The Machine in the Pastoral Imagery of Eighteenth-century Utopias
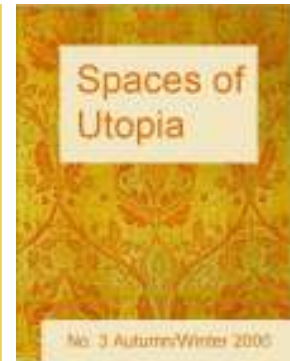
Alexandra Sippel
University of Paris IV – Paris Sorbonne

I am currently researching the representation of work and labour in eighteenth-century utopias, and this point raises several issues that led me to think about the nature and place of the machine in utopian societies of the time. The issue of labour is related to several ethical and practical questions. Dominique Méda, in *Le Travail, une Valeur en Voie de Disparition* (1995), questions the origins of labour and its painful or difficult aspect. In the prelapsarian world, labour existed since the first man and woman had to take care of the Eden garden. Work was part of the original, perfect picture of the beginning of the world according to the Judeo-Christian tradition. What changed with the Fall was not the nature of the work man had to do in the garden, but the conditions of this labour. From that time onwards, any labour (whether childbirth for women, or agriculture for men) became effortful and painful. As the aim of the invention of machines is first and foremost to make easier and faster the tasks that had to be performed by men, the question of the place and representation of the machines in utopias is a point that definitely needs to be raised in the reflexion over the representation of labour in these novels. Many utopian novels are, whether consciously or unconsciously, located in a prelapsarian environment, and therefore in places where work is both a necessity that allows them to earn their living and ensure the subsistence of the community, and a blessing insofar as anyone can work according to their gifts and wishes, and in this way develop their abilities and fulfil their personality. The prelapsarian utopian environment is typically represented by a rural, often pastoral landscape, as in More's arch-example.

Looking back on *Utopia* in 1516, we can see that More's characters are kept busy cultivating their garden and working at some particular crafts. In this way they are able to produce whatever food and goods they need and are taught not to desire more than that.

It is often the same in later utopias, but the appearance of the machine in the real world was necessarily mirrored and questioned in utopias at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. If a rural lifestyle and natural means of production guaranteed the virtue of the original utopian society as a whole, we may wonder what the irruption of the machine represents for later utopias.

I shall start this paper by a short reflexion on the importance of work and labour in utopias and the paradox that is created by the fact that labour is a part of utopian societies though it could be considered a constraint and therefore excluded from perfect worlds. I will then turn to some remarks on the utopian imagery of the city to see how urban centres are represented and try to understand how the rural milieu supposedly protects the virtue of men. In most utopias, the wonderful happiness enjoyed by individuals depends on their consideration for their country and community as a whole. Is virtue an innate quality of the utopians, or it is derived from their living conditions? Have they reached superior understanding or is it simply that they inhabit small rural zones that are kept away from the corrupt world?

My next point will have to do with the machines themselves. What kind of machines are used in utopias? Are they linked to the industrial world in the "real" environment of the authors or are they creations of the minds of the writers? In the real world, machines mean hard work made easier, but they often cause an increase in production. Besides, industrial manufacturing means standardised goods, which leaves no more space for imagination or variety. For economists in the real world, the machine means higher productivity and therefore more production of wealth. But wealth does generally not appear as a positive element in utopias, as the individual is not to desire his own wealth but that of the country as a whole. Besides wealth rather lies in virtue and happiness than in treasures of gold and silver. Very often this draws the line between eutopia and dystopia.

A final point that raises some questions about the legitimacy of the use of machines in utopias has to do with the relation of men to work. If work is a means of making men virtuous by the effort they have to produce to sustain their lives, the machine appears as a means of alleviating this effort, and thus as a possibility for man to fall into sloth and idleness, and therefore to enter a process of decadence. The introduction of the machine questions the entire idea of work as it aims at suppressing the notion of effort. It takes us back to the origins of work: was work painful in the prelapsarian world, which is often the background of utopias? Did it become painful after the Fall? And thus is alleviating the suffering caused by work a way of resisting God's punishment and curse? What is the place of the machine in the pastoral imagery of prelapsarian worlds in eighteenth-century utopias?

