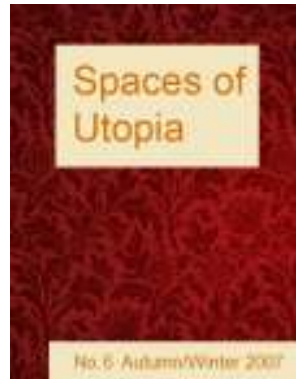


Fears of Globalization:

Anti-Corporate Visions in Recent Utopian Texts

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A new partnership of nations has begun, and we stand today at a unique and extraordinary moment. (...) Out of these troubled times, our fifth objective – a new world order – can emerge: A new era – freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice and more secure in the quest for peace.

George H. W. Bush¹

George Bush, Sr., former President of the United States, is famous for this promise that he gave in a speech in Congress on September 11th 1990. It was a promise for a utopian world of global union and peace that was ironically used to justify a war, which many considered more an act of policing than an act of conquest. For the authors of *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, world police action such as this is emblematic of the constitution of a "new world order" of different magnitude. In their book Hardt and Negri posit that we are witnessing the constitution of a global system of power relations that they refer to as Empire. Empire is the result of the progression from modernity to post-modernity and of the decline of national sovereign power. It is expression of a global market and a worldwide flow of products, information and population. In their opinion, Empire usurps the sovereign vacuum and establishes a new world

order. It should be noted, though, that Empire is not imperialism:

In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a *decentered* and *detrterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. (Hardt / Negri 2000: xii f.)

It must be stressed here that Hardt and Negri consider Empire not the imperial project of any nation-state, even though the US are considered to be the main source of Empire's policing and military actions – the centre of operating power so to speak. They clearly argue for Empire to be of "hybrid constitution", mixing the three functions of power and merging them "in the form of a rhizomatic and universal communication network" (*idem*, 316ff.). Hardt and Negri see the corporate world as a major participant in the constitution of Empire and position it in the middle of this web of power relations that interconnect the different layers: "[This layer] is structured primarily by the networks that transnational capitalist corporations have extended throughout the world market – networks of capital flows, technology flows, population flows, and the like" (*idem*, 309f.). It is to corporate interests that the articulation of Empire's goals and needs falls. It is through their networks of communication that they establish and assert power over the other layers. It should be noted that this is just a rough summary and interpretation of the state of Empire, since the realities of the power relations are far too complex and interwoven for this presentation.

For my purpose, it shall suffice to say that transnational corporate capitalism is at the heart of a new world order that has been establishing itself for quite a while now. The settling of Empire, though, has received a major thrust following the events of September 11th 2001, which in accordance to my hypothesis I see as an attack on Empire, not the nation-state of the US. Central

to the motivation of the attacks was a deep-seated hatred of the way that Empire operates. It is not surprising thus that the attack was aimed at the World Trade Center, one of the operational centres of the corporate part of Empire. In the actions that Empire has taken after the attacks, one can clearly see that the new world order has firmly established itself in power. Not wanting to go too deeply into political speculation I would just like to posit that transnational corporate interest has played a major role in many global political decisions that have been made since the events of 9/11.

It is with this thought in mind that I would now like to turn to the subject of utopian literary production. In taking the work of Tom Moylan as a basis for analysis, I consider the new millennium to present us with a historical specificity. Today's sociopolitical circumstances differ greatly from those of the 1990s. In keeping with Hardt and Negri's argument, the formation of Empire can be seen as a paradigm shift in sociopolitical power relations – from international to imperial sovereignty. Therefore, there must be some resonance at the site where alternatives are constructed and resistance to the *status quo* emerges. If in fact Empire constitutes itself more radically in the new millennium, we should then find the articulation of opposition to it in the utopian imagination.

