

BETWEEN ORDER AND ANARCHY – EXPLORING UTOPIANISM IN THE POLITICAL NOVELS OF JOSEPH CONRAD

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Abstract: In this paper I discuss the three political novels of Joseph Conrad – *Nostramo*, *Under Western Eyes* and *The Secret Agent* – along with one novel written together with Ford Madox Ford – *The Inheritors*. As well as analysing their literary structure, I examine the social and political visions that emerge from these novels.

In my opinion, several elements in these texts show similarities to classical utopias such as Thomas More's *Utopia*, Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* or Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun*. It would seem that the fictional reality which is presented in Conrad's novels can be understood as being a symbolic reference to utopian worlds, together with their geography, history and principle characters.

However, this is not to say that the meaning of Conrad's novels is simply a continuation of utopian texts. To begin with, as none of these novels can be taken completely at face value – given Conrad's irony and narratorial distance – a definitive identification of the social and political ideas which are to be found in them is no easy task. Moreover, some elements in these novels display a convergence of anti-utopian or dystopian visions, though the vogue for negative utopias only really began in the second decade of the twentieth century.

To conclude, we may say that – read in this context – Conrad's political novels can be interpreted as being both a positive and a negative vision of social development. They may also have had an influence on some later utopian or dystopian texts.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, *Nostramo*, *Under Western Eyes*, *The Secret Agent*, Ford Madox Ford, *The Inheritors*, Sir Thomas More, utopia, dystopia, political novel

The idea of invoking utopianism as a significant context for Joseph Conrad's political novels might at first sight appear to be somewhat of an over-interpretation. However, if we take a closer look at the structure and meaning of these works, the utopian context would seem to be relevant for at least two reasons. Firstly, utopias were an early form of European political fiction – a genre that later flourished in the twentieth century. For all their great diversity, modern works of political fiction can hardly sever all that links them with the prototype created by Sir Thomas More. Far be it from me to claim that political novels – like utopias – present us with the comprehensive depiction of a perfect (or frightful) world in all its details. However, they

must necessarily be based on some idea of an 'ideal' political system that drives the plot. If they are to be understood at all, the processes depicted in these novels must relate to certain known political systems, some of which are presented as being socially desirable, while others are presented as constituting a threat to Society. Thus a certain ideal *polis* is evoked, be it feasible or not. Secondly, more than a few direct or indirect references to literary utopias are to be found in Conrad's novels and – although the classical model of the utopia has here undergone various re-interpretations – obvious allusions to it can hardly be passed over in silence.

The novels which I would like to analyse in this context are: *Nostramo* (1904), *The Secret Agent* (1907), *Under Western Eyes* (1911) and – something that might come as a surprise – *The Inheritors* (1901), which Conrad wrote in collaboration with Ford Madox Ford. Conrad scholars admittedly do not attach much significance to this last little book, which they attribute to Ford rather than Conrad, whose role is thought to have been that of a polite reviewer. It must be remembered, however, that at the time Conrad did indeed collaborate intensively with Ford during the latter's stay at Pent Farm. Not only did both writers discuss the idea of *Nostramo*,¹ but – if we are to believe Ford's account – certain passages of the novel were penned by Ford himself.² *The Inheritors* should therefore be seen as being the effect of an unusual bout of literary collaboration – a book in which we may come across motifs and themes that were dear to Conrad himself.

I would first like to briefly recall some of the characteristic features of literary utopias before proceeding to detect their presence during my analysis of Conrad's texts. Utopias are usually seen as being phenomena that belong to the fields of literature and the philosophy of politics – and on occasion even to that of practical history. What interests me here is above all the literary aspect of utopias, i.e. the presence – in the 'represented world' of a given work – of certain constant elements that are to be found in almost every utopian text. Hidden behind the particular conventional structure of the represented world there is also a certain ideology – a certain constant (though not always fully expounded) system of values that permeates both positive and negative utopias.