I chose to study the topic of work and labour because it is a surprising element in utopias. As the essence of the utopian genre is to picture a society that does not exist, it could be expected that such dreams would be free from the constraint of labour. Yet in most utopian novels, the inhabitants of imaginary places do work, though it is never a painful element but an opportunity to exert their talents corresponding to what they like doing. The difference between the several genres within imaginary societies actually accounts for the fact that there is a place for work in the utopia. The point of utopias, when compared to such tales as those of the Golden Age or the Lands of Cocayne, is to present organised societies that have rules and institutions. It is therefore possible to say that work and labour are a part of the definition of a utopian society, as compared with other types of imaginary societies. In most utopian texts though, labour is not painful, as the climate and the lands are beneficial to agriculture, so that men and women only have to take care of their land, and, just as in Eden, their task does not involve superhuman or painful effort. Besides, work is not imposed on them, but most of the time they are allowed to do whatever task they feel they are talented for. So that in More's *Utopia*, all the inhabitants of the island have to till the ground and their gardens, but they also exert some craft according to their talent or taste, often in a family tradition. The followers of More who wrote later utopias also follow this main pattern: predominance of agriculture plus some other job that fulfils the talents of utopians. So most of the

time there is no use for machines in utopias, as agriculture is still based on small tenures and therefore does not demand too much effort. The crafts are also mostly manual. Yet some utopias introduce machines, as we shall see later on in this paper.

Whether in England or overseas, utopias are most of the time located in rural areas where the towns are reasonably planned out and geographically limited. Most utopian texts follow the lines determined by Thomas More who went so far as to evaluate the ideal number of inhabitants to form the best possible combination of people. Some texts offer a stereotypical vision of the pastoral landscape. The most striking in this category is Sarah Scott's *Millennium Hall* (1762). The narrator and his young friend called Lamont get lost in Cornwall and discover a scene that takes them centuries backwards: a shepherd playing the flute with his flock and later on women working in the fields. The narrator gives the comments of his friends about their attitude: "In them, Lamont beheld rural simplicity without any of those marks of poverty or boorish rusticity which would have spoilt the pastoral air of the scene around us". And he concludes on the feeling that this landscape evokes for them: "We began to think ourselves in the days of Theocritus" (Scott 1762: 188). This antique reference and imagery appears as a mark of distinction. The care women have for their natural landscape mirrors the attention they have for themselves. Nature is curbed and architecture becomes part of it, in the same way as the women's character is educated in such a way that their learning embellishes their good natural dispositions.

G. A. Ellis offers another vision of such a society. In *New Britain* (1820) men and women live in a colony founded in Missouri by enlightened men who advocate life according to the principle of reason. They are educated so that all are wise and reasonable. They live in small towns and each family lives on the product of their garden, with the milk of their cows, the eggs of their poultry. It is interesting to realise that in the "Constitution" of *New Britain*, the garden comes before the house. It has to be there first as it is the basis of daily life and necessity. Furthermore, the narrator enhances their virtue as he describes them as "a people where everyone is an agriculturist and also a useful mechanic or

professional man, and yet as careless of accumulation as the savages" (Ellis 1997: 149).

This reference to the savages is quite interesting as the imagery of the noble savage was developed in that period. As urban centres were mushrooming in Europe, and in England in particular, they were perceived as the element that corrupted men. Towns were the places of decadence at all levels, social, moral and cultural. The "civilised" urban population of Europe was interested in accumulating material riches with no regard whatsoever to the notion of virtue or even of their nature. The "savages" on the other hand represented people living in perfect harmony with nature and therefore with their human nature too. They were more concerned with preserving their natural virtue and happiness than in pursuing deceitful goods. It is therefore not surprising that eutopian societies rely on individual agricultural production in a rural context.

Other stories show the decadence of human or animal societies. Animals are used in allegories, bees being the arch-example of social beings, industrious animals living together to produce something useful.

In the parable of the *Revolt of the Bees* (1826), by John Minter Morgan, social constructions similar to large, rapidly growing cities only appear after the revolution that introduces private property and interest. From that moment onwards bees are concerned with the growth of their personal wealth and well-being, and try to achieve higher and higher productivity. The bees used to live happily in a typical pastoral picture – in the middle of a quiet field – until the capitalist revolution took place and disrupted the whole social fabric. Machines irrupted into the beehive and industrial techniques ruined the so far peaceful atmosphere.

