Satire and the "Inevitability Effect": The Structure of Utopian Fiction from *Looking Backward* to *Portlandia*

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Abstract In the late nineteenth century the literary genre of utopia enjoyed a boom inspired by the success of Edward Bellamy's 1888 *Looking Backward, 2000–1887*. These stories, including novels by William Morris and H. G. Wells, often featured a cicerone who explained how disordered nineteenth-century societies were transformed into superior future worlds. Because this utopian didacticism, inspired by Karl Marx, fell quickly out of fashion and was parodied ruthlessly by twentieth-century dystopias, it is hard to imagine how the form could be revived. However, the TV show *Portlandia*, which premiered in 2011, avoids the future-oriented "inevitability effect" of the fin de siècle utopias by returning to an earlier moment in the utopian genre: the satirizing of a society somewhere on Earth. *Portlandia* presents a lightly fictionalized version of Portland, Oregon, as a happy, inclusive, and prosperous town whose inhabitants are free to pursue their visions. Its "cringe comedy" satire of self-involvement complicates, but does not substantially undermine, its depiction of a peaceful alternative to the militarized American imagination of the early 2000s.

*Keyword*s utopia, *Portlandia*, satire, didacticism, Marx

U topian fiction began as a satirical genre, with the 1516 publication of Thomas More's *Utopia*, about a rational island of the same name, but the boomlet of utopian fiction that followed Edward Bellamy's 1888 *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* de-emphasized satire in favor of prescriptive optimism and a concrete vision of the future. These novels—including William Morris's 1890 *News from Nowhere*, Theodor Herzl's 1902 *Old New Land* (*Altneuland*), and H. G. Wells's 1905 *Modern Utopia*—have moments of self-reflection and whimsy, but they are in general explicitly didactic, arguing that the future will improve if the reader takes certain

steps in the present.[1] The hopefulness of the utopian genre at the fin de siècle may have been the secret of its popularity at the time, but it probably also contributed to the lasting backlash against the genre's perceived limitations and to its replacement in the twentieth-century canon by dystopian critiques. These dystopias—most notably E. M. Forster's 1909 story "The Machine Stops," Aldous Huxley's 1932 satire of Wells *Brave New World*, and George Orwell's 1949 fantasy of totalitarianism *1984*—are also set in the future, and their characters are as flat as the settings are vividly memorable, but the mood is more in keeping with the war-torn history of the twentieth century, achieving sublimity by depicting a world in which horrible oppression is so commonplace that it becomes invisible. Where utopian fiction asks the reader to identify with the inhabitants of a happier future, dystopia functions through disidentification, contrasting the reader's shock and disapproval with the characters' blind acceptance of their restricted horizons. The utopian genre is challenged aesthetically by its portrayal of a conflict-free society, while dystopia may follow a more conventional narrative form of individual struggle and pathetic defeat.

If utopian fiction began as satire, then, in the twentieth century it became easier to satirize the utopian genre itself than to use it to satirize social problems. However, in the last few decades there have been multiple attempts to reclaim utopian fiction from various political and theoretical standpoints. First, the general postmodern attention to minor forms and popular genres gives us a critical framework in which to read all kinds of "forgotten" genres, including nineteenth-century utopias as well as New Woman fiction, horror fiction, and dime novels. More particular historicist readings restore the scaffolding of allusion to political problems that would be obscure to present-day readers; in the introduction to *Looking Backward*, for instance, Alex MacDonald (2003) details the political links between the Nationalist Clubs inspired by Bellamy's novel and the Populist Party of the early 1890s. Such readings tend to treat the works' political aims as worthy but slightly embarrassing.

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[1] Other fin de siècle utopian works include Theodor Hertzka's 1890 *Freiland: Ein soziales Zukunftsbild* (*Freeland: A Social Anticipation*) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1915 *Herland*. Wells's 1898–1903 story "When the Sleeper Wakes," published in novel form in 1910 as *The Sleeper Awakes*, contains both utopian and dystopian elements.

In his introduction to the anthology *Utopian Spaces of Modernism*, Benjamin Kohlmann (2012: 2, 9) reclaims the project of utopia by rejecting its totalizing aspirations, focusing instead on "minor utopias" or—Fredric Jameson's phrase—"Utopian enclaves." These more modest utopian moments, marked by modernist aesthetic complexity and self-awareness, "are the nuclei of a utopianism that is aware of its own limitations; they contain tentative gestures towards a new life, but they also recognize the impossibility of emancipating the utopian impulse from a given universe of discourse and behaviour" (ibid.: 9). By contrast, the more ambitious critical reclamation projects, such as Jameson's 2005 essay collection *Archaeologies of the Future*, often have a political (usually Marxist) stake in both the optimistic content and the future-oriented form of utopian fiction. These works, including Phillip E. Wegner's 2002 *Imaginary Communities* and Matthew Beaumont's 2005 *Utopia Ltd.*, take the optimistic political goals of utopian stories more or less seriously, seeing in them the original impetus for the twentieth-century welfare state, with its guaranteed social insurance schemes and moderate wealth redistribution— or regarding them as visions of an even more radical redistribution. As Jameson (2005: xii) points out, the capitalist project since the end of the Cold War has been organized around

> tirelessly undoing all the social gains made since the inception of the socialist and communist movements, repealing all the welfare measures, the safety net, the right to unionization, industrial and ecological regulatory laws, offering to privatize pensions and indeed to dismantle whatever stands in the way of the free market all over the world. What is crippling is not the presence of an enemy but rather the universal belief, not only that this tendency is irreversible, but that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio-economic system is conceivable, let alone practically available.