I shall therefore be using the term 'utopia' to refer to a particular literary genre – a work of art that presents an ostensibly fictitious and idealistic vision of the way in which a perfect or imperfect world is organized. Being a literary vision, it clearly has nothing in common with any real attempts to improve the lot of Society, notwithstanding the fact that the import of its message is often critical of current realities in the world of the author and his readers. An essential (if not the most essential) element of a utopia is its particular metaphysical quality, which often takes the form of an unorthodox religious fervour that in its turn has a significant bearing on the overall structure of the work and the structure of its represented world. Characteristic features of the represented worlds of both positive and negative literary utopias in-

¹ A. Braun. *Kreacja Costaguany*. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1989, s. 125.

² Z. Najder. *Joseph Conrad: a Life*. Transl. H. Najder. New York: Camden House, 2007, p. 341. Z. Najder. *Życie Josepha Conrada Korzeniowskiego*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Gaudium, 2006, Vol. II, p. 58.

clude: the symbolic nature of their space; symbolic first names and proper nouns; language that is perfect and “true”; symbolism of numbers; a particular mythologization and a special form of religion that is present not only in the fictional reality, but also pervades every level of the entire utopian text.³

In a utopia, the view of the world is founded on the opposition between an ideal place that is inaccessible to most people – where the elect live in harmony with Cosmic or Divine law – and the outside world, which is steeped in sin and which is prey to a (variously understood) Evil Spirit. This opposition is in fact eminently Gnostic and pervades practically all positive and negative utopias.

Thus understood, literary utopias will always – to a greater or lesser extent – be continuations of the manner in which reality is represented in the writings of Thomas More, Tommaso Campanella, Johann Valentin Andreae and Francis Bacon.

***NOSTROMO* – LIFE AFTER A UTOPIA**

An analysis of the represented world of *Nostramo* should begin by examining the structure of space in the novel, for the geographical setting of Sulaco lends itself to several interesting interpretations. In their longstanding search for possible models for the fictional republic of Costaguana, scholars have often pored over the map of South America as Conrad would have known it. Jocelyn Baines maintains that Costaguana’s fictional geography is reminiscent of Venezuela, while Norman Sherry is of the opinion that it is an amalgam of Venezuela, Paraguay and Chile. Jerry Allen for his part points to Columbia and Panama as possible sources of inspiration.⁴ There is no agreement among Conrad scholars on the question of whether the town of Sulaco is situated on the coast of the Atlantic or the Pacific – or indeed whether it borders both.⁵

In a letter written to R.B.C. Graham in 1904, Conrad himself says that “Costaguana is meant for a South American state in general; thence the mixture of customs and expressions.”⁶ And with that quotation we could well let the matter rest. However, in our musings on the role played by the description of Costaguana I think it would be worth our while to shift our attention away from the real geography of South America and instead consider the possible literary sources for this fictional country. Here the utopian context immediately springs to mind, for we must remember that South America has often been chosen as the setting for utopian states, though their exact location is usually described in very vague and even obscure terms by the authors in

³ I have written at greater length on such an understanding of utopias in my book entitled *Stary wspaniały świat. O utopiach negatywnych i pozytywnych*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2014; cf. p. 28.

⁴ Cf. Braun, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-189.

⁶ Quoted by: I. Watt. *Joseph Conrad, Nostramo*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 16.

question, so that they cannot be found on any real map. This is the case in More's *Utopia*, Campanella's *City of the Sun* and Andreae's *Christianopolis*. What we are talking about in these old utopias – and also in Conrad's novel – is not a particular geographical location, but a symbolic place or rather a 'non-place' or 'ou-topos' which is *somewhere far away* – within the bounds of verisimilitude, but beyond the realm of knowledge. And the similarity does not end there.

