be the philosophy of an inhuman future:

> Fordism, or the philosophy of industrialism… demands that we should sacrifice the animal man (and along with the animal large portions of the thinking, spiritual man)... to the machine. There is no place in the factory, or in that larger factory which is the modern industrialized world, for animals on the one hand, or for artists, mystics, or even, finally, individuals on the other. Of all the ascetic religions, Fordism is that which demands the cruelest mutilations of the human psyche – demands the cruelest mutilations and offers the smallest spiritual returns. Rigorously practiced for a few generations, this dreadful religion of the machine will end by destroying the human race.⁵⁴

Despite his antipathy toward Marxism, which he associated with vulgar materialism, Huxley echoed much of Marx’s discussion of alienation in his own critique of Fordism. Rather than allowing each person to develop the full range of their physical and especially intellectual capacity, the specialized labor demanded under industrial conditions diminishes laborers by consigning them to narrow functions and subjecting them to technical criteria of evaluation:

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⁵⁴ Huxley, “To the Puritan All Thing are Impure,” in *Complete Essays*, p. 238.
“Where there is too much specialization, too much of the organized division of labor, a man is easily degraded to the level of a mere embodied function.”

Huxley feared that such standards would soon spread beyond the factory, giving rise to a society in which human beings would be valued “not as individuals, but as personified social functions.” Elsewhere, Huxley spoke to the dehumanizing consequences of the industrial system, writing that “The machine demands mechanical efficiency, but mechanical efficiency is practically synonymous with human imbecility,” and asking “Is a mechanized slave with atrophied powers of initiative a fully alive human being?”

If Huxley feared that industry could only support the existence of “a stupefied and aesthetically numbed human being, exactly like all other stupefied and aesthetically numb human beings,” he saw little hope that a democratic political system could do anything but compound such grievous deficiencies in its culture. One of the hazards of democratic egalitarianism which concerned Huxley – as it had previous critics such as Tocqueville and contemporaries like Ortega y Gasset – was that democratic culture made a virtue of homogeneity. Huxley’s skepticisms toward democracy, which, as we have seen, he supported “materially” but not “intellectually,” indicated an anxiety about the type of leadership which could be expected from the opinions of the masses. In the future, however, he imagined that such distinctions might be rendered obsolete: the totally egalitarian society would elevate the

57 Huxley, “To the Puritan All Thing are Impure,” p. 221.
“ordinary man” above “the exceptional man” and eventually drive the latter from existence, “for not to be ordinary will be regarded as a crime.”

While Huxley believed there was much in humanity that would resist the extreme regimentation and conformity of the industrial society, he was in no way convinced that these forces were adequate to confront all that was arrayed against them. His fascination with technological means of control, particularly those which might emerge from the nascent sciences of psychology, are evidenced in his notion of hypnopaedia, which is explored in both Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited. The construction of the term is revealing: in antiquity paedia referred not only to education in the conventional sense of the word, but the complete process by which the individual was molded by his or her culture. In Huxley’s dystopia, this entire process takes place beneath the level of consciousness, so that the individual is prevented from having any but the dimmest awareness of the exactitude with which his or her consciousness has been manipulated to fit the exact specifications of the social order. Huxley’s imagination was vexed by the potential of propaganda and “systemic mass-suggestion,” both of which he believed could be made “irresistibly effective” as the science of psychology grew more sophisticated.\textsuperscript{58} For the same reasons, he concluded that the scientific discoveries which would come to define the twentieth century were not those related to the harnessing of atomic energy, but instead the advances in biology, physiology, and psychology which he saw as having the most potential to affect human individuals. They would enable, if

\textsuperscript{58} Huxley, Brave New World & Brave New World Revisited, p. 9.
pursued far enough, what Huxley called “the truly revolutionary revolution, beyond politics and economics” – that is, the conquest of the human mind.59

Just as Huxley feared that the underlying logics of mass culture and industrial production militated against humanistic values, he saw in the scientific mindset – and especially in the desire to subordinate human life to scientific principles of predictability and control – a dangerous temptation, one which he found modern utopians guilty of indulging. “Science,” he wrote in Brave New World Revisited, “may be defined as the reduction of multiplicity to unity. It seeks to explain the endlessly diverse phenomena of nature by ignoring the uniqueness of particular events, concentrating on what they have in common and finally abstracting some kind of ‘law,’ in terms of which the make sense and can be effectively dealt with.”60 Huxley described the search for scientific explanations of the world as one expressions of an overarching “Will to Order” which also included the construction of metaphysical and theological systems. As purely intellectual pursuits, these projects were benign enough, but Huxley saw a danger in the temptation to apply the Will to Order to human affairs:

Here the theoretical reduction of unmanageable multiplicity to comprehensible unity becomes the practical reduction of human diversity to subhuman uniformity, of freedom to servitude. In politics, the equivalent of a fully developed scientific theory or philosophical system is a totalitarian dictatorship. In economics, the equivalent of a beautifully composed work of art is the smoothly running factory in which the workers are perfectly adjusted to the machines. The Will to Order can make tyrants out of those who merely aspire to clear up a mess. The beauty of tidiness is used as a justification for despotism.61

59 Huxley, Brave New World & Brave New World Revisited, p. 8.
60 Huxley, Brave New World & Brave New World Revisited. p. 254
61 Huxley, Brave New World & Brave New World Revisited, p. 255.
Of course, this is precisely what Huxley had predicted in *Brave New World*. And it is not just stability, efficiency, or order that are invoked as justifications for the inhuman conditions of the Fordist society. “The people who govern the Brave New World may not be sane (in what may be called the absolute sense of the word),” Huxley explains, “but they are not madmen, and their aim is not anarchy but social stability. It is in order to achieve stability that they carry out, by scientific means, the ultimate, personal, really revolutionary revolution.”

*Brave New World* represents Huxley’s most ambitious and enduring attempt to synthesize his disparate critiques of the modern utopian project, and to offer his own counter-utopian vision of what science, industry, and social organization will yield for the human future. But what is perhaps more unsettling than its extrapolation of these various tendencies is a self-critical insight that belies the more overtly didactic passages of the novel: what if the World Controllers are right, and there is no defense to be made of Huxley’s cherished humanistic values? Mustapha Mond, who speaks on behalf of the World Controllers in the novel’s climactic confrontation, informs the Savage that “civilization has absolutely no need of nobility or heroism. These things are symptoms of political inefficiency. In a properly organized society like ours, nobody has any opportunities for being noble or heroic. Conditions have got to be thoroughly unstable before the occasion can arise.” Whatever one may thing of the Savage’s eloquent defense of passion, courage, and self-denial, it is difficult to see why the comfort and security of millions should be exchanged so that the Savage can claim “the right to

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63 Huxley, *Brave New World & Brave New World Revisited*, p. 213. The parallel with Dostoevsky’s parallel of the Grand Inquisitor is discussed by Kumar in *Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, pp. 120-122.
be unhappy.”64 True to Mustapha Mond’s dictum, the Savage is not so much a hero as a would-be-hero who has arrived too late to make a stand for his values, and his recognition of this fact is reflected in his eventual downfall. It is clear that Huxley intended his readers to shudder at the meaningless existence to which each individual had been consigned in the Fordist future, but in the Savage, he offers an image of revolt which is itself irrational and, for that reason, doomed to fail. Huxley imagined that as the grip of industrial civilization tightened, such revolts would become increasingly common. “With every advance of civilization the savage past will be more and more appreciated,” he predicted, “and the cult of D.H. Lawrence’s Dark Gods may be expected to spread through an ever-widening circle of worshippers.”65 Though Huxley was clearly more sympathetic to the romanticist revolt than the rationalist utopia it opposed, he ultimately rejected it as well. As the conclusion of Brave New World indicates, he saw little more than defiant self-flagellation down that road. Rather than rejecting modernity tout court, what concerned Huxley after he wrote Brave New World was the imagination of a humane alternative, a new vision of modernity in which humanistic values could be defended in theory and realized in practice.

Reflecting, in 1946, on what had already become his signature literary achievement, Huxley wrote that “the most serious defect in the story” was its failure to present a compelling alternative to the grim vision of the technocratic future and the fruitless revolt against it.66 As he explained, “”The Savage is offered only two alternatives, an insane life in Utopia, or the life of a

64 Huxley, Brave New World & Brave New World Revisited, p. 215.
65 Huxley, Brave New World & Brave New World Revisited, p. 135
66 Huxley, Brave New World & Brave New World Revisited , pp. 6-7.
primitive in an Indian village, a life more human in some respects but in others hardly less queer and abnormal... Between the utopian and the primitive horns of this dilemma would lie the possibility of sanity.” From a social-philosophical standpoint, such a formulation would better represent the choices facing modern society, and from a literary standpoint, it would equip the Savage with a better set of arguments against Mustapha Mond’s rationalist defense of Fordism, hypnopaedia, and the rest.

Though the humanistic ideals which defined Huxley’s own ideal society remained constant, he tried a number of competing formulations of this ideal throughout his career – none, ultimately, as resonant as their dystopian inverse. Around the time he was writing *Brave New World*, Huxley was favorably inclined toward modern forms of aristocracy. In one passage, he described the “ideal state” as “one in which there is a material democracy controlled by an aristocracy of intellect — a state in which men and women are guaranteed a decent human existence and are given every opportunity to develop such talents as they possess, and where those with the greatest talent rule.”67 Of course, there is no daylight between this mixed regime and the society depicted in *Brave New World*. There, the great majority of the population is intentionally deprived of opportunities to develop their talents, and even the ruling class cannot be said to free, as they must either take up the task of administering the Fordist society as it exists or accept a life of exile. By the end of the Second World War, however, Huxley had concluded that a far more radical alternative was necessary if the humanist principles he held dear were to be realized in practice. In the interwar years, he had spoken of the authoritarian

state bureaucracies emerging in Germany, Russia, and China as “inadequate precursors” to his favored form of aristocracy, but the experience of the war as well as his observations on social developments in the democratic world convinced him that a critique of economic and political centralization was necessary if his humanist principles were to be vindicated. He now looked toward an alternative arrangement which he described as “a society of freely cooperating individuals dedicated to the pursuit of sanity.” \(^6^8\) It’s guiding principles would be as follows:

In this community, economics would be decentralist and Henry-Georgian, politics Kropotkin-esque, co-operative. Science and technology would be used as though, like the Sabbath, they had been made for man not (as at present and still more so in the Brave New World) as though man were to be adapted and enslaved to them. Religion would be the conscious and intelligent pursuit of man’s Final End, the unitive knowledge of the immanent Tao or Logos, the transcendent Godhead or Brahman. And the prevailing philosophy of life would be a kind of Higher Utilitarianism in which the Greatest Happiness principle would be secondary to the Final End principle – the first question to be asked and answered in every contingency of life being: How will this thought or action contribute to, or interfere with, the achievement, by me and the great possible number of individuals, of man’s Final End?

Eventually, Huxley explored these ideas in a utopian counterpart to *Brave New World* called *Island*, which concerns the civilization of the Palanese, an imaginary people whose utmost concern is “the modest ambition to live as fully human beings.” \(^6^9\) Published thirty years after the first edition of *Brave New World*, and just one year before Huxley’s death, the later novel reflected the constructive and critical commitments which had guided his career as a public intellectual, as well as his burgeoning interest in Eastern religion and the nascent counter-cultures taking root among the youth of the United States and Europe. It is the only work in which Huxley truly indulges the utopian side of his imagination – and even then, the society he

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\(^6^8\) Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, p. 7.
describes is a “tiny oasis of humanity.”” Whereas the false utopia of Brave New World was devoid of both history and futurity, the Palanese take as their mission “to make the best of all the worlds, the worlds already realized within the various cultures, and beyond them, the worlds of still unrealized possibilities.” Neither elitist in structure nor dominated by the masses, the culture of Pala is “judged by what all the members of the community, the ordinary as well as the extraordinary, can and do experience.” Instead of a massive, centralized bureaucracy, Pala is “a federation of self-governing units,” and instead of a meticulously planned existence, its members prepare for a life of “changes and chances… beauties and horrors and absurdities.” To make room for both happiness and freedom, there is a great deal which the Palanese must forego. In addition to renouncing large-scale political association, they do not conduct advanced research in chemistry or physics, nor do they engage in industrial production. As one of their spokespeople puts it, the Palanese have always chosen “to adapt our economy and technology to human beings – not our human beings to somebody else’s economy and technology.”

All of this might seem an uncharacteristically conciliatory note for the perpetually skeptical Huxley to end his career on. But the Palanese soon learn that theirs is a utopia besieged – though they have opted out of the military and economic structures by which so much of the world has been governed, they cannot hold the outside world at bay. Eventually, a

foreign power takes an interest in Pala’s natural resources, and the novel ends with the Palanese anxiously welcoming the colonists to the island. Speaking to the Island’s monarch, the Ambassador of the foreign power summarizes Pala’s dilemma, which for Huxley, is also the dilemma of the utopian ideal in modernity:

‘Pala was completely viable, I’d say, until about 1905. Then, in less than a single generation, the world completely changed. Movies, cars, airplanes, radio. Mass production, mass slaughter, mass communication and, above all, plain mass — more and more people in bigger and bigger slums or suburbs. By 1930 any clear-sighted observer could have seen that, for three quarters of the human race, freedom and happiness were almost out of the question. Today, thirty years later, they’re completely out of the question. And meanwhile the outside world has been closing in on this little island of freedom and happiness. Closing in steadily and inexorably, coming nearer and nearer. What was once a viable ideal is now no longer viable.’

Thus, humanistic ideals cannot hope to survive by carving out enclaves from a world still governed by the logics of technology, industry, and militarism. The forces which conduce to the dehumanization of modern life are global in their reach, and only by charting an alternative course as a civilization will humanity avoid the deadening banality of Brave New World and the apocalyptic horror of atomic warfare. Huxley’s dystopia and his utopia are two sides of the same dilemma, acts of political imagination meant to clarify the choice before us:

Indeed, unless we choose to decentralize and to use applied science, not as the end to which human beings are to be made the means, but as the means to producing a race of free individuals, we have only two alternatives to choose from: either a number of national, militarized totalitarianisms, having as their root the terror the atomic bomb and as their consequence the destruction of civilization… or else one supranational totalitarianism, called into existence by the social chaos resulting from rapid technological progress in general and the atomic revolution in particular, and developing under the need for efficiency and stability, into the welfare-tyranny of Utopia.

75 Huxley, Island, p. 66.
76 Huxley, Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited, p. 13
A Vision of the Totalitarian Future: Orwell’s 1984

“Almost certainly, we are entering an age of totalitarian dictatorships, an age in which freedom of thought will be at first a deadly sin and later a meaningless abstraction. The autonomous individual is going to be stamped out of existence.”77 Orwell wrote these words just as Europe had once again been engulfed by total war, and, as the decade wore on, nothing, not even the triumph of the democratic nations over their despotic rivals, could alter his judgment that a future of permanent domination was the one which humanity was most likely to face. Huxley had seen fit to warn that human freedom might soon be imperiled by the triumph of utopian programs which had seemed impossible just decades earlier. Looking out upon a European landscape which had once again been seized by violence on an incomprehensible scale, where huge swaths of the European population once again lived under repressive dictatorships with imperial ambitions, Orwell saw virtually no danger that humanity would fall victim to its own rationality – or that there would be anything even superficially pleasant about the future of servitude toward which the world was headed. In a letter written during the thick of the Second World War, Orwell unfurled a competing vision of the future which showed that the scenario he would explore some years later in 1984 was already weighing on his mind:

I think you overestimate the danger of a ‘Brave New World’ – i.e., a completely materialistic vulgar civilization based on hedonism. I would say the danger of that kind of thing is past, and that we are in danger of quite a different kind of world, the centralized slave state, ruled over by a small clique who are in effect a new ruling class... Such a state would not be hedonistic, on the contrary its dynamic would come from some kind of rabid nationalism and leader-worship

kept going by literally continuous war, and its average standard of living would probably be low.\textsuperscript{78}

In this short paragraph, Orwell lays out several of the most important themes of his own dystopian thought experiment, from the form that the despotic society of the future will take, to the means and motives which would constitute its base of power. In \textit{1984}, the ruling party has in no way surpassed or even sublimated their love of power or violence. The novel is a nightmarish fugue of surveillance, warfare, torture, and persecution; where \textit{Brave New World} permits the reader to observe its institutions with the detachment of that novel’s soma-addled subjects, \textit{1984} throws the reader directly into the paranoid consciousness of its protagonist.

Orwell’s Oceania, it is clear from a glance, is no utopia. Orwell did not intend to warn against the realization of a utopian society, not even a deeply misguided one. In his scenario, those who enjoy a position of power and privilege utilize modern methods of social control to route their opposition and pre-empt any challenge in the name of freedom or equality. He could imagine no future more barren than one in which the utopian impulse was driven not only from political life but from historical consciousness, as the final defeat of the egalitarian ideal would allow the ruling elite to freeze society in its hierarchical form. At his most pessimistic, Orwell was willing to entertain the deeply dystopian possibility that had vexed Huxley in his way: that such a hi-tech inquisition could succeed in changing human nature permanently, such that the longing for freedom would be extinguished altogether.

\textsuperscript{78} “To S. Moos,” in \textit{George Orwell: A Life In letters}, ed. Peter Davison (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).
Though Orwell had not always been so fatalistic about the future, his confidence in human freedom never recovered from the experience of totalitarianism and the beginning of the Cold War. Not only was Orwell profoundly shaken by the spectacle of totalitarianism itself, but, still more disturbingly to his mind was the acquiescence of European intellectuals to the restriction of free thought and expression under the totalitarian regimes. At precisely the historical threshold where the technological means of exercising total control were at hand, the intellectuals had abandoned their responsibilities as defenders of liberty and instead become apologists for the emergent totalitarian order. The complicity of the intellectuals was particularly striking for Orwell, who, despite being aware of the immediate physical deprivations and cruelties visited upon the subjects of totalitarian regimes, always conceptualized totalitarianism in terms of the danger to “freedom of thought.” As he explained in his first essay on the subject:

Totalitarianism has abolished freedom of thought to an extent unheard of in any previous age. And it is important to realize that its control of thought is not only negative but positive. It not only forbids you to express – even to think – certain thoughts, but it dictates what you shall think, it creates an ideology for you, tries govern your emotional life as well as setting up a code of conduct.... The totalitarian state tries, at any rate, to control the thoughts and emotions of its subjects at least as completely as it controls their actions.

It only followed from this that the intelligentsia, whose social position ostensibly required them to think freely, should oppose totalitarianism as a class. And yet Orwell noted among his fellow writers a distinct lack of interest in defending the freedom of speech or of the press against the censorship that had become commonplace in Soviet Russia, was horrified to

note that Stalin’s purges were even defended at a meeting of literary intellectuals.\footnote{Specifically the P.E.N. club, at a meeting dedicated to the tercentenary of Milton’s \textit{Aeropagitica}, according to Orwell “a pamphlet, it may be remembered, dedicated to the freedom of the press.” This was the proximate occasion for “The Prevention of Literature.”} Orwell believed that the threat of totalitarianism to freedom of thought had been underestimated insofar as the intellectuals who defended censorship and persecution depended on a distinction, untenable, in Orwell’s opinion, between public and private freedom. “The secret freedom which you can supposedly enjoy under a despotic government is nonsense, because your thoughts are never entirely your own. Philosophers, writers, artists, even scientists, not only need encouragement and an audience, they need constant stimulation from other people.”\footnote{Orwell, “As I Please,” in \textit{Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters}, Vol. III, p. 133.} Orwell feared that the totalitarian states would not be content to repress or censor their opposition, that their true goal was, instead, to render opposition unthinkable. And he feared that they could succeed insofar as “It is almost impossible to think without talking.” These intimations of total control receive a heightened expression in 1984, wherein Orwell imagines a regime which is capable of capturing the “inner mind” of its subjects.\footnote{In 1984 O’ Brien explains “The Party is not interested in the overt act: the thought is as well care about” (253) and “We are not content with negative obedience, nor even with the most abject submission… We convert him, we capture his inner mind, we reshape him… We bring him over to our side not in appearance, but genuinely, heart and soul.” Orwell, 1984 (New York: Signet, 1949), p. 255.} As Irving Howe rightly notes in his remarks on 1984, the world it evokes is “post-totalitarian… not totalitarianism as we know it, but totalitarianism after its world triumph.”\footnote{Irving Howe, “1984-Utopia Reversed,” \textit{New International} 16: 6, pp. 360-368.}

How would Orwell have arrived at such a vision of the future? As with Huxley, Wells had exercised a powerful influence over Orwell’s thinking about the future and its possibilities. Orwell described him as “a true prophet,” with the qualification that the world since 1914 had
largely diverged not only from Wells’ utopian expectations, but even from the broad outline of history as he had been capable of understanding it. In Orwell’s judgment, Wells was too rational to comprehend the deeply irrational forces which had brought about the calamitous events of their times. His own rationalism left him ill-equipped to understand the appeal of a leader like Hitler, just as his confidence in progress blinded him to the endurance of superstition and barbarity in the modern world. Contra Wells, Orwell suggest that the “energy that actually shapes the world spring from emotions – racial pride, leader-worship, religious belief, love of war – which liberal intellectual mechanically write off as anachronisms.”

In Wells vision of history, scientific rationalism was bound to triumph over such forces: “On the one side science, order, progress, internationalism, aeroplanes, steel, concrete, hygiene: on the other side war, nationalism, religion, monarchy, peasants, Greek professors, poets, horses. History as he sees it is a series of victories won by the scientific man over the romantic man.” Such a dualistic view of civilization could not capture the terrifying reality of totalitarianism and total war, in which science had proven compatible with, even conductive to, the emergence of cult-like leaders presiding over neo-Feudal institutions, wherein “the order, the planning, the State encouragement of science, the steel, the concrete, the aeroplanes, are all there, but all in the service of ideas appropriate to the Stone Age.” Orwell suggested that Wells had been closer to the mark with his early dystopian novel The Sleeper Awakes, which forecast “a glittering, sinister world in which society has hardened into a caste system and the workers are permanently enslaved.” But the work he eventually came to esteem most – as a prophecy, if not as a literary

achievement – was Zamyatin’s We. Unlike Wells and Huxley, whose dystopias forecast an existence that was altogether purposeless, even for its ruling caste, Orwell saw in Zamyatin a writer who displayed an “intuitive grasp of the irrational side of totalitarianism – human sacrifice, cruelty as an end in itself, the worship of a leader who is credited with divine attributes.” Like Zamyatin, Orwell increasingly came to think that the society of the future would be no sterile experiment in social engineering, but rather something resembling “the sinister slave civilisations of the ancient world.”

Orwell’s interest in such visions of the future, the various “prophecies of fascism” arrayed in the speculative fiction of the earliest twentieth century, was motivated by his sense that novelists had anticipated the totalitarian menace in ways that serious philosophers and social thinkers had failed to do. As a result, he concluded that such works might provide a more accurate glimpse of the future than most intellectuals of his day. However, his own prophecy of the future was not formed entirely in conversation with the fictional products of the dystopian imagination. In hindsight, Orwell’s engagement with the political prophecies of James Burnham also seem significant for the vision of the future he would advance in 1984. In a work called The Managerial Revolution, Burnham projected the extreme centralization of political and economic authority as the irresistible tendency which would shape the political future. Burnham posited that this tendency was furthest advanced in the bureaucratic dictatorships of Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, but pointed toward the New Deal as evidence that the capitalist, democratic

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86 Orwell, “Review of We,” in Collected Essay, Letters, and Journalism, Vol. IV., pp. 72-75.; For similar reasons, he had praised Jack London’s The Iron Heel.
states would eventually have to centralize authority as well. In each case, a new ruling class of managers was the beneficiary, acquiring an unprecedented control over economic and political decision-making, and paving the way for a future in which all political systems would converge under the single heading of bureaucratic domination. Rather than criticizing this trend, Burnham suggested that the managerial system may well provide the most efficient resolution to the persistent problems of governing mass societies – and that if the ineluctable tendency of human societies was toward hierarchy and domination, then a managerial system may well be preferable to the alternatives.

Initially, Orwell was skeptical of such predictions. He detected at the heart of Burnham’s theory an uncritical and ahistorical conception of the power-drive, one which he took Burnham to share with many realist thinkers. As a result, he argued, Burnham’s predictions were insufficiently critical of the interests of the managerial class, and his neo-Machiavellian conception of power in fact served as an ideological cover for those interests. Such a framework led thinkers like Burnham to “overrate the part played by force in human affairs.”88 In a remark that could well have applied to his own vision of power in 1984, Orwell objected that “Burnham is always fascinated by power, whether he is for it or against it, and he always see it a little larger than life.” What Burnham had not taken sufficiently seriously, then, was the possibility that “the Machiavellian world of force, fraud, and tyranny may somehow

88 Here we see evidence of Orwell’s wider critique of realism: “That a man of Burnham’s gifts should have been able for a while to think of Nazism as something rather admirable, something that could and probably would build up a workable and durable social order, shows what damage is done to the sense of reality by the cultivation of what is now called ‘realism’. See Orwell, “James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution,” in Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters, p. 160-180.
come to an end.” Orwell, by contrast, believed that what he called “power worship” or “power hunger” was “only dominant in comparatively few people,” and that a theory which naturalizes these dispositions as part of human nature is bound to offer a distorted view of the future. What was needed instead was an inquiry into the sources of the desire for domination – to question why it had become so pronounced at their exact historical juncture:

True, drudgery persists; class distinctions are probably re-establishing themselves in a new form, and individual liberty is on the down-grade: but as these developments are now technically avoidable, they must have some psychological cause which Burnham makes no attempt to discover. The question that he ought to ask, but never does ask, is: Why does the lust for naked power become a major human motive exactly now, when the dominion of man over man is ceasing to be necessary? As for the claim that ‘human nature’, or ‘inexorable laws’ of this and that, make Socialism impossible, it is simply a projection of the past into the future. In effect, Burnham argues that because a society of free and equal human beings has never existed, it never can exist.

Thus Orwell concluded of Burnham’s theory of power that, “There is no strong reason for thinking that it tells us anything about the future, except perhaps the immediate future.”

This makes it all the more striking that, within a year, Orwell had swung to a position of extreme pessimism that made Burnham’s theory look palatable by comparison. Though he still clung to the hope that the world would turn back from the precipice of nuclear war, the “worst possibility of all,” which disturbed him even more than the prospect of a Third World War, was the emergence and entrenchment of permanent totalitarian rule on a global scale – precisely the scenario he would explore in 1984. In an essay published just before he began work on his

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89 Orwell, “James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution.”
90 Orwell, “James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution.”
91 See Kateb, “Road to 1984,” 574-576.
dystopian novel, Orwell predicted a future geo-political order structured, at its core, by the fear of the bomb, characterized by permanent war-footing and paranoia:

It would mean the division of the world among two or three vast super-states, unable to conquer one another and unable to be overthrown by any internal rebellion. In all probability their structure would be hierarchic, with a semi-divine caste at the top and outright slavery at the bottom, and the crushing out of liberty would exceed anything that the world has yet seen. Within each state the necessary psychological atmosphere would be kept up by complete severance from the outer world, and by a continuous phony war against rival states. Civilizations of this type might remain static for thousands of years.

Orwell did not believe that this threat would be averted unless the public came to grasp the true danger of the world situation, and thus he set out to devise a new literary technique which could demonstrate the profound choice which lay before his generation. However, it is important to emphasize that Orwell’s novel was intended to clarify a choice, that is, even at his most pessimistic he never came to the conclusion that a future like the one he describes in 1984 was already determined. In one of his last statements on the novel before his death, Orwell explained, “I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily will arrive, but I believe … that something resembling it could arrive. I believe also that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences… totalitarianism, if not fought against, could triumph anywhere.”

Orwell’s thus devised his dystopian thought experiment as an inquiry into the question which he took to be of decisive significance for political thought in the age of

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93 This statement reflects the contents of two letters written by Orwell just before his death, which were published in July 1949 by The New York Times and Life magazine. See the document in J.R. Hammond, A George Orwell Companion – A Guide to the Novel, Documents, and Essays (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), p. 172.
totalitarianism: under what conditions would it be possible for a ruling party to establish absolute control over its subjects? As Orwell described it, totalitarianism itself entailed a bold and unprecedented experiment in social engineering. Taking seriously the possibility that this experiment might succeed, Orwell declined to conceptualize totalitarian rule as a variation on dictatorship or despotism as it had been known to history – for this would not do justice to totalitarianism, either in its radical ambitions or its technological capacities. As Orwell noted at the outset of the Second World war:

> The terrifying thing about the modern dictatorships is that they are something entirely unprecedented. Their end cannot be foreseen. In the past every tyranny was sooner or later overthrown, or at least resisted, because of 'human nature,' which as a matter of course desired liberty. But we cannot be at all certain that 'human nature' is constant. It may be just as possible to produce a breed of men who do not wish for liberty as to produce a breed of hornless cows. The Inquisition failed, but then the Inquisition had not the resources of the modern state. The radio, press censorship, standardized education and the secret police have altered everything. Mass suggestion is a science of the last twenty-years, and we do not know how successful it will be.

Much in Orwell’s construal of the totalitarian prospect, and the larger question pertaining to human freedom which it opens up, is reminiscent of Huxley. Most apparently, the two writers shared similar anxieties about the new technological forms of control, including the mass media and its potential to disseminate propaganda, as well as with the more remote possibilities of “mass suggestion,” or large-scale psychological manipulation. In 1984, this qualitative threshold is invoked in Goldstein’s pamphlet on “oligarchical collectivism,” which explains that, “Even the Catholic church of the Middle Ages was tolerant by modern standards. Part of the reason for this was that in the past no government had the power to keep its citizens
under constant surveillance.” By contrast, the Party has devised telescreens which allow them to monitor their population at all times, and has taken an active role in manipulating public opinion through the media of mass communication, that is, print, radio, and television. As the pamphlet asserts that, “The possibility of enforcing not only complete obedience to the will of the State, but complete uniformity of opinion on all subjects, now existed for the first time.”

But it is Orwell’s remarks on the possibility of a reconstituted human nature which goes to the heart of dystopian thinking, and shows Orwell’s intellectual continuity with the problem of the human future as it was elucidated in the preceding chapter with respect to writers like Nietzsche and Wells. In Orwell’s usage, the very concept of human nature has to be bracketed, as it represents an untested hypothesis, namely that there is some underlying ontological or psychological substrate which acts as a necessary constraint on human malleability. The dystopian anxiety can really only take root on the condition that this proposal is taken as an unsettled question, if not rejected outright. In 1984, O’Brien, the Party’s inquisitor and spokesman, argues for the opposite position. He repudiates the novel’s protagonist, Winston, for “imagining that there is something called human nature which will be outraged by what we do and will turn against us.” On the contrary, he argues, “we create human nature. Men are infinitely malleable.”