Critical attention to utopian fiction may be seen as one way to combat this neoliberal narrowing of historical perspective.

I share the desire to recapture the progressive ideals of these utopias and to go beyond the dismissive intellectual history that lumps utopian fiction together with every failed social experiment of the last century. It is easy to forget how many progressive reforms suggested by utopias (from careers for women to the progressive income tax) were enacted. Most recent utopian analyses have passed over utopia's perceived

aesthetic failures in order either to situate them historically or to champion their implicit politics. But I would like to focus on one particular aesthetic dimension of utopian fiction, the dialectic between satire and didacticism. In discussions of utopian fiction, the question of the viability (or nonviability) of the utopia's political suggestions often coexists uneasily with the recognition that there is something peculiarly off-putting about the utopian form: the very confidence of its imagination invites readerly resistance and identification with utopia's dissenters. Northrop Frye (1975: 206), for instance, complains that "in utopian stories a frequent device is for someone, generally a first-person narrator, to enter the utopia and be shown around it by a sort of Intourist guide"—thus collapsing the fin de siècle figure of the utopian cicerone, or guide, with a mid-twentieth-century Eastern bloc totalitarianism that seeks to control the movements of its inhabitants.

   Clearly this kind of Cold War hindsight "inscribes [the utopian text] too rigidly within the confines of subsequent history," as Wegner (2002: 82) complains.[2] But in this essay I would like to suggest that Frye was not entirely off base in linking Marx implicitly to the cicerone. For the fin de siècle utopian writers, setting utopia in the future was at least in part a response to the eschatological moment in early Marxist politics, and it led to depicting utopias as faits accomplis, flattening out the kind of satire that may be easier to direct at a utopia on an island or in some other remote location. I tie the vision of utopia as compellingly inevitable most concretely to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's 1848 work *The Communist Manifesto*, but the turn from satire toward confident speculation can also be seen in earlier utopian reflections by, for example,

   [2] See also Jameson's (2005: 190) analysis of the fear, expressed both in the utopian story and by conservative critics, that living in a utopia might simply be dull: "The reproach of boredom so often addressed to Utopias envelops both form and content: the former on the grounds that by definition nothing but the guided tour can really happen in these books, the latter owing precisely to our own existential reluctance imaginatively to embrace such a life." Jameson argues that the terror of state enclosure that motivated anti-utopian writers like Orwell is in part merely an "optical illusion" deriving from the "formal closure" of the utopian story (193). Jameson makes several further observations about the inappropriate resistance to this kind of closure—it is a "metaphysical and Nietzschean resistance to promises about the future" (193); its anti-Stalinism is a "dimly apprehended [form] of capitalist organization [that is] projected onto its enemies or victims" (197); it displaces collective struggle into "identification with small groups" (206)—but he basically accepts that the "structure of Utopian closure" is "inevitable" (209).

Charles Fourier. What I will call the utopian "inevitability effect" increases the appealing prophetic romance of the utopian story, but it can also create a feedback loop in which the author's overconfidence about the future reinforces the utopian society's intolerance of dissent. Yet utopian fiction in general need not be openly didactic or rely on an "Intourist guide"—nor need it cloak itself in the prophetic mantle of inevitability, or even take the form of science fiction, the genre that Jameson suggests bears the most concrete residue of utopian aspirations. Many recent critical studies of utopia have proceeded from Ernst Bloch's idiosyncratically Marxist argument that utopian impulses point implicitly to the future,[3] but this move has tended to minimize the importance of satire and ambivalence in the utopian tradition. However, it is possible, especially in an era in which progressive goals seem baffled or in retreat, for utopian wishes not to be identified with the future. In the second half of this essay I analyze the TV show *Portlandia*, which premiered in 2011, as a recent utopia that relies more on the genre's satirical tradition than on the future-oriented monologism the literary tradition has inherited from the *Manifesto*—and hence, for better or worse, that is not as easily inverted into dystopia or dismissed as unrealistic. Set ambiguously in a lightly ironized past, *Portlandia* harks back to the satirical tradition of utopia, yet it avoids both the colonizing fantasies implicit in many spatial utopias and the future-topia's combination of prescriptive social planning and daunting faith in its own inevitability. Since the show is set roughly in the present instead of in the future, it draws on everyday observational comedy to a degree that would be impossible for a purely speculative utopia.

