

► A View from the South: Contemporary English and American Studies

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A VIEW FROM THE SOUTH:
CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH AND AMERICAN STUDIES

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Woolf: "An extraordinary achievement"

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He could have shouted and could not. Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet. At dusk the big Englishman, Belcher, would shift his long legs out of the ashes and say "Well, chums, what about it?" Although Bertha Young was thirty she still had moments like this when she wanted to run instead of walk, to take dancing steps on and off the pavement, to bowl a hoop, to throw something up in the air and catch it again, or to stork Bill and laugh at - nothing - at nothing, simply. "Halloo! Below there!" When he heard a voice thus calling to him, he was standing

at the door of his box, with a flag in his hand, furling round its short pole. Their bungalow was called 'Sea-View Cottage'. When the phone rings, who would you most like it to be? And who would you hate it to be? Buick? Yeah, I knew him. The whole street knew Buick. He wiped the bench dry enough to sit down, thrust his hands into his jacket pockets and hunched his shoulders, his chin coming down onto his chest. I bought the tin of sardines in Borough market, the gourmet-food version held on the site of the ordinary fruit and veg one on the third Saturday of

every month. One afternoon I was sitting outside the Café de la Paix, watching the splendour and shabbiness of Parisian life, and wondering over my vermouth at the strange panorama of pride and poverty that was passing before me, when I heard some one call my name. The small locomotive engine, Number 4, came clanking, stumbling down from Selston with seven full wagons. Lazy and indifferent, shaking space easily from his wings, knowing his way, the heron passes over the church beneath the sky. They were putting Punch to bed - the ayah and the homal, and Meete,

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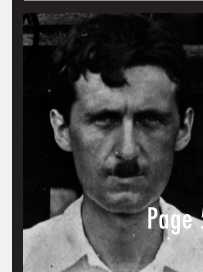
The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. This blind man, an old friend of my wife's, he was on his way to spend the night. For the most wild yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral. As Mr John Oakhurst, gambler, stepped into the main street of Foker Flat on the morning of the twenty-third of November 1850, he was conscious of a change in its moral atmosphere since the preceding night.

The following Tale was found among the papers of the late Dietrich Knickerbocker, an old gentleman of New York, who was very curious in the Dutch history of the province, and the manners of the descendants from its primitive settlers. Besides the neutral expression that she wore when she was alone, Mrs. Freeman had two others, forward and reverse, that she used for all her human dealings. The sexton

stood in the porch of Milford meeting-house, pulling lustily at the bell-rope. "You're a real one for opening your mouth in the first place," tripe said. Jim and Irene Wescott were the kind of people who seem to strike that satisfactory average of income, endeavor, and respectability that is reached by the statistical reports in college alumni bulletins. Day had broken cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray,

when the moon turned aside from the amid Yukon trail and climbed the high earth-bank, where a dim and little-travelled trail led eastward through the fat spruce timberland. Not long ago there lived in uptown New York, in a small, almost meager room, though crowded with books, Leo Finkle, a rabbinical student at the Yeshiva University. Elizabeth Willard, the mother of George Willard was tall and gaunt and her face was marked with smallpox scars. When the alarm goes off at 5:00 a.m., buzzing like a trapped

ORWELL: "IT'S OUTRAGEOUS"



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***Brave New World* Re-Explored: Aldous Huxley's
Critique of Utopian Thought
(Round Table)**

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Abstract: Aldous Huxley's negative utopia *Brave New World* (1932) (hence *BNW*) deserves to be re-explored from many angles, one of the foremost being its anti-utopian thrust. The Round Table focussed on a survey of pre-1932 Huxley essays which were of import for the composition of *BNW*, on the role of poetry in the novel seen from a perspective based on Aristotle's *Poetics* and his utopian notion of 'true happiness,' and on Huxley's extremely anti-utopian adaptation of *BNW* as a musical comedy (1956).

Keywords: English utopias; anti-utopianism; Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*; Huxley essays; musical comedy.

Aldous Huxley's world-famous negative utopia *Brave New World* (1932) (Huxley 1932) is still widely praised for its amazing topicality even in our twenty-first century. Dystopia as well as anti-utopia, *Brave New World* satirizes seemingly positive concepts, such as genetic and social engineering, community, identity and stability, technological and cultural progress, the pleasure principle including free love and happiness induced by drugs as well as pleasant substitutes for religion. Huxley offers no easy solutions but, as he put it himself in his 1946 foreword to the novel, a thought-provoking impossible choice between the insanity of the brave new world and the lunacy of a primitive society in an Indian reservation (Huxley 1946: vii-viii). Above all, instead of pleading for optimistic blueprints of a perfect society in the vein of H. G. Wells, Huxley rather aimed at a fundamental critique of utopian thought.