So far as the novel goes, O’Brien is proven correct: by the novel’s conclusion, Winston has devoted himself fully to the Party and its cultic figurehead, Big Brother. But Winston’s

94 Orwell, 1984, p. 205.
95 Orwell, 1984, p. 206
96 Orwell, 1984, p. 269.
psychological transformation is not wholly attributable to the torture he suffers in the Ministry of Love, much less so is the captivity of the population at large. The consummation of total control rests more fundamentally on the Party’s ability to engineer the thoughts of their subjects through the manipulation of history and language. It is these two accomplishments which allow the Party to “arrest progress and freeze history” so totally as to foreclose any possibility for change.\textsuperscript{97} In \textit{Brave New World}, the Fordist society teaches its subjects that, “History is bunk,” such that it is detached from any cultural memory of freedom. The society depicted in \textit{1984} goes further still: it does not simply ignore history, but fabricates it, establishing retroactively the historical narratives which suit their ideological mission. “From the totalitarian point of view,” Orwell had observed, “history is something to be created rather than learned…. Totalitarianism demands, in fact, the continuous alteration of the past, and in the long run probably demands a disbelief in the very existence of objective truth.”\textsuperscript{98} Both of these outcomes are depicted in \textit{1984}. Winston knows well that the Party has the means to remove his brief resistance from history. When the novel begins he is an employee of the Ministry of Truth, revising history to correspond with the Party’s ever-changing propaganda. The Party and their Thought Police can therefore threaten him with a kind of existential oblivion, to wipe his life and writings “out of existence and out of memory.”\textsuperscript{99} By controlling the past in this fashion, the Party also controls the future. Winston is left to wonder, “How could you make an appeal to the future when not a

\textsuperscript{97} Orwell, \textit{1984}, p. 217.  
\textsuperscript{98} Orwell, “Prevention of Literature.”  
\textsuperscript{99} Orwell, \textit{1984}, p. 27.
trace of you, not even an anonymous word scribbled on a piece of paper, could physically survive?"

This is how the totalitarian regime of the future would seal its subjects within an “artificial universe of thought”: first, by creating an artificial history, then, by creating an artificial language, such that the very concepts by which reality is construed and discussed can be determined in advance. Orwell suspected that an artificial language would comprise the ultimate instrument of social control, as its devisors would be able to establish limitations on the possibilities of thought, tethering both private reflection and public discourse to orthodoxies and clichés incapable of sustaining critique. This fear is reflected in Orwell’s concept of “Newspeak,” the official language of Oceania, “devised to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc.” It is suggested in the novel’s appendix that fleeting resistance like Winston’s is possible, in part, because the version of Newspeak which the Party has currently disseminated is merely provisional. The “final, perfected version” would sustain an airtight system of control, reinforcing the “world-view and mental habits” favored by the Party while also serving “to make all other modes of thought impossible,” “to diminish the range of thought.” For example, the notions of freedom and equality so central to liberal and socialist thought cannot be articulated in Newspeak, and therefore these ideologies can sustain no challenge to the Party’s domination. “A person growing up with Newspeak as his sole language would no more know that equal had once had the secondary meaning of ‘politically equal’ or that free had once meant ‘intellectually free,’ than for instance, a person who had never heard of chess would be

100 Orwell, 1984, p. 299.
101 Orwell, 1984, p. 299-300.
aware of the secondary meanings attached to *queen* and *rook*."^102 Whereas Huxley forecasted a future in which the written words, and with them the ideals and strivings, of past generations would simply be forgotten, Orwell anticipated a crueler mechanism for translating the world’s literature into meaningless propaganda, incapable of soliciting feeling or reflection. Eventually, the individual’s private vocabulary would follow suit, reducing thought to the frictionless manipulation of concepts which have been evacuated of any purchase on reality. “In the end we shall make thought-crime literally impossible, because there will be no words with which to express it,” Winston is informed by his superiors at the Ministry of Truth. “The whole climate of thought will be different. In fact, there will be no thought as we understand it now.”

Many of these ideas – Newspeak, Thoughtcrime, Big Brother and the Thought Police – have endured in the lexicon of political discourse, tokens of how vividly Orwell imagined the mechanisms of control which the totalitarian regime of the future might avail itself. Less well-remembered than the means of control is the motive, which is never as clear as the utilitarian apologetics made on behalf of Huxley’s Fordist society by its administrators. By contrast, the ends of the Party are presented as a mystery in *1984*; according to the pamphlet the Party’s “central secret” is “the original motive, the never-questioned instinct that first led to the seizure of power, and brought *doublethink*, the Thought Police, continual warfare, and all the other necessary paraphernalia into existence afterwards.”^103 Orwell reinforces the centrality of this question by having Winston’s reading interrupted just as Goldstein is preparing to disclose this motive. Contrary to the persistent tendency to interpret the novel as an anti-utopian work in the

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^103 Orwell, *1984*, p. 217
vein of *Brave New World*, the easiest explanation to rule out is that the Party seized power to create a utopia. During his interrogation, Winston proposes an explanation that would echoes Huxley’s: “That the choice for mankind lay between freedom and happiness, and that, for the great but of mankind, happiness was better... You are ruling over us for our own good.”104 O’Brien rejects this explanation with contempt: “Do you begin to see, then, what kind of world we are creating? It is the exact opposite of the stupid, hedonistic Utopias that the old reformers imagined.”105 Whereas Huxley’s novel depicted a utopian imagination turned megalomaniacal, in *1984* the utopian imagination is only a flickering in the margins, all but extinguished. From the Goldstein’s pamphlet, Winston learns of the utopian dreams that had, until recently, animated the political movement called socialism. “In the early twentieth century, the vision of a future society unbelievably rich, leisured, orderly, and efficient – a glistening antiseptic world of glass and steel an snow-white concrete – was part of the consciousness of every literate person.”106 The contrast with the reality of life in Oceania could not be more apparent. Winston characterizes life in Oceania by “its bareness, its dinginess, its listlessness.”107 The world of *1984* is “a bare, hungry, dilapidated place compared with the world that existed before 1914, and sill more so if compared with the imaginary future to which the people of that period looked forward.”108 If such ideals have no resemblance to the present conditions of life, they have also long lost their power as guiding forces for the Party’s totalitarian ideology. Goldstein’s

104 Orwell, *1984*, p. 262
105 Orwell, *1984*, p. 268
106 Orwell, *1984*, p. 189
107 Orwell, *1984*, p. 73.
108 Orwell, *1984*, p. 188.
pamphlet contrasts the present bareness of the utopian imagination with the great stretch of human history, in which “idea of an early paradise in which men should live together in a state of brotherhood, without laws and without brute labor, had haunted the imagination for thousands of years.”\textsuperscript{109} In the world which preceded the rise of Ingsoc and the Party, such egalitarian ideals came to be seen as a threat to the social position of the ascendant classes – a class which Orwell largely imagined in the mold of Burnham’s managers – and thus, “From the point of view of the new groups who were on the point of seizing power, human equality was no longer an ideal to be striven after, but a danger to be averted.” The destruction of memory and the instrumentalization of language are intended to expunge all radical ideals from consciousness, such that the opponents of the Party will not be able to interpret or articulate their resistance in terms of a lineage of historical struggle, or an encompassing egalitarian ideal. The Party, as O’Brien will eventually explain, does not “allow the dead to rise up.” Its enemies must be “annihilated in the past as well as the future.”\textsuperscript{110}

Oceania, then, is no utopia: its founding aims are not equality and freedom but permanent hierarchy and total domination; its core principle is not hedonism but sadism, “progress towards more pain.”\textsuperscript{111} All of this is made clear in O’Brien’s diabolic closing argument, which extols the “intoxication of power” as a self-sufficient end and the future as “a boot stamping on a human face – forever.” In the end, O’Brien argues that the Party recognizes no motive but power itself:

\textsuperscript{109} Orwell, 1984, p. 204.
\textsuperscript{110} Orwell, 1984, p. 254.
\textsuperscript{111} Orwell, 1984, p. 267.
The party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness; only power, pure power... We are different from all the oligarchies of the past in that we know what we are doing.... The German Nazis and the Russian Communists came very close to us in their methods, but they never had the courage to recognize their own motives. They pretended, perhaps they even believed, that they had seized power unwillingly and for a limited time, and that just around the corner there lay a paradise where human beings would be free and equal. We are not like that... Power is not a means; it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship.\(^{112}\)

But if Orwell were to agree with O’Brien’s explanation, that power is an end in itself, then it would seem he had given up on finding a truly satisfactory answer to the question he posed to Burnham: “Why does the lust for naked power become a major human motive exactly now, when the dominion of man over man is ceasing to be necessary?”\(^{113}\) I doubt whether *1984* is intended to confirm O’Brien’s view of history or human nature. O’Brien, the novel suggests in places, is not an accurate reflection of what humanity is, but, in keeping with the dystopian vision of the novel, a reflection of what humanity could become. He seems to be aware of this himself, as when he tells Winston, “If you are a man... you are the last man. Your kind is extinct; we are the inheritors.”\(^{114}\) O’Brien is not bound by human psychology as we know it because he has been produced by an inhuman world of cruelty and domination. He is a warning, not an explanation.

Even if Orwell does not provide an answer to his own philosophical regarding the nature or origins of the power drive, *1984* does provide one compelling scenario for how a system in which power comes to be worshipped as an absolute might emerge, and of the bulwarks that totalitarianism would have to overcome in order to triumph. It is precisely at the

\(^{112}\) Orwell, *1984*, p. 263.
\(^{113}\) Orwell, “James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution,” p. 178.
\(^{114}\) Orwell, *1984*, p. 270.
historical juncture where egalitarian ideals stand a chance of being realized that the powerful
will have the most incentive to route the proponents of a free and equal society. Should the
ruling classes avail themselves of the full range of technological and psychological controls, and
should they fail to face opposition from the middle strata of society – the managers, the
intellectuals – then it is possible they might succeed in permanently suppressing the
emancipatory ideals which have motivated generations of reformers and revolutionaries. It is
the poor and oppressed who would be the most immediate victims of such an outcome. But
then, Orwell warns, all will have to suffer in a world in which the moral and political ideals
which have served to constrain power in the past have been decisively defeated. It is this final
defeat of utopian strivings, more than the establishment of state surveillance or the
centralization of the economy, which brings the terrifying, post-totalitarian world of 1984 into
the range of human possibilities.

1984 is not a warning against the excess of the utopian imagination, but rather a
warning against its abdication. Orwell conceptualized his career as a writer as a struggle
“against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism,” and he feared those who, in the name of
realism or expediency, made apologies for inequality and injustice far more than he feared their
utopian opponents. Orwell’s vehement protests against the abuses of socialism, at those who,
in Spain, England, or the Soviet Union, corrupted the ideals of equality and social justice into
ideological pretexts for their own claims to power, made him a favored voice among Cold War
liberals opposed to utopianism in general and socialism in particular. But Orwell conducted

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these campaigns against socialism-in-practice precisely because he was determined to safeguard the egalitarian ideal against those who would corrupt it. As he had written in his *Homage to Catalonia*:

In every country in the world a huge tribe of party-hacks and sleek little professors are busy trying to ‘prove’ that socialism means no more than a planned state-capitalism with the grab-motive left intact. But fortunately there also exists a version of Socialism quite different from this. The thing that attracts ordinary men to socialism and makes them willing to risk their skins for it, the ‘mystique’ of Socialism, is the idea of equality; to the vast majority of people Socialism means a classless society, or it means nothing at all.\(^{116}\)

Orwell’s unwavering commitment to equality reflected his belief that in a society where the grossest forms of hierarchy, dependence, and poverty had been alleviated, something approaching genuine human decency might be able to animate human interaction on a large scale. As such, Orwell himself never renounced socialism, and never gave up on the compatibility between egalitarianism and individual liberty. Indeed he believed until the end that the creation of a society in which both principles were on secure footing was the only alternative to the great misery which both capitalism and collectivism had proven capable of generating.\(^{117}\) In the essay in which Orwell had first forecast the rise of the “super-states,” he concluded that a utopian alternative must be made viable if the future of abject domination was to be averted: “The only way of avoiding them that I can imagine is to present somewhere or other, on a large scale, the spectacle of a community where people are relatively free and happy and where the main motive in life is not the pursuit of money or power. In other words, democratic Socialism must be made to work throughout some large area.”\(^{118}\) Like Huxley,
Orwell came to see the choice between utopia and dystopia as something approaching a binary: to the extent that humanity failed to put its ideals into practice, their power as guiding forces and eventually even as minimal constraints would be eroded, leaving the future open for the worst abuses of power. We must strive for a world in which power is applied to the pursuit of freedom and equality, or else we incline closer to the world of Oceania, Big Brother, and O’Brien, in which all memory of human decency is lost to blind worship of power for its own sake. “The moral to be drawn from this dangerous nightmare situation is a simple one,” Orwell remarked in a final missive to his readers. “Don’t let it happen. It depends on you.”

119 Orwell, quoted in Hammond, George Orwell Companion.
3. Paradigms of Dystopian Thinking

Huxley’s and Orwell’s prophetic novels crystalized widespread anxieties about the direction of modern society and challenged their readers to consider how either future could be averted. *Brave New World* and *1984* have remained fixtures of public discourse wherever their respective themes are relevant, and together they have definitively established the conventions of the dystopian literary enterprise. Nearly every vision of a dread future written or filmed since has drawn on one or both, with *1984* representing the overt depredations of the totalitarian state and *Brave New World* the subtler degradations of the engineered society. However, the dystopian impulse is by no means confined to the field of speculative fiction. After the Second World War, European and American intellectuals working from a variety of disciplinary and ideological perspectives made their own dire predictions about the likely course of social evolution. For the intellectuals engaged in what I refer to as “dystopian thinking,” the prospect of a dehumanized existence subject to a tyrannical system of control was no mere fictional bogeyman, but instead a significant interdisciplinary hypothesis. Like the novels which are more familiarly described as a dystopian, their works depict future societies in which freedom has been eliminated and warn that the makings of such a world are already underway. Such an outcome, we are repeatedly warned, would not only be unfree but inhuman, as modern technical and organizational means allow for the characteristically human capacities for thought and action to be suppressed or eliminated to an unprecedented extent.
In this chapter, I consider how dystopian thinking illuminated the stakes of three of the twentieth century’s characteristic social and political problems. Each section identifies a context of concern where public discourse revolved around the *summum malum* of a closed future society in which individuality and democracy would be rendered meaningless. The first focal point for this discussion is the debate over *totalitarianism* which gripped European and American intellectuals in the lead-up to and aftermath of the Second World War. In trying to make sense of the massive state tyrannies whose power and violence threatened to liquidate not only the political freedoms of their subjects, but much of their moral and intellectual autonomy as well, writers such as Orwell, Arendt, and their contemporaries were forced to consider the future of Western civilization without reference to comforting narratives of progress. Even so, the experience of totalitarianism led to the projection of dystopias which were readily identifiable, if not preventable, at the institutional level – but might it be possible that equally dismal futures awaited even those modern societies whose institutions were formally liberal and democratic? In the debates over the nature of *mass society*, which has roots as far back as Tocqueville but was debated with new urgency during the 1950s, and the possibility of a fully *technocratic or technological society*, which became a major concern during the 1960s, dystopian thinkers confronted menaces that could in no way be diagnosed as regressions to premodern forms of tyranny or barbarism. The utopian potential of egalitarian democracy and technological progress, according to thinkers as varied as Riesman, Arendt, Ellul, Marcuse, and
others, may blind the citizens of capitalist democracies to the subtle and pervasive forms of
domination operative in their own societies.

The overall pattern of the *summum malum* described in the three sections is a totalizing
structure of social control which suppresses individual identity (by removing contexts for
meaningful differentiation) and collective agency (by dismantling institutions for effective
collective action). The result is that the future loses its potential as a site of dynamic
transformation, in short, loses its openness (because the potential for dynamism has been closed
off by feedback loops between closed institutions and conditioned individuals). We lose the
effective tools for the transformation of self and society and accept a passive, instrumental role
in the dystopian social order. All three dystopias are hypotheses about the form of the
emergent social order. The idea of totalitarianism is a response to this explosive and largely
unforeseen crisis of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, and all societies have to reckon with the possibilities of
totalitarian domination. Though it would be inaccurate to say this threat ever fully subsides, at
least not until the end of the Cold War, dystopian thinkers increasingly focus their critiques on
the possibilities of mass society and technocracy. As we will see more fully in the next chapter,
many of the most salient critiques of modernity are partially derived from the mass society and
technocracy theses. That is, they are less concerned about a total collapse of democratic
institutions and constitutional constraints on state power, as they are with the emergence of
subtler social and psychological powers which have a no less debilitating effect on our
possibilities for self-direction.
The goal of this chapter is by no means to present an exhaustive survey of this terrain, but rather to draw attention to the animating role of dystopian images, themes, and anxieties in each of these contexts. The panoply of intellectual figures engaged with herein makes the distillation of any singular moral or conclusion impossible, but I will nonetheless venture a few generalizations about the intellectual enterprise of dystopian thinking as it is manifested in these discussions. First, though each thinker included in this chapter speaks from a position of authority in his or her own discipline, the types of claims that dystopian thinking raises about the future prospects of society transcend the confines of specialization. The philosophers, social scientists, and public intellectuals who I engage with here believed that they could speak to issues of broad human significance, and indeed that they had a responsibility to do so. Second, though their ideological allegiances run the spectrum, dystopian thinking is necessarily a practice of social criticism, meant to illuminate pathological tendencies which operate in the present and to make the case for a change of course. Third, and perhaps most importantly given the colloquial understanding of dystopia, while many of the thinkers surveyed here are pessimistic about the future, few are true fatalists, and indeed, it would make little sense to issue a warning if one sincerely believed that the form of the future society was in no way up to us. Dystopian thinking is meant to alter the space of possibilities in which judgment and action unfold, to show us what we stand to lose and, though less directly, what we might still preserve or even gain if we resolve to do so.
In Leviathan’s Belly: The Trauma of the Total State

Threatening to transform the modern state into an instrument of unlimited physical and even mental coercion, totalitarianism, in Orwell’s enduring image, as well as in the formulations of the many intellectuals who shared his apprehensions, posed an unprecedented threat to human freedom in its relentless pursuit of total control. Though it is understandably difficult to find a commentator who is sanguine about this prospect, the dramatic, Orwellian rendering of totalitarianism has been challenged by skeptics since the outset, and deflated by subsequent empirical research. The generation of intellectuals whose works made it one of the central terms of political thought during the twentieth century have been accused of over-interpretation, while historians and political scientists have raised doubts about the extent to which either Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia actually resembled the totalitarian model furnished by post-war theorists (even moreso the claim that both nations converged upon a singular form of governance).¹ The failure of totalitarianism to describe the social and political realities of modern authoritarianism, no less than its ideological use and abuse during the Cold War, have led many scholars to conclude that the concept is best consigned to history.² Whether or not totalitarianism remains a fruitful concept for empirical research, it would be impossible

¹ See the essays collected in Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds, Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). The introductory essays provides a lucid critical account of the uses and abuses of the concept in studying the two regimes.
² The most influential attack on the concept is the one advanced by Herbert J. Spiro and Benjamin Barber in “Counter-Ideological Uses of Totalitarianism in the Cold War,” Politics and Society, 1 (1): 1970
to do justice to the political thinking of the post-war period without attending to it. Jeffery Isaac calls the idea of totalitarianism “the signal contribution of the twentieth century to political thought,” while Wilfred McClay describes it as “our era’s social and political *summum malum.*”\(^3\) That the concept of totalitarianism has proven flawed should not prevent us from appreciating it as an innovative, imaginative response to a period of historical trauma, an attempt to take the measure of a political world that seemed to have been irrevocably altered. The concept emerged during a time of intense crisis, and represents the attempt of the best minds of a generation, including many who witnessed the atrocities of Nazism and Stalinism firsthand, to make sense of a terrifying new reality and to re-evaluate the prospects for freedom in a world shattered by oppression and violence at a staggering scale.

To speak of totalitarianism as it occurs to the dystopian imagination is to emphasize the chilling new possibilities which it brings into the world: possibilities for the means by which power can be exercised and the ends to which it can be put. The discourse on totalitarianism is, with few exceptions, motivated by fear, and treating totalitarianism as a product of the dystopian imagination allows us to ask not what totalitarianism is or was, but what it represented to the intellectuals who confronted it, the novel danger which with it seemed to

threaten the modern world.\textsuperscript{4} When the American Academy of Arts and Sciences convened its conference on totalitarianism in 1953, George Kenan opened the proceedings by remarking on the phantasmal character of totalitarianism:

When I try to picture totalitarianism to myself as a general phenomenon, what comes into my mind more prominently is neither the Soviet picture nor the Nazi picture as I have known them in the flesh, but rather the fictional and symbolic images created by such people as Orwell or Kafka or Koestler or the early soviet satirists. The purest expression of the phenomenon, in other words, seems to me to have been rendered not in its physical reality but in its power as a dream or a nightmare. Not that it lacks the physical reality, or that this reality is lacking in power; but it is precisely in the way it appears to people, in the impact it has on the subconscious, in the state of mind that it creates in its victims, that totalitarianism reveals most deeply its meaning and its nature. Here, then, we seem to have a phenomenon of which it can be said that it is both a reality and a bad dream, but that its deepest reality lies strangely enough in its manifestation as a dream, and it is by this manifestation that it can best be known and judged and discussed.\textsuperscript{5}

Kenan’s remarks provide an eloquent exposition of what it means to consider totalitarianism as a product of the imagination, though from our vantage point it is perhaps easier to appreciate the continuity between the “fictional and symbolic images” which Kenan associates with literature and the broader inquiries of Kenan and his contemporaries. After all, their efforts were in large part motivated by a desire to understand the totalitarian “state of mind,” both of its perpetrators and its victims. Presenters at this conference expressed as much interest in the ideological, psychological, and intellectual dimensions of totalitarianism as they

\textsuperscript{4} See the discussion in Simon Tormey, \textit{Making Sense of Tyranny: Interpretations of Totalitarianism} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995). Tormey raises the idea that totalitarianism is a “dystopia” that cannot really exist when discussing criticisms of the concept as well as in his discussion of Arendt’s concept of total domination.

did its political and economic institutions. Among those who convened to discuss what they saw as “the central problem of our time” were Carl Friedrich, who remarked that “totalitarianism is not only, nor even primarily a form of government... it engulfs the whole man who participates in it, and hence has its economic, sociological, and other aspects beyond the political and governmental,” and Hannah Arendt, whose massively influential work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, set out to distill the “basic experience that finds political expression in totalitarian domination,” and thereby to grasp its nature and historical significance.\(^6\) The central political institution of totalitarianism, the total state, might be its most conspicuous feature, but for Friedrich its function had to be understood in relation to an absolutist philosophy which he referred to as *totalism*, as for Arendt the state itself was secondary to the aspirations it expressed: a form of rule in which *total terror* is the means and *total domination* the end.

Dystopian visions of life under totalitarian rule explore the extent to which such total control is possible. At what point does control actually become total, and under what conditions might this possibility be realized? In general, we might characterize the dystopian hypothesis regarding totalitarian rule as follows: The ambition of the totalitarian state to achieve total control, to thoroughly regiment both the behavior and thought of its subjects, raises the possibility of a complete transformation of the human being and the emergence of a new human type. The possibility of cultivating a personality and of acting spontaneously depend on

social conditions which the totalitarian experience proves to be fragile. And since there is no underlying substrate of human nature which can act as a limit on the propensity to control, we find ourselves vulnerable to an existence in which we are totally conditioned for obedience. The totalitarian state rejects and constitutional constraints on its powers, permits no opposition either in the formal offices of government or in civil society. It takes as its goal the absorption of every sphere of social life, and sets out to co-opt or destroy every competing social institution.

Indeed, the conceptual history of totalitarianism begins with the recoiling of the liberal imagination from the outsized ambitions of twentieth century authoritarianism, specifically Italian Fascism. Critics of fascism such as the Giovanni Amendola described it, in a limited and somewhat technical sense, as a “sistema totalitaro” before cognates emphasizing the role of the state such as “lo stato totalitario” and “der totale Staat” became leitmotifs of Fascist and Nazi rhetoric, respectively. What Amendola and his liberal compatriots intended to highlight were the monopolistic political aims of Mussolini’s Fascist movement and the unscrupulous electoral practices – blackmail, intimidation, violence – which allowed them to consolidate their power and claim the state as an instrument of the Fascist party. As the power of the Fascist movement intensified, so did the polemical weight of the totalitarian idea. Amendola would soon write of a totalitarian “spirt” animating the Fascist movement “which will not allow any new day to dawn that has not rendered the Fascist salute, just as it does not allow the present era to know a

conscience which has not bowed the knee and confessed ‘I believe.’” 8 Thus, as early as 1923, Amendola had touched upon the theme of total control that would vex later analysts and define totalitarianism as a dystopia. Fascism, he argued, “denies you the right to possess a conscience – of your own, not one imposed by others – and burdens the future with a mortgage heavy as lead.” As totalitarian movements gained ground during the 1920s and 1930s, they confronted the question of how to realize their ambitions, at which point totalitarianism emerges as an aspirational language of holistic, transformative rule, and the state as its principle instrument. Political philosophers such as Giovanni Gentile and Carl Schmitt took up the task of explicating and justifying in theory what Mussolini and Hitler would attempt in practice: the construction of an all-powerful state which would control every sphere of social life, from industrial production to education, from the material conditions of life to the animating values of the nation. Looking out upon a Europe devastated by war and economic depression, Gentile and Schmitt concluded that the philosophy of limited government, with its liberal constitutions, parliamentary democracies, and bourgeois social norms, had failed to unify the people and realize their will in action. The new form of political association they envisioned would equip strong leaders to resolve the European crisis by sweeping away the decaying institutions of the liberal state and transforming their societies into politically and spiritually unified totalities. That no regime approximated, let alone achieved, this ambition to absorb the whole of society (least of all

Fascist Italy, where the technical and organizational means lagged far behind the flamboyant theorization of the total state) should not prevent us from appreciating how important was the aspiration to total control, both for the totalitarians themselves as well as for their critics.

During World War II, the concept of totalitarianism attained new currency among European and American intellectuals as a formal antithesis to liberal democracy. For many observers, the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 was the final piece of evidence that a single “totalitarian idea” had taken control of not only France and Germany, where the theory of totalitarianism had incubated, but of the Soviet Union, Japan, China, and Spain as well. The totalitarian regimes were at this time characterized by the rule of a single party, the centralization of political and economic authority under the national state, the suppression of intermediary associations, and the use of terror and indoctrination to ensure the compliance of the citizenry. Commentators believed they were witnessing the emergence of a new type of state, a form of domination more pervasive and less vulnerable to resistance than any previous form of autocracy or despotism. Perhaps even more disturbing than the totalitarian state itself was the “New Man” it set out to engineer. The literature of the period evinces a grim fascination not only with the iron-clad mechanisms of social control, but the possibility of “a new human type, totalitarian man” who accepts unquestioningly the dogma of the ruling Party and becomes a

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willing executor of its ambitions.\textsuperscript{10} The totalitarian repudiation of limited government is but a prelude to its true ambition, which is the destruction of individuality as it has been known to Western culture and the construction of a synthetic collectivity whose thoughts and attitudes, no less than its behavior, are shaped in accord with the totalitarian ideology. The controversy over the extent to which such total control was possible, and if so, by which means it might be achieved, animated much of the post-war discourse on totalitarianism. While some followed Orwell in emphasizing the subtle and insidious mechanisms of psychological control – ideology, propaganda, and indoctrination – others, particularly Arendt, saw the true nature of totalitarianism revealed in its overt and gratuitous use of terror. Both camps could be challenged by skeptics who doubted both the practical possibility of total control and its sufficiency in accounting for the historical distinctiveness of the totalitarian regimes. Friedrich and Brzezinski argued in their seminal study \textit{Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy} that “while it may be the intent of the totalitarians to obtain total control, it is certainly doomed to disappointment: no such goal is actually achieved, even within the ranks of their party membership or cadres, let alone over the population at large.”\textsuperscript{11} In addition, they maintained that the “ideologically motivated concern for the whole man” was not unique to totalitarianism

\textsuperscript{10} See Gleason, \textit{Totalitarianism}, 51. Schlessinger’s \textit{Vital Center} describes the totalitarian man as “tight-lipped, cold-eyed, unfeeling, uncommunicative men, as if badly carved from wood, without humor, without tenderness, without spontaneity, without nerves,” p. 57. Orwell’s O’Brien would be the most infamous fictional example. For an interesting discussion of this trend in the context of what Mark Grief calls “crisis of man talk,” see his \textit{The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973} (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015).

or even to modernity, as numerous regimes throughout history had sought to comprehensively shape the character of their citizens.

But those who took the dystopian possibilities of totalitarian rule seriously were not comforted by the seeming futility of attempts at total control. Many observers feared that the technical and organizational means available in modernity would be the decisive factor, equipping totalitarian regimes to succeed where previous regimes had failed. Orwell, as we saw in the previous chapter, feared that totalitarian regimes would go well beyond the suppression of dissent to actively mold the emotional and intellectual lives of their subjects. In 1984, he imagined life inside the “artificial universe” of totalitarian ideology, wherein the Party can completely mediate their subjects’ access to reality through the manipulation of media and the fabrication of language and history. The capacities of the modern state, and of modern technology, make the totalitarian regimes a historically unprecedented danger, even if the goal of total control is not unique to modernity. Orwell notes, for example, that the Spanish Inquisition failed in this respect, “but then the Inquisition had not the resources of the modern state. The radio, press censorship, standardized education, and the secret police have changed everything. Mass suggestion is a science of the last twenty-years, and we do not know how successful it will be.”

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For commentators like Erich Fromm and Erik Erikson, the key to total control lay not in the technical and organizational specifications of the regime, but rather in the psychological appeal of the totalitarian movement. Totalitarian regimes could so thoroughly overcome the independent thought and judgment of their subjects because they exploited the psychological vulnerabilities endemic to modern mass societies (a concept which, as we will see shortly, constituted an important symbol in the dystopian imagination in its own right). Participation in the party and in auxiliary institutions offered atomized individuals a powerful new sense of identity, one which promised membership in a unified national community and the pursuit of a world-historical mission. The comprehensiveness and dogmatism of the totalitarian ideologies, precisely the same qualities which made them so disagreeable to liberal intellectuals like Orwell, contributed to their appeal for those who sought reassurance regarding from insecurities of social status and material well-being. As Fromm explained, “the psychological significance of Fascism” was how readily it exploited the “unconscious forces” of its subjects in order to secure their unquestioning obedience, particularly the “insecurity of the isolated individual” who feels cut off from the world and therefore exists in an “unbearable state of powerlessness and aloneness.” Paradoxically, Fromm saw this precarious condition as an outgrowth of precisely the individualistic cultural currents which totalitarianism set out to undermine. Fromm believed that the ideals of freedom and individuality which had been

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incubating in Western society and culture since the Renaissance were both a blessing and a burden. He feared that many would just as soon surrender their sense of self to an overarching collectivity such as the nation or state in order to rid themselves of the anxieties and responsibilities that accompanied the increase in autonomy. Whereas Orwell feared that the totalitarian state would impose its regimen of mental discipline through a combination of overt and covert force, Fromm perceived a greater danger in the willingness with which so many submitted themselves to the ideological dictates of totalitarian movements. Concurring in this regard was Erikson, who described commitment to the totalitarian state as a kind of psychological realignment which compensated for the loss of “wholeness” through “totalism.”