Monologic Futures and the Cicerone

More's Utopia was a place—an island—but since the late nineteenth century, starting with Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, utopias have been

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[3] See, e.g., Freedman 2000: 62–86; Jameson 2005: 2–9; and Wegner 2002: 18–24. Bloch constructs the hermeneutical argument that utopia is located in hints of a collective futurity expressed obliquely in aesthetic form as moments of hope and wish fulfillment. The aesthetic form itself need not be set in the future—indeed, a true utopia may be unrecognizable to the present—but it is constitutively future-oriented; Bloch (1986: 8, 9) designates utopia the "Future, Front, Novum," the "Not-Yet."

more often set in the future.[4] This focus usually decreases the satirical component of utopian literature and pushes it toward a less dialogic voice.[5] Carl Freedman (2000: 80) summarizes the critical opinion that literary utopias are distinguished by "a generally monologic authorial style that tends to foreclose any properly novelistic clash and heterogeneity of different voices." More's (1975: 84) *Utopia* is framed by a skeptical narrator who jests at the end of book 2 that the idea of a moneyless society is "quite absurd," but in most fin de siècle utopias More's irony (not to mention Jonathan Swift's more violent satire) is tamed into a kind of prophetic travelogue. These utopias have flat characters—the bane of the realist novel—who interact with their settings in a mood of contentment and bland curiosity, evacuating tension and suspense from the plot. Whereas Charles Dickens's distorted characters indict the social stratification of their industrial environment (Woloch 2003: 155–66), utopian characters are boringly healthy and beautiful, like their society. The monologic didacticism of future-oriented utopian fiction is most intensely concentrated in the figure of the cicerone, whose Socratic authority harmonizes with the position of the implied author. In *Looking Backward* the cicerone who guides the hapless nineteenth-century visitor Julian West around the rational future city of Boston is named Dr. Leete, which suggests both professional authority and "elite" social status. In Bellamy's text the position of the cicerone and that of the implied author coincide in the assertion that the future Boston—in which every worker

[4] Mario Ortiz-Robles (2011: 219) suggests that the "shift in fictional paradigms from a spatial to a temporal horizon of perfectibility" at the end of the nineteenth century can be explained not only by the influence of Marx and Darwin but also by increased global interconnectedness and the transformation of the "discourse of 'discovery' into one of commerce and colonization." Wegner (2002) is noteworthy for his focus on spatial rather than on temporal aspects of utopias, arguing that the utopian bounded spatial order is crucial to the imagination, and thus perhaps to the construction, of the nation-state.

[5] Gilman's *Herland* breaks this mold, since it is set not in the future but in a remote South American jungle. Like the future-oriented utopias, it features cicerones who display utopian characters' typical blank inability to imagine a less rational society. However, it is somewhat more satirical than other utopias, staging multiple comic misunderstandings between the three male American explorers and the beautifully rational utopian women they discover. I will not argue that utopias set in the future have *no* satirical element, just that they tend to be more confidently prophetic and less satirical.

is enrolled in the New Industrial Army—is better in every way than the violent and unjust world of 1887 Boston. Dr. Leete's authority is reinforced by the narrative's rapt attention to his extensive answers to West's questions. Morris's *News from Nowhere* is a very different text, written to refute Bellamy's vision of centralized state socialism, but it too has a cicerone, the happy manual laborer Dick Hammond, who demonstrates through his very obliviousness the superiority of his well-rounded lifestyle. When the narrator, William Guest, asks why he sees no poor people on the roads, for example, Hammond is puzzled: "'No, naturally; if anyone is poorly, he is likely to be within doors . . . but I don't know of any one sick at present.'" When Guest explains his meaning, Hammond's ignorance is telling: "'No,' smiling merrily, 'I really do not know'" (Morris 2004: 63). Hammond happens to have an older relative who lives near the decrepit remains of the British Museum and who is thus the only one able to answer Guest's questions about "how the change came"; ironically, public apathy to history, which is considered merely one of old Hammond's peculiar hobbies, reinforces the authority of the story of a society so happy that it can afford to forget the past. In Herzl's *Old New Land* the cicerone David Littwak, who escorts the protagonist, Dr. Friedrich Loewenberg, around the New Society—the modern socialist Jewish settlement in Palestine—is elected president at the end of the story, adding political power to the authority of his narration. In Wells's *Modern Utopia* the role of the cicerone is played, ironically, by the narrator's alternate Utopian self, who, on a faraway planet that resembles Earth in every way but historically, has become a member of the ruling meritocratic class of Samurai and hence is in a position to answer all the narrator's questions.

Setting a utopia in the future thus minimizes one source of narrative interest—the helplessness of the individual in the face of external circumstances—in favor of a textual delight that resides on the surface of the story, in the solution of the problem of history itself.[6] If a detective story is built around suspense about an event in the past that has been