As chairman of the Round Table I gave a brief overview of the categories in which Huxley's anti-utopianism manifests itself in *Brave New World*. These are: (1) process of composition: authorial intention, sources and textual documents; early Huxley essays related to *BNW*; (2) *BNW* as literary work of art: themes, structure,

characters, style; dystopian and satiric elements; names of persons and places; setting: London vs. America; (3) genre aspects: comparison with Huxley's other utopias and the literary tradition, i.e., *Ape and Essence* (1948), *Brave New World: A Musical Comedy* (1956), *Island* (1962), Thomas More to H. G. Wells; (4) critical reception: Huxley's own hints (1932 motto, 1946 foreword, *Brave New World Revisited*); avenues of criticism: utopia vs. satire, genetic engineering, social relevance (caste system, manipulation; pleasure principle, stability, technological progress), prophetic potential (see, e.g., *Brave New World Revisited* (1958); cloning; standardization; over-organization; centralization / globalization), cultural dimension (modern state vs. Indian reservation; abolition of literature and the arts; religious substitutes; drugs).

Within this framework the round table focussed on three exemplary perspectives on the chosen theme, one from outside and one from inside the novel, and another from the angle of genre problems. In that order, James Sexton dealt with little-known early Huxley essays that were of import for the process of composition, Jesús Isaías Gómez López discussed a specific cultural dimension, the role of poetry in a dystopian milieu, and I myself raised the question to what degree Huxley's dystopias are also anti-utopias, using Huxley's adaptation of *BNW* as a musical comedy (1956) as example.

James Sexton started by presenting a survey of key pre-1932 essays, all of which served as sketches or drafts of ideas that would later be fleshed out in *BNW*. The early essays 'Notes on Decoration' (Huxley 2003 [1930a]) and 'Puritanism in Art' (Huxley 2003 [1930b])—both published in 1930—provide an interesting architectural context, especially as to Huxley's hostility to the work of Le Corbusier, who could be considered the unacknowledged third person of the trinity of Fordian dispensations, the other two being Ford and Freud. James Sexton also referred to Huxley's amusing account of a brief exchange between Dalí and Le Corbusier (Webster 1961: 8), as well as to Julio Camba's essay 'Los estados engomados' (1917) and selections from his *La ciudad automática* (1932). These essays, if not sources, certainly contain interesting analogues to Huxley's best-known dystopia.

Two other short pieces, 'Modern Amusements' (Huxley 2003 [1928]) and 'Christ and the Present Crisis' (Huxley 2003 [1932]), show parallels to some of D. H. Lawrence's social commentary in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and in his essay 'The Grand Inquisitor,' which led naturally into a discussion of the influence of Dostoevsky's parable on *BNW*. The survey was illustrated with various photos of contemporary satiric cartoons critical of both Communism and Capitalism, one of which appeared in Huxley's review essay of René Fülöp-Miller's *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism* (Huxley 1928). These materials, excerpted from James Sexton's online teaching unit on *BNW*, provided the transition to a discussion of the satire on Ford and Lenin.

Jesús Isaías Gómez López followed with a talk on *BNW* from a poetic

perspective, taking Aristotle's *Poetics* as his vantage point. Aristotle showed, he argued, that the terms 'poetry' and 'poet' are not limited to verse but cover a much broader sense which involves all the different manifestations of literature. Thus, a novel is another mode of poetry and, consequently, a good novelist is, in some ways, a poet, too. In *BNW*, the Alpha social engineer Helmholtz Watson is quite unhappy with the World State, which he considers devoid of inspiration and conducive to a meaningless society. Therefore, he tries to find meaning in poetry, which he sees as a way of redemption for himself and for his surrounding world. He is fascinated by Shakespeare's poetry. In this utilitarian simplicity ruled by the World State, which leads to abuse of technology and certain dehumanization, poetry or, at least, a poetic view of life through the eyes of Shakespeare, is surely the only way to provide distinctiveness, self and truth to humankind, who is on the brink of losing its essence and becoming what Ortega y Gasset called a simple 'mass', or, quoting T. S. Eliot, 'hollow men' (Eliot 1963). With this approach, one can see the role of poetry not merely as a form of literature restricted to rhythm and/or rhyme, but in its artistic universal dimension which appeals to fundamental qualities of human beings: our consciousness of freedom, our consciousness of individuality, and our consciousness of imagination.

One of the greatest philosophers of all times, Aristotle, among other achievements, conceived provocative arguments and comments concerning humanity and human functions, including the notion of a singular mode of living that, if adopted by all men, would yield true and sustained happiness forever (Rabkin 1983: 198). This idea reoccurs in the long tradition of literary utopias and dystopias, such as *BNW*. But Aristotle's philosophical notion of true happiness, perhaps original in his time, has become almost as common as a cliché and has just as easily been passed off as wishful thinking. Still, the beauty of logic is that it never needs to be congruent with reality. Thus, in his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines storytelling, or rather the delineation of a dramatic plot, in terms of *mimesis*, the imitation of an action (Hutton 1982: 96), which, according to Richard Kearney, 'gives us a shareable world' (Kearney 2002: 213). In contrast, Aldous Huxley extended traditional utopian and dystopian fictions in *BNW* for giving Dr Frankenstein an *unshareable* world to live in. Only later, in the motto to his positive utopia *Island* (1962), did he feel in a position to quote Aristotle as a premiss: 'In framing an ideal we may assume what we wish, but should avoid all impossibilities' (Huxley 1962: 6; McLeish 1999: 346). This quote aptly describes Huxley's attitude towards the creation of his imaginary utopia. But one should also remember what Aristotle said about individualism: 'The individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing, and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole. But whoever is unable to live in society, or who has no need of it because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god' (Aristotle 2006: 46-47). The same fear of individualism is manifest everywhere in Huxley's novel. To sum up, one can state that *BNW* shows an imperfect human nature within the non-utopian logic of Aristotle's *Poetics*.