As Tom Moylan describes in his book *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, the dystopian variant of the utopian imagination delivers an exploration of the “very worst of social alternatives” (Moylan 2000: 147), but can differ greatly in its outlook on hope for betterment. As many critics have pointed out before, one of the main points of dystopian critique lies with corporate capitalism. This anti-corporate sentiment can be traced from as early as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* through Kornbluth and Pohl's *The Space Merchants* to Marge Piercy's

He, She and It. The fear of the evils of corporate capitalism is not new, but the constitution of Empire denotes a paradigm shift to which dystopian literature responds. It is not in the formal aspect of category – classical or critical – that a difference is to be found. Rather it is within the frame of the sociopolitical critique that these dystopian texts negotiate the paradigm shift brought about by the emergence of Empire.

This negotiation can be seen in an argument that Hardt and Negri take up from Michel Foucault. They define the sociopolitical constitution of Empire along the lines of two concepts: the society of control and the biopolitical nature of power. The society of control, as opposed to disciplinary society, bases its power not on the sanctioning of appropriate behaviour and the punishing of deviant behaviour, it rather controls by socially integrated operations and through directly organizing brain and body of its subjects via communication systems. The normalizing of society is thus internalized within all aspects of this network. The second aspect of Empire, that Hardt and Negri posit, is that its power can be recognized as biopolitical:

Biopower is a form of power that regulates social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it, and rearticulating it. (...) The highest function of this power is to invest life through and through, and its primary task is to administer life. Biopower thus refers to a situation in which what is directly at stake in power is the production and reproduction of life itself. (Hardt / Negri 2000: 23f.)

It is especially the concept of biopower that exerts influence on the dystopian imagination of the new millennium. Authors like Margaret Atwood and Geoff Ryman acknowledge Empire's strategic rule over human life and all its biological aspects and thus choose this mechanism as a main point of critique. I will now analyze the latest novels of both authors in respect to their treatment of

the biopolitical.

Margaret Atwood's 2003 novel *Oryx & Crake* describes a world in which corporations have exploited the earth to an extent that natural resources are almost depleted, the climate problems have led to massive droughts, which left the corn chambers of the world empty. The elite of human society has taken refuge in corporately owned and heavily guarded enclaves, the so-called compounds, while the mass of people live in the unprotected pleeblands. In this corporately owned world, employees are regarded as assets, some more, others less valuable. Since agriculture and breeding is impossible, the most cherished products for a company lie within the field of the life sciences, creating new species of plants and animals to comply with the demands of a growing population, and researching medical and cosmetic products. Consequently, the most valuable assets to a company are geneticists and other natural scientists. It is within this framework that Atwood places her protagonist Jimmy, with his worthless humanistic traits, at the edge of corporate society.

Creative work is of little use in the world of corporations; it is limited to either the advertisement branch – called contemporary application – or has to find an economically more valuable outlet. Atwood inscribes the human creative potential not in the arts but in science and especially in genetic splicing. Under corporate control, grade school pupils are introduced to the creative potential of genes and grow up with the fundamental knowledge that the power of creation is at their disposal. Under careful guidance, an elite is being educated to be employed at the most advanced corporate compounds. This leads to the exploitation of nature even in its smallest parts, as humankind invents species for its own purposes such as the pigoon, which is used for growing human

tissue organs, or the wolvog, an enhanced watchdog for security personnel. *Oryx and Crake* shows human science to be the master of all biomass – to borrow a term from Neal Stephenson – and the corporations the masters of Science.

It is thus obvious that *Oryx and Crake* takes us into the realm of the biopolitical, with the question of who holds power over life at its core. Corporations have managed to integrate themselves into the lives of their employees, they provide for education, entertainment, information, communication and profession. With this method the corporation controls all social interaction and has integrated its values and standards into society. In this society of corporate control, the biopolitical becomes the key field of power struggle and Atwood is very apt to place her main critique on corporate capitalism here.