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[6] Utopian fiction would provide an excellent test case for recent methodological investigations of "surface reading" (Best and Marcus 2009), since its superficial characters repel the search for psychological depth, and many of its suggested political reforms have been implemented and thus have declined into invisibility. I am not proposing, however, that twentieth- and twenty-first-century science fiction necessarily

hidden from view, the utopia tells the story of the past (most specifically the occasionally traumatic passage from imperfect nineteenth-century society to well-ordered utopia) from the perspective of the all-knowing detective after the mystery story has ended. Because the cicerones were born into utopia, they avoided suffering during the revolution or transition to the new society and in fact cannot conceive of being in a state of doubt about its outcome—so their personal stories are not compelling (though Littwak does rise from rags to riches in *Old New Land*). These utopian texts elevate the omniscience of hindsight to a personal point of view, creating the effect of magical foreknowledge in their anticipation of events that the reader has not experienced. At the same time, neither the visitor nor the cicerone really has agency during the time depicted in the story—though Littwak helps build the New Society between the story's opening in present-day Vienna and its second half, set in a future 1922. The characters have almost no effect on their environment—but instead of reflecting their disempowerment, this lack of agency signifies the perfect harmony between their desires and their surroundings. The inevitability effect of the utopian text—the monologic voice speaking with perfect hindsight—both increases the text's persuasive power and places it more firmly on the romance side of the romance/high realism divide.

However, these texts are not completely monologic, nor do most nineteenth-century realist novels, recounted in the past tense by a more or less omniscient narrator, entirely avoid the inevitability effect, despite their more successfully dialogic form. Even *Looking Backward*—the most serenely rational of these utopias—has traumatic moments, dramatizing West's loss of his nineteenth-century identity and his subsequent disorientation and despair. *News from Nowhere* ends with a nightmarish expulsion: Guest, who has spent the whole book desperately trying to assimilate into Utopia, is about to arrive at a feast when his new lover turns toward him with a "mournful look" (Morris 2004: 227) and he wakes up in sad present-day Hammersmith. In *Old New Land* the glib Jewish comedians Gruen and Blau, who aggravate Loewenberg in the café society of fin de siècle Vienna, show up in 1922 as hangers-on in the

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has the same narratological structure or limitations as these fin de siècle utopias, though the genres are related and science fiction is generally set in the future.

New Society—a land in which, ironically, their cynical attitude makes them as marginal as their Jewish identity made them in Vienna. *A Modern Utopia* is a special case, constructed within an ironic and speculative frame narrative and neither temporally nor spatially linked to the place of its writing; it plays out on an alternate Earth that resembles our own in every way except its history, during which more rational choices have been made at every point. The text begins with an excursus on "the owner of the voice," whom the reader is to imagine as "sitting at a table reading a manuscript about Utopias"—and then again, as a figure in "a cinematographic entertainment . . . going to and fro in front of the circle of a rather defective lantern" (Wells 2005: 7–8). Yet despite the artfully conditional stage setting, the story's monologic effect remains, since there is still a cicerone who is a member of the meritocratic ruling elite and is granted several chapters of didactic dialogue.

The overdetermination of the cicerone in *A Modern Utopia*—in effect, he is both the narrator and the implied author, since the narrator resembles a self-conscious caricature of Wells—is all the more interesting since Wells himself is perhaps the first to make fun of the convention of the cicerone, in his 1895 novel *The Time Machine*. This story combines the prophetic technological magic of the utopia with social satire, an archaeological mystery, and an adventure story to riveting effect, relying for suspense on the Time Traveler's arrival in the year 802,701 with "no convenient cicerone, in the pattern of the Utopian books" (Wells 2001: 111). He is thus forced to piece together the intervening rise and fall of civilizations, repeatedly making false inferences about his surroundings. He sees first the splendor of the buildings and the delicate refinement of the Eloi, concluding that successful communism led to a peaceable degeneration. Only later does he learn that in fact the Eloi are bred as meat by the Morlocks, descendants of a proletarian working class who now live underground. His mistaken conclusions, as well as the clear devolution of groups that resemble both upper and lower Victorian classes, add to the satirical effect, and the story avoids the horrifying entrapment of most dystopian narratives simply by permitting the Time Traveler to escape in his clever machine, which can go both backward and forward in time.

It is frequently argued that Charles Darwin influenced the evolutionary utopian narratives of the late nineteenth century, particularly

those of H. G. Wells, who not only earned a degree in zoology, attending lectures by "Darwin's bulldog," T. H. Huxley, but was powerfully attracted, during his career, to the idea that evolutionary science could help build a less wasteful and more efficient society. Moreover, these utopias, with the exception of *News from Nowhere*, optimistically promote a vision of social change that favors evolutionary gradualism over violent revolution. The technocratic *Looking Backward*, for instance, asserts that the transition from messy nineteenth-century politics to the rational future America took place with "absolutely no violence" (Bellamy 2003: 77). But despite their gradualistic vision of history, the formal structure of these utopias—the combination of future setting and overdetermined didacticism that constitutes the inevitability effect—is inspired more by *The Communist Manifesto* than by Darwin. This most eschatological of Marxist texts used the device of revolution to join the utopian promise of earthly harmony to the Christian narrative of the Last Judgment and the end of days. In doing so, it suggested a powerful future-oriented narrative structure that fused as uneasily with the realist novel as did realism's earlier antagonist, religious didacticism.[7]

One of the *Manifesto*'s most powerful rhetorical strategies is to assert that the communist future is inevitable, driven by the relentless progress of both economic logic and European history. Marxist historical determinism is, in some ways, a more compelling narrative than Darwinian evolution. In Darwin's cool vision, after all, evolution is not necessarily progress; fitness for a particular evolutionary niche need not imply superiority in another realm, any more than a thick-billed finch is superior to a thin-billed one. So despite the universal sorting mechanism of extinction, there is no moral fitness or deeper meaning to the adaptation of a species to its environment. The story of evolution—and this has proved its most difficult lesson—is that there is no story, no justice or ultimate truth to human evolution, though there can be beauty and wonder in our contemplation of the "entangled bank" of complex natural arrangements.[8] The Marxist story of ironic reversal, in which an

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[7] On the contentiousness between realism and didacticism in nineteenth-century fiction, see Courtemanche 2006.