For Erikson, totalism signified the construction of the identity in absolute terms, both positive, in terms of the individual’s sense of immersion in the totalitarian movement, and negative, in terms of the individual’s sense of distinction from the stereotypically constructed enemies of the movement. Like Fromm, Erikson maintained that this mode of identity construction was most appealing to individuals who lacked a sense of stable identity, and most especially for the younger generations of Europeans who had never known the stability of a pre-industrial world: “Where historical and technological developments severely encroach upon deeply rooted or strongly emerging identities (i.e., agrarian, feudal, patrician) on a large scale, youth feels endangered, individually and collectively whereupon it becomes ready to support doctrines

14 Erik Erikson, ”Wholeness and Totality,” in Totalitarianism, p. 162.
offering a total immersion in a synthetic identity (extreme nationalism, racism, or class consciousness) and a collective condemnation of a totally stereotyped enemy of the new identity.\textsuperscript{15} These and other contemporaneous accounts of totalitarianism as a psychological phenomenon indicate that total control can be achieved insofar as individuals subordinate their sense of selfhood and adopt a new identity defined by absolute obedience.\textsuperscript{16}

But it was those individuals who resisted these psychological appeals who experienced totalitarianism as its worst. Like Winston in 1984, whose refusal to conform to the dictates of the Party elicited the full extent of O’Brien’s sadistic violence, those resisted or dissented against the onset of totalitarian rule were met with terror. For thinkers like Arendt, who described terror as the basic experience at the heart of totalitarian rule, “the essence of totalitarian domination,” the totalitarian world was principally defined by its mechanisms of violence: the secret police and the extermination camp.\textsuperscript{17} Where the psychological interpretation of totalitarianism emphasized the regime’s ability to confer a sense of identity, the terror signified the negative pole, the ability to unmake the self through violence. This concern for the dehumanizing consequences of violence are exemplified in Leo Lowenthal’s analysis of terror’s “atomization of the individual” and in Hannah Arendt’s discussion of “total domination.”\textsuperscript{18} Both writers focused their attention

\begin{enumerate}
\item[] \textsuperscript{15} Erikson, “Wholeness and Totality,” p. 170.
\item[] \textsuperscript{16} Also foundational in this respect is Adorno’s widely discussed work, The, Authoritarian Personality.
\item[] \textsuperscript{17} Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, 464.
\item[] \textsuperscript{18} Leo Lowenthal, “Terror’s Atomization of Man,” Commentary (1946), p. 6; Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, 437. A common influence on these two discussions is Bruno Bettelheim’s study on the concentration camps, which was rooted in his firsthand experience as a survivor of Dachau and Buchenwald. See his “Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations,” in Surviving and Other Essays (New York: Knopf, 1979).  
\end{enumerate}
on the Nazi concentration camps, arguing that it was in these contexts of absolute terror and
dehumanization that the totalitarian aspiration to total control was most directly realized. In
that sense, they considered the camps to express the secret blueprint for totalitarian rule, a
political ideal of absolute power more perverse than even Orwell had imagined. Thus
Lowenthal observed that “the difference between the effect of terror upon by the population
within and without the concentration camp is one of degree rather than the kind,” while Arendt
maintained that the concentration camps were the “true central institution of totalitarian
organizational power.”19 Thus Arendt suggested that in order to understand the true nature of
totalitarianism, it would be necessary to confront the nightmarish world of the concentration
camps and by doing so "to assess the possibilities of total domination, to catch a glimpse of the
abyss of the 'possible.'”20

Lowenthal’s concept of “atomization” was meant to convey the psychological
transformation undergone by the victims of terror, connoting the internalization of a sense of
helplessness and the subsequent breakdown of the personality. In one sense, such atomization
was a general condition of life under totalitarian rule. Whereas Fromm and Erikson emphasized
the sense of identity, stable if artificial, offered by totalitarian movements, Lowenthal argued
that the subordination of the self to the collective would only deepen the individual’s sense of
anxiety and loneliness. This is because the individual’s membership in the collectivity is

19 Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 438.
20 Arendt Origins of Totalitarianism , p. 437.
conditional on their obedience to a set of rules that is both rigid and arbitrary, and so he or she relates to others only through a highly circumscribed set of social channels which make no allowance for sincere communication. The terror that is visited upon the population at large by the secret police reinforces the sense of continual surveillance, adducing the individual into a routine of thoughtless acquiescence. As Lowenthal explains:

Terror accomplishes its work of dehumanization through the total integration of the population into collectivities, then depriving them of the psychological means of direct communication... The individual under terrorist conditions is never alone and always alone. He becomes numb and rigid not only in relation to his neighbor but also in relation to himself; fear robs him of the power of spontaneous emotional or mental reaction. Thinking becomes a stupid crime; it endangers his life. The inevitable consequence is that stupidity spreads as a contagious disease among the terrorized population. Human beings live in a state of stupor – in a moral coma.21

Police violence and surveillance, mass arrests, and, at the most extreme end of the spectrum, imprisonment in the camps, all conduce to a psychological atmosphere in which the individual’s plans and expectations, that is, their ability to meaningfully direct their own life, are rendered insignificant. Lowenthal believed that this form of control, where physical violence and constraint conduce to “psychological repression,” was most advanced in the concentration camps, where the individuals environment and interactions could be so rigidly controlled as to produce a total “breakdown of the personality.”22 What prisoners’ accounts of life in the camps proved, according to Lowenthal, was that the “creative faculties of fantasy imagination, memory, become meaningless and tend to atrophy where they can no longer bring

about any desired change in the individual’s fate.”

The conditions of life in the concentration camps reduced prisoners to shells of their former selves, passive and dissociated; they succeeded at making control total from the moment that their prisoners “lose the power to envision a different order of life.” Total control could be established only on this condition of utter hopelessness and passivity, insofar as the camps had enabled the “transformation of the individual, whose essence is continuity of experience and memory, into a unit of atomized reactions.”

Arendt’s analysis of the camps noted a similarly radical dehumanization of the prisoners, a paradoxical outcome of the grand metaphysical ambition which she imputed to totalitarianism, which set out to create humanity anew but succeeded only in consigning its subjects to a subhuman condition of domination. Like those analysts of totalitarianism who emphasized its ambition to produce a “new man,” Arendt claimed that the totalitarian regimes ultimately set out to “transform the human species.” She took this ambition to be revealed in the deterministic visions of history on which the totalitarian regimes had converged: in Soviet Russia, a historical materialism which culminated in the emergence of a classless society, in Nazi Germany, a pseudo-naturalistic evolutionary process which would give rise to a master race. The totalitarian movement thus imagines itself as the executor of historical law which will

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23 Lowenthal, “Terror’s Atomization of Man,” p. 3.
25 Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 462
“produce mankind as its end product.” Terror and domination are the means by which this grandiose project can be brought to fruition, as each plays apart in reducing free human beings to the passive subjects of the totalitarian experiment. Terror on its own would not be enough to accomplish this aim, but it sets the stage for more thorough forms of domination by creating a social condition devoid of possibilities for free movement, association, or communication, and thus eliminates the pre-conditions for resistance which thwart ordinary tyrants:

> By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them; compared to the condition within its iron band, even the desert of tyranny, insofar as it is still some kind of space, appears like a guarantee of freedom. Totalitarian government does not just curtail liberties or abolish essential freedoms; nor does it, at least to our limited knowledge, succeed in eradicating the love for freedom from the hearts of man. It destroys the one essential prerequisite of all freedom which is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space.

Though it might succeed in eliminating the political space for freedom, Arendt did not think terror was adequate to fulfilling the true metaphysical ambitions of totalitarian rule. Even so, she did not conclude that the aim of total control was an impossibility. However much this vision of a humanity totally deprived of individuality and spontaneity ran contrary to the historical record, Arendt nonetheless maintained that the possibility of such an existence, a degree of objectification and control hitherto unthinkable, nonetheless lay at the heart of the totalitarian project, and was a danger that could not be dismissed on the grounds that it had no precedent.

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26 Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 462
The concentration camps therefore came to occupy such an important position in Arendt’s theoretical account of totalitarianism because they fully realize the possibility of total domination which the regime can only approximate in wider society, but which is central to its ideological mission. Since total control, that prodigious ambition of the totalitarian regime, could not be accomplished so long as subjects maintained their capacities for autonomy and spontaneity – that is, any semblance of their freedom – it would be necessary to carry out a fundamental reshaping of the human being. If the hypothesis that such an outcome was possible given the right conditions stood at the center of the totalitarian experiment, then the concentration camps were intended to create the conditions under which this ambition could be fulfilled. “The concertation and extermination camps of totalitarian regimes serve as the laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified,” Arendt argued.28

Total domination, which strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual, is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never changing identity of reactions, so that each of those bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other. The problem is to fabricate something that does not exist, namely, a kind of human species whose only ‘freedom’ would consist in ‘preserving the species.’ … The camps are meant not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something that even animals are not.29

28 Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 437.
29 Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 438.
Sealed off from even the reign of terror, where freedom was diminished but not entirely eliminated, those held captives in the camps could be separated from everything that gave them personality or character, from every context in which their free will could manifest itself in spontaneous action. Though Arendt did not believe that this could be accomplished anywhere accept the concentration camps, she nonetheless believed that these experiments in dehumanization provided “the guiding social ideal of total domination in general.” And while she would go on to argue that much in the human condition as we have known it militated against this grotesque ambition, she rejected the argument that anything in humanity’s nature could act as a safeguard against the possibility of total domination.

As we saw in the preceding chapter, Orwell had been concerned with this very question, highlighting the distinctive technological capacities which might enable totalitarian regimes to rewrite human nature. Arendt’s own observations on totalitarianism arrived at a similarly disquieting conclusion. “The success of totalitarianism,” she wrote, would mean “the radical liquidation of freedom as a political and human reality.” If this dystopian outcome were to be realized, Arendt warned, “it will hardly be consoling to cling to an unchangeable nature of man and conclude that either man himself is being destroyed or that freedom does not belong to man’s essential capabilities. Historically we know of man’s nature only insofar as it has

30 Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 438.
existence, and no realm of eternal essences will ever console us if man loses his essential capabilities.”32

Of course, not all observers of totalitarianism accepted the dystopian hypothesis that humanity was susceptible to such fundamental changes in its constitution. The philosopher Eric Voegelin, whose rebuke to Arendt elicited the response just quoted, argued that, philosophical difficulties notwithstanding, an account of totalitarianism which took seriously the possibility of “changing human nature” failed to engage critically with the most dangerous aspect of the totalitarian ideology.33 More apt, Voegelin argued, was to characterize the totalitarian project as one of destroying human nature. One could argue that this is exactly where Arendt’s account concluded, but Voegelin thought the difference between changing and destroying human nature was far more than a semantic quibble – to concede that humanity is as malleable as the totalitarians believe, he feared, was “politically dangerous” and even tantamount to “complicity in murder.” From his vantage point, Arendt’s account of the fabrication of humanity in the concentration camps had ceded to “a metaphysics of the creation of humans by humans,” precisely the article of the self-aggrandizing totalitarian faith which intellectuals ought to challenge.34 Likewise, the sociologist David Riesman objected to the dystopian vision of totalitarianism found in Orwell and Arendt insofar as it overestimates the capacity of totalitarianism to restructure the human personality and to destroy all bonds of organization.

34 Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 375.
among its victims. These intellectuals, he alleged, were guilty of over-interpreting the totalitarian phenomenon, and perhaps of being seduced by its nightmarish spectacle to the point where they had failed to consider its real limitations. Striking a note of caution which could apply to much dystopian thinking, Riesman warned that “we may subtly succumb to the appeal of an evil mystery; there is a long tradition of making Satan attractive in spite of ourselves.” However successful totalitarian regimes might be in destroying their organized political resistance, they could not stop individuals from disobeying their laws strategically – and here Riesman had in mind not only the heights of altruism exhibited by those who sheltered the persecuted or helped them to flee the country, but even those who engaged in bribe-taking or organized black markets. Such acts of rebellion demonstrated how radically the systems of indoctrination and repression had fallen short of their goal of restructuring the personalities of their subject populations, and, in Riesman’s optimistic account, how short they would inevitably fall. The error in the dystopian rendering of totalitarianism was that it underestimated the mental adaptability and resourcefulness of human beings:

It assumes that men can be readily manipulated and controlled, either as the earlier utopians thought in pursuit of some greatly uplifted state, or as the more recent anti-utopians such as Huxley and Orwell have thought, in pursuit of vulgarity and beastliness... Thus we run into a paradox. On the one hand, we think men can be adjusted into some Brave New World because of fundamental human plasticity and flexibility, while on the other hand we do not see that men’s ability precisely to fit, part-time, into such a world is what saves them from having to fit into it as total personality...

35 The debate is covered in great detail by Peter Baehr in Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Social Sciences (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010). The second chapter is debated to Arendt’s exchange with Riesman regarding totalitarianism and the extent to which it could fulfil the ambition of total domination.
their view of men as plastic allows them to suppose that the totalitarians will change all
that and transform men into automatically socialized creatures like the ants.\footnote{Riesman, “Limits of Totalitarian Power,” p. 165-166.}

Riesman’s competing analysis of totalitarianism highlighted the shortcomings of its
system of domination, attending in particular to the myriad ways in which the totalitarian
regimes were resisted and sabotaged by non-compliant subjects. He warned that the power of
dystopian accounts of totalitarianism should not lead us prematurely “to assume that
totalitarianism possesses the kind of psychological pressure system pictured by Orwell in the
sadistic but symptomatic book, \textit{1984},” calling the novel “a fantasy of omnipotent totalitarian
impressiveness” which recoiled in horror from totalitarianism even as it advanced a vision of
the totalitarian future apiece with the totalitarian apologists “who admire efficiency and have
little faith in man.”\footnote{Riesman, “Limits of Totalitarian Power,” p. 158. Of Orwell, Riesman remarks, “When we put matter this way, we
can see that there may be grandiose fantasies at the bottom of some of the fears of people like Orwell, deeply
repressed fantasies of human omnipotence such as Hannah Arendt has traced in the totalitarians themselves.”
Seemingly he does not think the same should be said of Arendt herself, though her account of total domination is
nearly as dystopian.} In reality, Riesman argued, the peoples held captive by the terror
continued to circumvent the authority of their oppressors, in ways that showed they could not
be forced to completely accept the new social order, “not so much in practical life as in mental
obeisance, in refusal to internalize the system’s ethical norms.”\footnote{Riesman, “Limits of Totalitarian Power,” p. 161.} Thus the experience of
everyday life under totalitarian rule not only failed to support the dystopian hypothesis, but
spoke to a deep strain of psychological resilience, rooted less in the potential for heroic revolt as
in “sheer unheroic cussed resistance to totalitarian efforts to make a new man.” Deflationary accounts like Voegelin’s and Riesman’s provide a necessary corrective to the excesses of the dystopian imagination. The strength of dystopian thinking, both in general and with respect to totalitarianism, is its capacious presentation of the space of possibilities: dystopian thinking provides a powerful tool for avoiding complacency, a severe failure of imagination which may lead to yet more severe failures of judgment when grave threats are underestimated. And yet, by admitting certain outcomes to the range of possibility which are nevertheless unlikely, the dystopian thinker risks undercutting the very forces which will need to be arrayed against the emergent system of domination if the dystopian outcome is to be avoided.

Even if the dystopian rendering of the totalitarian state and its capacity for total control seems to have lost its power in the course of the Cold War and particularly after – a historical period in which the susceptibility of totalitarian regimes to both internal resistance and external cultural dilution has been amply illustrated – totalitarianism has remained an important lens for thinking about the prospects of modern society. In this respect, we might say that it remains a significant dystopia: one way of envisioning the end-point of certain tendencies in modern society, particularly those which free societies will need to avoid. In the decades following the end of the Second World War, intellectuals and social critics in America and Western Europe gradually shifted their attention from the threat of totalitarianism to the

underlying structural conditions which their large-scale industrial societies shared with the totalitarian regimes against which their liberal, democratic systems were increasingly defined. Whereas the totalitarian regimes demonstrated one cataclysmic manner in which the social, psychological, and organizational tendencies of modern societies could undermine the conditions of human freedom, it also prompted social thinkers to attend more carefully to the ways in which the same tendencies worked, subtly and pervasively, against individuality and democracy in the ostensibly free world. The next two sections of this chapter explore further the idea that modern societies were in the midst of a transformation into “mass” or “technological” societies – each a one of these concepts signifying a significant dystopian outcome to be confronted by social and political thought. During the 1950s and 1960s, both the mass and technological aspects of modern society were problematized in ways that highlighted the continuity between totalitarianism and modern society at large. The danger now at hand was not total domination, but “total identification” or “total integration,” patterns of social interaction deeply entrenched in modern society which were, formally speaking, compatible with liberty and democracy, but according to their critics, hardly less totalizing in their imposition of a predetermined form of life. The lonely and alienated individual striving for identity, the suffusion of mass media with its potential for manipulation and control, the centralized structures of bureaucratic domination, the increasingly sophisticated technologies of surveillance and social control – were these not features of all advanced industrial societies, and did they not pose their own dangers to individual autonomy and collective self-determination
independent of the possibility that they might be co-opted by one totalitarian movement or another? Totalitarianism therefore came to be seen by many critics as an exaggerated form of modern society’s own latent social pathologies, a black mirror which reflected harshly on societies which, having avoided the most overt forms of domination, might yet fall victim to their own complacency. Arendt concluded her assessment of totalitarian rule with just such a suggestion:

If it is true that the elements of totalitarianism can be found by retracing the history and analyzing the political implications of what we usually call the crisis of our century, then the conclusion is unavoidable that this crisis no mere threat from the outside, no mere result of some aggressive foreign policy of either Germany or Russia, and that it will no more disappear with the death of Stalin than it disappeared with the fall of Nazi Germany. It may even be that the true predicaments of our time will assume their authentic form – though not necessarily the cruelest – only when totalitarianism has become a thing of the past.⁴¹

Fear of the Masses: Autonomy in the Era of Crowds

If the discourse on totalitarianism drew on the Orwellian stream of the dystopian imagination, then the fear of an emergent mass society reflected Huxleyan concerns. When Huxley himself revisited his dystopian classic in 1958, he was struck by how quickly the ostensibly free societies of America and Europe had come to resemble his *Brave New World*, warning that “even in the those countries that have a tradition of democratic government, this

freedom and even the desire for this freedom seem to be on the wane.” He feared that, just as in it his novel, the greatest dangers to individuality and democracy were not overt forms of coercion and repression, but instead the subtle and insidious techniques of non-violent manipulation which would subtly undermine the autonomy of the individual even as they preserved an illusion of free choice. “It is perfectly possible for a man to be out of prison, and yet not free,” Huxley cautioned,” to be under no physical constraint and yet to be a psychological captive, compelled to think, feel and act as the representatives of the national State, or of some private interest within the nation, want him to think, feel and act.” Huxley was far from being alone in this conclusion, as his Brave New World Revisited appeared at the end of a decade in which social scientists had been preoccupied with the decline of autonomy under the conditions of what was typically referred to as mass society.

Critics of mass society argued that the freedoms and liberties afforded to the individual belied conditions deeply at odds with the free and full development of an autonomous personality, leaving individuals to express instead a “pseudoindividuality” which is in fact meticulously scripted, or to vacillate between “anomie” and “wan conformity.” In still other formulations, the individual is supplanted by the “mass man,” a “degraded state of the human” which more closely resembles an “automaton” or a “cheerful robot” than an autonomous

42 Huxley, Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited, p. 238.
43 Huxley, Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited, p 333.
person. By the end of the decade, the concept of mass society had become such a dominant motif of social thought that, in 1960, Edward Shils would characterize it as “a specter… haunting sociologists” and Daniel Bell could describe it as “probably the most influential theory in the Western world, Marxism notwithstanding.” Each of these scholars registered their skepticism about a concept which often seemed to express an inchoate dread about the conditions of modern society – what Bell called an “ideology of romantic protest” motivated by a “sense of the radical dehumanization of life” – rather than any specific program of critique or reform, and yet these analytical deficiencies should not prevent us from acknowledging that mass society was, for at least a short period of time, one of the most significant dystopias of twentieth century social thought. Like the concept of totalitarianism, which described its subject in terms of a conceptual limit rather than an empirical manifestation, mass society functions in social thinking as an ideal type, one in which descriptive, predictive, and normative elements intermix with varying degrees of precision. Further, as William Kornhauser argued in the same year that Bell and Shils issued their critiques of the concept, “the idea of mass society has a very rich history as a conception of the specific tendencies which undermine freedom in the modern world,” such that, wielded precisely, it could serve as a diagnosis for pathological

tendencies in modern society and even illuminate those counter-tendencies which would need to be set against them.\textsuperscript{47}

Dystopian thinking about totalitarianism raised the question of whether "total control" was a real political possibility. Those who feared that it was - among them, Orwell, Fromm, and Arendt - did so for two interrelated reasons. First, they subscribed to a philosophical anthropology which emphasized the mutability of human characteristics and therefore led them to reject the reassuring notion that human nature imposed a strict limit on the direction or extent that humanity could be conditioned. Second, they feared that the technological and organizational means available in modern societies equipped totalitarian regimes with the techniques they would need to exploit this vulnerability. The dystopian critics of mass society suggested that the pressures of modern society might work more gradually but no less effectively to these ends, deteriorating the autonomy of the individual and with it his or her personal identity. There is some truth, then, to Bell’s generalization that the critics of mass society were concerned "less with the general conditions of freedom in society than with the freedom of the person and with the possibility, for some few persons, of achieving a sense of individual self in our mechanized society."\textsuperscript{48} And yet the most perceptive critics of mass society would reject the idea that their concern was only with subjective experience and not the structural aspects of modern society which give rise to pathologies such as alienation and

\textsuperscript{48} Bell, \textit{End of Ideology}, p. 21.
conformity. It is the conviction that the individual’s struggle to actualize his or her freedom is
connected to larger social problems that necessitates an analysis of mass society and its
distinctive patterns of interaction and organization, rather than a therapeutic approach to those
individuals who fail to adjust themselves to it. No critic better encapsulates this standpoint than
C. Wright Mills, who argued that mass society would gradually transform the individual into a
“cheerful robot,” a passive and compliant personality who appears to do just as he or she
pleases but is deprived of meaningful opportunities to deliberate and choose.\(^49\) Mills invoked
this possibility in a way that made the parallels to the totalitarian experiment in total control
explicit:

We know of course that man can be turned into a robot, by chemical and psychiatric
means, by steady coercion and by controlled environment; but also by random pressures
and unplanned sequences of circumstances. But can he be made to want to become a
cheerful and willing robot? Can he be happy in this condition, and what are the qualities
and the meanings of such happiness? It will no longer do merely to assume, as a
metaphysics of human nature, that down deep in man-as-man there is an urge for
freedom and a will to reason. Now we must ask: What in man’s nature, what in the
human condition today, what in each of the varieties of social structure make for the
ascendancy of the cheerful robot? And what stands against it?\(^50\)

Not only does Mills’ line of questioning convey the stakes of a dystopian mass society,
his comments on how the “sociological imagination” might be deployed to address this
problem present an instructive case for the utility of dystopian thinking. “To formulate any
problem requires that we state the values involved and the threat to those values,” he

\(^{50}\) Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, p. 189.
explained, and as a social critic he labored to convey “that felt threat to social values – such as those of freedom and reason – that is the necessary moral substance of all significant problems of social inquiry.” Absent such a perspective, Mills feared that the psychological experience of mass society would vacillate between apathy and anxiety, the former a product of complacency about the status of social values, the latter an “unspecified malaise” which takes such values to be threatened but without any comprehension as to how or why. In this context, dystopian thinking provides an important mechanism for social thought, insofar as it enables reflexive thinking about values like freedom and the social tendencies which threaten them. At its best, dystopian thinking leads not to anxiety or panic, but instead to a critical awareness of future possibilities for freedom and domination. The purpose of dystopian thinking could therefore be described just as Mills’ described his own conception of sociological imagination, that is, as an intellectual orientation which will help the citizens of mass societies “to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on the world and of what may be happening within themselves.” Mill, like many of his contemporaries, formulated the idea of mass society not as a neutral explanatory tool, but as a way of envisioning the dangers to freedom in modern society.

Though the conception of freedom animating such criticisms would be transformed considerably, the idea that mass society is antithetical to freedom descends from a deeply elitist

strain of thinking about modern society and its prospects.\textsuperscript{54} As with the anti-utopian outlook considered in the preceding chapter, the particular diagnosis of modern society in terms of the "masses" or "mass society" can be traced back to the conservative intellectual response to the French Revolution, that most dramatic confrontation between the institutions and values of the aristocratic social order and the great majority of the population whom they oppressed or excluded.\textsuperscript{55} More broadly, the aristocratic critics of mass society reacted to the gradual universalization of education and the franchise, which enabled mass participation in political and cultural life while eroding the privileged position of traditional elites.\textsuperscript{56} From the elite point of view, the movement towards democratic equality appeared as a leveling of significant social distinctions, one which provokes a crisis of authority and raises new possibilities for political despotism and cultural decline. These arguments can be found in the writings of purely reactionary thinkers like Burckhardt, who protested that "so long as the masses can bring pressure on their leaders, one value after another must be sacrificed: position, property, religion, distinguished tradition, higher learning."\textsuperscript{57} In Tocqueville's more balanced appraisal, the movement toward equality of conditions introduces new opportunities as well as new

\textsuperscript{54} For some, like Raymond Williams, this elitist strain of contempt for the masses, makes the idea of mass society – and even the dystopian imagination as a whole – unpalatable. Williams holds that "there are in fact no masses, there are only ways of seeing people as masses." He is repulsed, by example, by what he takes to be Orwell's disdain for the proles in 1984. See Raymond Williams, "Culture Is Ordinary," in Resources of Hope: Culture Democracy, Socialism (London: Verso, 1989), p. 3-14.


\textsuperscript{56} Kornhauser, Politics of Mass Society, p. 19.

\textsuperscript{57} Burckhardt, quoted in Kornhauser, Politics of Mass Society.
dangers. And yet Tocqueville still feared that the ideals of liberty and excellence which had flourished in the age of aristocracy would be casualties of the movement toward equality. These aristocratic intellectuals, and those who carried their skepticism toward mass society into the twentieth century, ultimately feared that the general population would prove incapable of effective self-rule, and that the opinion of the masses could not and would not provide an adequate basis for political authority. Even so, the masses, as the revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had proven, would be capable of exerting force, and in doing so, of being policies and cultural standards to their wills. This fear of an all-powerful and all-consuming mass was memorably expressed in Gustave Le Bon’s study of The Crowd, which prophesied that, “The age we are about to enter will in truth be the era of crowds... The divine right of the masses is about to replace the divine right of kings.”\(^{58}\) In Le Bon’s estimation, the crowd is a destructive mob which expresses it power in strikes, demonstrates, and riots, using the sheer force of number to force the elites. In an account that would later be seen as a prescient anticipation of the totalitarian mass movements, Le Bon explained that the typically languid masses could be inflamed into action by demagogues and charismatic leaders – presaging the concern with “mass mobilization” which would emerge as analysts game to grips with the way that totalitarianism turned the institutions of mass democracy toward despotic ends. While Le Bon was willing to concede that the individual constituents of the crowd were

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capable of reasoning, he maintained that the crowd could only constitute itself insofar as the individuating judgments and opinions of these members were suppressed. Thus, the crowd descends into barbarism and instinct; where a well-defined group or class might be capable of pursuing its interests rationally, for the crowd any particular course of action is secondary to the “rage for unanimity” and “thirst for obedience.” Nearly all of these reactionary lines of argument can be discerned in Jose Ortega y Gasset’s Revolt of the Masses, which presents the increasing power of the masses as a danger to the cultivated taste and judgment of its “select minorities.”\(^{59}\) Along with these typically aristocratic concerns, Ortega y Gasset channels a Nietzschean antipathy toward the masses which construes them as the enforcers of a herdlike conformity. “The mass crushes beneath it everything that is different, qualified, and select. Anybody who is not like everybody, who does not think like everybody, runs the risk of being eliminated.”\(^{60}\) In introducing this typically existentialist concern for the endurance of the authentic individual amid the self-enforcing uniformity of the crowd, Ortega y Gasset brings the debate over mass society closer to the social-psychological concern with autonomy that would animate the mid-century dystopian renderings.

In the early twentieth century, these accounts of mass behavior were taken up with new urgency by intellectuals seeking to comprehend the sudden and unexpected political upheavals brought about by totalitarian movements in Italy, Germany, and Russia. Ortega y


\(^{60}\) Ortega Y Gasset, Revolt of the Masses, p. 18.
Gasset himself was among the first to explain modern totalitarian politics in terms of the masses. Fascism, he argued, is a “movement of mass-men” and “the most palpable manifestation of the new mentality of the masses, due to their having decided to rule society without the capacity for doing so.” Yet few of the analyses that followed would accept the conclusion that totalitarianism entailed the direct rule of the masses, the tyranny of the mob that writers like Le Bon and Ortega y Gasset feared. And even among those whose diagnoses echoed the aristocratic critique in key respects, greater care was taken to first address the question of where the masses, this new actor on the scene, had come from. For Le Bon, the masses were the mob, for Ortega y Gasset, they were the vulgar and uncultivated, the *hoi polloi*. Analysts like Lederer, Fromm, and Arendt offered a more nuanced description of the masses, one in which the masses do not simply rise up from the lower castes of the social order, but are instead constituted by changes in the material and social structure of society. In these accounts, the mass society is what emerges after traditional communities are broken down by the forces of urbanization and industrialization, while the masses themselves are distinguished precisely by their indistinctness: their lack of belonging to any social group or class which would give them a sense of identity and social status. Thus, the masses are “amorphous,” “atomized, isolated,” “lonely,” “self-alienated and suggestible” – and it is this precariousness which leaves them vulnerable to the appeal of totalitarian leaders. The totalitarian movement responds to this

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61 Ortega Y Gasset, *Revolt of the Masses*, p. 73.
void of identity by offering an artificial and all-encompassing community and absolute standards of authority. According to Arendt, the “total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty” demanded by totalitarian movements “can only be expected from the completely isolated human being who, without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances, derives his sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement, his membership in the party.” Thus, totalitarianism can only take root where masses have been or can be created. But by virtue of their atomization, the masses are in no position to assert themselves spontaneously or forcefully in the political sphere as the earlier accounts of mass behavior would suggest. Rather, the masses are available to be mobilized by elites through propaganda; in a sense, they are an instrument of totalitarian rule, and a source of power in democratic political systems, but not an independent driver of policy or ideology. As Kornhauser explains, mass society refers to “a set of conditions under which democratic institutions are vulnerable to totalitarianism, rather than as a set of conditions underlying totalitarian institutions.”