Sulaco is presented by the narrator as a town whose centuries-old lush "orange gardens" bear eloquent witness to its "antiquity".⁷ It is isolated from the outside world even as a coastal town, since – as far as access to it by sea is concerned – "The clumsy deep-sea galleons of the conquerors that, needing a brisk gale to move at all, would lie becalmed, where your modern ship built on clipper lines forges ahead by the mere flapping of her sails, had been barred out of Sulaco by the prevailing calms of its vast gulf."⁸ Access by land is also impaired, as the town is separated from the rest of the country by high mountains, the tallest peak being Higueroa. Its isolation would therefore seem to have been assured by a higher force that has contrived to prevent seagoing visitors from the outside world from entering the gulf. This state of being cut off is also emphasized by the novel's characters, who objectively (as it were) confirm that it is well nigh impossible to reach the town. As Sir John, the chairman of the railway board, confesses: "I had no notion that a place on a sea-coast could remain so isolated from the world."⁹ Elsewhere the narrator says:

Sulaco had found an inviolable sanctuary from the temptations of a trading world in the solemn hush of the deep Golfo Placido as if within an enormous semi-circular and unroofed temple open to the ocean, with its walls of lofty mountains hung with the mourning draperies of cloud.¹⁰ [emphasis added]

This short description of Sulaco's setting would not merit any particular attention were it not for the fact that the author compares it not only to a sanctuary, but also to a temple. It can of course be read as being no more than a slightly ironic hyperbole, but it can also be read in a somewhat different context. The description of Sulaco's geographical isolation with which the narration begins sets up an opposition between this ancient (*antiquity*), peaceful (*inviolable*) and sacred (*sanctuary, temple*) place on the one hand and – on the other – the dangerous outside world which is driven by trade and profit. In a certain sense, it is this antagonism between a potential 'earthly paradise' and the world of business that becomes the metaphysical axis of the represented world. It is reminiscent of the tension that exists in almost all classical utopias between the ideal place and the bad world that surrounds it. This tension also has strong affinities with the Gnostic vision of the world.

Furthermore, the ideal place is here shown as a natural temple, which in turn awakens associations with the vision in *The City of the Sun*. In Tommaso Campanella's work, the entire ideal city is a temple at the centre of which stands an altar (also mark-

⁷ J. Conrad. *Nostromo*. Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2000, p. 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

ing the centre of the city) which corresponds to the position of the Sun on a map of the Solar System, this being a symbol of the natural Cosmic order. Likewise, J.V. Andreae's *Christianopolis* is one great temple dedicated to Christ. All these utopian concepts no doubt have their source in the image of the New Jerusalem (the ideal city being a temple) which is to be found in the Apocalypse. Although in the case of *Nostromo* the 'temple' is a natural phenomenon, there would seem to be a significant connection between the way in which this space has been shaped and its symbolic meaning – especially in view of the fact that more convergences of this kind are to be found in the description of the town of Sulaco.

The narrator describes Sulaco as bordering on the gently curved shoreline of the Golfo Placido, which on one side ends in the cape of Punta Mala and on the other in the Azuera peninsula. The town does not lie on the shores of the gulf itself, but on those of a second inner bay. It is thus cut off from the open seas by two bays, each of which have fairly narrow entrances. This radical double isolation from the outside world and the shape of the coastline itself bring to mind Thomas More's island *Utopia*, which in its lower part can only be reached via a crescent-shaped inner bay and in its upper part (as in the environs of Sulaco) is protected by impenetrable mountains. As in the case of Sulaco, the very shape of the bay hinders free access to the island.

In More's work, the opposition between the 'happy place' (*eu-topia*) and the outside world is highlighted by the story of a founding feat carried out by the dauntless King Utopus, who dug a channel through the isthmus which connected what had been the cape of Abraxa with the rest of the continent, thus turning the cape into an island. This action is sometimes interpreted as the symbolic severing of the umbilical cord that connected Utopia with the world of sin – the corollary to this being that the island's physical form is reminiscent of that of a mother's womb.¹¹ This is all the more plausible given that the moon – to which More himself compares the island's shape – is the Cosmic counterpart of the womb in various alchemical theories. The world of More's Utopia is therefore a world from the dawn of time and a journey to it becomes a return to the bosom of humanity (or alternatively to God or the Cosmos). The "white head of Higuerota" which "rises majestically" over the coast may well be a symbol of that eternal Higher Being which safeguards the peaceful existence of the faithful inhabitants of Sulaco. This personified highest peak was interpreted as a key symbol even during the writer's lifetime. Writing to Conrad in 1912, Arnold Bennet remarked: "I always think of that book as Higuerota, the said mountain being the principal personage in the story."