[8] The last paragraph of *On the Origin of Species* (Darwin 1964: 489) begins, "It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of various kinds, with birds singing in the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with

unsustainable social order is inverted and justice restored, makes more coherent moral sense in a Judeo-Christian context, for all its claims to be based in science. Its paradoxical logic of the despised proletarians becoming the foundation of a just new social order resembles that of Christ's quotation of Psalms: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" (Ps. 118:22; Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17 ESV). The prophetic authority of the *Manifesto* is based on a reading of history as stadial and revolutionary, proceeding by analogy with the cataclysms of recent European revolutions: as the bourgeoisie overturned the feudal order in the French Revolution, so shall it in turn be overturned by the proletariat. The dramatic contrast between the ignorance of the nobility in the ancien régime and the violence of the Revolution itself is projected into the future, implying that just as many surprises await the bourgeoisie as awaited the French aristocrats. The *Manifesto*'s vision of history, of course, also reflects the era's romantic progressivism, expressed for instance in Fourier's 1808 *Theory of the Four Movements* and Auguste Comte's 1848 *General View of Positivism*. It is possible also to trace the overconfidence in the ideal future back to utopians like Fourier (1996: 13–15), who is given to assertions such as "The ordered society that is going to succeed our civilized incoherence will have no place for moderation or equality. . . . Once established in a single canton, [the phalanxes] will be imitated spontaneously in every country, simply by virtue of the vast profits and numberless pleasures this order will guarantee all individuals." In the *Manifesto* the present tense often fuses together historical observations, like "The bourgeoisie . . . draws all, even the most barbarian nations, into civilization"; logical axioms, like "The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself"; and descriptions of things that have not quite happened yet, like "The organization of the proletarians into a class . . . ever rises up again, stronger, firmer, mightier" (Marx and Engels 2002: 224, 226, 230).

This combination of historical analysis, logic, and prediction gives the *Manifesto* stirring authority—absorbed in utopian fiction, I argue,

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worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us."

into the figure of the cicerone, who can explain, in hindsight, how society achieved its transformation. But the prophetic authority that Marx and Engels use to inspire historical change—the *Manifesto* ends, famously, with the command "Working Men of all Countries—Unite!" (ibid.: 258)—is in utopian fiction ossified into retrospective. The role of individual agency in bringing about this desirable future is obscure in both utopian and Marxist discourses. Gareth Stedman Jones points out that Marx changed his view of the impact of ideas on history in response to a challenge by Max Stirner, who argued that post-Feuerbachian secularism (in which man has to aspire to achieve his destiny as Man) is still implicitly religious. Before Stirner, the Young Hegelians "had presupposed the intolerable character of the present, had assumed they stood at a turning point in history and had therefore looked forward to the prospect of imminent redemption" (Stedman Jones 2002: 141), a position shared by the young Marx. In the "Theses on Feuerbach" Marx expresses confidence that philosophers should change the world rather than merely interpret it. But after encountering Stirner, "not only does this normative and voluntarist theme disappear, but any sense in which ideas may play an innovatory or independent role in history was abruptly abandoned" (ibid.: 142). So in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels assume that communism is not an "ideal" but merely "the real movement which abolishes the present state of things" (quoted ibid.). This denial of voluntarism partly explains their distaste, in the *Manifesto*, for the utopian thought of their own age, which they denounce as mere undeveloped wish fulfillment (ibid.: 253–56).

Like Marxism, the literary utopia is often ambivalent about the role of the individual in bringing about the desired future. We can see one extreme in *Looking Backward*, in which the future is merely the unfolding of an economic law, aping the rhetoric, though not the content, of Marxism. *Looking Backward* in fact suggests that radical political agents were secretly "paid by the great monopolists to wave the red flag and talk about burning, sacking, and blowing people up, in order, by alarming the timid, to head off any real reforms" (Bellamy 2003: 193). Meanwhile, however, history was unfolding its inexorable law: "The movement toward the conduct of business by larger and larger aggregations of capital . . . was recognized at last, in its true significance, as a process

which only needed to complete its logical evolution to open a golden future to humanity" (ibid.: 76). Beaumont (2005: 79) suggests that Bellamy's depiction of submission to economic law, if persuasive, also has a "sedative effect," while Morris's *News from Nowhere*, in deliberate contrast, foregrounds individual struggle. In her last address to the protagonist, the utopian Ellen begs Guest to "go on living while you may, striving, with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness" (Bellamy 2003: 228). Nevertheless, both texts aim, implicitly, to turn their readers into converts of the society of the future. In replacing the traditional utopia set somewhere on a present-day Earth with one set in the future, the fin de siècle utopia tends to supplant social satire with a propagandistic and monologic voice.