The dystopian image of mass society which begins to take shape in the post-war era begins from this assessment of modern society as fragmentary and atomized, experiencing a crisis of authority and community. But in this case dystopian thinking pursues a different set of possibilities, albeit possibilities rooted in the same underlying psychological and social

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63 Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 323-324.
64 Kornhauser, Politics of Mass Society, p.16.
vulnerabilities. Assuming the cataclysmic politics of totalitarian mass mobilization can be averted, then what becomes of the masses? Naturally, not all observers of mass society shared the trepidation of its dystopian critics. Shils, for example, though loathe to use the term, defended what critics called mass society as a more inclusive and stable form of society which was succeeding at incorporating larger and larger portions of the population into its central political and cultural institutions.\textsuperscript{65} Shils specifically contested the concerns of individualist critics like Fromm and Mills by arguing that mass society had created conditions more conducive to individuality than any preceding form of society. By weakening the hold of tradition and authority, and giving rise to a new legal and political order premised on the rights and dignity of the individual, modern societies had given individuals access an unprecedented degree of self-determination and self-expression. “People make choices more freely in many spheres of life,” Shils argued, “and these choices are not necessarily made for them by tradition, authority, or scarcity.”\textsuperscript{66} But most of the dystopian critics of mass society would agree with this assessment. Their arguments are meant to highlight an unsettling paradox of modern society, that just as conditions favorable to individuality have come into place, the development and exercise of autonomy has been short-circuited by new social and psychological pressures. This is what Fromm had in mind when he argued that “although man has rid himself from old enemies of freedom, new enemies of a different nature have arisen; enemies which are not

\textsuperscript{65} Shils, \textit{The Constitution of Society}, p. 72.  \\
\textsuperscript{66} Shils \textit{The Constitution of Society}. p. 82.
essentially external restraints, but internal factors blocking the full realization of the freedom of personality.”67 Accordingly, the individual may enjoy a wide range of free choices, without, to use Fromm’s formulation, having the power to choose, or to use Mill’s, may lack the capacity for reasoning that would make such choices meaningful. More disturbing to these critics is the possibility that the individual may ultimately accept this passive role. Mill argued that the “ultimate problem of freedom is the problem of the cheerful robot” precisely because he worried that many would prefer being robots to being individuals, “because today it has become evident to us that all men do not naturally want to be free; that all men are not willing or not able, as the case may be, to exert themselves to acquire the reason that freedom requires.”68

The fear which is common to dystopian critics of mass society is that the structural pressures of mass society, its distinctive patterns of social organization, undermine the freedom of choice which is formally embodied in the political institutions of representative democracy and the economic institutions of free market capitalism. Though these institutions are supposed to enshrine the individual’s capacity for choice, indeed, critics of mass society allege that in the most significant domains of social life, the individual’s choices are pre-empted, if not pre-determined. The individual cannot choose freely in practice because he or she lacks the social and psychological resources to do so. Mass society is instead organized such that individuals are barraged with cues, particularly from the media but also in their workplaces and families,

67 Fromm, Escape From Freedom, p. 104.
68 Mills, Sociological Imagination, p. 175.
that encourage them to conform with behavioral expectations, to choose from and be content with the options presented to them in their political life, to be “productive” in the sphere of labor and a “consumer” in the marketplace. Failure to fit into and identify with these roles is stigmatized, and those who do not find such roles fulfilling are judged to be insufficiently well-adjusted. Thus, it is possible for mass society to extract a high degree of conformity and regimentation from its members without anything approaching the coercive apparatus of the total state. The type of authority which pervades a mass society, according to Fromm,” is not overt authority, but anonymous, invisible, alienated authority. Nobody makes a demand, neither a person, nor an idea, nor a moral law. Yet we all conform as much or more than people in an intensely authoritarian society would.”

It is the very diffuseness of authority in mass society which makes it so insidious and difficult to resist. Individuality is not curtailed by an identifiable they, but rather an “It,” “profit, economic necessities, the market, common sense, public opinion, what ‘one’ does, thinks, feels.” These exigencies are “invisible” and “unassailable” – as Fromm asks, “Who can rebel against nobody?” – and they constitute a form of authority which cannot and does not issue commands, but can “suggest,” “coax” and “manipulate.” This invisible and omnipresent adversary is one that threatens the individual with existential defeat. While the individual could rebel against overt authority, and, in doing so, maintain some semblance of a self even in defeat, “If I am ruled by an anonymous authority,

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69 Fromm, Sane Society, p. 152.
70 Fromm Sane Society, p. 148.
71 Fromm, Sane Society, p. 149.
I lose the sense of self, I become a ‘one,’ a part of the ‘It.” This “It,” however, is nothing more than the aggregated judgments and expectations of discrete individuals. Following Marx, Fromm takes authority to be alienated insofar as it is experienced as an external force by the individuals out of whose thought and activity it emerges.

The mechanism by which this form of authority operates is what Fromm calls “automaton conformity,” which exist whenever the individual is ready and willing to adapt themselves uncritically to the needs or expectations of their immediate social group. Fromm’s understanding of human psychology led him to the conclusion that this type of behavior would not need, in the vast majority of incidents, to be compelled. Conformity is a dominant style of social interaction because it alleviates the feelings of anxiety and lack of belonging which are endemic to mass society. The anonymous authority of social expectations, expressed in “public opinion” and “common sense,” “are so powerful because of our profound readiness to conform to the expectations everybody has about ourselves and our equally profound fear of being different.”\textsuperscript{72} Fromm’s explanation for conformity in mass society parallels his account of totalitarianism insofar as both are mechanisms by which individuals can cope with the underlying sense of alienation which he attributes to modernity. Both are “mechanisms of escape.” Understood as adaptive responses to the shortcomings of modern society, obedience to authority – whether it is overt or anonymous – can be a way of responding to an unmet

\textsuperscript{72} Fromm, Escape From Freedom, p.105.
psychological need for orientation and identity. But it is ultimately, Fromm wagers, a self-defeating strategy, one which affords the individual no opportunity to develop or express their own personality, or to exercise their own capacity for reason and choice. In both cases, this is to leave the distinctive potential of our human existence unexplored. Fromm writes that, “the person who gives up his individual self and becomes an automaton, identical with millions of other automatons surround him, need not feel alone and anxious any more. But the price he pays however, is high; is the loss of his self.”\textsuperscript{73} As this analysis indicates, the question that concerned Fromm and other social scientist concerned with the prospects for autonomy in mass society could not be answered simply by referencing the “negative freedom” of the individual. They wanted to know if the individual in mass society would be able to acquire the positive capacities for free decision making and exercise them in practice, or if the unique pressures of such a society would eventually work to suppress that potential. To answer such questions, Fromm deployed the analytical concept of social character, by which he referred to the “the essential nucleus of the character structure of most members of a group, which has developed as the result of basic experiences and the mode of life common to that group.”\textsuperscript{74} Fromm’s core insight is that the traits and dispositions which become predominant in any society will reflect its material conditions and distinct modes of socialization.\textsuperscript{75} In this respect, he acknowledges

\textsuperscript{73} Fromm, \textit{Escape From Freedom}, p. 184.  
\textsuperscript{74} Fromm, \textit{Escape From Freedom}, p. 275.  
\textsuperscript{75} Like his peers in the Frankfurt School, Fromm’s theoretical perspective reflected a Marxist concern with the material conditions of society and their potential to induce alienation, alongside a Freudian concern with the genesis of the individual self.
that the individual’s character is always, to a great extent, adapted to their social conditions such that being autonomous is never a matter of forming one’s own self in isolation from society and its expectations. But not all social conditions and, as a result, not all social characters, are equally compatible with the exercise of freedom. Under the right conditions, the individual might be able to navigate the pressures of modern society with a sense of integrity, but dystopian visions of mass society emphasized the tendencies which were accelerating the trend toward submissive, conformist, and otherwise alienated modes of being.

Though Fromm’s criticism of mass society was particularly vivid in its account of alienation and conformity, his concerns resonated even in more sober analyses. Several important works blending social science with social criticism emerged out of Fromm’s program, such as Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* and William Whyte’s *The Organization Man*, both of which considered the emergent social character of American society in light of patterns of association and organization which they took to diminish autonomy.76 Riesman suggested that the conditions of mass society had given rise to an “other-directed” personality who, though in principle capable of either autonomy or conformity, was deeply susceptible to the pressures of

76 The overarching problem intimated by such works is a “collectivism of the mind” (McClay 234) and the variety of expressions it has taken in contemporary American culture, as well as the forms it might take in the near future. If such works bore more than an incidental trace of Huxley’s vision of the Fordist society, Huxley himself took these lines of inquiry as confirmation that his dystopian prophecy was coming true, and sooner than he had originally anticipated. In *Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley cites Mills, Fromm, and Whyte as confirming his thesis that modern society was being transformed into a homogenous and centrally administered “social organism.”76 He took Whyte in particular to have shown that, “a new Social Ethic is replacing our traditional ethical system – the system in which the individual is primary. The key words in this Social Ethic are ‘adjustment,’ ‘adaptation,’ ‘socially orientated behavior,’ ‘belongingness,’ ‘acquisition of social skills,’ ‘team work,’ ‘group living,’ ‘group loyalty, ‘group dynamics,’ ‘group thinking,’ ‘group creativity.’”76 See Huxley, *Brave New World & Brave New World Revisited*, p. 252-257.
public opinion, which were increasingly amplified and disseminated through the mass media. In Whyte’s study, which frequently echoes Weber’s classic account of bureaucratic society, the principle obstacle to autonomy is the predominance of “mass” organizations, whose internal hierarchies and mass memberships require that the individual’s judgment is subordinated to collectively determined goals and values. Both works argued, however, that even as social conditions were becoming less favorable to autonomy, it would still be possible to reconfigure the institutions and values of modern society in order to accommodate individuality. Reisman, for his part, took pains to emphasize that the other-directed personality was not by nature a conformist and still has the opportunity to become autonomous.” 77 In Riesman’s typology, other-direction is the social character which predominates in advanced modern societies, and it refers to the tendency of individuals to interpret and adjust to their social role by being “sensitized to the expectations and preferences of others”; this succeeds the pre-modern mode of “tradition-direction” which is oriented by authoritative communal norms and the early modern mode of “inner-direction” in which the individual is oriented by an “internalized set of goals” acquired early in life.78 Each of these social characters has the potential for both creative and conforming behavior, and it is not the case that the autonomous person must find themselves in constant revolt against society. As Riesman explains, “The ‘autonomous’ are those who on the whole are capable of conforming to the behavioral norms of their society – a

77 Riesman, The Lonely Crowd, 240.
78 Riesman, Lonely Crowd, p. 8.
capacity the anomics usually lack – but are free to choose whether to conform or not.” In practice, however, Riesman observes that the other-director person seems to vacillate between “compulsive adjustment” to the expectations of others and anomic debilitation resulting from actual or perceived failure to adjust accordingly. Though they are certainly less “less total and relentless” than their totalitarian counterparts, Riesman nonetheless argues that the modern democracies are not without their own “enemies of autonomy.” Citing Fromm, he argues that “the diffuse and anonymous authority of the modern democracies is less favorable to autonomy than one might assume. One reason, perhaps the chief reason, is that the other-directed person is trained to respond not so much to overt authority as to subtle but nonetheless constricting interpersonal expectations.” Such a person does not develop a distinctive set of values or characteristics, but simply aims to be available to the desires and expectations of his or her peers. In a media-saturated society, these cues are less likely to be experienced firsthand and more likely to originate from radio, newspapers, television, and other forms of mass communication.

Just as the analysts of totalitarianism had taken up propaganda as one of the central mechanisms of power in totalitarian society, critics of mass society followed took increasing interest in the way that mass communications and the emergent mass media had begun to transform the bases of power and authority in democratic contexts. For some theorists of mass

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80 Riesman, Lonely Crowd, p 251.
society, it is precisely their role as the audience for mass communications which constitutes the mass. For analysts like Mills, this position accentuates the vulnerability of individuals to manipulation from both political and economic interests. As consumers of the mass media, the masses are a captive audience, susceptible to distortions of reality, and subjected to undifferentiated content to which they can make no critical reply. In this context, control over the means and contents of mass communications is a vital means of exercising power over the masses. Thus, Mills’ critique of mass society includes an examination of “opinion-making” processes, noting that that, “Alongside or just below the elite, there is the propagandist, the publicity expert, the public-relations man.”

Confirming his view were works like Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders*, which sought to expose the forms of psychological manipulation embedded in modern advertising techniques, as well as to show how those techniques had begun to migrate into politics as officials sought ways to monitor, predict, and even control the formation of public opinion.

While these accounts of the industrialization of culture and opinion raised concerns about the extent to which the individual mind might prove vulnerable to manipulation, they stopped short of predicting, or even endorsing the possibility of, the total fabrication of the conscience envisioned in works like *Brave New World*. A stronger version of this hypothesis, that the most insidious forms of domination in modern society would be cultural rather than

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political, and that they would be deployed through the mass media, was pursued by two of Fromm’s colleagues, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, in their infamous attack on the “culture industry” as a tool of “mass deception.”\textsuperscript{82} In this trenchant work of philosophical social criticism, Horkheimer and Adorno anticipated a far more totalizing form of domination, one which is clearly indebted to Huxley’s novel in its depiction of a homogenous and stupefying mass culture where entertainment, not propaganda, is the most important mechanism of social control.\textsuperscript{83} In their diagnosis, individuality is not merely suppressed, rather, the individual “is entirely nullified,” and “individuals as such are vanishing before they apparatus they serve.”\textsuperscript{84} The rising standard of living and the availability of consumer goods has only increased “the powerlessness and pliability of the masses,” while a “flood of precise information and brand-new amusements make people smarter and more stupid at once.” Even so, the only direct references to Huxley in \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment} are critical. In fact, Horkheimer and Adorno take pains to distinguish their own critique of mass culture from the

\textsuperscript{82} Horkheimer and Adorno, \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, p. 94.

\textsuperscript{83} Horkheimer and Adorno, like other members of the Frankfurt School, read and discussed \textit{Brave New World}. Richard Wolin notes that one symposia held during the summer of 1942, just as Horkheimer and Adorno were beginning work on \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, evinced an "obsessive fascination" with the novel. The members of the Frankfurt School "endowed Huxley’s dystopian prophecies with nearly evidentiary status... if one wanted to gain insight into the future shape of consumption-driven mass society, there was, it seemed, no better point of reference than Huxley’s novel. For the Frankfurt School’s inner circle, it epitomized the political prospect they came to fear most: frenzied material progress minus emancipation, thereby standing Marx’s technological optimism on its head.” When Adorno reviewed \textit{Brave New World} in \textit{Prisms}, however, he was mostly critical, saying the novel tells us only about the present and not about the future. See Wolin, “Introduction to the Discussion of Need and Culture in Nietzsche,” \textit{Constellations}, 8:1 (2001), p.128, and Adorno, “Aldous Huxley and Utopia,” in \textit{Prisms}, trans. Samuel and Shirley Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967), pp. 95-118.

\textsuperscript{84} Horkheimer and Adorno, \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, p. xvii.
concerns that typified the elitist criticisms of the masses, writing that their concern “is not culture as a value, as understood by critics of civilization such as Huxley, Jaspers, and Ortega y Gasset,” but rather the necessity of confronting a culture which dulls the critical consciousness and contributes to the maintenance of an “unjust society” and bring us to the threshold of a “totally administered world.” Likewise, their analysis of the culture industry uses the aristocratic theory of a mass society for their own distinctly dystopian vision, writing that, “the sociological view that the loss of support from objective religion and the disintegration of the last precapitalist residues, in conjunction with technical and social differentiation and specialization, have given rise to cultural chaos is refuted by daily experience.”

What they fear is not the outbreak of anarchy, but of stifling conformity in culture as well as in the material conditions of life. Culture “is infecting everything with sameness.” The various media – film, radio, magazines – comprise a closed universe of culture, “unanimous within itself.” The modern city becomes a single organism: “Just as the occupants of city centers are uniformly summoned there for purposes of work and leisure, as producers and consumers, so the living cells crystalize into homogenous, well-organized complexes.”

Whereas critics of mass culture argued that the intellectual and aesthetic standards of the elites would be debased by the demands of the masses, Horkheimer and Adorno assert that the opposite is true – that the commercial imperatives of mass-scale cultural production compel

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85 Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 94.
86 Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 94-95.
the pursuit of ever-wider audiences, and as such it is the culture industry itself which constitutes and then addresses its product to a mass audience. What this looks like in practice is the formulation of interchangeable commodities and entertainment which can appeal to the broadest possible segment of society, supported by the “psychotechnique” of advertisement which convince the masses that their needs can be met by such products.\(^\text{87}\) The omnipresence of entertainment and advertising means that individuals are increasingly pressured to interpret their needs through the jargon of the industry itself, which thereby succeeds in “never releasing its grip on the consumer, of not for a moment allowing him or her to suspect that resistance is possible... The more strongly the culture industry entrenches itself, the more it can do as it chooses with the needs of consumers – producing, controlling, disciplining them.”\(^\text{88}\) It is for this reason that “pseudoindividuality reigns” in mass society, even in the context of an industry which supposedly enshrines the choice of the consumer.\(^\text{89}\) According to Horkheimer and Adorno, mass culture has not facilitated individuation, but forced individuals to identify with the stereotypes presented in advertising and entertainment. The individual becomes complicit in their own commodification, attempting “to turn oneself into an apparatus meeting the requirements of success, an apparatus which, even in its unconscious impulses, conforms to the model presented by the culture industry.” In one of its darkest moments, their analysis concludes that the masses will sooner adapt to this semblance of individuality than rebel

\(^{87}\) Horkheimer and Adorno, \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, p.135.
\(^{88}\) Horkheimer and Adorno, \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, p.115.
\(^{89}\) Horkheimer and Adorno, \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, p.125.
against it: “The hope that the contradictory, disintegrating person could not survive for generations, that the psychological fracture within it must split the system itself, and that human beings might refuse to tolerate the mendacious substitution of the stereotype for the individual – that hope is in vain.”

What distinguishes Horkheimer and Adorno’s radical critique from more individualistic arguments against mass society is that they see this kind of conformity as being actively induced, rather than as an incidental byproduct of mass society, and that they therefore interpret the culture industry as a mechanism of political control, one which effectively stabilizes the structure of advanced industrial capitalism and hides it behind an “ideological curtain.” In this respect, their theory has less in common with observers like Reisman and more in common with radicals like Mills. More than any other analyst of mass society, Mills was concerned to show that it was not just individual autonomy, but also democratic self-rule, the autonomy of the public, which was threatened by the trajectory of mass society. As Richard Bellamy explains “the ideas of the ‘masses’ and of ‘mass society’ were embedded within accounts of social organization and behaviour that challenged the models of individual agency and rationality traditionally associated with democratic decision-making.” Whereas Fromm associated mass society with the anonymous authority of public opinion, Mill’s vision of mass society was one in which authority was supplanted by covert forms of manipulation, which increasingly

90 Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 126.  
91 Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. xvii.  
92 Bellamy, “Advent of the Masses,” p. 70.
apprehended public opinion as an instrument for legitimizing the rule of the elite. “With the broadening of the base of politics within the context of a folk-lore of democratic decision-making, and with the increased means of mass persuasion that are available, the public of public opinion has become the object of intensive efforts to control, manage, manipulate, and increasingly intimidate,” by those who try to make the public “a relay network of their own views.”

What concerns Mills is that “in addition to their enlarged and centralized means of administration, exploitation, and violence, the modern elite have had placed within their grasp historically unique instruments of psychic management and manipulation” – specifically, the mass media and the “universal, compulsory” education system. As a result, Authority is being replaced by manipulation – whereas the former is voluntarily obeyed, the latter “is the ‘secret’ exercise of power, unknown to those who are influenced.”

Manipulation becomes a problem wherever men have power that is concentrated and willful but do not have authority, or when, for any reason, they do not wish to use their power openly. Then the powerful seek to rule without showing their powerfulness. They want to rule, as it were, secretly, without publicized legitimation. It is in this mixed case – as in the intermediate reality of the American today – that manipulation is a prime way of exercising power. Small circles of men are making decisions which they need to have at least authorized by indifferent or recalcitrant people over whom they do not exercise explicit authority. So the small circle tries to manipulate those people into willing acceptance or cheerful support of their decision or opinions – or at least to the rejection of possible counter-opinions.

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If the individuals who constitute the democratic public are not capable of independent or critical decision-making, if instead they are subject to the manipulation of elites, then, Mills concluded, the conceptual and normative basis of democratic politics is thrown into crisis. Though his own vision of mass society is distinct, Mills sees the original, aristocratic theories of mass society as an important turning point in the downfall of political optimism; Mill, Tocqueville, and Ortega Y Gasset all indicate that “the transformation of public into mass – and all that this implies – has been at once one of the major trends of modern societies and one of the major factors in the collapse of that liberal optimism which determined so much of the intellectual mood of the nineteenth century.”

Mills develops his image of the mass society against the ideal of the public which plays a legitimating role in theoretical accounts of democracy as well as in folk conceptions of American political life. “The United States today is not altogether a mass society, and it has never been altogether a community of publics.” Each of these represents an ideal type which is partially realized in real social life. Mills also suggests that a pure mass society would be a totalitarian society: “we have moved a considerable distance along the road to the mass society. At the end of that road there is totalitarianism.”

In the ideal model, public opinion emerges from the unconstrained and un-coerced discussion among citizens, and then is realized in institutions. The ideological myth of “The Great American Public” has to be dispelled so that the realities of political power can be better

97 Mills, The Power Elite, p. 301.
appreciated. The classical democratic theory of the public presents “images out of a fairy tale… not adequate even as an approximate model of how the American system of power works. The issues that now shape man’s fate are neither raised nor decided by the public at large. The idea of the community of publics is not a description of fact, but an assertion of an ideal, an assertion of a legitimation masquerading – as legitimations are now apt to do – as fact.”

The public is replaced by masses, and political decisions by administrative ones – the democratic public can no longer play its role. Mills’ mass is the dystopian inverse of the democratic ideal, the shadow of the community of publics. It is an extreme form of social organization characterized by asymmetrical communication and the manipulation of opinion and action by the authorities.

The process by which a public becomes a mass has to do with the way that mass communication technologies reshape the formation of public opinion. Mass communication skews “the ratio of the givers of opinion to the receivers… At one extreme on the scale of communication, two people talk personally with each other; at the opposite extreme, one spokesman talks impersonally through a network of communications to millions of listeners and viewers.” Thus, the active, critical role in discussion becomes less feasible; those arenas in which a more symmetrical give and take is possible may be disconnected from any real

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100 Mills, The Power Elite, p. 300.
101 In summary: “(1) far fewer people express opinions than receive them, for the community of publics becomes an abstract collection of individuals who receive impressions from the media. (2) The communications that prevail are so organized that it is difficult or impossible for the individual to answer back immediately or with any effect. (3) The realization of opinion in action is controlled by authorities who organize and control the channels of such action. (4) The mass has no autonomy from institutions; on the contrary, agents of authorized institutions penetrate this mass, reducing any autonomy it may have in the formation of opinion by discussion.” Mills, The Power Elite, p. 304.
opportunities to shape decision-making – almost by definition, wide influence means a wide audience, and thus the broadcasting of a message rather than the initiating of a discussion. Mass communication also alters “the possibility of answering back an opinion without internal or external reprisals being taken… In the extreme case, we may conceive of an absolute monopoly on communication to pacified media groups whose members cannot answer back” – as opposed to “the wide and symmetrical formation of opinion” appropriate to the community of publics.103

There is, finally, the degree to which institutional authority, with its sanctions and controls, penetrates the public. Here the problem is the degree to which the public has genuine autonomy from instituted authority. At one extreme, no agent of formal authority moves among the autonomous public. At the opposite extreme, the public is terrorized into uniformity by the infiltration of informers and the universalization of suspicion. One thinks of the late Nazi street-and-block system, the eighteen-century Japanese kumi, the Soviet cell structure. In the extreme, the formal structure of power coincides, as it were, with the informal ebb and flow of influence by discussion, which is thus killed off.104

Mills therefore concludes that the mass media “have helped less to enlarge and animate the discussions of primary publics than to transform them into a set of media markets in mass-like society” – even beyond the structural distortions outlined above, Mills points to a “psychological illiteracy facilitated by the media” and the maintenance of a “pseudo-world.”105 People trust the media rather than their first-hand experiences and interpretations; they select into media markets which reinforce their world view, and they even acquire “new identities

and new aspirations” from the media – that is, the media transforms the relationship of self-to-self as well as that of self-to-world; they provide information without context or comprehension. Dependent on the media for information and access to public debate, and barraged by the messaging of elites, the masses themselves are powerless in the overall political process. For this reason, Mills rejects the aristocratic thesis regarding mass society, arguing that “those who have supposed the masses to be all powerful, or at least well on their way to triumph are wrong… they must now be seen not a publics acting autonomously, but as masses manipulated at focal points into crowds of demonstrators. For publics become masses, masses sometimes become crowds; and, in crowds, the psychical rape by the mass media is supplemented up-close by the harsh and sudden harangue. Then the people in the crowd disperse again – as atomized and submissive masses.”

Mills’ vision of mass society is an important part of his wider inquiry into the place of the power elite in American politics, and he ultimately sees the eclipse of the public as concurrent with the centralization of power under an economic, military, and political elite whose institutions monopolize effective decision making ability. Under such conditions, the individual can attain influence by joining into voluntary associations, however, the increasing size of the organizations means that the individual has little ability to shape their agenda – or if he does, they are too small to exercise meaningful influence. The same, he wagers, is true of

parties and other mass organizations with significant capacity to shape political decision-making:

It is because they do not find available associations at once psychologically meaningful and historically effective that men often feel uneasy in their political and economic loyalties. The effective units of power are now the huge corporation, the inaccessible government, the grim military establishment. Between these, on the one hand, and the family and the small community on the other, we find no intermediate associations in which men feel secure and with which they feel powerful. There is little live political struggle. Instead, there is administration from above, and the political vacuum below.\textsuperscript{107}

Thus, Mills concludes, “man in the mass is without any sense of political belonging.”\textsuperscript{108}

The Mechanized Mind: Technology and Mastery

Having made influential contributions to the study of totalitarianism and mass society, Fromm, like many intellectuals, eventually turned his attention to a third dystopia. He opened his 1968 book, \textit{The Revolution of Hope}, with the following admonition:

A specter is stalking in our midst whom only a few see with clarity. It is not the old ghost of communism or fascism. It is a new specter: a completely mechanized society, devoted to maximal material output and consumption, directed by computers; and in this social process man himself is being transformed into a part of the total machine, well fed and entertained, yet passive, unalive, and with little feeling. With the victory of the new society, individualism and privacy will have disappeared feelings toward others will be engineered by psychological conditioning and other devices, or drugs which also serve a new kind of introspective experience… This new form of society has been predicted in the form of fiction in Orwell’s \textit{1984} and Aldous Huxley’s \textit{Brave New World}.\textsuperscript{109}

\textsuperscript{107} Mills, \textit{The Power Elite}, p. 308-309.
\textsuperscript{108} Mills, \textit{The Power Elite}, p. 308.
Once again, the contours of the dystopian future had changed, but Fromm’s point of reference also indicates the essential continuity of the post-war dystopian imagination: “This new form of society has been predicted in the form of fiction,” he wrote, “in Orwell’s 1984 and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World.*” Decades on from their initial publication, these works continued to inform social thought as changes in the structure and character of modern society gave rise to new hopes and fears. As with his previous writings, Fromm himself did not counsel despair; the subtitle of his work, “Towards a Humanized Technology,” pointed the way toward an alternative future. It also raised important questions about the relationship between humanity and technology: how exactly had our technology become *de*-humanized?

Though the technological dystopia became a particularly important motif of social thought during the 1960s, concerns about the rate and direction of technological progress, and the ends toward which humanity’s powers might be put, had not sprung up from nowhere. As Fromm’s comment indicates, the canonical dystopian novels gave an important role to technology. In *We* and *1984*, technology is principally an instrument of control: Zamyatin’s “procedure” for the removal of the imagination, and Orwell’s telescreens come to mind. Even so, these novels depict societies where technology has been permitted to regress where it does not serve the interests of the ruling caste. Thus, the One State and Oceania are both primitive and modern, with technology playing little role in the daily lives of their subjects except to instill fear. In *Brave New World*, however, the twentieth century was given a glimpse of a dystopia that is thoroughly technological, not only in its methodology of control but also in its
governing philosophy. Huxley describes his dystopia as one in which science and technology are not used “as though, they had been made for man,” but instead, “as though men were to be adapted and enslaved to them.” Likewise, the dystopian images of totalitarianism and mass society each had their technological components. The centralized state, whether total or administrative, the means of mass communication, whether used principally for propaganda or for advertising and entertainment, were common features in both totalitarian and mass society, while the latter form in particular emerged out of modern forms of production, transportation, and communication which brought the “masses” into being. In this sense, the availability of technical means of control furnished the common material base of the dystopian societies. In their seminal analysis of totalitarianism, for example, Friedrich and Brzezinski noted that the totalitarian regimes depended on modern technology not only in “weapons and communications,” but also for surveillance, that is, “the supervision and control of movement,” as well as for the construction of a command economy, which “presupposes the reporting, cataloging and calculating devices provided by modern technology.” The ends to which they were deployed notwithstanding, what principally distinguished the totalitarian regimes was the degree to which such instruments were centralized under the authority of the state. But the relationship between totalitarianism and technology is more than incidental, and Friedrich and Brzezinski were among the first to suggest that totalitarianism was a possibility that in some

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ways reflected the essential character of modern technology. Insofar as “the trend of technological advance implies the trend toward greater and greater size of organization,” they argued, “totalitarian societies appear to be merely exaggerations, but nonetheless logical exaggerations, of the technological state of modern society.”

Dystopian critics of technology made a stronger claim: not that technology could prove conducive to totalitarianism, but that technology was itself, or was on its way to becoming, a form of totalitarianism in its own right, and that such an outcome could occur even – or rather, especially – in the formally liberal political context of the advanced industrial democracies. This form of “technocratic totalitarianism,” much like the mass society theories that preceded it, afforded the administrative state an important role, but more as a reflection of and response to underlying technical imperatives than a major driver of policy or ideology in its own right.¹¹² What these critics feared was a new form of domination, one which could become “total” by virtue of the sheer pervasiveness of technology, but which would need not be enforced by a despot or a secret police. Herbert Marcuse’s infamous critique of advanced industrial society is emblematic in this regard:

By virtue of the way it has organized its technological base, contemporary industrial society tends to be totalitarian. For ‘totalitarian’ is not only a terroristic political coordination of society, but also a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests. It thus precludes the emergence of an effective opposition against the whole. Not only a specific form of government or party rule makes for totalitarianism, but also a specific system of production and distribution which may well be compatible with a ‘pluralism’ of parties,

Marcuse therefore aims to show that advanced industrial capitalism is no less “totalitarian” than Communism or Fascism; in the latter, power is monopolized by an overbearing political cult that compels obedience through terror, in the former, by an unceasing system of production that induces passivity through subtle, technological methods. Marcuse’s diagnoses was expanded on by the American historian Theodor Roszak, who argued that totalitarianism describes any society in which “a system of politics devours the surrounding culture,” it’s hallmark is not any particular ideology, but “the attempt to bring the whole of life under authoritarian control.” He therefore argued that under the technocratic system which was developing in the industrial democracies, totalitarianism would “perfected,” “because it’s techniques would become progressively more subliminal,” and therefore more difficult to resist. Left to run its course, this process would lead humanity into an “era of social engineering” wherein “the total human context which surrounds the industrial complex” is subjected to technical manipulation.