In *Crake* we are presented with a scientific genius that is the perfect tool for corporate ambitions. He is highly intelligent, rational, a “numbers person” as Jimmy calls him, and can achieve everything in corporate society. After graduating, he receives a research position at one of the wealthiest compounds and gets a *carte blanche* for his project Paradise, which researches the corporate holy grail: immortality. In order to assure this immortality to the well-paying customer though, Crake has to get rid off the many hazards that life offers, most of which are caused by human. Crake names religion, politics, and economics as hazardous but highlights sexual drive as the main cause for war, diseases, and overpopulation. All of this can be stopped by the BlyssPlus pill, which is the first of his scientific initiatives for immortality. The pill not only genetically alters humanity so as to make it immune to sexually transmitted diseases, it intentionally but unknowingly to the user also sterilizes the

population. The second step to immortality, then, will be to present the now sterile customer with an alternative in reproduction, a better human race that has none of the destructive features of the old one. To this aim, Crake has created what he calls floor models of a new form of human reproduction – a species of humans whose features can later be added or subtracted from your privately bought and custom made model. He has genetically altered humanity and created a new product, which is supposed to be sold as an alternative to children. In this we find Atwood's most poignant critique of corporate behaviour, as she extrapolates the idea of the biopolitical to literally take hold of the means to the reproduction of life, not only in the manipulation of our natural surroundings, but in the very essence of humanity itself. Human society falls victim to the exploitation mechanisms of creating a disease for the profit of selling a cure: "[T]he benefits for the future human race of the two in combination would be stupendous. They were inextricably linked – the Pill and the Project. The Pill would put a stop to haphazard reproduction, the Project would replace it with a superior method" (Atwood 2003: 366).

But Atwood does not succumb to anti-utopian pessimism; this corporately controlled world of human products does not become reality. Unknown to the corporation Crake has secretly nurtured an anti-corporate sentiment and worked on a plan to save the human race from destroying the earth. He has designed his floor models without the flaws he sees in humanity: they have no hereditary diseases, are beautiful and docile, are better adapted to the climatic changes; they are sexually promiscuous and they are equipped with the ability to feed on their own excrements. Thus they do not need to kill, to possess, to worship or to be jealous. They are naturally able to survive in the

harshest conditions without any of the amenities to which corporate society clings. Thus, when in a terroristic act Crake infuses the pill with a retrovirus that kills human society, his creations are best equipped to survive in the non-functioning world. To his own logic, he has broken the cycle of self-destruction and saved the human race. Atwood has commented on Crake's intention herself:

The human race seems bent on destroying itself, and the biosphere along with it, because it seems unable to check its own greedy and aggressive behaviours. An individual in my book uses science to speed up the process, true, but only because he thinks that he's made some essential improvements to the breed, and wants in all benevolence to eliminate the defective model – ourselves. (Atwood 2005: 163)

It is with this benevolent act, that Crake undermines the corporate vision of a capitalist utopia in which all human reproduction, all life, has become a marketable product. He has loosened the corporate chokehold on the world's biomass – humanity included – and has given it a chance for betterment. With this creative act, he has written the future anew, creating a counter-narrative that challenges the hegemonic order and reveals a glimpse of hope. It is not hope for us though, but for the created and revised version of humanity.

And in this I see the fundamental difference of *Oryx and Crake* as regards other dystopias – be they critical or classical – that have been written before 2000. In recognizing the fundamental paradigm shift towards Empire, with its power based in the biopolitical, Atwood creates a society in which corporate control is not limited, but universal and all-embracing, it is a constituent of life itself. Consequently, her site of resistance, her counter-narrative needs to be biopolitical as well and so she creates a new human race; renegotiating social life from its interior, interpreting it anew and rearticulating it,

in order to re-write the creation myth of Genesis.

But Atwood is not alone in her contestation of Empire's rule. We can see a similar renegotiation of the biopolitical in Geoff Ryman's latest novel *Air*. *Air* tells the story of Chung Mae Wang who lives in a small village somewhere in the mountains of Central Asia, in the fictional country of Karzistan. Her village is the last place on earth to go online exactly at the moment of a technical turning point in communication development. Karzistan has been chosen by the information-technology corporations to be the testing field of a new communication system called Air, which will allow everyone access to an internet-like network in their head. Even though the test is only for one day, it opens a new world to the villagers and they soon recognize the utopian promise, but also the dystopian threats that the online-world holds. In a connected world, with global networks, Karzistan's existence will be jeopardized and the people of the village will be ground up in the machinations of the world market. The village has already lost many of its young to the city, and even there a productive future is limited. The globalized world that Ryman describes leaves little room for underdeveloped countries in Central Asia. The fact that its people get exploited by greater corporate goals is most effectively shown by the field test for Air. The low position in the world market leaves the county prone to corporate interests, and thus it can be bought as a guinea pig for this new technology.

