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## **HUMAN NATURE AND POLITICS IN UTOPIAN AND ANTI-UTOPIAN FICTION (2018) BY NIVEDITA BAGCHI**

Review by Peter J. Maurits

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Bagchi, Nivedita. *Human Nature and Politics in Utopian and Anti-Utopian Fiction*. Lexington Books, 2019. 100 pp.

In a five second YouTube clip, an unknown editor brilliantly summarizes the legendary 1971 human nature-debate between Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault. It starts with Chomsky carefully gesturing with his left hand and articulating that “a fundamental element of human nature...” A hard cut follows to Foucault who, bent over in his chair, bursts out laughing. The clip is an effective summary of the human nature debate as such, in which a millennia-old fundamental disagreement about if human nature exists at all engages disciplines from philosophy to neuroscience. The publication of Nivedita Bagchi’s *Human Nature and Politics in Utopian and Anti-Utopian Fiction* (2019, henceforth *H&P*) is thus as timely as ever. And in a utopian studies-field based largely on repetition (cf. Maurits, 2020), *H&P* is a welcome variation.

*H&P* starts from the premise that anti-utopian fiction in the form of novels such as *The Hunger Games* (2008-2020) and *Divergent* (2011-2013) have lately seized the “American imagination” (ix). It considers this “amazing” because the US was founded on the “utopian ideal of the ‘City on a Hill’” (ix). The book therefore aims to address this perceived discrepancy and suggests in its opening pages that anti-utopian as well as utopian fiction may be *en vogue* now because these genres have historically been “extremely successful at capturing” the aspirations, hopes, and fears of the people (ix).

The interest in anti-utopias raises an additional question for Bagchi. She considers utopias social-systems that are “right and perfect,” and that shape the human beings in it in such a way that they are “harmon[ious],” behave “correct[ly],” and pursue the “right goals” (ix). Yet this would assume that human beings and their supposed human nature can be controlled by way of institutions at all. It is this assumption – the assumption that human nature can or cannot be controlled – that for *H&P* underlies all utopian and anti-utopian writing. And because (anti-)utopian fiction does not make its position explicit, the main aim of *H&P* is to “tease out the assumptions utopian and anti-utopian writers make on human nature,” without offering a theory of human nature itself (x). Its “strongest claim” is that “certain views on human nature [...] logically impact the writer’s political views including their views on freedom” (xiv).

The study is neatly (and intentionally) structured in dialectical-like fashion, with an introduction, four chapters in which utopia and dystopia are opposed based on their human nature conceptions, and a synthesis-conclusion. The introduction outlines *H&P*'s premise: utopians think of human nature as knowable and manipulatable by (State) institutions (x). Dystopians, on the other hand, believe that the only predictable aspect of human beings is their indestructible "desire for freedom," and that humans are malleable and recalcitrant which limits State powers (xii, xvi). The notion of humans as knowable is "antithetical to human freedom" for dystopians. Hence, the "more restrictive the political system, the more the individual and the state come into conflict" in a dystopian framework (xii). Contrary to scholars who claim that one person's utopia is another's dystopia," Bagchi therefore claims that they can be distinguished based on their conceptions of human nature (xvii).

To support these claims, each chapter provides a succinct but informed overview of scholarship on one literary work and its connection to human nature and freedom. The first chapter argues that Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) has a fundamentally pessimistic notion of human nature. According to Bagchi, More believed that it exists but that only some aspects of it can be manipulated. Education and religion, for More, may steer humans in a certain direction, which thus also facilitates the possibility of a good society. Bagchi writes that, for More, "men cannot but choose to be good" due to Utopia's social structure (9). Nevertheless, due to the way human nature is conceived by More, even a society that is good will always be flawed. The second chapter focuses on Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888). For *H&P*, Bellamy's understanding of human nature was deeply rooted in his religious upbringing. He believed that it existed, that it entailed both antisocial and cooperative characteristics (26), and that it could be shaped. One way of doing so was to change the "human conditions," which would then lead to a "new type of human" (23). The institutions in *Looking Backward* are therefore imagined in such a way as to appeal to the sociable aspect of human beings (25).