That technological society should emerge as the dominant dystopian image of the late twentieth century represents a remarkable inversion of the modern utopian hopes for rational progress and mastery. As illustrated in chapter one, the optimistic visions of the future which predominated in the post-Enlightenment political imagination were premised on the

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114 Roszak, Making of a Counter Culture, p. 9.
possibilities opened up by the application of scientific reason to social life. This is seen most clearly in the writings of utopian socialists like Saint-Simon and Comte, whose blueprints for the society of the future prescribed the rule of a benevolent class of managers, engineers, and scientists. Though he articulated his program in opposition to his utopian forebears, Engels’ description of the incipient classes society nonetheless maintained that “the government of persons” would be replaced by “the administration of things, and by the conduct of the processes of production.”¹¹⁵ Though this formulation seems to capture the fears of dystopian writers precisely, Engels was describing liberation, not domination. Engels argued that the state, having seized the means of production on behalf of the proletariat, would no longer intervene in society in order to defend property through coercion in the manner of the bourgeois state, but instead restrict its purview to the management of production and the distribution of goods. Nor had the program of technocratic rule been forgotten in the twentieth century. During the Great Depression, intellectuals like Thorstein Veblen in the United States and Walther Rathenau in Germany had argued on behalf of a technocratic system of governance, in which the management of human affairs would be largely delegated to engineers, the only ones qualified to coordinate technical and economic activity of such scale and complexity.¹¹⁶ Since then, variants on the technocratic model had been championed by an


¹¹⁶ For a historical view of the technocracy movement in America, see William Akins, Technocracy and the American Dream: The Technocrat Movement, 1900-1941 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977). These intellectual and
eclectic cadre of progressive and reactionary figures. What unites the various advocates of technocracy throughout modernity is their confidence in what I have referred to as the modern project of mastery, their conviction that the rational application of knowledge can yield not only a mastery of nature and fortune, but of the contingencies of social and political life as well.

Dystopian visions of technocracy counter this appraisal in two crucial respects. Their proponents argue, first and foremost, that whatever benefits such a system might provide in terms of efficiency, power, control, or productivity, are outweighed by its less tangible social and psychological consequences. The control that modern technology offers over human conduct is experienced by those subjected to it as domination, and at its most extreme, dehumanization. This is, of course, one of the major premises of the Huxleyan lineage in the dystopian imagination, and also of arguments against the project of mastery as it is realized under totalitarian conditions. But there is another argument that is distinct to the critique of technology, which poses a paradoxical outcome to the project of mastery. In this case, the very instruments by which enlightened humanity is to have asserted control over nature and society slip gradually from our grasp, rebounding back on us in ways that we feel powerless to prevent. In his pioneering work, The Technological Society, the French philosopher Jacques Ellul had observed that “Everything today seems to happen as though ends disappear, as a result of the magnitude of the very means at our disposal.”117 Technological progress, it seemed, had

become an end in itself, a massive and self-sustaining process whose ends were increasingly located in the distant future, rather than in response to proximate needs, or articulated only in the arcane language of specialists and incomprehensible to the ordinary person. Our technology, seemingly autonomous, escapes from our control. Ellul described the outcome of this process just as Huxley did, as one in which technology no longer serves any cognizable human end, and humanity is instead “progressively absorbed” into an ever-expanding technological system. What is at stake in this scenario is not the domination of a class or party, as the formulation of “technocracy,” a regime ruled by experts, would suggest. Slightly closer to the mark is the increasingly autonomous “technostructure” which John Kenneth Galbraith describes in The New Industrial State. The system that Galbraith describes is a massive planning apparatus, consisting of managers and engineers in various private and public firms, that is somewhere between an interest group, a political class, and a self-propelling bureaucratic system. It is not the case that any of its constituents can, strictly speaking, “control” the direction of technological progress; rather they are each born along by imperatives emerging from other parts of the structure. Its goal of heightened autonomy stands over and against the interest of its members, however obviously they profit from their position.

118 For a lively and wide-ranging discussion of this theme, including a an in-depth analysis of Ellul’s thought, see Langdon Winner’s Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977).
119 Ellul, Technological Society, p. 6.
Nonetheless, Galbraith, a progressive economist, thought it possible that understanding the social forces at work in the technostructure would render it amenable even democratic control.

The dystopian imagination entertained nothing of the sort. Dystopian thinking about technology began from the premise that, as Roszak argued, technocracy is not merely a “power structure,” but instead “the expression of a grand cultural imperative.”\(^\text{121}\) The roots of technological domination lie within the project of mastery itself, and mark the endpoint of a process in which reason has been narrowed to rationality, a purely instrumental logic of means and ends, capable of positing methods for control but not for articulating substantive values for the conduct of individuals or the structure of societies.\(^\text{122}\) When Marcuse, for example, argued that the “totalitarian universe of technological rationality is the latest transmutation of the idea of Reason,” he meant to indicate the inextricable connections between modern progress and the forms of domination encroaching on advanced industrial society.\(^\text{123}\) Roszak concurred, describing technocracy as the “the social form in which an industrial society reaches the peak of its organizational integration,” powerful precisely because it can deliver the efficiency, security, coordination, affluence, and power that humanity has sought in modernity.\(^\text{124}\) Unlike the totalitarian programs of the extreme right or the extreme left, technocracy is rooted in the “scientific worldview” of modernity, and is the outcome of a program of technical progress to

\(^{122}\) Horkheimer discusses this problem at length in the first chapter of *The Eclipse of Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 1947).
\(^{123}\) Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 123.
which neither right nor left has proposed an alternative. It is a symptom of industrial society itself which has manifested itself under both capitalism and socialism, a ““transpolitical phenomenon following the dictates of industrial efficiency, rationality, and necessity.”

Though individual critics differed in the details of their narrative, the most influential accounts of technological domination converged on this point: to critique technology was not simply to criticize any given innovation, or even the whole ensemble of technological innovations, nor was it to object to the rule of an expert class of technocrats. To do so would prioritize the particular manifestations of technological domination over the underlying structural forces that impelled modern society toward the technological dystopia. Whether conceptualized, as in Marcuse, as ‘technical rationality,” as in Ellul as “technique,” or as in Lewis Mumford’s writings, as a program of “megatechnics,” the dystopian critics of technology take the essence of modern technology to be a particular mode of activity which is concerned with the efficient realization of pre-determined ends; the irony is that technology now manifests itself as rapidly proliferating system of means whose power and momentum threaten to eclipse any particular end, and instead conduces to the pursuit of power and efficiency for their own sake.

What these diagnoses also share, of course, is a grim fascination with the future toward which this process is oriented – a future in which the project of mastery has been completed, but only insofar as humanity now counts itself among the material to be mastered. Fromm’s offsets

125 Roszak, Making of a Counter Culture, p. 7- 8.
his message of revolutionary hope with a description of “the dehumanized society of 2000 AD,” while Ellul’s exceedingly pessimistic study concludes with “A Look At the Year 2000” in which the entire world is run like a single giant factory, its functioning guaranteed by a massive bureaucratic apparatus for planning and control. “Enclosed within his own creation, man finds that there is ‘no exit,’” he imagines, “that he cannot pierce the shell of technology to find again the ancient milieu to which he was adapted for hundreds of thousands of years.”

Mumford’s *The Myth of the Machine* envisions a “uniform, all-enveloping, super-planetary structure, designed for automatic operation” in which “man will become a passive, purposeless, machine-conditioned animal.” It is with such visions in mind that the critics of modern technology set out to expose the emergent pattern of domination, locating its roots in our past and tracing out its implications for our future. Mumford and Ellul, among the earliest and most influential critics both present a narrative in which technique begins as a force bound to and by the cultural forms of life that it serves, and both conclude that in the modern age we are threatened by a technical system whose scale and power has made it the determinative context for all human activities.

Ellul’s account holds that the ultimate source of domination in modern life is not technology as such, but the principle of organization which inheres in and guides the development of technology. In his influential species of technological determinism, *technique –*

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the orientation toward efficient control – transgresses the traditional boundaries which govern, where, when, and for what purposes it may be used and eventually comes to dominate every sphere of culture. This prompts our belated recognition that technique is now, as it always has been, “autonomous”: a self-augmenting system which is driven toward ever-higher levels of efficiency and complexity. The historical dimension of Ellul’s project is an endeavor to show how technique has come to occupy this central role: how what was once an ensemble of techniques relegated to functional roles in the context of work, military, medicine, and other areas of social life now comes to be a unified system to which all other cultural goals and practices are subordinated. Technique has penetrated economic life, via the system of industrial production, and political life, via the modern bureaucratic state and most especially the totalitarian state. The evidence which Ellul presents, including the historical incidence of simultaneous technological breakthroughs, the fact that each new technology must be produced out of the existing ensemble, and even our sense that technology “progresses” rather than simply changing, does not conclusively establish his claim. But it is more than adequate to establish that technology cannot be redirected toward any end whatsoever. Rather, it is the goals and values of human civilization which must be adapted to it. “Technology cannot put up with intuition and ‘literature.’ It must necessarily don mathematical vestments. Everything in
human life that does not lend itself to mathematical treatment must be excluded – because it is not a possible end for technique – and left to the sphere of dreams.” 128

Ellul argues that modern society is unique in the depth and extent to which it is shaped by techniques. By this he means something more expansive than what Marx had in mind when he talked about the means of production, specifically the emergence of the machine. Writing from the standpoint of the mid-twentieth century, Ellul also makes a significant advance over preceding analysts such as Carlyle and Siegfried Gideon, whose discussions focused narrowly on “mechanization,” by looking beyond the machine to the larger “technical phenomenon” of which it is a single component. Technique, or rational means for efficiently achieving ends, and organization, technique applied to social, economic, and administrative life, are the determining forces in activities that go well beyond the sphere of production. 129 The hallmarks of organization are impersonality, a division of tasks, and methods for resolving issues in advance – all methods, which as Weber so presciently noted, make the mass organization into a kind of machine in its own right. In a society which is so thoroughly dominated by technical processes, human beings become cogs in the vast machinery of production and administration. Thus, even as technique liberates humanity form natural necessity, it imposes its own “artificial necessity” which compromises the autonomy of individuals, that is, their ability to rationally select and pursue their own ends. 130 Instead, “All men are constrained by means external to

128 Ellul, Technological Society, p. 431.
129 Ellul, Technological Society, p. 11.
130 Ellul, Technological Society, p. 429.
them to ends equally external.” Ellul wagers that our ability to tolerate the emerging social order, with its artificial environments, tempos, stressors, and stimuli, will be through an increasing willingness to make ourselves the subjects of techniques for adjustment and enhancement. He imagines a future in which this accomplished, at the species level, through genetic engineering and, at the individual level, through a massive industry of pharmaceuticals, and in that respect he foresees a world rather like Huxley’s. But the area which is most worrying to Ellul is the new field of “human techniques” which are tasked with adapting human beings to the transformed technical milieu. Human techniques become necessary because human beings cannot adapt quickly enough to the demands of the modern social order. The artificial environment contrasts harshly with the evolutionary conditions of our species and gives rise to psychological anxiety and alienation. When human technique succeeds, it overcomes these tensions, but in Ellul’s estimation this is not a triumph, but rather a step toward the final subordination of humanity to its products. This is because human techniques render individual human beings as fungible resources, interchangeable units of productivity who will adapt themselves to whatever end is required by the imperatives of efficiency. In this sense, Ellul subsumes the critique of mass society, viewing “massification” as a necessary step in the preparation of the human material for a totally artificial existence.¹³¹ “Who is too blind to see that a profound mutation is being advocated here? A new dismembering and a complete

reconstitution of the human being so that he can at least become the objective (and also the total object) of techniques.”

The final outcome of this “mutation” is envisioned in the closing chapters of Ellul’s study, a dystopian vision in the extreme: a “dictatorship of test tubes rather than of hobnailed boots.” By the year 2000, humanity will have traveled to and undertaken the colonization of space, will ingest synthetic foods and a variety of pharmaceuticals, will greatly expand before eventually stabilizing its population, and will regulate hygiene through efficient inspection and control. This image of the future is not another entry in the catalog of “philosophic utopias,” as all of this is within the purview, Ellul reminds us, of serious scientific minds. In describing the uses of electronic messages and genetic engineering, Ellul claims to have uncovered a “future Huxley never dreamed of,” but from our vantage point the resemblances seem more striking: a genetically encoded caste system, techniques of mental manipulation that bypass consciousness—nothing Ellul describes would be out of place in the Hatching and Conditioning Centers of Brave New World. This comfortable, if bland, utilitarian existence can only be maintained, he argues, through the continuous centralization of administrative power, “a worldwide technological dictatorship which will allow technique its full scope and at the same time resolve the concomitant difficulties.” This, Ellul claims, is the implicit political ideal of those who

132 Ellul, Technological Society, p.431.
133 Ellul Technological Society p. 434.
134 Ellul Technological Society, p. 432.
135 Ellul, Technological Society, p.434. In criticizing the means that would be necessary to accomplish this Golden Age, Ellul sounds like Popper responding to the political utopians: only dictatorship of the most extreme and oppressive
forecast a new, technologically enabled Golden Age. It is the dystopia that lurks within their utopia – the shadow side of the future in which humanity presides over nature and the universe with perfect efficiency and control. More dispiriting than the means, in this case, are the values will animate the society of the future. For the technicians and scientists who would produce such a future seem to lack any vision of culture or human nature, satisfied instead with the infinite perfection of knowledge and means. Their ideals for human cultivation are those of the specialist, narrow and confined to his or her sphere. Nor do they pose any ends or values beyond “happiness,” which they cannot define in any substantive sense now that they know it can be guaranteed under any conditions, that given the proper human techniques individuals can be molded to accept and adjust themselves to any environment. The philosophical upshot of Ellul’s thought experiment, then, is the emptiness of happiness as an end of human effort: in itself it has no substance, and it is possible to imagine a society which is both happy and utterly inhuman.

Much in the substance Ellul’s dystopian vision resonates in Mumford’s depiction of the “megamachine” which has set upon modern civilization. But whereas Ellul’s view of technique as an autonomous and inhuman force seems to leave no prospect for a redemption of modern society, Mumford’s analysis emphasizes that other forms of technological society are possible – humanity need not continue on its course toward the dehumanized future. This potential is kind could achieve the degree of coordination, especially over the many private decisions of individuals, that would be necessary to realize the technological utopia.
most ably illustrated in Mumford’s *Technics & Civilization*, which was published two decades before Ellul’s *Technological Society* and three before Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*. It represents not only his own first foray into the study of technology, but one of the first serious scholarly engagements with the problem of technology whatsoever. The thesis of this work is that technics are “an element in human culture,” animated by our ideals, shaped by our cultural norms, and reaching back to shape our ideals and values in kind, quite the opposite of Ellul’s autonomy thesis.\(^{136}\) Technology therefore appears to Mumford as an ambiguous and underdetermined force, capable of interfacing with human beings and their cultures in a number of different configurations. While this study criticizes much of the role of technology in modern society, it nonetheless ends with the somewhat optimistic argument that the closer integration of humanity and technology will yield a new “biotechnics” in which technology serves and enhances human life, rather than dehumanizing and depersonalizing the human world in the manner of modern machinery.\(^{137}\) During the 1960s, however, Mumford would revisit these questions in a far darker work called *The Myth of the Machine*. While this work develops the inquiry into technics in ways that are fundamentally continuous with Mumford’ early work, it’s diagnosis is far more pessimistic. In the intervening decades, Mumford claims to have witnessed something rather far from the sanguine possibilities he forecasted before the Second World War. Instead, modern technology has taken the form of what he calls

“megatechnics,” which promises to bring the project of mastery to completion through the total conquest of nature and the substitution of an artificial habitat for the organic environment.

Mumford’s narrative aims to show how the machine, understood not as an automaton but as a method of organization, has been attempted in human affairs since the pharaohs of ancient Egypt coerced teams of slaves to building the pyramids. It has recurred throughout history in various socio-technical configurations which aspire to continually enhance their power in the interest of control of nature and humanity. In tracing this “megamachine” as a principle of human organization, Mumford tells the story of how power, order, predictability, and control become ends-in-themselves, imposed by divine command and military coercion on subjected populations in the premodern world, and gradually imposed upon the modern world by mechanization. If this process succeeds, it will not simply be a consequence of the power or prestige of technology, but of the inability of modern civilization to formulate any competing values on the basis of history or culture. For Mumford “the most striking thing about this power complex is its studious indifference to other human needs, norms, and goals; it operates best in what his, historically speaking, an ecological, cultural and personal lunar desert.”

In order to bring technology back into the ambit of human values, Mumford believes we must retrieve a normative conception of humanity and the its relation to technology, such that we have some ideal which can be opposed to the dominance of the megamachine. This pathological

development has been allowed to take root, he argues, because we have come to accept a

distorted image of humanity and human history. The interpretation of our past in terms of the
current notions of progress and mastery has served mostly as a justification for our current
obsessions. “The widened interpretation of the past is a necessary move toward escaping the
dire insufficiencies of current one-generation knowledge. If we do not take the time to review
the past we shall not have sufficient insight to understand the present or command the future:
for the past never leaves us, and the future is already here.”139

Mumford’s humanistic alternative rests on his appreciation of “ritual, art, poetry,
drama, music, dance, philosophy, science, myth, and religion,” which is to say, “the symbolic
activities which give significance both to the processes of work and their ultimate products and
consummations.”140 Technics, however important to history, needs to be situated within the
complex functioning of culture. Mumford thus rejects the characterization of humanity as homo
faber writing that “there was nothing uniquely human in tool-making until it was modified by
linguistic symbols, esthetic designs, and socially transmitted knowledge.”141 By contrast,
Mumford argues that, “What is specifically and uniquely human is man’s capacity to combine a
wide variety of animal propensities into an emergent cultural entity: a human personality…
man is pre-eminently a mind-making, self-mastering, and self-designing animal.”142 The

purpose of technological progress is therefore not to control nature or achieve any other utilitarian purpose, but to utilize and express humanity’s potential for culturally determined (“superorganic”) purposes. Thus, the action of human beings on themselves, individually and socio-culturally, is the main story of human development, one which precedes, determines, and directs our later material and technological efforts. Mumford argues that the cultivation and expression of human potential is the end too which technics ought to be oriented – and he endeavors to show that for much of human history this is precisely the way things have been.

The notes, for example, that he integrity of technics and culture is intimated by the Greek “tekhne” which encompasses both industry, which responds to objective needs, and fine art, which responding to subjective needs. From this point of view, the physiological and behavioral transformation of the human being over time via technics is the main accomplishment of civilization – the use of technics for life in general rather than specifically for work or for power. Mumford argues that humanity set out “to give form to a human self, set apart from his original animal self by the fabrication of symbols – the only tools that could be constructed out of the resources provided by his own body: dreams, image, and sounds.” Technology may aid us in this task, but it cannot replace it or fulfil it. It is when technology is uprooted from the symbolic context of culture, from values and aspirations, that it comes to stand over and against its creator in the dystopian form of the megamachine.

Marcuse’s critique of advanced industrial society echoes many of these underlying concerns, and is premised on a similar narrative of rational mastery gone awry. However, his vision takes on a more radical political character, both in the nature of its diagnosis and in the offered prescription. His distinctive account of technological domination emphasizes that technical rationality is a *political* rationality, one which evolves in tandem with the specific political and economic structures of industrial capitalism. In this respect, he concurs with Horkheimer and Adorno, who wrote, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that the “adverse effects” of technological progress “should not be attributed to the internal laws of technology itself, but to its function within the economy today.”144 The “comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom” which Marcuse set out to expose is produced by new forms of technical control whose ultimate purpose is to insulate the industrial society against radical political change.145 Marcuse therefore concludes, unlike the humanistic critics of modern technology, that a revolution in cultural values will not be enough to stem the tide of technological domination. New ways of thinking will of course be necessary, but the yoke of social control will only be broken by large-scale collective action – a political revolution beginning with the refusal of the system and demanding nothing less than total liberation. Thus, *One-Dimensional Man* entertains both utopian and dystopian futures for modernity. The dystopian hypothesis is that “advanced industrial society is capable of containing qualitative change for the foreseeable future,” while

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144 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 95.
the competing utopian hypothesis is that “forces and tendencies exist which may break this containment and explode the society.”146 As a critical theorist, Marcuse understands his contribution to consist in bringing to consciousness this “choice between historical alternatives,” beginning with the revelation that “the experience, transformation, and organization of nature as the mere stuff of domination” is but one “specific historical project” to which competing projects may be opposed.147

The most insidious consequence of technical control is that it drives the possibility of such an alternative from consciousness. This is what it means to render thought “one-dimensional”: to constrain the political imagination to the reproduction of what already exists. Whereas Marx had been confident that the intolerable conditions of the industrial proletariat would lead them to revolution, Marcuse fears that the historical problem of alienation has been resolved by an ideological and technical system which cultivates those needs which it is capable of meeting, and designates all others as irrational. Thus, industrial society may become “richer, bigger, and better,” in a way that defuses the impetus to radical politics, even as it brings humanity to the threshold of nuclear war and ecological catastrophe.148 The greatest obstacle to liberation is the efficacy with which technological progress and economic affluence suppress

146 Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, xlvii.
147 Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man xlviii. He elaborates: To investigate the roots of these developments and examine their historical alternatives is part of the aim of a critical theory of contemporary society, a theory which analyzes society in the light of its used and unused or abused capabilities for improving the human condition.”
148 Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, p. xli.
dissent, leading individuals to identification with the system as opposed to experiencing alienation from it. As Marcuse writes:

This immediate, automatic identification (which may have been characteristic of primitive forms of association) reappears in high industrial civilization; its new “immediacy,” however, is the product of a sophisticated, scientific management and organization. In this process, the “inner” dimension of the mind in which opposition to the status quo can take root is whittled down. The loss of this dimension, in which the power of negative thinking – the critical power of Reason – is at home, is the ideological counterpart to the very material process in which advanced industrial society silences and reconciles the opposition.149

Marcuse, then, is well aware that revolt will appear irrational so long as the terms of technical rationality are taken for granted, that “the alternatives are Utopian.”150 But he believes that the utopia must be demanded nonetheless. He imagines critical thought and radical politics as progressing tandem, in a “dialectic of liberation” which depends “in the first place on the prevalence of the vital need for abolishing the established systems of servitude; and secondly, and this is decisive, it depends on the vital commitment, the striving, conscious as well as sub- and un-conscious, for the qualitatively different values of a free human existence.”151 In terms of his practical political involvement, Marcuse associated this vision of liberation with the protest of the student counter-culture of the 1960s, whose opposition to the materialistic values of society seemed to embody his call for a Great Refusal. Even moreso than Marcuse himself, Roszak saw the student movement as the only hope for an effective opposition to technocracy.

149 Marcuse One-Dimensional Man, p. 10.
150 Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, p. 145.
“If the resistance of the counterculture fails,” he concludes, “I think there will be nothing in store for us but what anti-utopians like Huxley and Orwell have forecast.”

Though he affirmed much in Marcuse’s account of modernity, and agreed that nothing short of a revolutionary effort could redeem modern society, Fromm envisioned an altogether different type of revolution: a revolution of values which would lead to the *humanization* of technology. Fromm argued that the predicament of modern society was that the project of mastery led to a “one-sided emphasis on technique and material consumption” at the expense of “humanistic values.” He interpreted this situation as the outcome of two dogmas which elevated technology above all competing values: first, that whatever is technically feasible must be done, and second, that efficiency and output must be maximized at all costs. To humanize technology in this context would mean subordinating technological progress and economic growth to some substantive ethical criterion, which is to say, some vision of human flourishing which would serve as a new end for technical development. Fromm believed that the fatalism of thinkers like Ellul stemmed from their focus on the internal logic of the technical system and lack of emphasis on “the human system” out of which it emerges and with which it interacts.

Rather than viewing technology as part of an ongoing or impending process which will result in

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153 Ellul seemed bitterly pessimistic about this prospect; he calls this idea “a pious hope with no chance whatsoever of influencing technical evolution.” Ellul’s pessimism comes from his sense that it is for the most part technicians themselves who are in a position to determine the ends of technique, and they are inclined to construct the inquiry into ends as a technical inquiry, to be established “numerically and mechanistically.” See *Technological Society*, p. 40, p. 431.
the absolute restructuring of human nature, Fromm sees a more dynamic and dialogical process which hypothesizes a wider sphere of human influence. The symptoms of “dissatisfaction with our present way of life, its passiveness and silent boredom, its lack of privacy and its depersonalization, and the longing for a joyful, meaningful existence, which answer the specific needs of man which he had developed in the last few thousand years of his history and which make him different from the animal as well as from the computer” are in fact signs that we have not yet fully succumbed to the demands of our environment and may act to reshape it. Fromm is therefore optimistic about the possibility of “a movement which combines the wish for profound changes in our economic and social practices which changes in our psychic and spiritual approach to life.”

In order for this desire to manifest itself in social change there must be hope that a different kind of social structure is possible. Fromm observes that a superficial optimism about the possibilities of progress masks a deeper sense of “hopelessness” about humanity’s efforts. On the one hand, there are the shattering events of the 20th century that have played out on the world scale. But the phenomena described by the theorists of mass and technological society are also part of the equation, particularly “the formation of the totally bureaucratized industrial society and the powerlessness of the individual vis-a-vis the organization.” Such structures cut off hope because they prevent individuals from realizing their hopes in action. What is

important to realize, Fromm argues, is that hope is not a passive anticipation of improvement or deliverance, but rather a confidence in our ability to act and intervene in our own fate.

Ironically, then, the casual faith in progress, no less than the fantastic projections of utopian thought, may contribute to hopeless rather than working against it. When the anticipation of a utopian future becomes a kind of promissory note which offsets our passivity and powerlessness – the future as compensation for the present – then true hope does not exist. It is where utopian aspirations illuminate real possibilities for change that humanity may chart a course to a better and less endangered future.
4. Theorizing Freedom and Domination

Those who advance a dystopian vision of modernity emphasize its negative potential. They allege that the underlying logic or “rationality” of modern societies poses a special kind of threat to humanity – not human extinction in a literal sense, but rather the dehumanization of humanity. As noted in the preceding chapter, dystopian thinkers in the twentieth century based their normative conceptions of the human on freedom. Crucial to the dystopian outlook was the sense that human freedom was not an intrinsic feature of human nature, but instead a contingent feature of a “human condition” underwritten by intersecting cultural, political, and psychological frameworks which open up the possibility for autonomous action. The danger of modernity, then, is that its characteristic social features – typically systems of industrial or post-industrial production, bureaucratic political organization, and technological control – could undermine human freedom. When critics of modern societies allege that modern social institutions “reduce” their members to number, animals, objects, and so forth, or when they describe modern social interactions as objectifying, instrumentalizing, or commodifying, they make a version of the dehumanization argument, echoing the allegation that in some way the patterns and institutions of modern societies are not appropriate for persons capable of individual and collective self-determination. Further, these patterns are taken to be self-perpetuating, insofar as their success not only restricts the range of freedom but also, perhaps more worryingly, undermines those mutable social and psychological conditions which enable autonomy. The legacy of the dystopian turn for political theory in the later part of the twentieth
century are the critical vocabularies and imaginative constellations by which the problem of modern domination can be thematized.

In this chapter, I attend to three influential diagnoses of modernity which engage with its dystopian potentialities, namely those advanced by Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and Michel Foucault. In each of their bodies of works, we find a sharply articulated concern for modern forms of domination, though also a refinement of the generalized malaises regarding totalitarianism, mass society, and technocracy that were discussed in the preceding chapter. Hannah Arendt, who as we saw was a major contributor the dystopian vision of totalitarianism, went on to develop a wider dystopian theory of modernity in which totalitarianism was simply the most overt and violent outgrowth of tendencies deeply written into modernity. She anticipated that free political activity might be suppressed in favor of instrumental projects which justified violence and coercion, and that the public realm in which such activities unfold would gradually be subsumed to cyclical process of production and consumption. As in her vision of total domination, the “society of laboring animals” entails the suppression of the potential for free activity in favor of predictable mass behavior. Opposed to this is the fragile public realm, a space for individuation and self-determination which civilization has occasionally been able to carve out, but which has to continually be rescued from the crushing weight of natural and, in modernity, pseudo-natural, processes. The insight, which Arendt shared with dystopians like Orwell and Fromm and defended against critics like Reisman and
Voegelin, that freedom was a fragile and revocable civilizational achievement, lies at the heart of her neo-republican conception of politics as a bulwark against total domination.

Arendt’s notion of public freedom is among the points of inspiration for Habermas’ own defense of the autonomous public. A defense of the communicative reason that unfolds in this public setting is at the heart of Habermas’ paradigm of modern rationality, which opposes the capacity for self-direction inherent in moral and political deliberation to the disempowering and depoliticizing systems of technical rationality. The dystopian outcome which most haunts Habermas is a variation on the technocracy thesis, a distorted realization of modernity’s rational potential which heightens the degree of control exercised by markets, bureaucracies, and their expert spokespeople, relegating democratic politics to a subservient role in the overall integration and legitimation of society. Technocratic consciousness, Habermas maintains, is an ideological disposition which obscures the moral and political stakes of collective decision-making and, more than that, diminishes the communicative resources of the social lifeworld which make such discourses possible. In my discussion of Habermas, I emphasize the way that this critique of technocratic consciousness leads him to articulate the infrastructure for his mature theory of communicative action and its accompanying diagnoses of a lifeworld “colonized” by systems – even as the core ethical motives for this critique remain obscure – and even sets the stage for his later intervention in the debate over genetic engineering.

In Foucault’s rendering of modernity, what occurs is not the emergence of a singular system of domination but the proliferation and intersection of various networks of power and
control which subjugate the individual in the name of efficiency, productivity, and security. The vividness with which Foucault’s investigations depict the “swarming” of disciplinary institutions, apparatuses of surveillance and regulation, and other sophisticated techniques for the observation and micro-management of populations makes him one of the most provocative critics of dystopian modernity. Particularly unnerving is Foucault’s sense of how these processes are internalized by the individual, not simply impeding pre-given potentialities but constituting the very fabric of identity such that the constraints and limitations they impose are naturalized. While many of Foucault’s readers have taken this image of modernity to be despairing and normatively impoverished, Foucault himself maintained that this situation was not as desolate as it appeared. Intermeshing with the great modern circuitry of power and domination are “technologies of the self,” that is, practices for critically reshaping oneself and one’s relations to others. Foucault’s political ethos of critique should therefore be understood in tandem with his personal ethos of freedom, as both of which evince his concern with resisting conceptual discourses and institutional patterns that close off future possibilities in the interest of control. To be aware of one’s place within systems of control is to be capable of taking a strategic stance toward the limitations they impose, and it is the reflective renegotiation of these limitations which Foucault takes to be the purpose of ethics.