Other famous utopian characters show that they want to avoid the decaying atmosphere and influence of the towns and cities as they choose to end their lives in a quiet rural country. Gulliver and Candide both find the answer to their quest for happiness and morality in their garden. Happiness to them means producing whatever they need in close association with nature, and living away from the corrupt society of selfish people. The end of both these tales reveals the importance of individual responsibility. They have to live on

their own in order to escape the evil of the world. They find their way to happiness in the return to a basic social structure (family and/or friends) in a typically rural frame. In eutopias, on the contrary, virtuous communities live in a respected natural milieu and are characterised by the reasonable exploitation of gardens or of agricultural resources by and for all. The land has to be taken care of, either as a way of preserving the balance of society or as a means to discipline the men and women who are kept busy producing useful goods.

The education and leisure of utopians is part of the pastoral framework. As in More's *Utopia*, the inhabitants of Sarah Scott's *Millennium Hall* and of Ellis's *New Britain* enjoy a thorough education that guarantees their virtue. Reason is the guiding principle of New Britain. Both boys and girls are granted the same education, given by all adults, and the community thus lives by enlightened principles. Leisure is also directed towards this idea of encouraging reason for all as the New Britons spend their spare time in enlightened conversation or in country dances which allow them to make the most of their rural way of life.

The ladies at Millennium Hall are educated in the same way, with the same attention to intellectual development and artistic talents, especially music, that often characterise the pastoral universe.

In dystopias, on the other hand, there is no time either for education, as reason is replaced by superstition, or leisure, as intensive work causes men to be tired and depressed. *The Revolt of the Bees* offers a striking image of this situation.

Utopian contexts are therefore often very close to the land, and the inhabitants of these countries produce enough to maintain themselves and are satisfied with the bare necessities of life, which makes productivity an unknown notion. There is often a direct contact between the producer and whatever he wants or needs, and the machines appear as a rare feature of utopian production as it would introduce an unnatural medium between man and his task. The machines that are used in utopias are therefore often very different from those found in real-life Britain at the time. It is once more the distinctive sign of a dystopia when a machine belongs both to the real and the imaginary

world. These often emphasise the unhealthy and unnatural consequences of industrialisation in Britain.

From a theoretical point of view there are several issues that are related to the question of mechanical production. As utopias most of the time depict happy societies, one could expect many inventions and machines to be devised in these countries to spare work and effort for men and women. And yet, machines are fairly rare in those stories and when they appear in the context of industrial production, it is most of the time in dystopias rather than eutopias.

The positive aspect of the machine is that it reflects man's creative capacities. In this respect, it is part of his identity as a being created in the image of God and therefore able to use his imagination and create new devices by himself. On the other hand and still from a religious point of view, man acts in a challenging way when he uses machines to make his work more productive and less painful. The original sin caused the human race to be cursed and condemned to tiring and effortful labour and the use of machines can therefore appear as a desire of evading God's curse, and thus of defying His authority. Besides, it was often considered that a reasonable amount of effort or pain in work has a purifying effect on human character. Even in utopias most of the tasks that have to be accomplished are manual, sometimes difficult, but provide man with a direct link to whatever he is to produce. Effort means the refusal of idleness. Making work easier and allowing people to work shorter hours represents a threat for the community as individuals may lose some of the qualities which guarantee social stability. Even working shorter hours did not mean having much time to spend isolated for personal amusement as leisure was to be as useful as work in order to educate the population in many utopias, after More's example. Work and leisure are group activities that enable men to develop their social qualities and hence their virtue.

From an economic point of view machines represent another threat. Mechanization was celebrated by Adam Smith and other economists of the time as a means of increasing productivity, and therefore of building up British commercial exchanges. Manufactured goods were more valuable than raw materials and meant a larger accumulation of capital, thus personal and general increase in wealth. But the accumulation of capital or of personal riches does

not correspond to the utopian ideals. Private property is very rarely allowed in eutopias. No one desires either personal wealth or increase of productivity in utopian worlds. Personal or individual wealth would mean a disruption of communitarian happiness and equality, and an increase in productivity could be useful only in the context of a society linked to the rest of the world by trade. But as some critics have underlined, utopias are regulated on the basis of their separation from the rest of the world, and therefore there is very little or no communication with the outside world.