After these utopian chapters, *H&P* transitions to two dystopian works. Chapter Three focuses on Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). *Brave New World*, it is argued, departs from the idea that manipulating and suppressing human nature through education from birth onwards can lead to the successful standardisation and oppression of human beings (36). In order for this to work, however, human beings have to be considered "knowable," which *H&P* argues is an assumption that is characteristic of utopian works (38). In line with this, Huxley in his dystopian *Brave New World* parts with that assumption, and even some of the characters in the novel that appeared to have been successfully manipulated all their lives manage to break away from the oppressive State, and "show glimpses of individuality and independence" (47). Chapter Four on George Orwell's *1984* (1949) has more difficulty proving the point about dystopians' views of human nature because "individuality and freedom are completely eroded in that novel" (49). As an aside, we may recall that Raymond Williams even said that he could not bear to read *1984* anymore, because it was so without hope. Still, *H&P* claims that even human nature in *1984*, and specifically the desire for freedom, "can be suppressed but not eliminated" (52). To argue this, Bagchi steps outside of the text and argues that even if the State in Orwell's *1984* controls characters in the novel fully, this "horrifies readers and incites a determined reaction against" it (60).

Bagchi's conclusion argues that Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) "neither discards utopianism nor adopts it," and maintains that "we need" both dystopia and utopia to accomplish a "better world," because the "combination of the two represents our lives—filled with hope and fear" (66, 63, 68).

*H&P* is written with remarkable clarity, and if this makes for a dull and even repetitive reading experience at times (some sentences are almost literally repeated on subsequent pages or even paragraphs), this is mediated by the refreshingly modest length of the book (about 80 pages). Moreover, although human nature has been a standard part of utopian studies discussions (e.g. Levitas, 1990) and has been the topic of several dedicated studies (e.g. Sargent 1975; Cooke 2002; and Beauchamp 2007), and despite the extremely canonized corpus, *H&P* does add something to the field. Particularly convincing is the idea that "utopias and dystopias [...] interrogate each other" and thus the concept of human nature (63). The insightful translation of that idea in an intentionally "dialectical" organization of the study is a solid methodological base from which to show this (xiv). Some of *H&P*'s claims are pleasantly provoking. The notion that dystopian literature is the literature of liberalism because it "promotes individual liberty" certainly characterises liberalism in an interesting way, especially in the US context (xi). *H&P*'s claim that utopia and dystopia *cannot* be conflated based on the perspective of the reader counters a prominent postmodernist line of argument – which fails to historicize these genres and insufficiently takes into account genre theory.

Yet the book has a number of problems on the level of argument, method, and ideology. First, the conclusion apparently undermines the study's argument that utopia/dystopia can be distinguished based on perceptions of human nature, stating that "our perspective dictates whether we see [a story] as utopia or dystopia" (67). Second, the author is a political theorist who is aware of literary conventions and terms such as "character development" (34, 47, 49) and the so-called *death of the author* (51). Yet *H&P* insists on referring to authorial intention throughout, claims that the "views" of characters "reflect the views of More the author" (7), and argues that a character's speech in *Looking Backward* is what Bellamy "believed" (25). This begs the question if a political studies approach would have rendered the analyses more solid. Third, *H&P* is philosophically idealist and ideologically naïve. For *H&P* it is "amazing" that anti-utopianism can be successful in the US because that nation is based on the utopian model of the City on the Hill. Yet decades of Imperialism should make it evident that such narratives are ideological and thoroughly at odds with reality. Similarly, it is claimed that "utopias provide hope; dystopias provide realism" (68). It will be recalled that dystopianism for *H&P* is the literature of liberalism, from which it would follow that liberalism equals realism. But has liberalism not been the ideological vehicle and justification, at least in part, of the aforementioned Imperialism? And has its value of 'freedom' – a deeply problematic and often abused concept, on which *H&P* continuously insists as a positive, without a thorough cultural or historical contextualization – not been instrumental to that ideology in the problematic form of 'freedom of the market'?

One could thus propose in conclusion that if liberalism were indeed realism, then all hope really is lost. Despite its added value to the field, and symptomatic of its time, this would make *H&P* a dystopian text.

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**BIONOTE**

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