The test commences without anyone in Mae's village even being properly educated to deal with the intense experience of a virtual world in their minds. Consequently, there are several accidents, the most severe of which leaves Mae's neighbour dead in her arms and both their spirits entangled in Air. Air is

all pervasive, a broadcast that imprints itself on the user's mind and like a technical DNA-code identifies him wherever he may be. But Air is also a battleground for corporate interests, the format or interface to accessing Air proving to be the most lucrative piece of software ever to be developed, since all of mankind will be using it. In an open allusion to Microsoft's Windows, Ryan describes the corporately owned Gates-Format as competing with the more open UN Format. Mae's unique status and her malfunctioning Air-imprint are seen as valuable assets to the technology corporation in its battle for the software monopoly. She is brought to the research facility with the promise of treating her malfunction but then gets probed and tested instead while help is denied.

Ryman describes the world of *Air* to be traversed by corporate networks; the information and production flows are global and controlled by forceful capitalistic markets. They are shown to influence even the far-reaches of the world. The old online information system is causing an impact on the villagers by infusing them with capitalist ideals, standards and ambitions, which their reality cannot comply with. The promised world of the new information system Air is even more threatening to the old ways of life; the system leaves no choice to not become integrated into the corporate world; it is universal and ubiquitous. Ryman describes a society of corporate control, in which power is exerted by infusing all social interaction, all of life, with corporate standards and values. The biopolitical seems a manifest aspect of Ryman's view of the future with Air representing a form of power that regulates social life from its interior and functions as a corporate enclave within every human being.

If Ryman on the one hand describes his world to be even more

pervasively controlled by corporations than Atwood's, he also, on the other hand, has a more optimistic outlook at resistance to this biopolitical power. In Mae he describes not only a fierce activist for her own people, but also a person that uses the given pervasive system of power and manipulates it for her own goals. She establishes several online businesses that deal with the conservation of old folkways and manages to educate the villagers in the matters of both information systems. In taking some of the biopolitical power into her own hands, Mae creates a site of resistance to the system and thus ensures that an alternative is possible. But Ryman goes one step further in objecting to the corporate rule over biomass – over the minds of all humanity. He provides for a human evolution that goes beyond the need for corporate software. In her fight against the malfunctioning Format, Mae discovers the true nature of Air lying beyond corporate imagination. Air can be described as merging the ideas of Carl Gustav Jung's collective subconscious with Saul Kripke's possible worlds theory²:

Air was real life – all of life all at once, for it made all times one time. (...)
We live and we die in eternity. Our physical bodies occupy the balloon world. The balloon world has space, and we are trapped in one part of it. The balloon expands and we are trapped with that expansion. And that is time. Air has no time.
Air is everything that has been and will be, waiting its turn to puff out of its tiny dot into our brief world. (Ryman 2004: 372f.)

It is with this knowledge, that Mae is able to free herself from the malfunction, and by that struggle also, to free Air from any human endeavour to capture its essence. In the end, Ryman shows human evolution to surpass any corporate dystopian vision and in Mae's struggle for knowledge inscribes all of humanity with the inherent ability to be free from biopolitical manipulation. Our future world may have been scarred by corporate control over the biopolitical, but it is

within our abilities to evolve beyond that control and make that future better nonetheless. In this I see Ryman's argument for a horizon of hope, just as Atwood posited hope in the creation of a new species. In both cases the authors of these utopian visions have reacted instinctively, if not knowingly, to the power relations of Empire. It is the question of the reproduction of life, the question of the biopolitical that drives their novels. Both *Oryx and Crake* and *Air* show a deep understanding of the mechanics of corporate control and the biopolitical. And with the negation of that power, both novels open the mind of their readers to the possibility of an alternative model.

Notes

¹ George H. W. Bush, "Toward a New World Order", speech given to US Congress, Washington D.C. on 11 Sept. 1990.

² See, for instance, Jung 1971 and Kripke 1984.

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