My own contribution focussed on a brief analysis of Huxley's *Brave New World: A Musical Comedy*, which, in my view, represents the culminating point of his anti-utopian thinking. Written in 1956, the script was unfortunately never produced in his lifetime although Huxley tried to win over Leonard Bernstein and Igor Stravinsky to set it to music. However, it was at last rediscovered and printed almost fifty years later in *Aldous Huxley Annual*, a journal published by the Centre for Aldous Huxley Studies at the University of Münster, Germany (Huxley 2003 [1956]).

Deceivingly harmless, the first act introduces work and life at the Central London Hatchery in a fashion similar to the novel, but in a tone more light-hearted and even funny in places, as one might expect of a musical. This is, for instance, well reflected in the song of the Epsilons, the lowest caste of brave new worlders, which was played to the audience in a private musical rendering and whose first stanza runs thus: 'No more Mammy, no more Pappy: / Ain't we lucky, ain't we happy? / Everybody's oh so happy, / Everybody's happy now!' (2003 [1956]: 50)

The first scene in the second act presents Bernard and Lenina's visit to the Indian reservation at Malpais, New Mexico, and just by directly mentioning an American place name Huxley alerts the audience to the fact that the story is much closer to contemporary American society than it seemed in the first act. This drift is reinforced in the second scene, in which Bernard's return together with the Savage John surprises the Director of the Central London Hatchery with the embarrassing discovery that he is John's father: the Director's secretary is called Gromyka Franco in allusion to two representatives of totalitarian regimes of the 1950s, one being a leading government official and later foreign secretary of the Soviet Union, Andrej Gromyko, and the other the then dictator of Spain, Generalissimo Franco. In addition, the Director's office is described as similar to 'the office of any twentieth-century Big Shot—only considerably more so' (2003 [1956]: 71) so that the spectators—in contrast to the far-away oddities of the first act—are not only reminded of the familiar US State of New Mexico but also of the decade in which they themselves live.

In the third act, finally, the story closes in fully on contemporary American society by alluding to elements of the current lifestyle: the first scene presents a TV advertising spot and a broadcast of the celebration of GLOBAL LOVE WEEK, culminating in the choice of a Queen of Global Love, which clearly resembles popular competitions like the Miss World contest (78-82). Thus, American society is indirectly equated with the brave new world and silently accused of the loss of values, such as freedom, individuality, and morality. Even more drastically, the second scene turns the shallow comedy into downright farce: in the Hospital for the Dying, where John's mother Linda is dozing off toward death under the influence of *soma*, a nurse practises death-conditioning with small children and sings them a truly macabre song about death being 'like that scrumptuous coma, / Into which you fall, / After seven grammes of soma— / Nothing to worry about at all' (Huxley 2003 [1956]: 92).

But the very height of black humour is reached in the ending of the musical. Just after Helmholtz Watson, John and Lenina have decided to go into exile to Tahiti, the brave new world's place for outsiders, a TV newscaster interrupts the conversation, preposterously combining a kind of modern reality TV with advertising. The scene is Tahiti, where several islanders, i.e., outcasts, are shown killing each other in the name of God, Justice and Truth. Switching back abruptly to the brave new world, the newscaster, obviously unmoved, presents a TV commercial for Voluptua hand cream (2003 [1956]: 102-103). That the outcasts, who are supposedly superior to the brave new worlders, should still be ready to kill each other in the name of ideas that form the backbone of the Western mindset is certainly anti-utopian enough in itself, but that all this happens against the backdrop of Tahiti—an island that conjurs up utopian dreams of a South Sea paradise—makes it doubly anti-utopian; that, however, a TV commercial for Voluptua hand cream—presumably an erotic name—should in its triviality follow the atrocious scenes from reality TV, clearly reflects the mindless pleasure principle at work also in American society. All in all, in his satiric musical comedy, which forestalls any sympathy, pity or even tragical effects by employing a mixture of songs, ridicule and farce together with a most macabre ending, Huxley raises his anti-utopian thrust to a maximum of intensity seldom reached before.

The concluding discussion showed that the audience in many points agreed with the main arguments in favour of re-exploring Huxley's most famous novel as anti-utopia.

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