Like More's Utopia, Sulaco is cut off from the outside world, but at the same time in the course of the novel we hear of an undertaking that will restore it to the greater world outside, as it were, by means of a railway line running over a narrow isthmus – a new 'umbilical cord' that will connect the town with the rest of the country. One might say that in the case of Sulaco – a remote and peaceful place which is reminis-

¹¹ Cf. Ch. Ferns. *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999, p. 40; A. Bammer. *Partial Visions, Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s*. London: Routledge, 1991, p. 14.

cent of More's Utopia – this reconnection with the outside world can bring nothing but evil and suffering. The building of the railway line gives rise to political conflicts, anxiety and chaos.

In Conrad's novel, the happy city of Sulaco was founded in the very distant past (indeed, in ancient times) and – as in the case of More's Utopia – its founder was a mythical king (Charles IV), whose equestrian statue still stands in the town centre. Significantly, hardly anybody can remember whose monument it is: "[...] the big equestrian statue of Charles IV [...] was only known to the folk from the country and to the beggars of the town that slept on the steps around the pedestal, as the Horse of Stone."¹² The narrator for his part makes frequent references to the statue – making it a sort of witness to the events in the novel – until its removal after the coming of the New Order.

Time would seem to have stopped in this idyllic place, which is isolated from the outside world. Such at least is the conclusion that can be drawn from the conversations which the chairman of the railway board (from London) has with Mrs Gould on the subject of building the railway line. Extolling the benefits that the railway will bring, the chairman asks rhetorically, "Has anything ever happened here for a hundred years before today?"¹³

In utopias, as in Sulaco, nothing happens. History has stopped, for if the place is ideal, why should it change? Why should anything happen? In utopias, all events belong to pre-history and the first parts of *Nostramo* are no different in this regard: nothing has happened before the coming of the railway and the opening of the mines: "Has anything ever happened here for a hundred years before today?"¹⁴ All important events took place in the remote past and are recalled by the vestiges of Spanish colonial rule. To be more precise, we must add that the narrator informs us that the republic of Costaguana has witnessed many coups and revolutions, tyranny being the most common form of government there. However, from the point of view of the narration conducted since the coming to power of the enlightened dictator Ribiera, the past for Sulaco has become a 'golden', or rather a 'silver age'. The Montero Revolution for its part shakes the world to its foundations, causing it to move in the wrong direction.

Another similarity that associates *Nostramo* with utopian visions is the status of material goods in the novel's represented world. At first sight, the difference between Sulaco and utopian societies would seem to be obvious: in utopias there is no private property and riches (including natural riches) count for nothing, whereas in the fictional republic the income of the State (and of every inhabitant) depends on the country's inexhaustible deposits of silver. It must be noted, however, that Sulaco was 'happy' or at least peaceful as long as its riches remained undiscovered. With the opening of the silver mine in 1800 or thereabouts the peaceful existence of the province came to an abrupt and permanent end. In the old days, the Indians knew that there was silver in the mountains and that there was gold to be found on the Azuera peninsula, but had no use for these commodities. It was the prophets of the new world

¹² J. Conrad. *Nostramo*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

order – global trade – who began to mine the silver, which becomes the cause of all evil on an individual level and on the level of Society as a whole.

Utopia was happy thanks to the absence of economy and private property – and also thanks to the fact that all riches – including gold and silver – were of no significance there. In *Nostramo*, the obsession with silver brings to an end the peaceful existence that is in harmony with the spirit of Sulaco. The community of Sulaco was therefore utopian before the age of silver (in what was its ‘golden age’), but the political and economic changes which are bringing it into the modern world are also in the process of moving it further and further away from the erstwhile sources of its happiness.