In Morgan's *Revolt of the Bees* machines only appear once the territories of the bees have been divided into private properties and individual bees begin to try and imagine ways of increasing their own wealth through the exploitation of the weaker bees who are condemned to work on the machines, and often end up mutilated by these new devices.

Jonathan Swift gives a fairly negative idea of the machines as unnatural elements in the academy of Laputa in the third book of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). The scientists who live and work there try to lead absurd experiments such as inventing a literary machine supposedly able to write books. Letters are randomly assembled and any sensible section that could make a word or part of a sentence is written down in order to create a coherent book afterwards. Their scientific aim is to demonstrate that mechanisation can be used in the writing of learned or artistic literature. Swift's obvious target is the absurdity of believing that machines can replace man's intelligence and imagination.

So in both these instances machines appear as a further indication of the decadence of the utopia into a dystopia. The society that appears after the *Revolt of the Bees*, just as the Society of Lagado, is a fallen representation of a community that could have been an example, had the inhabitants become wise and virtuous.

In most utopias, there is not even the possibility for improved technologies as they are totally cut off from the rest of the world. When the utopian society feels threatened by the corruption of the outside world, it refuses any influence and thus remains in a state of supposedly preserved virtue, looking to the past as an ideal way of life, not to be turned away from. Hence the feeling of the narrator of *Millennium Hall* of being back "in the days of

Theocritus" (Scott 1762: 188). However, this also indicates that the virtue of these communities is not to be trusted as it is only maintained thanks to their isolation and strict legislation.

New Britain however offers another example of a happy utopia that still has links with the outside world. If all families are centred around their gardens that offer them whatever they might need to live, they have managed to reach such a state of enlightened reason that the outside world is no longer a threat to their morality and happiness. On the contrary they study the history of other peoples in order to avoid their mistakes and discover whatever useful element they could take up into their own world. They even leave their colony in order to visit other territories to see if anything good could be derived from their neighbours' technical and intellectual progress. They are thus familiar with techniques that were well-known in Europe and that the visitor already knows, as wind-mills and even steam engines. The New Briton who shows him around the country concludes: "with us, genius may pursue invention without the dread of its ultimately proving injurious to anyone" (Ellis 1997: 212). New Britons do not seek to produce more than they need or to accumulate wealth for selfish purposes, which makes all the difference with the European societies or with dystopias.

The pastoral imagery of eighteenth-century utopias is therefore most of the time characterised by small towns and families living from the produce of their gardens and crafts. Even leisure corresponds to the pastoral ideal with a particular emphasis on enlightened conversation, music and dances. Most of them look to the past for their ideals, and it is to be noticed that the prelapsarian world of labour based on the garden is the main background of many texts. They refuse the ideas of productivity or idleness that were derived from the introduction of new machines and new devices in the real world.

In the following centuries, the same question of the place and role of the machine in the utopian pastoral universe was asked again and again. William Morris provided an answer: "The wonderful machines which in the hands of just and foreseeing men would have been used to minimise repulsive labour and give pleasure, or in other words added life to the human race, have been so

used on the contrary that they have driven all men into mere frantic haste and hurry, thereby destroying pleasure, that is life, on all hands. They have instead of lightening the labour of the workmen, intensified it and thereby added more weariness yet to the burden which the poor had to carry" (Morris 1884).

The criticism is not addressed to the machine *per se*, but to the unwise use that is made of it, and to the selfishness of those who are ready to exploit the "workmen" in order to increase their profit. Besides, Morris also emphasises the satisfaction that man feels at making his own goods with his own hands. Creating useful goods is a way of fulfilling one's nature and therefore of feeling happy. Earlier utopians also underlined the same idea.

The fear of extensive use of the machine was also voiced in later dystopias, by Aldous Huxley for example, who depicted the extreme danger involved. In *Brave New World* (1932), the machines are not used only to create useful goods, but human beings, and some are scientifically altered in order to create a genetic hierarchy in mankind. This text shows in an extreme way how machines could be used by a totalitarian state in order to brainwash the population and have them accept unnatural and degrading living conditions, suitable in the pseudo-balance of a standardised mechanised society.

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