If we take Arendt, Habermas, and Foucault as instructive cases, then we can conclude that, however strong their condemnation of at least some tendencies within modernity, dystopian critics are not fatalistic about our prospects. They can and should be distinguished
from critics of modernity such as Weber, Heidegger, and Adorno who maintain that its potential has been exhausted by its negativity. Their argument is not that modern society must issue forth an unshakeable regime of domination, but that so long as we live out collective existences structured by instrumental or technical rationalities, we will have to operate with the critical awareness that they might overwhelm or undermine freedom. Thus, each of these thinkers – though Habermas notably more so and Foucault notably less so – has contrasted their vision of dystopian modernity with an attempt at retrieval. For Arendt and Foucault, this has often taken the form of a historical recovery, to explore alternative political and ethical figurations inspired by pre-modern practices of freedom and to think about how they can be made to resonate in the modern world. Habermas is more confident that the critique of domination can be conducted adequately within the intellectual framework of the Enlightenment. But all three believe that the power of modern societies can be wielded responsibly and in a way that is consistent with human freedom, even if such potential is, factually speaking, only realized in fugitive intervals.

It is also worth noting that none of these thinkers evince any faith whatsoever in political utopianism – not even Habermas, whose work has sometimes been characterized as utopian. Certainly, Habermas is most attuned to the positive achievements of modern rationality, and his confidence that what is constructive and conducive to freedom in modernity can be separated from that which is pathological has led him to counterpoint his criticisms of the dystopian patterns with at least the possibility for redemption. But like Arendt and
Foucault, he has declined to put forward a specific blueprint for the future society and repudiated attempts to project a theoretically derived utopia in advance of the constructive visions which would be worked out in concrete situations of political struggle. We can observe similar maneuvers by Arendt and by Foucault, both insofar as they present skeptical arguments against utopian political programs, and also insofar as their positive proposals emphasize the open and underdetermined nature of free action. Rather than trying to depict in concrete terms which goods should be pursued by free subjects, either individually or collectively, each of these thinkers instead reflects on the minimal conditions which would need to be in place for free activity to remain possible. Thus, their critiques are in keeping with the spirit of the dystopian imagination to the extent that they prioritize the avoidance of a *summum malum* characterized by domination rather than the enactment of a specific vision of the good society or the good life.

**The Abyss of the Possible: Arendt and the Republicanism of Fear**

In all of her thinking about the possibilities for freedom and domination in the modern world, Arendt never exercised the specter of totalitarianism. The terrifying extent to which totalitarian regimes had proven capable of destroying political freedom through terror, yoking freedom of thought to ideological dogma, and, most disturbingly, eliminating spontaneity and personality under conditions of total domination, revealed to Arendt the startling vulnerability of characteristics that other commentators took to be the immutable expressions of human
nature. Totalitarianism may have been novel in this respect, but this did not mean that it was entirely unique. Having seen the degradation of humanity to which these regimes were liable, Arendt looked out onto the modern world and saw tendencies which, though less cruel and less violent, pointed toward similar ends. The work in which Arendt’s dystopian thinking is most vivid is The Human Condition, in which Arendt proposes “a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears.”¹ At a time when modern science promises unheralded possibilities for the “future man,” promising the “conquest of space,” to “create life in a test tube,” and to “extend man’s life-span far beyond the hundred-year limit,” Arendt sees humanity in danger of oblivion, imagining futures in which “the stature of man would not simply be lowered by all standards we know of, but have been destroyed.”² And yet the principal danger she confronts in this work is not political or technological domination. Her dystopian rendering of “the laboring society,” in which humanity persists as a passive and undifferentiated “animal species,” behaving predictably and uniformly, isolated from another and from the public world, may be understood as a variation on the mass society thesis, where the principal source of domination are conformity and an ever-accelerating cycle of production and consumption.³ The public realm must withstand these forces, or else “freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance.”⁴ To emphasize

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³ Arendt, Human Condition, p.4; p. 320.
⁴ Arendt, “What is Freedom?” in Between Past and Future, p. 147.
the dystopian dimension of Arendt’s thinking is, to some extent, to prioritize what has been called her “republicanism of fear” over her “republicanism of redemption” or of “hope.” After all, Arendt was not content to argue that we should value the public only as a safeguard against the worst possibilities of our civilization, thought this would seem reason enough. She emphasizes throughout her work that the public realm and the forms of speech and action which it supports sustain some of the highest capacities of humanity, and allow us to realize some of our noblest aspirations. The public is a kind of theatre, a “space of appearances,” where we can disclose our individuality, discover opportunities for acting in concert, and, when we rise to our circumstances, even leave a legacy of words and deeds that will outlast our deaths. These are the fulfilments of freedom, and Arendt takes them as seriously as she does the threats to freedom. And yet it is impossible to mistake Arendt’s overwhelming concern for the fragility of freedom, and of the public world in which it unfolds, or the urgency of her attempt to recover an ideal of freedom that stands in danger of being irretrievably lost.

Arendt’s basic understanding of domination evolved in response to the novel danger of totalitarianism. She shared the dystopian outlook of writers like Orwell, who rejected the complacent assumption that human nature would establish a limit on totalitarian domination,

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5 These appellations have been used by a number of scholars, principally to emphasize the generative role of the encounter with totalitarianism in Arendt’s thought. Examples include Peter Baehr, ed., in his introduction to The Portable Hannah Arendt (New York: Penguin, 2000), Tony Judt in Chapter 1 of Thinking the Twentieth Century (New York, Penguin 2012), p. xlii; and Rainer Forst in Chapter 8 of Justification and Critique: Towards a Critical Theory of Politics (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

and took seriously the possibility that human freedom could be expunged. As discussed in the preceding chapter, Arendt’s account of total domination conveyed the distinctive threat which totalitarianism posed to humanity, it’s potential to bring about “a more radical liquidation of human freedom as a political and as a human reality than anything we have ever witnessed before.” Through terror, Arendt argued, totalitarianism had carried out an unprecedented destruction of the human capacity for action, but the furthest extreme of domination, which went entailed the destruction of spontaneity and personality as well, had only been possible amid the isolation and relentless dehumanization of the concentration camps. It would be an exaggeration to say that Arendt feared the same outcome could result from the subtler degradations of mass society; for even as she worried that mass society would reduce its inhabitants to “laboring animals,” total domination went further still, “transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something that even animals are not.” Even so, Arendt maintained that acknowledgment of this prospect had allowed her to “asses the possibilities of total domination and a glimpse into the abyss of the ‘possible.’” As such, Arendt’s philosophical interpretation of totalitarianism yields insights which will structure her later thinking about freedom and domination, as it clarifies the limits of domination as well as the conditions which make it possible. This proves important with respect to Arendt’s later

8 Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 438.
9 Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 437.
diagnosis of modernity, as she discerns parallel tendencies in mass society which she argues will, if left unchecked, overcome the fragile basis of human freedom.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt concludes that totalitarian domination was made possible by a deliberate transformation of society through the means of terror. The first consequence of domination is that it destroys human plurality, which for Arendt refers to the condition of being a distinct individual among other individuals.\(^{10}\) This is what distinguishes humans from other animals, who are merely interchangeable members of their species. Political freedom as Arendt understands it exists only on the condition of plurality, but total domination represent a project to “to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual,” and to fabricate “a kind of human species whose only ‘freedom’ would consist in ‘preserving the species.’”\(^{11}\) Likewise, Arendt says of terror that it “substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality has disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions.”\(^{12}\) In both instances, the destruction of plurality looks like the enforced unanimity and regimentation of totalitarian society. The metaphor of constriction draws attention to the way in which terror destroys “the living space of freedom,” by preventing people from coming together and exchanging their perspectives freely. “By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them,” Arendt explains, “It

\(^{10}\) Arendt, *Human Condition*, pp. 7 – 8.

\(^{11}\) Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 437.

destroys the one essential prerequisite of all freedom which is simply the capacity of motion
which cannot exist without space.” It is this space, as we shall see, in which free people can
come together in order to constitute a common world. Without this capacity, they are left in a
condition of isolation, and as Arendt in all of her reflections on politics, the isolation of citizens
from one another is the condition most favorable to despotism. This is what it means to destroy
freedom as a political reality.\textsuperscript{13} Taken further still, domination means not only the destruction of
political freedom, and with it the capacity for action, but also the personality and spontaneity of
the individual. Since plurality and individuality are closely related, total domination must
destroy the latter as well, and “to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man’s power
to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the
basis of reactions to the environment and events.”\textsuperscript{14} Likewise, terror must eliminate “the very
source of freedom which is given with the fact of the birth of man and resides in his capacity to
make a new beginning.”\textsuperscript{15} Terror and total domination both point toward the destruction of
freedom, though the former is more absolute. From her reflections on both phenomena, we can
distill an account of domination which emphasizes that domination becomes possible where
plurality is reduced to uniformity and where citizens are isolated from the common world, as
\textit{plurality} and \textit{worldliness} are the conditions which sustain the capacity for action. The ultimate

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{13} Arendt, “What Is Freedom?,” p. 147. Just as Orwell believed that the destruction of free speech was tied to the
destruction of free thought, Arendt takes little consolation in the idea that the desire for freedom would live in our
hearts while being deprived of its “wordly reality.”
\footnote{14} Arendt, \textit{Origins of Totalitarianism}, p. 455.
\footnote{15} Arendt, \textit{Origins of Totalitarianism}, p. 466
\end{footnotes}
consequence of domination is the loss of individuality. Though Arendt rarely uses the term domination outside the context of totalitarianism, she observes the same patterns in her discussion of mass society.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt develops a more comprehensive account of this capacity for action, and in doing so gives an expanded account of what human freedom is, what conditions it depends on, and which forms of domination threaten it in modern society. True to her claim that totalitarianism was but one expression of a modernity in crisis, she detects structurally similar forms of domination setting upon modern societies, which confront their own tendencies toward the destruction of plurality and the public realm. In the case of modern mass societies, this is not accomplished through terror or ideology, but a more complex process which Arendt refers to generally as the triumph of the laboring society, with both labor and society occupying distinct roles in Arendt’s critical lexicon. Arendt believes that insofar as the laboring activities, or, “life process” of the species – which includes possibilities for cyclical activities of production and consumption, but not the for the less determinate activity which she calls action as such – intrudes into the public, then a kind of herdlike conformity reigns. Not only does Arendt see this process as tending toward the same conclusions which she highlighted in her theory of domination, namely the atrophy of action, spontaneity, and personality, she also deploys similar rhetoric and imagery to illustrate the outcome, including the reduction of spontaneous action to predictable behavior and the reduction of humanity to an animal species.
To some extent, the dystopia of The Human Condition can be understood as a variation on the mass society thesis. Arendt’s claims about the nature of mass society are certainly alarming; for example, she writes that “mass society, where man as a social animal rules supreme and where apparently the survival of the species could be guaranteed on a world-wide scale, can at the same time threaten humanity with extinction.”\(^{16}\) But Arendt’s description of mass society is nonetheless highly idiosyncratic, introducing a number of important complications to the accounts described in the preceding chapter. Initially, Arendt does not seem to affirm the strong association between conformity and mass society evinced by critics like Fromm, Riesman, and Mills. She argues that conformity is not unique to mass society, and that is in the nature of society, or what she will sometimes refer to as “the social” to demand conformity.\(^{17}\) Society itself, she writes, “tends to ‘normalize its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action our outstanding achievement.’\(^{18}\) This social world needs to be hemmed in by the private, on one side, as well as by the public, on the other; the former provides a shelter from the pressures of conformity, while the latter provides a space for individuation. So long as these conditions are in place, the pressures of the social will not become absolute. When Arendt

\(^{16}\) Arendt, Human Condition, p. 46.

\(^{17}\) As Hannah Pitkin has vividly illustrated, “the social” is almost invariably an antagonistic force in Arendt: “In The Human Condition society or the social is variously said to ‘absorb,’ ‘embrace,’ ‘devour,’ people or other entities; to ‘emerge,’ ‘rise,’ ‘grow,’ and ‘let loose’ growth; to ‘enter,’ ‘intrude’ upon and ‘conquer’ realms or spheres; to ‘constitute’ and ‘control,’ ‘pervert’ and ‘transform’; to ‘impose’ rules on people, ‘demand’ certain conduct from them; to ‘exclude’ or ‘refuse to admit’ other conduct, or people; to ‘try to cheat’ people and act under a ‘guise.’ It’s like a science-fiction story: an evil monster, a Blob, entirely external to and separate from us, has appeared as if from outer space, intent on taking us over, gobbling up our freedom and our politics.” See her Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p.4.

\(^{18}\) Arendt, The Human Condition, p. 40.
expresses anxiety about the “unnatural conformism of mass society,” and it is clear that she has in mind something qualitatively different from the ordinary effects of the social.\textsuperscript{19} First and foremost, Arendt understands mass society as a context in which the reach and power of conformity has been amplified and universalized. “The rise of mass society,” she writes, “indicates that the various social groups have suffered the same absorption into one society.”\textsuperscript{20} Thus, like several preceding theorists of mass society, she maintains that the leveling of social distinctions has produced an atomized society in which the abstracted expectations and judgments of public opinion reach further than any more definite or particular sense of identity. Thus, “with the emergence of mass society, the realm of the social has finally, after several centuries of development, reached the point where it embraces and controls all members of a given community equally and with equal strength.” Second, Arendt claims that the scale of mass societies creates a strengthens the incentive to conformity, since deviation from norms will stand out more starkly against a large number who behave uniformly. “Large numbers of people, crowded together, develop an almost irresistible inclination toward despotism, be this the despotism of a person or of majority rule,” she notes, adding that as numbers increase, so do “conformism, behaviorism, and automatism in human affairs.”\textsuperscript{21}

The consequence of mass society is an increase in what Arendt calls behavior, which is predictable, and most importantly from the perspective of her theory of domination, devoid of

\textsuperscript{19} Arendt, \textit{Human Condition}, p. 58.
\textsuperscript{20} Arendt, \textit{Human Condition}, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{21} Arendt, \textit{Human Condition}, p. 43.
spontaneity. A mass society is one in which “behavior has replaced action as the foremost mode of human relationships.” Here, Arendt’s critique of mass society intersects with her criticism of the behaviorist theories then advanced in the social sciences, perhaps the most well-known of which was B.F. Skinner’s controversial argument that human activity could be understood simply by reference to its conditions and its consequences – that given these, the outcomes would follow automatically.

Whereas other social scientists have attacked the theory of behaviorism on epistemic and methodological grounds, Arendt made a more provocative claim: that the world the behaviorists had constructed in theory was being brought about in practice by the conditions of mass society. Likewise, it is hard to ignore the parallels between Arendt’s claim that the behavioral sciences “aim to reduce man as a whole, in all his activities, to the level of a conditioned and behaving animal,” and her diagnosis of total domination.

But such explanations have only become plausible because “mass society has devoured all strata of the nation and ‘social behavior’ has become the standard for all regions of life.” However wildly it departs from her own underlying assumptions about human activity under human conditions, the philosophical anthropology of behaviorism provides a valid explanation of what humanity would be and do under dystopian conditions. As Arendt argues:

The unfortunate truth about behaviorism and the validity of its ‘laws’ is that the more people there are, the more likely they are to behave and the less likely to tolerate non-

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22 T Arendt, Human Condition, p. 41.
23 Though Skinner’s theory struck many as dystopian, he thought it had utopian applications, particularly for education. His Walden Two as the ignoble distinction of being a seriously intended utopia that is widely read as a dystopia.
24 Arendt, Human Condition, p. 45.
behavior. Statistically this will be shown in the leveling out of fluctuation. In reality, deeds will have less and less chance to stem the tide of the behavior, and events will more and more lose their significance. Statistical uniformity is by no means a harmless scientific ideal; it is the no longer secret political ideal of a society, which, entirely submerged in the routine of everyday living, is at peace with the scientific outlook inherent in its very existence.25

And elsewhere: “The trouble with modern theories of behaviorism is not that they are wrong but that they could become true, that they actually are the best possible conceptualization of certain obvious trends in modern society.”26 Therefore, the first way in which mass society threatens the human capacity for action is by increasing the pressures of conformity, leading to the domination of action by behavior.

But this is not the extent of mass society’s threat to freedom. Insofar as mass society leads to an increase in uniformity, it deprives humanity of the experience of plurality. For to be plural human beings must be individuals, possessed of their own distinct perspectives, and they must be able to encounter one another and to constitute a public world. Arendt argues that the expansion of the social can only happen on the condition that “the public realm has almost completely receded.”27 “What makes mass society so difficult to bear,” she elaborates, “is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate, and to separate them,” remarking on the “weirdness” of a situation where humanity would “no longer be separated but also would

25 Arendt, Human Condition, p. 43.
26 Arendt, Human Condition, p. 322.
27 Arendt, Human Condition, p. 52.
be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible.”  

The idea that humanity is crushed together in a way that compromises both space and separation, which is to say, the public world, indicates another structural similarity between the conditions of mass society and the “iron band” of terror which “presses masses of men together.” And just as Arendt described the outcome of that process as the merging of humanity into a single organism, she notes that the same can occur “under conditions of mass society or mass hysteria,” wherein “all people suddenly behave as though they were members of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of his neighbor.” When human beings no longer occupy and express distinct perspectives on the world, then they are “deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them” just as much as if they were isolated. “They are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times. The end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective.”

This vision of mass society, while already quite dystopian, is not the final step in the transformation which Arendt understands modern society to be undergoing. There is a greater danger posed by the conditions of mass society, that is to say, under the conditions where the social has infiltrated and subsumed the public. This is the phenomenon which Arendt refers to

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as “the emancipation of labor.” By labor Arendt means the activities which sustain “the life of the species,” and as indicated above, these processes are cyclical in nature, concerned with production and consumption, or what Arendt sometimes refers to as the human metabolism with nature. Arendt’s remark that under total domination, humanity’s freedom would consist only in the preservation of the species is our first clue that she takes something to be grossly awry in modernity when she notes that “through society it is the life process itself which in one form or another has been channeled into the public realm.” When the public realm is only concerned with the life process of the species, that is, with consumption, production, and economic growth, then Arendt argues, it has lost its vital function as a realm for free action.

Labor may be more natural than action, but for Arendt there is nothing characteristically human about it, which is why she argues that in society each person is “not truly a human being” but “a specimen of the animal species mankind, and further, that the “unnatural growth, so to speak, of the natural” poses a vital threat to human civilization. Unlike some anti-modernists who seek a return to nature, such as Rousseau and the romantics, Arendt is a humanist in the sense that she attaches great significance to the cultivating effects of civilization. The artificial world created through generations of human effort creates the conditions under which humans can act freely, as this can only occur where the incessant demands of the life process are held at bay. As Arendt explains elsewhere, “Where men live together but do not form a body politics –

31 Arendt, Human Condition, p.130.
32 Arendt, Human Condition, p. 45.
33 Arendt, Human Condition, p. 46.
as, for example, in tribal societies or in the privacy of the household – the factors ruling their actions and conduct are not freedom but the necessities of life and concern for its preservation.”\textsuperscript{34} It is the predominance of such concerns, and their crowding out of the space for action, that Arendt takes to the central source of domination in the laboring society. To this transformation, she projects the following outcome:

The last stage of the laboring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life had actually been submerged in the over-all life process of the species and the only active decision still required of the individual were to let go, so to speak, to abandon his individuality, the still individually sensed pain and trouble of living, and acquiesce in a dazed ‘tranquilize,’ functional type of behavior… It is quite conceivable that the modern age – which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity – may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known.\textsuperscript{35}

Once this process of degeneration has been set into motion, Arendt sees little chance that it will be stemmed or reversed. Arendt held no confidence in Marx’s great alternative, of emancipating human’s from the necessity of labor. Arendt reflects on the possibilities, still entertained in her time by thinkers like Marcuse, of achieving such an anticipation through automation. Recalling that Arendt’s specialized definition of labor includes a both production and consumption, it is first important to note that an emancipation from labor would not truly be possible. Even if machines took over the production process, humanity would still face the necessity of consumption. Indeed, with possibilities for action decreasing under the conditions of mass society, Arendt wonders if such a society would have anything left to do but consume.

\textsuperscript{34} Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” p.147.
\textsuperscript{35} Arendt, Human Condition, p. 32.
“Painless and effortless consumption would not change but would only increase the devouring character of biological life,” she argues, such that humanity “would be free to ‘consume the whole world and to reproduce all things it wished to consume.”36 The material things of the world “would appear and disappear daily and hourly in the life process of such a society,” and the “durability” of the human world would be worn away. Arendt understands these concerns to be remote from those that have motivated dystopian visions of technological domination. From her perspective, the question is not “whether we are the masters or the slaves of our machines, but whether machines still serve the world and its things, or if, on the contrary, they and the automatic motion of their processes have begun to rule and even destroy world and things.”37

While Arendt is obviously not sanguine about the role of technology in modern life, it’s consequences are epiphenomenal with respect to her overarching criticism of mass society: technology may accelerate and intensify the distinctive activities of the laboring society, but it is not ultimately a source of domination or emancipation on its own. However, this wearing away of the world presents yet another way, along with the subordination of plurality to uniformity, and action to labor, that modern society has been brought to the precipice of what Arendt calls “worldlessness.” Evidently, Arendt does not think that the human world can withstand the further intensification of production and consumption, and once “the assumption that the

36 Arendt, Human Condition, p. 132.
37 Arendt, Human Condition, p. 152.
world will not last” is allowed, then “worldlessness, in one form another, will begin to dominate the political scene” because “the existence of a public realm and the world’s subsequent transformation into a community of things which gathers men together and relates them to each other depends entirely on permanence.”\textsuperscript{38} The acceleration of the life process can therefore be assumed to intensify the already significant “worldlessness of the animal laborans,” who “does not flee the world but is ejected from it in so far as he is imprisoned in the privacy of his own body, caught in the fulfilment of needs in which nobody can share and which nobody can fully communicate.”\textsuperscript{39} As these negative descriptions indicate, the human world as Arendt understands it is the totality of share contexts and meanings within which and in light of which human beings may encounter one another in their uniqueness and plurality. As we noted in the preceding discussion, the distinctive scourge of totalitarianism was that it was able, through terror, to destroy any such contexts, and, through ideology, to disable the common sense by which individuals remain tethered to the common world even as they approach it from different perspectives. If worldlessness is a precondition of total domination, then the phenomena which Arendt has uncovered in mass society should be of grave concern to those who wish to prevent modernity from lapsing into its own distinctive pattern of domination. Arendt had already seen such a prospect on the horizon as she was completing her study of totalitarianism, where she wrote that human beings are subjected to an unbearable isolation “in

\textsuperscript{38} Arendt, \textit{Human Condition}, pp. 54-55.
\textsuperscript{39} Arendt, \textit{Human Condition}, pp. 118-119.
a world whose chief values, are dictated by labor, that is where all human activities have been transformed into laboring,” precisely because each person would now be treated “as an animal laborans whose necessary ‘metabolism with nature’ is of concern to no one. Isolation then becomes loneliness,” and it is a society of lonely people who are most vulnerable to totalitarianism.40

In a society that had progressed to this point, whether totalitarian or not, it would go without saying that the public realm would be eclipsed by the social and its herdlike behavior, perhaps irrecoverably. The crucible of totalitarian terror clarified the connection between public and world, and now, in mass society, the public stands in danger of being lost rather than crushed. Arendt writes that “the term public signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it,” and the public includes “the affairs which go on among those who inhabit the world together,” which means that there cannot be a public world when each of its potential inhabitants is concerned only with their private activities of production and consumption.41 Further, “the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself,” which means that the public realm becomes unreal when all perspectives are merged into the uniformity of a social mass. And finally, insofar as to “live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in

40 Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 475.
41 Arendt, Human Condition, p. 52.
common,” there cannot be a public in the extreme case of the laboring society, which has neither world nor things, but a continuous flux of fungible goods that are made only to be consumed on demand.

In this sense, the disappearance of the public takes the form of a vicious cycle, as it is both a cause and outcome of mass society. And to the extent that the public falls into decay, the capacities in light of which it might be retrieved grow dimmer as well. Without the public, the mass social trend toward uniformity grows stronger, because it is within the public sphere that human beings have an opportunity to disclose themselves to one another in their “uniqueness,” and to experience what Arendt calls the “paradoxical plurality of unique beings.”42 It is specifically by “acting and speaking” in public that “men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities, and thus make their appearance in the human world.”43 Though Arendt’s philosophical anthropology evidently privileges the capacity to act, speech is itself a closely related activity, sharing in the “worldliness” of action and thought, which do not “produce” but aspire to “become worldly things, that is deeds and facts and events and patterns of thoughts or ideas,” a condition of which is that they must first be seen, heard and remembered.”44 Speech in particular “corresponds to the fact of distinctness and is the

42 Arendt, Human Condition, p. 176.
43 Arendt, Human Condition, p. 178.
44 Arendt, Human Condition, p. 95.
actualization of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique being among equals.”

Just as the desiccation of the public diminishes the possibility for speech, which endows the world with meaning, it also spells the end of the human capacity to act, which endows the world with new possibilities. Arendt argues that “to act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin,” or else “to set something into motion.” If there is to be any redemption for the modern world, it will have to be born of action. And yet this capacity is endangered not only by those who prefer the comforting regularity of labor to the risks of action, but also by those who would substitute the certainty of making, or fabrication. There is perhaps no greater example of this in politics than the kind of political utopianism which imposes its “model” or “blueprint” on reality, as though human beings were a raw material to be sculpted, and which imagines that the human world could, as in the crafting of an object, be “entirely determined by the categories of means and end.” Arendt believes that to approach politics from the standpoint of fabrication invites political violence. But more than that, it jeopardizes the distinctive internal good of action, namely, its freedom and indeterminacy. When one makes in accord with a pre-determined scheme, then “what guides the work of fabrication is outside the fabricator and precedes the actual work.” This would entail that the outcome of our efforts had

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already been decided in advance. In Arendt’s typology of human activities, only fabrication has “a definite beginning and definite predictable end.” By contrast, labor, “caught in the cyclical movement of the body’s life processes, has neither a beginning nor an end,” while action “though it may have a definite beginning, never, as we shall see, has a predictable end.” It follows from this conclusion that even as we search for alternatives to the crushing forces of mass society, we do not fall prey to the malign forms of political utopianism which try to prescribe the form of our social world in advance. This temptation is deeply written into the tradition of political thought, as Arendt reminds us with her reflection on Plato, and perhaps even more deeply written into the outlook of modern utopianism. To succumb to the utopian temptation would be to substitute one kind of domination for another. Arendt demurs from such utopian excesses. Though there is a sense in which her vision of the public is “utopian,” it is only in the imprecise sense that any ideal can be called a utopia. But Arendt’s vision of the public does not try to prescribe in advance the ends which freely acting citizens should pursue, only to remind them of the conditions under which they will have the capacity for action to begin with. To access the manifold possibilities of freedom, we must be willing to forgo the project of mastery.

50 Arendt, Human Condition, p. 143.
51 Arendt, Human Condition, p. 144. Arendt’s argument here has widely been interpreted, including by Habermas, as a retrieval of the Aristotelian distinction between praxis (action) and techne (production). An invaluable source for understanding the stakes of this retrieval is Joseph Dunne’s study, Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997). Chapter 3 discusses the distinction between acting and making in The Human Condition.
As such, Arendt’s hopes for humanity in the modern age are pinned on what cannot be known or planned ahead of its happening. Though much of the world now seems to be dominated by deterministic forces, Arendt reminds us that, “The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amount to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle.” Even when the public has fallen into disrepair, and the people feel isolated and powerless, Arendt would not counsel despair. After all, the “boundlessness” of action, the potential for action to unfold in unexpected ways, is “characteristic not of political action alone.” Even when we act alone, by virtue of not being alone in the world the outcomes of our actions may defy our expectations; even “the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation.”

**Antinomies of a Rational Society: Habermas Between Utopia and Dystopia**

*Toward a rational society:* this phrase, which provides the title for a collection of Habermas’ early writings on science, technology, and politics, expresses a profound ambiguity.

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which lays at the heart of his thinking about the modern prospect.\textsuperscript{54} Habermas does not doubt that a more rational society lies ahead, but the process by which it will emerge and the final shape that it will take remains undetermined. Will the rational society express the best hopes of the Enlightenment, wherein human freedom advances side by side with scientific knowledge and technological power? Or will it be more like Weber’s “iron cage” or Marcuse’s “one-dimensional” society? Looking out on the contentious political climate of the 1960s, Habermas saw tendencies toward both futures, monitoring closely, as had Marcuse, the confrontation between student radicals and the increasingly technocratic university here – not because he believed the students would lead a revolutionary effort, but because he saw their protest as a microcosm of the conflict between the democratic public and the expanding administrative state. Decades later, he would reflect that the situation remained obscure, that it was still unclear whether the “plans for rational forms of life” which had emerged from the tradition of modern utopianism could be separated from their “deceptive symbiosis with the rational domination of nature and the mobilization of social energies.”\textsuperscript{55} While the utopian promise of a “humane, egalitarian, and at the same time libertarian” society seemed an ever more remote possibility, the outlines of an altogether more dystopian outcome were omnipresent and impossible to ignore:


Today it seems as if the utopian energies have been used up, as it they had withdrawn from historical reflection. The horizon of the future has now narrowed itself and in doing so has fundamentally changed both the Zeitgeist and politics, at least in Western Europe. The future is occupied with the merely negative; on the threshold to the 21st century we find the terrifying panorama of a world-wide threat to the interests of life in general; the spiral of the arms race, uncontrolled proliferations of automatic weapons, structural impoverishment of developing countries, unemployment and growing social imbalance in the developed countries, problems of overburdening the environment, and the nearly catastrophic operations of high technology are the catchwords that penetrate by way of the mass media into public consciousness.56

Modernity had come to a crisis of confidence, Habermas concluded, and at this critical juncture, the best that its political and intellectual leaders had to offer were expressions of helplessness, either complacent apologetics for the status quo trafficked under the auspices of realism, or the totalizing skepticism of postmodern thought. Neither position would fulfil the need “to find orientation determined by and directed toward the future.” One might expect Habermas to respond to this predicament by offering his own utopian project, and indeed, several interpreters have taken Habermas’ notion of the ideal communication community to serve precisely this function.57 Habermas himself refuted the suggestion that his theory of

57 Foucault, for example, remarks “I have always had a problem insofar as he gives communicative relations this place which is so important and, above all, a function that I would call ‘utopian’. The idea that there could exist a state of communication that would allow games of truth to circulate freely, without any constraints or coercive effects, seems utopian to me.” See Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in The Essential Foucault, eds. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (London: The New Press, 1994), p. 39. Whether Habermas assumption is utopian in the sense of being overly idealistic, and whether or to what extent this compromises its value as a heuristic, is a legitimate question, though it is clear that Habermas does not propose his communicative ideal as the modern utopians did their own, that is, as a concrete social vision to be worked out in real historical and political life. For a balanced consideration of this debate, see James Tully, “To Think and Act Differently: Foucault’s Four Reciprocal Objections to Habermas’ Theory,” in Foucault Contra Habermas: Recasting the Debate Between Genealogy and Critical Theory, eds. Ashenden, Samantha, and Owen, David (London: Sage Publications, 1999).
communicative action “proposes, or at least suggests, a rationalistic utopian society,” writing that he does not regard “the fully transparent,” “homogenized,” or “unified” society as an ideal, and does not wish to suggest any other idea. 58 Social theory as Habermas understands it and practices it, has no basis from which to “project desirable forms of life into the future,” and should instead focus on “criticizing existing forms of life.” 59 This is not the only moment at which the underappreciated moment of negativity comes to the fore in Habermas’ thinking. In a somewhat different context, he has remarked that, “Negative versions of the moral principle seem to be a step in the right direction. They heed the prohibition of graven images, refrain from positive depiction, and as in the case of discourse ethics, refer negatively to the damaged life instead of pointing affirmatively to the good life.” 60

What Habermas prescribes in theory, he has also demonstrated in practice, as his thinking has evolved at several critical junctures in response to dystopian visions of modernity, “negative utopias” which condense the tendencies he wishes to criticize in the present. The most significant of these, the particular sumnum malum which recurs throughout Habermas’ body of work, is a variation on the technocracy thesis, though some of what Habermas has said about the desiccation of the public sphere by economic interests and the concomitant expansion

59 Habermas, “Philosophico-Political Profile,” p. 168.
of the public sphere also reflects the influence of mass society theory. But the specter of technocratic domination to which I am referring has manifested itself more vividly, and more frequently, across the various stages of Habermas’ intellectual development. It first appears in his writings on the dangers of “technocratic consciousness” from the 1960s, in many ways setting the agenda for his mature theory of communicative action and the anxieties it expresses about the “colonization of the lifeworld” by systems. And Habermas has continued to confront this possibility in the twenty-first century, warning against the potential for the “technological domination” of human nature through genetic engineering and exposing “the lure of technocracy” as it occurs in European politics. Each of these threats replicate the internal logic of the technocratic phenomenon as Habermas understands it, and each instance he responds to the threat by drawing on normative concepts which originated in his early critique of technocracy.