Another typically utopian element which is to be found in Conrad’s novel are meaningful names, which one might say constitute a kind of commentary on the reality with which we are presented. In utopias, such symbolic names are very common and in the first instance include place names: “Utopia” (a non-place and at the same time a happy place); “The City of the Sun”; “Amaurotum” (the town hidden by a mist); “Bensalem” (the son of Jerusalem); “Christianopolis” (the City of Christians or the City of Christian [Rosenkreuz]). People’s first names can also have meaning: “Hythlodæus” (knowledgeable about nonsense); “Morus” (a fool) and so on. Symbolic names in *Nostramo* are of two kinds: old names referring to the geographical setting and new names referring to contemporary people, ships or institutions.

Here there is a hint of ambiguity in Conrad’s text, as in Spanish the name “Costaguana” means “The Guana coast”, while the name “Sulaco” may come from the word “Sula”, which is the name of the *Sulidae* family of birds – commonly known as boobies (because of their legendary stupidity). What is even more interesting is the fact that one of the subspecies of the *Sulidae* family is called “Morus”, which in Latin means “stupid”. This would seem to be an obvious allusion to the Latin version of Thomas More’s surname. A similar (humorous) play on the word “morus” is also to be found in More’s *Utopia* and in the writings of Erasmus. In all probability, therefore, Conrad would seem to be making an ironic allusion to More’s *Utopia* as well as an equally ironic allusion to the nature of the town. The name of the mine around which the plot revolves may well be an allusion to the name of the author of *Utopia*, for Thomas More was known as San Tomé after his beatification by Pope Leo XIII in 1886.

The Golfo Placido or “peaceful bay”, near the shores of which Sulaco lies, ends in two capes: Punta Mala (meaning “bad point”) and Azuera, whose name alludes to the blue colour (*azul*) of the sea or the sky. It might therefore just be that the names which are used to delineate space in the novel suggest that the action takes place somewhere between ‘heaven’ and ‘evil’.

To recapitulate: in *Nostramo* we can find a surprisingly large number of traces that lead us back to the utopian tradition. Conrad’s novel is not, of course, a utopia in the strict sense of the word. However, its numerous utopian allusions may suggest a certain interpretational context. Although neither Sulaco nor Costaguana are presented as ideal places, their creation betrays a tension between the present time – which is

the scene of dramatic events – and the distant past, which – being peaceful and at one with nature – is devoid of interest from a historical perspective.

NOSTROMO – THE BIRTH OF A DYSTOPIA

In Conrad's novel we can also detect traces of a negative utopia. The revolution which takes place in Costaguana, the civil war driven by the political ambitions and the craving for power and wealth on the part of the Montero brothers – in other words, the political and social chaos that Conrad has portrayed so well – are all marks of a dystopia (a genre that was then unknown to Conrad). Sulaco's political system is one of anarchy and can thus be described as dystopian: all the contenders are fighting for nothing but their own power and wealth. The symbol of these gains is the silver from San Tomé, which is treated as a valuable commodity. For the Indian community living in the vicinity of the mine, silver had acquired some significance in that it assured their livelihood, but had never been treated as a commodity to be bought and sold. In Sulaco, however, silver has become a coveted commodity for which people are willing to kill and destroy.

This is not to say that silver has a material value only for the greedy and primitive politicians of Costaguana. It is also coveted by Holroyd, who invests in the mine, thus increasing his wealth and influence. For the Indians, the silver extracted from the interior of the eternal mountain used to have a spiritual value. After it is brought down (yet another symbol), it becomes tainted, as it were, by the fact that it acquires an economic value and thus loses its metaphysical character. Putting this another way, we may say that the metaphysics of nature (the religious beliefs of the Indians) has been replaced by the metaphysics of the market, whose follower and prophet is Holroyd.

Conrad's vision is clearly not the comprehensive portrayal of all social institutions that we see a little later in the dystopian novels of Orwell, Zamyatin or Huxley, but – as in these works – we are shown a degenerate world that has been built on false values and (what is of much greater significance) a world that brings death and destruction to individuals and to the community at large. The dystopia which is portrayed in *Nostromo* is of the anarchic variety, whereas that in the novels of later writers is always totalitarian in character. It is therefore the prefiguration of a Society which is ruled by money and the quest for power – and which is bereft of any non-pragmatic values.