The Alternate Space-Time of *Portlandia*

In *Utopia or Bust* Benjamin Kunkel (2014: 144) suggests that a principal theme of recent Marxist criticism—and especially of Jameson's work—is the unrepresentability of utopia under late capitalism: "The time is past for the left to content itself with the blank proposition that another world is possible." Thus we should start to imagine what utopia might look like as a way out of this postmodern "intellectual blockage" (ibid.: 142). But we already have this vividly imagined utopia—or at least *a* utopia—in *Portlandia*, a TV show that has aired on the cable channel IFC since 2011. That this sketch comedy is a gentle parody of utopian discourse—as well as a situational appreciation of the distinctive artistic, bohemian, and hipster culture of Portland, Oregon—hardly lessens the power of its representation of an actual utopia. What is more, *Portlandia*'s episodic structure, its setting in a remote but not aggressively bounded location, its observational humor, and its self-conscious nostalgia make for a utopia that escapes the monologism of the earlier utopian fictions and resists simple inversion into a dystopia. Part of its novelty within the utopian tradition is of course its medium, which places it in intertextual tension with other TV comedies and frees it from the fin de siècle utopia's rivalry with the realist novel. Some of the show's characters may be Marx-friendly (though Marx is not openly discussed), but *Portlandia*'s

form avoids the inevitability effect of Marxist futurology. Portland in the show is, playfully, both like the real Portland (the recurring "Feminist Bookstore" skit is filmed in an actual feminist bookstore [Turnquist 2011]) and clearly fictional (the recurring Mayor of Portland character is played by recognizable character actors like Kyle MacLachlan and Roseanne Barr). The show's fantasy elements are enhanced by the casting of its stars, Carrie Brownstein and Fred Armisen, as the central dyad in almost all the sketches, though they play different characters in each, often cross-dressing to represent various platonic and romantic combinations. The show depicts an inclusive, democratic, queer-friendly, and unobtrusively prosperous city that makes room (perhaps too much room) for self-expression through music, crafts, and food politics. It is a city in which one can be poor but not socially excluded; voluntaristic interest groups and safe spaces like coffee shops and music clubs create solidarity.

Moreover, the city benefits from being part of the American nation while avoiding most of the putatively negative aspects of American culture. This utopia does not need to police a border between itself and the outside world, like the trench that divides More's island from the mainland.[9] Implicitly protected by American military might, it needs no army of its own.[10] Its position within a larger society explains its prosperity (much of which is presumably based on economic activity elsewhere), but its geographic isolation also protects it from the ugliest aspects of international capitalism. Portlandia is too small to succumb to

[9] The people of Utopia "say (and the appearance of the place confirms this) that their land was not always an island. But Utopus, who conquered the country and gave it his name (it had previously been called Abraxa), brought its rude and uncouth inhabitants to such a high level of culture and humanity that they now excel in that regard almost every other people. After subduing them at his first landing, he cut a channel fifteen miles wide where their land joined the continent, and caused the sea to flow around the country" (More 1975: 31).

[10] In a pathetic literary parallel, Herzl (1997) imagines in *Old New Land* that the future New Society will need no army, because it is not a nation-state, merely existing on a long-term lease under the protection of the Ottoman sultan. The Palestinian Arabs are pleased by the region's burst of cosmopolitan economic development and are welcome to join the New Society if they wish. Before his death in 1904 Herzl himself negotiated with the sultan for permission to settle Palestine; of course, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the Balfour Declaration of 1917 redirected the outcome for Palestinian Zionism.

the sprawl of so many other American cities and too remote to attract major development—yet it is big enough to defend itself with the weapons of local taste and culture. Possibly the greatest threat to Portlandia society is depicted in the 2013 episode "The Temp" (3.7), in which Barr plays a temp who replaces the affable mayor, played by MacLachlan. Barr's character, who comes from the America of hot, impersonal sprawl (i.e., Phoenix), is confused by Portland's most charming aspects, such as the prevalence of bicycles, and vows to "clean up the mess!" She paints over the bike lanes and bans the use of the Internet in coffee shops. The show does not completely side with the locals against the temp: for instance, one of her suggestions, to make the town "less white," exposes Portland's reactionary resistance to the larger culture. However, the threat is quickly contained when Armisen's character, an unofficial mayoral adviser, contacts the temp agency and has Barr's character recalled. At the end of the episode, the status quo is restored—as in a familiar sitcom, but with more self-conscious artifice.[11]