As he encountered it during the 1960s, Habermas associated the threat of technocracy with two distinct programs – both the dystopian program of Jacques Ellul, who warned of incipient technological program, and the reactionary program of German conservatives such as Arnold Gehlen and Helmut Schelsky. We have already seen that Ellul imagined a dystopian

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64 See note 2 in Habermas, “The Scientization of Politics and Public Opinion,” in *Toward a Rational Society*. 244
scenario in which technique becomes autonomous, and, in doing so, detaches itself from the cultural and political determination of human societies before finally returning to absorb its creators into the technical system. Schesky’s vision of technocracy is less apocalyptic, but it shares foundational assumptions with Ellul’s. In “Man in Scientific Civilization,” Schelsky wrote that “Modern technology requires no legitimacy; with it man ‘rules’ because it functions,” the political consequence of which is that “the statesman is not all ‘decision-maker’ or ‘ruler’ but rather analyst, planner, executor. Politics in the sense of normative will-formation falls in principle outside of these realms.” For Schelsky, then, the promise of technocracy is precisely what Ellul perceives to be the threat: that the social system as a whole can be steered by technological imperatives, managed by administrators whose job is to anticipate and accommodate said imperatives rather than to direct them. Consequently, Habermas emphasizes the threat that technocracy poses to democracy, insofar as it cuts the process of public will-formation off from any meaningful role in political decision-making – or even denies that there are any political decisions left to make. Political autonomy notwithstanding, Habermas also suggests that technocracy poses an existential threat insofar as it dissolves the underlying moral grammar of human society, which is premised on norms of freedom and reciprocity. Technocracy bodes nothing less than “the dissolution of the sphere of linguistically mediated interaction by the structure of purposive-rational action. This is paralleled subjectively by the

disappearance of the difference between purposive-rational action and interaction from the consciousness not only of the sciences of man, but of men themselves.”⁶⁶ Put otherwise, the technocratic ideology denies that there are moral or political questions which cannot be reduced to questions of rationally adjusting means to ends. And since the ends themselves cannot be scientifically determined, they fall below the level of rational discourse.

The technocratic project acquired some of its momentum for reasons that were unique to post-war Germany, but even so the aspiration to assert complete technological control over society is deeply rooted in modern thought. As virtually all of the critics of technocracy considered in the preceding chapter agreed, technocratic domination is the dystopian underbelly of the modern project of mastery. As Habermas explains, the ambition to construct a political science modeled on the empirical sciences dates back to the 17th century, with Hobbes, whose scientific “social philosophy” can be distinguished from the classical Aristotelian “politics” along three dimensions: First, the new science of politics, “aims at establishing once and for all the conditions for the correct order of the state and society… independently of place, time and circumstances.”⁶⁷ Second, it conceptualizes “the translation of knowledge into practice, the application,” as a technical problem in which the goal is to produce “correctly calculated generation of rules, relationships, and institutions.” And third, as an outcome of the first two

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suppositions, “human behavior is therefore to be now considered only as the material for science. The engineers of the correct order can disregard the categories of ethical social intercourse and confine themselves to the construction of conditions under which human beings, just like objects within nature, will necessarily behave in a calculable manner.”

According to Habermas this shift follows from a version of politics which eschews questions about the contents of a good life in order to find technical solutions to practical necessities, principally, stability but also sheer physical survival, which of course were closely related for Hobbes. However, Habermas looks back even further, locating the inception of modernity with the arch-realist Machiavelli and ur-utopian More, each of whom aspired to use deploy technical knowledge in response the contingencies of social and political life. It is only with Hobbes, however, that political prescriptions carry “the scientific precision of calculated technique.”

Habermas’ genealogy of modern political rationalism also demonstrates his skepticism toward the utopian programs with which it has frequently intersected. Habermas alleges that, beginning with More and moving forward to Marx, utopian thought has been guilty of a “productivist bias… namely, the idea that scientific control over nature, and labour to transform it, is in itself liberating.” From More on through Bacon, St.-Simon, Comte, and Marx, Habermas interprets modern utopianism as a stream of thought which has largely explicated and justified the technocratic program. Not only is Habermas a skeptic of utopias on

68 Habermas, “Classical Doctrine of Politics,” p. 60.
methodological grounds, he also agrees with critics like Marcuse and Arendt that modern utopianism has contributed directly to the forms of domination emerging modern society.

Though Habermas may rightly be said to have been less vexed by the dystopian character of modernity than his Frankfurt School predecessors, he is by no means sanguine about the potential for technocratic domination to bring about severe and pathological distortions in social life and even consciousness. “The corresponding danger of an exclusively technical civilization,” he writes, “can be seen clearly: it is threatened by the splitting of consciousness and the division of human beings into two categories: the social engineers and the inmates of closed institutions.”70 Habermas fears that the technocratic paradigm is gaining momentum among capitalists and socialists alike, with the former fetishizing the rationality of the market and the latter the administrative state. Common to these programs is the intention to “bring society under control in the same way as nature by reconstructing it on the pattern of self-regulating systems,” to which Habermas objects that “this reconstruction could be achieved at no less a cost than closing of that only dimension that is essential, because it is susceptible to humanization, as a structure of interaction mediated by ordinary language.”71 Such a project could only be thinkable under the conditions of “technocratic consciousness,” which is how Habermas describes the ideological erasure of the distinction between instrumental and communicative rationalities. The implicit ideal of such a reconstruction is what Habermas “a

70 Habermas, “Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision,” in Jürgen Habermas on Society and Politics A Reader, ed. Steven Seidman (Boston, Beacon: 1989), p. 46.
central system for social control,” it is “an automaton” that could resolve moral-political controversies, “cybernetically, that is, by ‘itself.’” This, according to Habermas, is “the negative utopia of technical control of history.”

Elsewhere, Habermas characterizes this cybernetic system as technocracy’s “model” for “the planned reconstruction of society.” This enables the social system as a whole to efficiently maintain itself through “instinct-like self-stabilization” but only insofar as “the behavioral system of purposive-rational action, not only predominates over the institutional framework but gradually absorbs communicative action as such.”

If we follow this “technocratic intention” to its logical conclusion, then, Habermas argues, we will arrive at an outcome in which:

…man can not only, as Homo faber, completely objectify himself and confront the achievements that have taken on independent life in his products; he can in addition, as Homo fabricatus, be integrated into his technical apparatus … According to this idea the institutional framework of society – which previously was rooted in a different type of action – would now, in a fundamental reversal, be absorbed by the subsystems of purposive-rational action, which were embedded in it.

While Habermas would like to maintain that this plan is not only far from being realized, but also, in principle unrealizable, he nonetheless argues that “this technocratic intention… serves as an ideology for the new politics, which adapted to technical problems and brackets out practical questions.” Habermas invokes this image as a warning, and his specific warning is that if the technocrats get their way then “behavioral control” and “psychotechnic

72 Habermas, “Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision,” p. 44.
73 Habermas, “Technology and Science as Ideology,” p. 254.
manipulation” will pre-empt our capacity to guide or behavior in terms of internalized norms. As per Habermas’ philosophical anthropology “The moral realization of a normative order is a function of communicative action oriented to shared cultural meaning and presupposing the internalization of values.” And yet Habermas cannot disqualify the technocratic intention on these grounds. It is still possible that the integrating mechanisms of moral socialization and communicative interaction could be suppressed substantially. Already, Habermas argues, moral autonomy “is increasingly supplanted by conditioned behavior, while large organizations as such are increasingly patterned after the structures of purposive-rational action. The industrially most advanced societies seem to approximate the model of behavioral control steered by external stimuli rather than guided by norms.” Habermas sees the pervasive manipulation of electoral, consumer, and leisure behavior as evidence of that even areas where freedom and choice are celebrated may succumb to manipulation.

Despite its initial implausibility, then, Habermas cannot deny that “certain developmental tendencies” support this dystopian vision, in which humanity is subjected to “the manipulative compulsions of technical-operational administration.” The end result of a society in which subtle forms of control and manipulation supplant self-direction would be an “increase in adaptive behavior” and eventually the wholesale “destructuring of the superego.”

Peering into the future, Habermas, anticipates increasingly more sophisticated physical,
psychological, and even “biotechnic” methods of control which could lead to the total objectification of humanity.

“If this occurred, old regions of consciousness developed in ordinary-language communication would of necessity completely dry up. At this stage of human engineering, if the end of psychological manipulation could be spoken of in the same sense as the end of ideology is today, the spontaneous alienation derived from the uncontrolled lag of the institutional framework would be overcome. But the self-objectivation of man would have fulfilled itself in planned alienation – men would make their history with will, but without consciousness.

... I am not asserting that this cybernetic dream of the instinct-like self-stabilization of societies is being fulfilled or that it is even realizable. I do think, however, that it follows through certain vague but basic assumptions of technocratic consciousness to their conclusion as a negative utopia and thus denotes an evolutionary trend that it taking shape under the slick domination of technology and science as ideology.”

As Habermas thought has evolved in response to new theoretical considerations as well as emergent social and political issues, this encounter with technocracy has remained an important, even foundational, moment. Following his initial criticism of technocratic consciousness, Habermas set out to formulate more clearly the categories of rational-purpose (which is to say, technical or instrumental) activity and the alternatively competing and complementary form of rationality that he calls interaction, later communicative action. It is not difficult to see that these categories anticipate the mature of theory of communicative action. In the transitional works that followed from his engagement with the technocracy thesis, Habermas developed his contention that human rationality, behavior, and society could be characterized in terms of these two complementary structures. It is important to note that for

75 Habermas, “Technology and Science as Ideology,” p. 262.
Habermas that rational structures are always, first and foremost, structures of action. In his account of human evolution, which arrives at a quasi-Kantian theory of constitution by way of Marxist materialism, cognition is an emergent property of patterned activities which predate the formation of human societies. Through repetition and selection they are written, so to speak, into the brain where they take on an architectonic role, bounding and directing our conscious interchange with the world and one another. These rational structures are to some extent replicated in human institutions as well, based on the interests they serve.\textsuperscript{76} Habermas' hypostasizing terminology aside, a rational structure is simply a way of talking about a related set of practices, sensibilities, and modes of cognition that are concretely expressed in human life.

The first of these to develop is the structure of “rational-purpose action,” which corresponds to the activity of work and the social dimension of systems. As a category, purposive-rational action includes both “instrumental action... governed by technical rules based on empirical knowledge” and "rational choice... governed by strategies based on analytic knowledge.”\textsuperscript{77} The significant connection between the two types of activity is that they both realize defined goals under defined conditions. Technique and strategy are matters of means, and they can only be deployed when ends are defined or assumed. But these operations are not themselves useful for selecting among ends. In Habermas' philosophical anthropology, rational-

\textsuperscript{76} Though Habermas frequently notes that his typology is ideal: institutions corresponding exclusively to only one structure exist rarely, if ever. See, “Technology and Science as Ideology,” in \textit{Toward a Rational Society}, p. 93.

purposive action originates in the labor process. The necessity of manipulating the environment in order to attain food and shelter requires that sentient beings learn to regulate their activities with regard to the “feedback” they receive from the world. When this done consciously, it can be described in terms of observing causal relationships and acquiring empirical data, and for this reason, Habermas identifies the knowledge domain of the natural sciences and their application in technological research with the rational-purposive structure.

There is one other rational structure that must develop before a distinctly human mode of social reproduction becomes possible, and that is the structure of “communicative action,” which corresponds to interaction and the social dimension of the lifeworld. This is the mode of cognition which orients social behavior, that is, “symbolic action... governed by binding consensual norms which define reciprocal expectations about behavior and which must be understood and recognized by at least two acting subjects.”

The material basis for communicative action is the need to coordinate hunting and gathering activities. Only when basic competencies for both work and interaction have developed is it possible for the more complex structures which distinguish human societies from those of advanced hominids – specifically, family units in which humans enact roles that are functionally independent from their role in the social labor process – develop.

Rationalization in the Weberian sense, then, refers specifically to the extension of the

structure of rational-purposive action: the enhancement of techniques and strategies, and the perfection of means and methods for control. This is the rationalization of systems, and in Habermas’ later work, his focus is less on the cognitive or behavioral basis of these mode of activity than in their role in the macro-level integration of societies. More specifically, he is interested in how two particular systems, the state and the market, deploy two particular kinds of media, administrative power and money, to overcome integration problems where consensus can’t be reached through communicative processes. This is not, intrinsically, problematic, as there can be compelling justifications for social action even where consensus cannot be reached efficiently. The critical thrust of Habermas theory of communicative action, however, is that this tendency has now developed to a pathological extreme, much as the negative utopia of the cybernetically steered society had suggested. In the process that Habermas refers to as the “uncoupling of system and lifeworld,” the state and the market exercise ever-greater influence on society while becoming progressively detached from social values and from local knowledge. Their operations are only accessible, let alone manipulable, by elites who have access to power and money. But even experts cannot fully account for the consequences of systemized actions, as they are uprooted from the exchange of reasons that characterizes communicative rationality:

Media such as money and power attach to empirical ties; they encode a purposive-rational attitude toward calculable amount of value and make it possible to exert generalized, strategic influence on the decisions of other participants while bypassing

For a reasonably brief account, see “The Uncoupling of System and Lifeworld,” in Jürgen Habermas on Society and Politics.
processes of consensus-oriented communication… Demystified media of communication such as money and power connect up interactions in space and time into more and more complex networks that none has to comprehend or be responsible for. If by responsible we mean that one orients one’s actions to criticizable validity claims, then a ‘de-worlded’ coordination of action that is unhinged from communicatively established consensus does not require that participants be responsible actors.\textsuperscript{80}

Habermas has offered a number of compelling moral and pragmatic reasons to be wary of such developments. What he has more recently referred to as the “commodification” and “bureaucratization” of the social world can have a range of negative consequences, from undermining the legitimacy of a system that gradually loses its relation to the values and interests of the people who comprise it, to the dreadful sense of being a plaything of malign forces beyond one’s control that comes from inhabiting a social world “colonized” by systems.\textsuperscript{81}

One consequence stands out as particularly significant given the wider ethical concerns of Habermas’ thinking, and this is the way in which the predominance of money and administrative power lead to a degradation or devaluation of the equivalent “media” which sustains communicative action. Namely, what Habermas call solidarity.\textsuperscript{82}

Throughout his career, Habermas has avoided arguing for substantive ethical positions for the same reasons that he has avoided utopian speculation – he believes that to advance a concrete vision of the

\textsuperscript{80} Habermas, Theory of Communicative Action, Volume II, p. 184.
\textsuperscript{81} Admittedly, Habermas has made less of the psychological and spiritual afflictions of modernity than his predecessors – once could be forgiven for judging him more blithe about such prospects than Fromm, Adorno, or Marcuse, his progenitors, or Axel Honneth, his successor. See for comparison Axel Honneth, Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Which is not to suggest that Habermas’ theory cannot accommodate such concerns. For an example of how it can be addressed to this task, see Timo Jutten, “The Colonization Thesis: Habermas on Reification,” International Journal of Philosophic Studies, 19:5 (2011), p. 701-727.
\textsuperscript{82} This is explained concisely in “The New Obscurity,” p. 14-18.
good life or the good society is a task for the participant in a specific lifeworld context, not for the theoretician who tries to stand over and apart from it. Moreover, Habermas accepts the burden of what he calls “post-metaphysical” ethics, which means that he wants to avoid speculation about what makes a human life worthwhile in general, as against how this question might be answered by specific individuals’ or cultures. Even so, Habermas has gradually developed what he takes to be the minimal ethical core of his theory of communicative action, and this largely in response to critics like Charles Taylor who, while sympathetic to Habermas’ critique of modernity, have challenged him to explicate the normative underpinnings of his critique.\textsuperscript{83}

Habermas has offered two responses. The first, a minimalist ethics, tries to read off the ethical content presupposed by the idea of communication as a core human competence, and using that as a basis to argue that some nexus of values incorporating autonomy and solidarity is essential to any form of human social life. Habermas presents the minimalist position as such:

\begin{quote}
… the same medium, linguistically mediated interaction, is both the reason for the vulnerability of socialized individuals and the key resource they possess to compensate for that vulnerability. Every morality revolves around equality of respect, solidarity, and the common good. Fundamental ideas like these can be reduced to the relations of symmetry and reciprocity presupposed in communicative action. In other words, the common core of all kinds of morality can be traced back to the reciprocal imputations and shared presuppositions actors make when they seek understanding in everyday situations.\textsuperscript{84}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{84} Habermas, “Morality and Ethical Life,” p. 200.
The other strategy, alluded to above, is a *negative ethics*. This is how Habermas suggests a negative ethics might be carried out:

Can one formulate concepts like universal justice, normative rightness, the moral point of view, and the like independently of any vision of the good life, i.e., independently of an intuitive project of some privileged but concrete form of life? Noncontextual definitions of a moral principle, I admit, have not been satisfactory up to now. Negative versions of the moral principle seem to be a step in the right direction. They heed the prohibition of graven images, refrain from positive depiction, and as in the case of discourse ethics, refer negatively to the damaged life instead of pointing affirmatively to the good life.85

In Habermas’ provocative entry into the twenty-first century controversy over genetic engineering, we can see each of these lines of thinking come to fruition, as Habermas once against finds the moral infrastructure of the lifeworld besieged by a colonizing technical rationality, and he once again his efforts include the contemplation of a negative utopia wherein the characteristically human mode of conduct expressed in in moral consciousness and communication action would be eliminated. In this case, the specter which confronts Habermas is not instrumental rationality refracted through the seemingly autonomous logic of bureaucratic or market institutions, though he does again fear that we will find ourselves imitating a sequence whose consequences no one will be able to account for. But in a way that is more vividly felt than at any point since his early critique of technocracy, Habermas sees his nemesis as a kind of technological domination rooted squarely in the modern project of mastery. “From the perspective of experimental science,” he observes, “this technological

85 Habermas, “Morality and Ethical Life,” p. 205.
control of human nature is but another manifestation of our tendency to extend continuously the range of what we can control within our natural environment.”

In “Technology and Science as Ideology,” Habermas wrote fearfully of the “future possibilities for detaching human behavior from a normative system linked to the grammar of language-games and integrating instead into self-regulated subsystems of the man-machine type by means of immediate physical or psychological control.” More prescient still, he added that, “Behavioral control could be instituted at an even deeper level tomorrow through biotechnic intervention in the endocrine regulating system, not to mention the even greater consequences of intervening in the genetic transmission of inherited information.” When Habermas initially made these predictions, he seemed convinced that he had allowed his imagination to drift to a pole of extreme negativity, anticipating futures that vividly condensed the trends he opposed in modern society, while resting assured that they went well beyond the probable, perhaps even the possible. With modern genetics fast approaching the threshold of eugenic technologies, and all of the dire commercial and political applications they might find, Habermas cannot be so sanguine.

At the core of Habermas’ anxiety regarding eugenics is the fears that research in the field has far outstripped the publics ability to stay informed or to arrive at a consensus. In the meantime, research programs run far ahead of what most imagine to be possible, let alone

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87 Habermas, “Technology and Science as Ideology,” in *Jürgen Habermas on Society and Politics*, p. 255.
proximate, and a dangerously unregulated field of research raises disquieting possibilities. Self-styled post-humanists anticipate a technological emancipation from the human condition as we have known it, anticipating a merging of humanity and machine that will allow those with the means and will to attempt to transcend their mundane social and biological existence:

To illustrate the technologically assisted life processes of the human organism, engineers draw up visions of man and machine fused into a production plant subjected to autoregulated processes of supervision and renewal, permanent repair and upgrading. In this vision, self-replicating microrobots circulate in the human body, combining with organic matter in order, for instance, to stop ageing processes or to boost the functions of the cerebrum. Computer engineers, as well, have not been idle, contributing to this genre by drawing up the vision of the future machines which mark flesh-and-blood human beings as a model doomed to extinction. These superior intelligences are supposed to have overcome the flaws of human hardware. As to the software, which is modeled on our brains, they promise not only immortality, but unlimited perfection.  

And yet this is very nearly a best-case scenario: a techno-libertarian playground for those who want to pry at the limits of human nature. What truly concerns Habermas is the possibility that humanity will lose itself in the process of technological enhancement and self-instrumentalization:

Whether these speculations are manifestations of a feverish imagination or serious predictions, an expression of displaced eschatological needs or a new variety of science-fiction science, I refer to them only as examples of an instrumentalization of human nature initiating a change in the ethical self-understanding of the species – a self-understanding no longer consistent with the normative self-understanding of persons who live in the mode of self-determination and responsible action.

For all that this image echoes the preceding negative utopia of technical control, the threat that Habermas discerns to human nature here is unique – if not in intention, then in the

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possibility of execution. His ultimate anxiety is that the basic moral norms underpinning human interaction will deteriorate as the distinction between person and object is blurred. Even benign applications of human enhancement technologies defy what Habermas takes to be an intuitive distinction between he grown and the made – between what must be respected for its rudimentary subjectivity and what can be freely disposed over – and that this will lead to undesirable biopolitical outcomes, namely, the callous instrumentalization of entire generations of human beings, whose will be designed and manipulated at the level of their genetic nature, without ever knowing what of their spontaneous potential they have lost in the bargain. The already significant power of the present generation over the next would expand to the point of gross asymmetry. “Not without reason, we worry over the possible emergence of a thick intergenerational web of actions for which no one can be called to account, because it one-sidedly cuts vertically through the contemporary network of interactions.”

What might the consequences entail? A new structure of action which rescinds the distinction between the person and object, a potential suffocation of the novelty and unpredictability – what Arendt called natality – that comes with each generation, and the internalization of the objectifying view by the engineered, who may well lose the psychological basis for their own autonomy if they cannot see themselves as their own person.

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One might say, to borrow a well-worn phrase, that Habermas was awakened from his
dogmatic slumbers – whereas he had taken the mode of communicative rationality and the
ethics of autonomy and solidarity it implied as an unproblematic background condition of
human life, a foundational structure of the human experience as we knew it, now he confronted
a situation where they dystopian possibilities were no more heuristic or rhetorical tool. For at
this juncture, the question of what makes a human life worthwhile, of in what capacities our
dignity as a species inheres, cannot be tabled. This much, Habermas concedes when he writes
that, “postmetaphysical abstention runs up against its limits in an interesting way as soon as
questions of a ‘species ethics’ arise. As soon as the ethical self-understanding of language-using
agents is at stake in its entirety, philosophy can no longer avoid taking a substantive position.”91
The debate about how to conceptualize and respond to such dangers goes beyond “this or that
difference in the great variety of cultural forms of life, but on those intuitive self-descriptions
that guide our own identification as human beings – that is, our self-understanding as members
of the species.”92 The question Habermas poses is whether “the instrumentalization of human
nature changes the ethical self-understanding of the species in a way that we may no longer see
ourselves as ethically free and morally equal beings guided by norms and reasons.”93 And with
that, “the original philosophical question regarding the good life in all its anthropological

91 Habermas, Future of Human Nature, p. 11.
generality appears to have taken on a new life.”

But even if this were the case, on what basis could Habermas, or any other philosopher, discern an answer?

One trap which Habermas is concerned to avoid is to fall back on dogmatism or traditionalism of one kind or another – an attempt to reassert the sanctity of the species on purely religious, grounds, for example. Rather than looking to pre-modern modes of thought and belief to underwrite a “re-enchantment of inner nature,” Habermas offers a characteristically modern and stubbornly anti-foundationalist response wherein moralizing human nature “would itself be a political act of self-referential moral action,” an instance of “modernity having become reflective,” and “seeking to guarantee the conditions under which the practical self-understanding of modernity may be preserved.” Habermas does not presume that we moderns will come to any belated realizations about the human essence or the purpose of our existence. But we can begin by recognizing the stakes of our predicament, and how it underscores the fragility of our species. From that vantage point, we may begin to discover the cultural and intellectual resources that would support “the assertion of an ethical self-understanding of the species which is crucial for our capacity see ourselves as the authors of our own life histories and to recognize one another as autonomous persons.”

After all, Habermas has maintained, as explicated in his minimalist position, that dignity and vulnerability go hand in hand; that morality responds to the fragility of the human species

by mitigating the physical and psychic vulnerabilities which we suffer as intersubjective creatures whose security and esteem is bound up with one another. It is in that context that Habermas has argued for a notion of “equal respect for the dignity of each individual” which gives a degree of “inviolability” to each. However, this inviolability only inheres so long as we continue to comport ourselves within “the web of intersubjective relations of mutual recognition” which constitute our communal attachments. This is the conception of ethical life which, Habermas maintains, was always presupposed in the notion of moral autonomy, and it is this vision of ethical life which he has variously termed solidarity and human dignity.

Human dignity as Habermas understands it is a kind of “relational symmetry”; “It is not a property like intelligence or blue eyes, that one might ‘possess’ by nature; it rather indicates the kind of ‘inviolability’ which comes to have a significance only in interpersonal relations of mutual respect, in the egalitarian dealings among persons.” Human dignity is, in a way, our intersubjectivity. We participate in a moral community that is regulated by norms. It is through our socialization into this moral community that we develop subjectivity, personality. Taking into account the socially situated nature of our dignity also sheds new light on the concept of autonomy. Reflecting on the possibility of a future characterized by pervasive instrumentalization of human beings, we are better positioned to appreciate that autonomy, “is a precarious achievement of finite beings who may attain something like ‘strength,’ if at all,

97 Habermas, “Morality and Ethical Life,” p. 200.
only if they are mindful of their physical vulnerability and social dependence... Only within this network of legitimately regulated relations of mutual recognition can human beings develop and – together with their physical integrity – maintain a personal identity.”

As Habermas’ confrontations with each “negative utopia” have clarified, to engage in dystopian thought experiments is to “adopt the perspective of a future present” and evaluate the present dilemma from that standpoint, and then to respond to the specific vulnerabilities which it reveals. Habermas has, for example, discussed the possibility of “a political practice designed to realize the conditions necessary for a dignified human existence,” and dystopian thinking could help bring such preconditions into view by forcing us to recognize their mutability: “For the self-evident nature of elementary background assumptions to crumble, it takes the unanticipated emergence of surprising alternatives.” None of this is to suggest that dystopian thinking can respond to all moral dilemmas. For in the last analysis, Habermas reflections on the moral crisis provoked by the specter of eugenics brings him face to face with the same question that he has repeatedly confronted, albeit in more arid intellectual climes, regarding the moral foundations of his theory: “why – if biotechnology is subtly undermining our identity as members of the species – should we want to be moral?” The same question could be posed with respect to the usurpations of democratic autonomy by technocratic

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99 Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, p. 34.
102 Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, p. 73.
administration, or even with respect to the question, why should we want to be free? Such a question cannot be answered by moral philosophy alone. More substantial commitments are needed. The best Habermas can do is point out how undesirable the “moral void” would be as alternative. The “coldness” of a human life without morality or dignity would be “unbearable.” What would we have to become to adapt ourselves to such a climate?

**The Circuitry of Power and Domination: Foucault’s Technologies of the Self**

Of the three thinkers discussed in this chapter, perhaps it will be least surprising to suggest an affinity between Foucault and the dystopian imagination. Foucault’s gothic fixations run rampant in many of his works, all the more disconcerting for how he will pivot from the role of the dry documentarian to indulge in some vivid scene of madness, confinement, or cruelty. It is thanks to Foucault, if we wish to thank him, that talk of “docile bodies,” and “carceral archipelagos” now pervade the discourses of the social sciences and humanities. His recalcitrance with respect to utopianism of any kind, and his ability to detect the hidden logic of domination in the most seemingly humanitarian of ideas and institutions, indicate a skeptical temperament so strident that even Huxley looks a bit sentimental by comparison. Perhaps the greatest difference between Foucault’s sensibility and that of the dystopian is his disinclination

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to speculate about the future. On the contrary, with his far reaching studies on the institutions of power that shaped and continue to shape the modern world, each of which reads as an exposé on the subliminal violence which pervades our ostensibly civilized epoch, Foucault’s missives often come across like an alarm sounded too late. The modes of domination he asks us to imagine do not lay off in a near or distant future, but creep out of the recent past. They are already around us. And unlike the wary humanists who warn us about what we, as a species, are in danger of becoming, Foucault is most troubled by what we already are – and finds nothing more disturbing than the suggestion that what we are exhausts the parameters of what we can be. “Don’t ask me who I am, or tell me to say the same,” Foucault once demanded. “That is the bureaucratic morality, which ensures that our papers are in order.”

For any of the above reasons, Foucault would register as a provocative figure in modern intellectual life. But his enduring contribution to contemporary thought is not merely one of style, or even ethos, appropriate as that might be given Foucault’s final resolve to subvert the disciplinary society through radical acts of self-making. Rather, Foucault has transformed our understanding of power and domination, and at the same time permanently unsettled many of our conventional ideas about the forms that freedom might take. Following decades in which he painstakingly laid bare the vast “techno-political” machinery of modern domination, Foucault responded not, as many hoped and expected, as a political theorists concerned with leading the resistance, but

as a kind of ethicist – and, of course, a far from conventional one. When Charles Taylor declares that “Foucault disconcerts,” what he has in mind has less to do with the expansive modalities of domination which Foucault set out to unmask in the early and middle stages of his career, but with the apparent normative paucity of Foucault’s later ethical stances.\footnote{Charles Taylor, “Foucault on Freedom and Truth,” in \textit{Philosophical Papers: Volume 2, Philosophy and the Human Sciences} (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985).} Having argued that our selfhood, or “subjectivity,” is yet another effect of power, and that the “truth” was little more than a token in the sprawling discursive formations of power/knowledge, what then could Foucault offer us that would be helpful in the cause of emancipation? Assuming that one finds Foucault’s analyses persuasive, or even plausible, what would be left to emancipate?