As in the later dystopias, the portrayal of an imperfect society in which good people suffer at the hands of global evil is contrasted with the vision of an ideal community whose members are confined to the periphery of the dystopian world. In Zamyatin's *We*, these are the "wild people" living beyond the Green Wall, while in Huxley's *Brave New World* they are the Zuni Indians living on their reservation. In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the ideal community is a "Golden Country" which

exists solely in Winston Smith's imagination. In the case of *Nostramo*, a similar function is performed by the San Tomé silver mine.

The portrayal of the mine itself – the description of the community of Indian miners living a peaceful existence under the watchful eye of Gould, his wife, Fr. Roman and the retired soldier Don Pepe – is reminiscent of a utopian idyll. All the needs of the inhabitants of the settlement are satisfied and their livelihood is assured thanks to their conscientious work and the owner's honest management of the mine. The miners are to all intents and purposes indifferent to the wealth which they extract from the mountain. Their work is something natural, as it were, not being motivated by inordinate greed and the quest for personal gain. Therefore, like typical inhabitants of utopias, they are immune to the glitter of silver. The wise and humane management of the mine – aided by Mrs. Gould, who is the embodiment of mercy – in its turn brings to mind the wise Utopus – the Founder and King of More's Utopia.

It is revealing that the Cholo Indians who work in the mine – together with their families and the mine's management – form a single cohesive community that is ready to make the ultimate sacrifice for its leader. A measure of this trust is their readiness to defend the mine and even to blow it up, to say nothing of their willingness to take up arms against the troops of General Montero. Charles Gould and his trusted Indians restore social order in Sulaco, though in a certain sense it is a town which they cannot call their own.

Whereas dystopias merely portray the defeat of the individual in an unequal battle against the new world order, in *Nostramo* we have a happy ending from the political point of view, namely the restoration of the utopia. Chaos and anarchy in Sulaco are overcome firstly thanks to the symbolic operation (undertaken by Decoud and Nostromo) to take the silver abroad, secondly thanks to Nostromo's secret mission to summon relief and thirdly because the miners eventually descend on the town. We learn of the wonderful new world of Sulaco in the final chapters of the novel, in which the narration is taken over by Captain Mitchell, who takes evident pleasure in relating how social order has been restored in the happy new country, whose citizens once again live peaceful lives and prosper thanks to the silver from the mine. This optimistic account is not entirely credible, however, as the captain is also known to us as a rather dull-witted prattler and fantasiser. In his eyes, all is now well, but his wisdom as our guide in this happy and contented world is seriously called into question by the author. This is yet another allusion to utopias, in the accounts of which the ideal world always takes the form of a story told by a guide, teacher and guardian who explains the principles of the utopia to an astonished stranger. Although Captain Mitchell lacks credibility, this may well be an allusion to More's *Utopia*, in which our guide is the eccentric Raphael *Hythlodæus*, whose name means "knowledgeable about nonsense".

What, then, is the meaning of this Conradian utopia? Does it really portray the world as an opposition between good and evil – between an idyll which is cut off from worldly temptations and an outside world which is steeped in sin? Or is it an ironic critique of "the land of the boobies" which lies on the "bird dropping coast"? Is Conrad an enemy of anarchy or is he really its secret and ironic advocate?

Instead of taking a definite stand on the matter, Conrad would seem to use numerous allusions to well-known utopias in order to show that all social and political systems are quite ridiculous and deplorable. He does so, however, in the name of some idea of world order which is not quite spelt out, but which would seem to be basically similar to the visions of world order that inspired More and Campanella.

POLITICS – THE EVIL EMPIRE

Let us note that in other political novels penned by Conrad – such as *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* – the existing world order (as in classical utopias) is perceived as being flawed. Both these novels are acknowledged to be critiques of revolutionism as much as of autocracy. Although in *The Secret Agent* we see only lesser representatives of the autocratic power, which itself remains hidden in the background, it is clear that here we are dealing with a State that is morally evil, as it is willing to resort to all forms of political provocation. The novel gives a much more detailed portrayal of the anarchist movement, which attempts to combat all forms of autocracy, though this struggle is only theoretical and takes place only in the anarchists' imaginations. The anarchists who meet at the back of Verloc's shop are merely a group of incurable dreamers whose views are in no way translated into action. They could be described as utopians in the pejorative sense of the word: their heads are in the clouds and their lofty ideals (a Society with no violence, exploitation or differences between its members, etc.) are just repetitions of well-worn utopian ideas.