In representing the helpless (yet oddly resilient) hipster natives of a geographic backwater, *Portlandia* draws on a television pattern established by *Flight of the Conchords*, an HBO show that ran from 2007 to 2009. On this show Bret McKenzie and Jemaine Clement play thinly disguised comic versions of themselves as New Zealanders trying to make it as musicians in New York City. The show's main point is to dramatize their geographic dislocation and unfitness for adult life, a tack that gives the plot a loose and episodic feel, though the show is also enlivened by elaborately costumed music video parodies. The superiority of the duo's musical fantasy lives to their dreary real lives is complicated by their New York locale, still rebuilding after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As innocent foreigners, though, Bret and Jemaine have nothing to do with terrorism

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[11] The wiki site TV Tropes (n.d.-b) describes this episode as an example of "Lampshade Hanging"—that is, "the creators are using the tactic of self-deprecatingly pointing out their own flaws themselves, thus depriving critics and opponents of their ammunition." One of *Portlandia*'s distinctive elements, according to a TV Tropes page that catalogs the show's use of narrative patterns, is its setting in "Cloudcuckooland," "a fictional paradise state where everything is perfect—and which, therefore, doesn't exist" (TV Tropes n.d.-c, n.d.-a). The ease with which the threat posed by the temp is dispelled comes across as a playful admission that the show's setting is not the real Portland—although the series also fudges that disclaimer by identifying each skit with its real geographic location.

or the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, much less with the bitter domestic political divisions of the early 2000s—which is clearly part of the show's escapist fantasy. Their great enemy is not the intransigent network of al-Qaeda but Aussie prejudice against Kiwis, which may seem humorously pointless to an American audience inclined to see Australians themselves as provincials. The show celebrates New York not as a demanding, melodramatic city of heroes and victims but as a maze of shabby streets filled with mildly eccentric yet endearing personalities. *Flight of the Conchords* represents a fantasy American lifestyle that alludes to the wars and crass militarism of the early 2000s yet, with gentle optimism, renders them moot.

    Portlandia extends this fantasy of political innocence by depicting its harmless hipster males (and females) as Americans living in America and thus only slightly out of place. But it also dramatizes its own escapist desires in "Dream of the '90s," a sketch in the show's first episode that sets up its premise. This sketch begins with Armisen's character running into Brownstein's character in present-day Los Angeles. Armisen plays the knowing cicerone to Brownstein's naive utopian visitor, but because the utopia is set in the recent past, the visitor is already familiar with its conventions. The cicerone, unlike his traditional utopian counterpart, does not simply tell the visitor about a wonderful place that exists but invokes their shared memories: "You know how people were talking about piercings and getting tribal tattoos? . . . Remember when people were content to be unambitious? . . . Remember in the '90s when they encouraged you to be weird?" The visitor replies that she does remember but adds, "I thought that died out a long time ago." Placing the utopia in the recent past not only lessens the power differential between cicerone and novice (though Armisen's insider knowledge is played up for comic effect) but reminds them of their younger, more carefree selves. The effect is nostalgic, not only for youth itself but for a space in which austerity is a sign of sustainably low (and deeply humanist) personal expectations instead of painful global recession. A later episode (2.5) revisits this theme with the song "Dream of the 1890s," with characters in even more extreme flight from the present day to a decade that lacks Internet technology—though it does have tattooing, food canning, and other forms of nonmilitarized self-reliance.

But nostalgia in this show is not just a search for self-expression (though most sketches focus on the characters' humorous attempts to be both "alternative" and true to themselves) or even an ironized allusion to the infantile nature of utopian wishes. In "Dream of the '90s" the visitor quickly leaps to the political implications of the cicerone's promise: "So from what I can surmise, from what you're positing, it's like Portland's almost an alternative universe. It's like Gore won. The Bush administration never happened." The defining traumatic origin of the first decade of the 2000s is located not in 9/11, or even in New York City, but in the disputed 2000 presidential election between George W. Bush and Al Gore, in which Gore won the popular vote but Bush won the presidency after a controversial US Supreme Court decision ended the recount of votes cast in Florida. Instead of being predicated on the resolution of a future conflict, utopia is based on the possibility that the universe in fact split in two in the year 2000, and utopia is located along the other time line. The narrative of this other time line combines the irrational desire for lasting youth with the persistence of a regional alternative subculture (Portland is a real place, after all) and the subtle insistence that Gore *should* have won, perhaps sparing the nation at least some of the ensuing decade's hysterical militarization. That this alternate universe is so easily accessible creates a sense of magical wonder—the wonder that in future-oriented utopias relies on the assertion that a prophetic vision might come true.

The show's premise of rejecting the first decade of the 2000s is worked out generically as well, if we see it as a rejection of that decade's characteristic cinematic mode of the epic. In film, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–3) and the superhero franchises that began with *Spider-Man* (2002) and included *The Dark Knight* (2008) were marked by portentous moral themes and darkly sublime cinematography. On the small screen, the mood of frenetic political urgency and cynical moral realism continued on the TV show *24* (2001–10). But while it rejects these templates, *Portlandia* does draw on the comic tradition inaugurated in 2001 by the British Broadcasting Corporation TV show *The Office*.[12] This

[12] The possible origins of this comedic mode, according to Jason Middleton (2013), also include the movies of Michael Moore and Christopher Guest.