What Foucault has made most evident through his writings is that to exist under the conditions of modern society, or to be what Foucault would call a modern subject, is to exist amidst a plethora of intersecting networks of power “which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body.”\footnote{Foucault, \textit{Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972-1977}, ed. Gordon, Colin (New York: Vintage, 1972). p. 93.} Foucault’s “micro-physics of power” offers a typology of various kinds of modern power and the processes and strategies by which they operate. Whereas so many of the dystopian thinkers cataloged in this study so far focused on the extremes of totalitarian domination or its social and technological analogues, Foucault interprets power as something that is diffuse, capillary, and trained with microscopic precision on the individual body and mind. It manages us not in terms of our consciously held political ideologies, and
need not even interfere with our rights or political freedoms as we typically understand them.

On the contrary, Foucault asserts that, “Domination is, in fact, a general structure of power whose ramifications and consequences can sometimes be found reaching down into the fine fabric of society.” In that sense power pervades our social relationships – “production, kinship, family sexuality” – and functioning not so much like Arendt’s crushing iron band of terror and more like a fine-meshed net, made formidable as a constraint by the interweaving of strands that could be broken or ignored on their own. Thus, Foucault encourages us to reconceptualize domination along the following lines:

… that power is co-extensive with the social body… that relations of power are interwoven with other kind of relations… that their interconnections delineate general conditions of domination, and this domination is organized into a more-or-less coherent and unitary strategic form; that dispersed, heteromorphous, localized procedures of power are adapted, re-enforced and transformed by these global strategies, all this being accompanied by numerous phenomena of inertia, displacement and resistance; hence one should not assume a massive and primal condition of domination, a binary structure with ‘dominators’ on the one side and ‘dominated’ on the other, but rather a multiform production of relations of domination which are partially susceptible of integration into overall strategies.

One way of appreciating Foucault’s refined concept of domination is to compare it with a more conventional theory, such as Arendt’s notion of total domination. Arendt’s account seem the very definition of a “massive and primal condition of domination,” which may well be appropriate for the unique historical circumstances of totalitarian domination, but Foucault might question still the conclusions that arise when such a concept of domination is allowed to

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structure the analysis of mass society. For example, whereas Arendt describes the normalization which occurs in mass society as a nearly automatic outgrowth of social life, a sort of herd instinct to which one cannot help but succumb under mass conditions, Foucault’s account of normalization specifies “a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal,”109”mechanisms of power” which “brand” and “alter” the deviant. Nor, for that matter, must domination seek to immobilize, or destroy space, as in Arendt’s imagination. Foucault imagines regimes of power that solicit and even expedite our movement, making us more productive and efficient, enhancing us rather than degrading us, structuring space rather than obliterating it. This is not to say that Foucault does not in any way draw on the twentieth century dystopian imagination: his concerns with normalization and surveillance are classically dystopian, his vision of the bio-political state that administers a homogenized social body is reminiscent of much in mass society thinking, and his inquiries into the way that technique and knowledge constitute conditions of domination seems to extend and complicate the concept of technocratic domination. But in each one of these arenas, Foucault still manages to subvert orthodoxies for diagnosing and resisting domination. In contrast to the Frankfurt School tradition, carried out by Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas, Foucault is not content to diagnose a rupture between instrumental rationality and some larger or more encompassing rationality - be it aesthetic or communicative or something else. “I would not speak about one

109 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p. 199.
bifurcation of reason but more about an endless, multiple bifurcation – a kind of abundant ramification,” he once said in response to a question about Habermas. “I do not speak of the point at which reason became instrumental.”¹¹⁰ Not only does this have implications for the diagnosis of domination – since communicative or in Foucault’s parlance discursive rationalities might still be bound up in regimes of domination – it also has a concrete bearing on how to respond, insofar as Foucault would, in his late career, attempt to vindicate the techne that Arendt and Habermas both attacked for its relentless encroachment in modernity. As always with Foucault, it is the complexity and multiplicity of power that makes it such a formidable adversary. “[W]hen I speak of power relations,” Foucault explains, “of the forms of rationality which can rule and regulate them, I am not referring to Power – with a capital P – dominating and imposing its rationality upon the totality of the social body.”¹¹¹

Thus Foucault directs our attention to a complex and ever-evolving field of power. Among the diverse array of techniques and rationalities of power, Foucault nonetheless generalizes that, starting during the seventeenth century, “power over life” evolved around two poles:

One of these poles – the first to be formed, it seems – centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the disciplines: an anatamo-politics of the human body. The second, formed some what later, focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanisms of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health,

¹¹⁰ “Structuralism and Post-Structuralism,” in The Essential Foucault, p. 87.
¹¹¹ Structuralism and Post-Structuralism,” in The Essential Foucault, p. 95.
life expectancy and longevity. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population.112

Insofar as it is disciplinary power which acts upon the individual’s body, and is the principal force of subjection against which the individual must win his or her freedom, my discussion will focus on this pole of Foucault’s analysis.113 them, and against which the individual. For Foucault, it is critical to understand that disciplinary power is “non-sovereign power, which lies outside the form of sovereignty.”114 Principally what this means is a dissociation between power and the institution of the state, and more generally, between power and violence, which is typically the prerogative of the state. The famous opening of Discipline and Punish which juxtaposes the brutal execution of a regicide with the gentle cruelty of the modern prison expresses this point aptly. Further, the code defined and enforced by disciplines is not the law, per se, but rather the norm. The techniques of discipline give rise to what Foucault calls a “society of normalization,” which entails a subtler kind of domination.115 Whereas the sovereign form of power could issue into violence, claiming directly the power over life and death, sovereign power has also typically been constrained by a philosophy of right. But one cannot claim rights against society as such, or its norms, nor against the expert discourses and disciplinary techniques which constitute the social body.

113 Which is not to suggest that there is nothing interesting to be said about the alternative pole. See the essays in Vernon Cisney and Nicolae Morar, Biopower: Foucault and Beyond (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960).
114 Foucault, “Two Lectures,” p. 105.
115 Foucault, “Two Lectures,” 107.
It is equally disimportant to disentangle Foucault’s analysis of power from political economy in the conventional sense of Marxist thought. Though Foucault frequently discusses the “economico-political” register of power, he imagines nothing so bifurcated as the conventional class struggle. Closer to the mark would be Marx’ analysis of the factory, which is manifestly a site of discipline as well. But ultimately, Foucault does not wish to reduce power relations in any way to the division of labor, and he has insisted on more than one occasion that the type of power relations he observes in the modern industrial society manifest themselves in the socialist world as well. The rationalities of production and knowledge and especially the production of knowledge, the “economy of discourses of truth” – this is the political economy that truly interests Foucault.116

What then is disciplinary power? Foucault explains variously that disciplinary power “permits time and labor.. to be extracted from bodies,” “is constantly exercised by means of surveillance,” functions through “a tightly knit grid of material coercions,” and functions “to increase the subjected forces and to improve the force and efficacy of that which subjects them.”117 But his most enduring account of disciplinary power emerges from his discussion of the Panopticon, and institution which perfectly embodies the theory and practice of disciplinary power “It is regarded as not much more than a bizarre little utopia, a perverse dream – rather as though Bentham had been the Fourier of a police society,”118 Foucault muses. But to him, it is

116 Foucault, “Two Lectures,” 93.
117 Foucault, “Two Lectures,” 104.
something much more: this forgotten and failed utopia of early modernity has, to Foucault’s mind, prevailed in the long term, establishing a kind of covert blueprint for modern disciplinary power, “a design of subtle coercion for a society to come.”\(^{119}\)

Which is to say that, for Foucault, Bentham’s utopia is the blueprint for the dystopia of disciplinary power in which we now find ourselves:

The Panopticon… must be understood as a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men. No doubt Bentham presents it as a particular institution, closed in upon itself. Utopias, perfectly closed in upon themselves, are common enough. As opposed to the ruined prisons, littered with mechanisms of torture… the Panopticon represents a cruel, ingenious cage. The fact that it should have given rise, even in our own time, to so many variations, projected or realized, is evidence of the imaginary intensity that it has possessed for almost two hundred years. But the Panopticon must not be understood as a dream building; it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form… it is in fact a figure of political technology.”\(^{120}\)

In modern society, Foucault sees the Panopticon at work in a variety of disciplinary institutions including hospitals and prisons. What Bentham devised was “a technology of power designed to solve the problems of surveillance,” his core insight being that if space is structured in a certain way then power can be both “both global and individualizing” and can serve the “econo-political ends” of extracting efficient labor or conformity to rules.\(^{121}\) The core, characteristic of panoptic power is, of course, its effectiveness as a mechanism of surveillance.

\(^{119}\) Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 209.  
\(^{120}\) Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 205.  
Certainly, Foucault is not the first dystopian thinker to express a preoccupation with Bentham’s machinery of surveillance. Aldous Huxley, for one, once wrote a conventionally humanist bromide against the contraption:

> the real horror of the situation in an industrial or administrative Panopticon is not that the human beings are transformed into machines (if they could be transformed they would be perfectly happy in the prisons); no, the horror consists precisely in the fact that they are not machines, but freedom-loving animals, far-ranging minds, and God-like spirits, who find themselves subordinated to machines and constrained to live within the issueless tunnel of an arbitrary an inhuman system.122

It is interesting to contrast Huxley’s horror at the failure of the Panopticon with Foucault’s ominously clinical account of its effectiveness. To Foucault, the cruel genius of the Panopticon is that it can work – it can transform its subjects, and make them if not automatons, then at least participants in their own domination:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in shot, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers.”123

The Panopticon is therefore a clue regarding the intimate relationship between surveillance and subjectivity. For as indicated above, Foucault understands modern disciplinary power to work most effectively in and through the consciousness of the subject, who internalizes its dictates, and perhaps, at the extreme, can no longer tell them from his or her own. Hence Foucault’s unease with identity. He sees in modern society a distinctive, Panoptic

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123 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p. 201.
modality of power which instills in the individual a distinctive mode of subjectivity, such that the line between freedom and domination nearly vanishes:

This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on hum that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word ‘subject’: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to.”

It is in response to this predicament that Foucault calls for a a “critical ontology of ourselves… conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophic life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.” The goal of this practice is not to discover a true self, or an authentic self, which can then be excavated from the prison of power. Instead Foucault exhorts us to take up a set of practices on ourselves, variously defined as techniques, aesthetics, and ethics, but all of which are geared toward the invention or production of the self. This Foucault understands into opposition to a humanistic project in which we aim to uncover our true nature and ‘liberate man in his own being.’ To take up “the undefined work of freedom” means to adopt a “historical-critical attitude” of experimentation wherein we struggle to locate “the points where change is possible and desirable and to

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124 Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” The Essential Foucault, p. 130.
determine the precise form this change should take” and at the same time “give up hope of our ever acceding to any complete and definitive knowledge of what may constitute our historical limits.” In addition to ethos, Foucault also deploys the conception of an art of the self. “What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life,” he remarks. “But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?”

Finally, Foucault also describes the possibility of a set of techniques for taking over the governing or disciplining of the self. Late in his career, in what may be the understatement of the century, Foucault concedes that he has perhaps “insisted too much on the technology of domination and power.” What Foucault has called “technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject” meet “technologies of the self which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves.” What the two technologies have in common is that they both serve the “training and modification of individuals” in terms of the acquisition of certain skills and attitudes. But while the edifices of disciplinary power try to make the individual serve the interests of a productive apparatus or a

\[\text{126} \text{ Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” Essential Foucault.} \]
\[\text{127} \text{ Technologies of the Self, p. 19.} \]
\[\text{128} \text{ Technologies of the Self, eds. Luther Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick Hutton. p. 18.} \]
regime of knowledge, the individual may be able to use their techniques to craft themselves in their own knowledge – to pursue their own ethical, spiritual, or aesthetic self-cultivation.

Within this power relationship, the individual struggles to open up future possibilities for being that the disciplinary grid would otherwise foreclose. Foucault argues that “what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions.” Wherever there is power there is therefore also possibility. “At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom.

129 Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 137-139.
Conclusion

Though my study of the dystopian imagination leaves off at the close of the twentieth century, precisely as the recent history of political thought gives way to a familiar present, even a cursory glance at the politics and culture of the twenty-first century reveals that dystopia has hardly lessened its grip on the political imagination today. For the most part, the intentions of my study have been explanatory: to distill and examine a largely unacknowledged lineage of political ideas which have given twentieth century political thought much of its distinctive character, and to add to our understanding of the form and function of dystopia, this most unique and disquieting innovation of our historical era. The shadow cast by the dystopian imagination is a long one, and we have been living under it for more than a century now. This study has been motivated by the conviction that we will better grasp the stakes of our own times, fraught with anxiety as they undoubtedly are, if we understand how the dystopian outlook has evolved to become one of the predominant fixtures of our horizon of expectations.

By way of conclusion, I would like to reflect on how dystopian thinking has contributed, and may continue contributing, to political thought and judgment along two intersecting axes, which I will refer to as the politics of imagination and the politics of freedom.

In Chapter 1, I endeavored to show how the continuous expansion of the modern space of possibilities brought utopian and dystopian futures into view. Underlying my genealogy of the dystopian imagination is a concern with what scholars have referred to more broadly as political imagination, the implicit and explicit symbolic discourses through which society is
represented in speech, thought, and writing, and in light of which deeply normative conceptions of order, agency, and flourishing can be articulated. Of particular concern in this study is the way that the political imagination fills out a space of possibilities, that is, a set of both conscious and unconscious judgments about what is likely, probable, or possible. If we are to understand the history of our political ideas, we must attend to the way that this space of possibilities has conditioned political thinking, as well as the way that political thinkers have in turn narrowed or expanded the space of possibilities. Even possibilities which are remote – perhaps even those which are not, strictly speaking, possibilities at all – may have profound effects insofar as they enter into the thought and judgment of an era. For example, the prospect of global nuclear war which hung so vividly over the second half of the twentieth century (and which, sadly enough, we would still relegate prematurely to the history) was never made good on, and as that specter grows more remote, some will no doubt want to argue that the cataclysmic possibilities of “mutually assured destruction” were overstated. And yet it is inarguably the case that this threat structured the political existence of billions for the better part of a century, and continues to do so today. A possibility, even a distant one, can be a powerful thing. And so it goes for the products of the dystopian political imagination. From the dystopian rendering of totalitarianism, which fixated on the prospects for total control and the

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complete liquidation of human freedom, to the vision of a technological society in which humanity finds itself “mastered and possessed,” as it were, by the products of its own ingenuity, dystopian thinkers have always attended to the worst possibilities rather than the most likely. And yet I hope to have shown that the entry of such scenarios into the space of possibilities constitutes a significant event in the history of political ideas. And those early dystopian thinkers who probed such possibilities – writers like Weber and Zamyatin, for example, who produced such enduring images of the “rational” society – raised important and enduring questions about the future of modern society which have scarcely lost their relevance for having couched their inquires in the exaggerated form of the dystopia. As the great science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke has remarked, “the only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.”

But to discuss the political imagination only as a background condition is to leave unexplored the ways in which it may be actively appropriated and deployed as a resource for political thought. In Chapter 2, I described Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Orwell’s *1984* as acts of political imagination explicitly intended to redraw the twentieth century’s space of possibilities – bringing hitherto unthought-of prospects into consciousness with a vividness that has transformed, for generations of readers, the sense of what is at stake in political thought and action. Even Orwell’s vision of the totalitarian future, in many respects a future of the past,

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remains pertinent wherever his topological concerns, such as surveillance and torture, or his key themes as a political thinker, namely the politics of language and of truth, are relevant. No one could accuse Huxley or Orwell of having lacked political imagination, and in this respect we begin to see how greatly they differed from the resolutely anti-utopian thinkers who were among their contemporaries and who frequently appropriated their works toward the critique of utopia. In his discussion of the “vicissitudes of the political imagination,” George Kateb has distinguished between two interrelated dangers: “the proclivity to be prey to imagination, and the intertwined proclivity to fail to exercise imagination.” Following Kateb, I would argue that whereas anti-utopians have emphasized the former danger, the dystopian thinkers have been more concerned with the latter. Criticisms of utopian politics have sounded warnings against the “hyperactive” political imagination which, in its totalizing ambition to re-imagine and re-design the human world, frequently conceives of human beings themselves “as instruments or impediments, as raw material or dirt or disease.” Anti-utopians have found good reason to object to these excesses, but they are mistaken to think that their fear is the one animating works like *Brave New World* and *1984*. For Huxley and Orwell were principally concerned with failures of political imagination, our inability or unwillingness to perceive how the world was changing around us and to act accordingly. The dangers of the “inactive” imagination, which leads us “to fail to see the reality that is present and thus to treat it as if it were absent” may best be

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illustrated by circumstances where followers or bystanders fail to challenge their complicity in political evil – the type of thing which Arendt referred to as “thoughtlessness.” But it also resonates in the works of dystopian thinkers who challenge their readers to perceive more clearly the present in light of the future possibilities which are by turns opened up and closed off by patterns of social change. If anti-utopian thinkers have protested against the excesses of the political imagination, dystopians have counter-pointed their warnings with a concern for what happens when political imagination withers. Beginning with Zamyatin’s *We*, wherein the surgical removal of the imagination precedes the total victory of the One State, and extending on through Orwell’s *1984*, where total domination is consummated by the eradication of utopian longings from history and consciousness, dystopian writers have frequently expressed their horror at the closure of the political imagination. No society, however repressive its institutions or sterile its culture, can completely eradicate human freedom unless its subjects accept that no alternative is possible. If the future is shorn of all dynamic possibilities and extends the promise of nothing beyond an endless repetition of the present, the political imagination loses its critical potential and hopelessness prevails.

By counteracting our tendency to succumb to moral and political blindness, dystopian thinking may help us to avoid catastrophic failures of political imagination. And while it may seem that there is no shortage of pessimistic thinking in our times, dwelling on worst-case

scenarios and *summum malum* may be necessary to counteract not only the specific utopian excesses of modern technology and politics, but also the more mundane cultural and psychological heuristics which lead to failures of imagination. When dystopian thinking succeeds, it generates what are sometimes referred to as “self-defeating” or “self-preventing” prophecies. What I have referred to as the dystopian imagination indicates a rather diffuse range of anxieties and premonitions about the future, and indeed this imagination may not always be particularly useful to serious political thought. But the enterprise of dystopian thinking, wherein the products of the dystopian imagination are enlisted in the service of imaginative social criticism, can provide an important means for orienting political thought toward the future. To this end, much of what I take to be valuable in dystopian thinking can be captured in Hans Jonas’ call for an “imaginative-anticipatory heuristics of fear.” In *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Jonas explain that:

… in our search after an ethics of responsibility for distant contingencies, it is an anticipated distortion of man that helps us to detect that in the normative conception of man which is to be preserved from it. And we need the threat to the image of man – and rather specific kinds of threat – to assure ourselves of his true image by the very recoil from these threats. As long as the danger is unknown, we do not know what to preserve and why. Knowledge of this comes, against all logic and method, from the perception of what to avoid… We know the thing at stake only when we know that it is at stake.7

What I have said thus far pertains to what we might call the formal-critical aspects of the dystopia: that is to say, to the heuristic anticipation of any imaginary future which we want to

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6 For a fascinating discussion of such heuristics and their cultural origins, see Karen Cerulo, *Never Saw It Coming: Cultural Challenges to Envisioning the Worst* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
avoid. Throughout this study, however, I have also been interested in the substantive character of dystopian thought in the twentieth century. In principal, dystopian thinking can be applied to any ideological or normative end, and the range of dystopian thought experiments has included visions motivated by both far-right and far-left critiques of society, as well as many kinds of humanistic social criticism. That being noted, the dystopian vision of modernity which provides the through-line in this study, evolving from Weber and Zamyatin on to Arendt, Habermas, and Foucault, indicates a general concern with the future of human freedom. All of the dystopias discussed in this study are societies in which domination is deeply and permanently entrenched through modern techniques of organization and control. Chapters 3 and 4 in particular grappled with the variation on this image found in twentieth century political thought, noting the structural continuity between dystopian criticisms of totalitarianism, mass society, and technocracy, and their significance for contemporary thinking about freedom and domination.

What is most significant to note about political thinking at this juncture is how it contrasts with the surfeit of utopian thought which initially emerged out of the Enlightenment. By the middle of the twentieth century, utopian prospects have been defeated or discredited, such that they can no longer orient politics toward the future. This is not to say they lost all value as written forms of social criticism or philosophical speculation, but simply that in the aftermath of totalitarianism and total war they lost their ability to illuminate the future, and with it, the political and ethical choices facing the modern world. The re-orientation of political
thought around a summun malum, one which responds to the needs of an intellectual and political culture which is, if not thoroughly anti-utopian, than at the very least post-utopian, is one of the major tendencies of political thought in the twentieth century. The characteristics of this summun malum are also unique in the history of political ideas. Whereas classical thinkers like Plato and Aristotle dwelled on the degeneration of regimes into anarchy, and Hobbes feared the collapse of the commonwealth into civil war, the specter which haunts the twentieth century is not disorder but hyper-order. It is the danger of a social order that ossifies into an unchangeable and unbreakable shell, its patterns of domination so deeply entrenched at the psychological, institutional, and cultural levels that it gradually becomes impossible to resist – not only in action, but, at the furthest extreme, even in thought. For the humanistic intellectuals who confronted this danger, dystopian thinking underscored the necessity of finding new bases for freedom in social and political life. Though the critiques of totalitarianism, mass society, and technocracy focused on their own distinctive arrays of domination, each underscored a distinctive vulnerability in the human species which is brought to light by the understanding of human freedom as a contingent and revocable social condition rather than a guarantee underwritten by human nature. Thus emerges the paradoxical emphasis on dehumanization precisely at the juncture where the idea of an essential humanity seems to be thrown into doubt.

For the various thinkers and writers who conceptualized dehumanization as a loss or acquittal

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8 The term “hyper-order” is deployed by Eyal Chowers to characterize a certain political imagination of “entrapment”; he emphasizes the extent to which modern institutions impose – or are feared to impose – sameness and homogeneity on their subjects. See Chowers, Modern Self in the Labyrinth, pp. 9-10.
of human freedom, there was now an urgent need to discover and to preserve the social conditions which would sustain freedom. This extended not only to the formal political institutions which enshrine individual liberty and democratic self-rule real in political life, but also to the more abstract cultural and psychological conditions which make individual and collective autonomy a practicable possibility.

This interplay between the imagination of freedom and of domination was illustrated in greater detail in my discussion of Arendt, Habermas, and Foucault. As with the other dystopian theorists of totalitarianism, mass society, and technocracy, each of these thinkers reflects on characteristically modern forms of domination. Their works converge in depicting a society in which freedom is imperiled by impersonal forces arising out of those domains of technology, industry, and social organization where rationality and progress are taken to be most advanced, including the relentlessness of cyclical production and consumption, the pervasiveness of state and corporate power, the domination of the public sphere by commercial media, the anonymous rule of bureaucrats and experts, and the pressure to conform which is imposed by disciplinary institutions even as it arises endogenously from the tendencies of mass society. What I have endeavored to illustrate is how these visions of domination have in turn structured the vital contributions that each thinkers has made to our understanding of freedom, and specifically to the articulation of an idea of freedom which will be adequate to the unique perils and possibilities of the modern world. Each theorists draws our attention to a distinctive ensemble of political and ethical practices which enable, respectively, forms of collective and
individual autonomy. These practices must be safeguarded against the encroachment of
processes and institutions which subordinate autonomy to hierarchy, normalization, and
manipulation of various kinds. For Arendt, this principally means the preservation of a public
sphere in which speech and action can provide meaningful opportunities for under-determined
activity, and along with it, opportunities for citizens to encounter one another in their
uniqueness. It is her conviction that we can only exercise our characteristically human capacity
to reach out into the new under such circumstances. In Habermas’ thought, freedom is first and
foremost the capacity for autonomy that inheres in a social world governed by free and open
communication. The dangers to this kind of autonomy, which as at once moral and political are
manifold from the instrumentalizing procedures embodied by the market and the
administrative state to the encroachment of technical rationality into the very fabric of
socialization and interaction. And in Foucault’s wide-ranging oeuvre, we see how the modern
subject may yet find opportunities for self-creation and self-mastery even as he or she is
constituted, in a great many respects, by the manifold techniques of disciplinary society and its
pressures toward normalization. For Foucault, what is at stake in such projects is not the
retrieval of an antecedently true or authentic self, let alone of human nature, but instead the
continual and critical re-invention of the self, and the emancipation of new possibilities for the
future. We may conclude then, that for freedom to exist, individuals must be able to develop
into unique personalities rather than being treated as interchangeable members of a species,
social groups must be able to exercise shared power over economic and political institutions
rather than being subordinated to their impersonal forces, and the future must be seen as an open horizon in which new possibilities are not foreclosed by an unchanging present.

Dystopian thought makes us aware of all of this by describing in detail how each of these conditions could be altered, and underscores the importance of developing new practices of ethical reflection and political action which can provide the basis for individual and collective self-determination. But the dystopian thinker always underscores the possibility that these practices will be lost absent an active commitment to their preservation. Whether such constructive employments of the political imagination ought to be considered utopian is another question, but what is clear is that the imagination of domination and the imagination of freedom are closely related enterprises. As Ian Shapiro has written in his own recent study of freedom and domination, "Dystopias figure in utopian thinking partly to incorporate and emphasize the human capacity for choice; they speak to our proclivity to believe that our fate is in our hands."9

From the overwhelming negativity of a century which frequently contemplated the extremes of domination emerges an altogether positive conception of human freedom. As an observation on the history of political thought, this underscores Bernard Yack’s claim that we may well overrate the importance of utopian ideals in structuring our normative thinking, both historically and practically speaking.10 Negativity, by contrast, turns out to be an underrated

10 See Yack’s introduction to the Longing for Total Revolution. There, he argues that an important lineage of modern social philosophy, going back to Rousseau and Schiller, has been principally motivated by fears of dehumanization in
resource for normative thought. Visions of the ideal society or the fully human life are notoriously difficult to support without recourse to metaphysical conceptions of the human, and in comparison to such abstractions, our fears and anxieties are viscerally felt. My interpretation of twentieth century political thought has therefore emphasized the generative role of dystopian images, providing a clue as to how we may grapple with the uncertain future in the absence of a utopian horizon.

Thus we return once more to the question of whether there are any utopian alternatives which we may set against the dystopian potentialities of our present era. Is it true, as Habermas said, that all of the utopian oases have dried up, leaving only a desert of banality in their place?11 Today the left political imagination longs for utopian vistas that it has yet to discover, while many on the right and center bid an unsentimental farewell to this voyage. While I think it would be premature to conclude that the utopian tradition has come to an end, I believe that any utopian perspective will have to be transformed by the painful knowledge of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Visions of a better future, and plans for their pursuit, will have to emerge in the real crucible of political life, under rapidly changing conditions, and they will have to resist the tendencies toward finalism and totalism that have marred so many utopian projects. As Ursula K. Le Guin has written, “our final loss of faith in that radiant sandcastle may

enable our eyes to adjust to a dimmer light and in it perceive another kind of utopia.” If we are to meet this call, then we must be intentional in our efforts to cultivate a better society. A politics that seeks only to navigate between lesser evils will probably not succeed even in that modest venture. And so the longing for utopia, far from being a product of nostalgia or misplaced idealism, may well articulate something our political thinking badly needs. Unfortunately, it does not follow from this observation that this is a need that our culture and politics are capable of meeting. It does not follow from the abstract necessity of utopian thinking that any suitable utopian visions will be ready to hand, or that any will find them convincing, or that whatever new utopias we do manage to come with will have shed the totalitarian hubris so deeply engrained in the modern project of mastery. In the meantime, we may very well have to make do with our dystopian outlook, steering from calamity to calamity and warding off the great political and ethical evils as we foresee them. If there is any consolation in this, it is that dystopias are only thinkable because so much of the human condition as we have known it is now liable to change. Anxiety and possibility are inextricably intertwined, and prudent thinking about our prospects will give both their due, as is only

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13 Michael Walzer has recently argued, for example, that democratic political systems exhibit natural tendencies toward hierarchy and authoritarianism which can only be avoided when they are actively resisted by citizens. Though utopianism is not a formal requirement of such resistance, Walzer speculates that such resistance will, in practice, benefit from utopian imagery as sources of motivation and inspiration. See, Michael Walzer, “Should we reclaim political utopianism?”, European Journal of Political Theory, 12: 1 (2013), pp. 24. – 30.
appropriate in attempting to confront a future that will necessarily surpass our attempts to image it.

Even so, the imaginings of dystopian writers have proven their significance in orienting thought and judgment toward the future. Those who have contemplated the dystopian horizons of the twenty-first century have, for the most part, not fallen into despair or retreated from public life. Instead, the warnings of the great dystopian writers of the last century have resonated, spurring reflection and action in dark times. Over the last few years, Americans have found it profitable to consult Orwell as his Big Brother and Ministry of Truth have found their analogues in political reality. In 2013, when Americans learned of the vast scope of government surveillance, 1984 raced up the bestsellers charts and the Panopticon appeared on the cover of the New York Time Review of Books. In the months since Donald Trump became the 45th President of the United States, a number of dystopian novels have seen a revival of popularity. First 1984 and with it Brave New World, then Sinclair Lewis’ It Can’t Happen Here and Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale. Even a work as dense and forbidding as Arendt’s The Origins of Totalitarianism has found a new readership.

It is not difficult to find writers who will draw out the parallels between the new political climate and the dystopian worlds envisioned in speculative fiction. What is heartening is the fact that such comparisons have not been offered in the spirit of fatalism, but rather in the spirit of resistance. The day after Trump’s inauguration, millions gathered at Women’s Marches across the country, many carrying homemade signs expressing defiance and outrage – the most
popular of which soon circulated across the internet. One woman uploaded a photo of a sign on which she had recreated the spines of several dystopian novels in marker: *The Handmaid’s Tale, 1984, The Hunger Games, Fahrenheit 451, Brave New World, The Giver*. And above this small library of dystopias, in bold letters, her message of resistance: “I’ve read the books. I don’t want to live them.”
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Biography

Matthew Benjamin Cole was born on December 15th, 1987 in Arlington, VA, and grew up in Rockford, IL, and Victoria, TX. He attended Carleton College in Northfield, MN, and graduated with a B.A. in Political Science, magna cum laude and with distinction, in 2009. This dissertation was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Ph.D. from the Department of Political Science at Duke University. Matthew currently works with the Harvard College Writing Program as a Preceptor of Expository Writing.