show, starring Ricky Gervais, created a new form of television comedy based on the intensely uncomfortable, trivial, and pathetic interactions of employees stuck in a regional branch of a paper company. *The Office* led to multiple spinoffs in different countries, including an American version (also called *The Office*), which ran from 2005 to 2013 and inspired the roughly homologous *Parks and Recreation*, which premiered in 2009. The brand of humor on display in *The Office* is extremely small-scale and observational, rooted in humdrum geographic locations and mildly eccentric characters (as opposed to international terrorism and paranoid secrets). It is sometimes called "cringe comedy" (see Middleton 2013) or "the comedy of discomfort" because it is based not on identification with the comic actor but on pushing the comedy of manners to the point that it becomes almost unbearably embarrassing for both characters and viewer. The genre's arrogant characters ignore the conventions of political correctness and simple civility, forcing other characters to respond to their egotism and tactlessness.

Portlandia uses the comedy of discomfort to complicate its relation to the utopia it represents as ambiguously located in the actual city of Portland, Oregon. Though the show depicts a city with a pleasingly humane lifestyle, its skits often focus on satirizing American social mores, particularly those of a class of bourgeois bohemians who worship the shibboleth of alternative taste. It might be said that *Portlandia* continues, albeit more gently, in the tradition of social satire most vigorously practiced by Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*. Sometimes the discomfort manifests itself as friction between characters who take their alternative aspirations to absurd levels, as when the owners of the Feminist Bookstore make unrealistic demands of their customers or the character Spyke bikes around the city complaining, "Ugh, cars, man. Whyyyyy?" (1.2), until he has to buy a car himself (4.5) and quickly learns to hate bike riders. The domestic couples played by Armisen and Brownstein are sometimes lovable but more often annoy those around them with their myopic self-righteousness. One such couple commandeers a parents' meeting at the Shooting Star preschool, demanding that it ban albums by Mike and the Mechanics—"a gateway to other mediocre pop music"—and insisting on higher-quality albums by the Sex Pistols and Kraftwerk (2.5). In another episode the couple Armisen and Brownstein portray employs

the alternative singer-songwriter Aimee Mann (playing herself) as a maid, forcing her to play for them and then treating her housekeeping work with condescending cruelty (1.3). But despite the discomfort they inflict on viewers, these skits do not powerfully undercut the show's depiction of a cheerfully attractive utopian space; in fact, they redirect critiques of the utopia itself to the characteristics of its people. The utopian effect is intensified by the brief transitional bumpers that separate the skits and show Portlandia's inhabitants unironically enjoying typical leisure activity in small groups. The show begs the entire utopian question of social planning by being set in a space where the basics of the welfare state have already been constructed, allowing *Portlandia* to represent government as a benevolent local assembly not fundamentally more powerful than the various citizens' groups and causes. Because the essentially just and secure nature of Portlandia can be taken for granted, the characters are free to spend time creating absurd manifestos for their coffee shop (3.7) instead of, say, stockpiling munitions in fear of a zombie attack.

In treating the question of utopia with ironic distance without collapsing into dystopia, *Portlandia* harks back to the satirical origins of the utopian tradition in More and Swift. Its loose structure of sketches helps it avoid the heavy-handed didacticism of the fin de siècle utopias and dispense with the domineering Socratic figure of the cicerone. By exchanging the redemptive power of utopia's futurity for its mundane location on a map, and by swapping time (mostly) for space, the show replaces the genre's inevitability effect with something existing, observational, and concrete. Its escape from some of the genre's constrictions does not, of course, make *Portlandia* unambivalently progressive. I have argued that its mockery of Portland's liberal and progressive inhabitants does not undercut the beauty and appeal of the show's quasi-utopian setting. But the viewer who seeks a utopia that either transcends current economic contradictions or represents a truly new and unalienated future will probably be disappointed. *Portlandia* provides no workable plan for reorganizing all of society: while it mocks the superficiality of its characters' political rebellions, it does not generally imply that they need to get more serious about organizing. Indeed, the show seems content to let its characters and their situations be parodied by the ads that run

during the show itself.[13] Its representation of an economy in which anyone can drop out to sell jewelry on Etsy.com relies on a romantic fantasy that entrepreneurial energy is sufficient to dispel poverty and that poverty itself is a bohemian lifestyle choice enjoyed, briefly, by the young. Finally, the show depicts a city that, like Bellamy's future Boston, is almost completely white. However, in portraying an actual, recognizably American society purged of militarism, alienation, and exploitation, *Portlandia* offers evidence that the supposedly unfertile terrain of late capitalism can still generate an at least somewhat progressive utopian story.

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[13] For instance, several ads for GEICO, a car insurance company, that air during the show feature Maxwell, a disgruntled pig, in one of the show's characteristic uncomfortable situations, such as the skit in which restaurant patrons quiz their server about whether the chicken they plan to eat was actually happy (1.1). In the 2014 season GEICO aired ads that featured Maxwell running for mayor of Portland, supported by a parallel campaign on Twitter. In an article in *Adweek*, GEICO's vice president of "integrated marketing" suggested that "the show's fan base hasn't been turned off by the Geico [*sic*] TV-social integration" (Heine 2014).

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