The only truly anarchistic action that we are shown proves to have been orchestrated by the intelligence service of an autocratic power, which casts the anarchist movement itself in an uncertain light. The novel would seem to discredit not only the internal and external violence that is meted out by autocracy, but also the reaction to it – all of which is contrasted with the all too real suffering of ordinary people such as Mrs Verloc and her brother.

Under Western Eyes brings us yet another portrayal of a group of anarchists, who – as in *The Secret Agent* – are completely inert, having no strength or resources whatever. It is revealing that the assassination carried out by Haldin is an individual and somewhat private affair which the theoreticians of anarchism later attempt to exploit for their own ends. Here Conrad provides us with his very own depiction of an autocratic State, showing us the enslavement of its citizens, the callousness of its officials and the suffering that is meted out to ordinary people.

In this novel, Russia comes across as a veritable evil empire. The narrator states bluntly that this autocratic State is “an oppressed society where the noblest aspirations of humanity, the desire of freedom, an ardent patriotism, the love of justice, the sense of pity, and even the fidelity of simple minds are prostituted to the lusts of hate and fear, the inseparable companions of an uneasy despotism.”¹⁵

¹⁵ J. Conrad. *Under Western Eyes*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1963, p. 4.

Far from merely being the result of the actions of evil individuals, this evil permeates the whole social system and contrives to make every individual – however noble in himself – an instrument for the oppression of others. An illustration of this is the demonic Councillor Mikulin, who is not evil by nature, but serves the evil which is embodied in the State. Autocracy is thus presented as belonging to the domain of metaphysical evil, no less. However, it has no positive antithesis in the novel. The anarchists are nothing but a consequence of the functioning of the totalitarian State. Not only are they its creations, but they too are depicted as possessing Mephistophelian traits. Although they recognize the evil of dictatorship, they themselves succumb to it, inflicting suffering on their fellow compatriots in the name of freedom and justice. As in Conrad's other novels, each set of political or social views professed by the characters turns out to be no more than a façade of admirable and lofty ideals behind which there is nothing but meanness, cynicism and contempt.

Although Western democracy might have served as the real antithesis of autocracy, it too is discredited in the course of the novel. Switzerland – presented as the symbolic epitome of a genuinely democratic State – is depicted as an indescribably boring, hollow country that lacks character. Its citizens are merely anonymous consumers who are satisfied with their economic status and who live in a perfect country where nothing ever happens. The narrator describes Geneva as a lifeless, sterile city which is incapable of producing anything of genuine value. On the one hand, therefore, Geneva is a perfect State – a veritable utopia, as it were – in which nothing more needs to happen, while on the other hand it is bereft of life and humanity. Indeed, at one point in the story the narrator observes: “It seems that the savage autocracy, no more than the divine democracy, does not limit its diet exclusively to the bodies of its enemies. It devours its friends and servants as well.”¹⁶ This would seem to confirm the hypothesis that Conrad's narrator was inclined to think that all political systems were lethal to ordinary people.

Such an ambiguous appraisal of a particular social and political situation is also to be found in *The Inheritors*. This weird, supposedly fantastical novel shows us how people of the future (living in the fourth dimension – post-people, one might say) carry out a plan to destroy Britain's political system in order to become rulers of the entire world. Their heartless creed is set forth at the very beginning of the novel by their representative – a mysterious woman who, styling herself as the narrator's sister, declares that in the future humanity will be efficient, pragmatic and rational, but devoid of any feelings or values. This outrageous vision is juxtaposed with a hard-hitting, sarcastic appraisal of British social and political elites that runs throughout novel. This *Bildungsroman* of sorts introduces us to ever higher circles of the British Establishment, whose endeavours are doomed to failure because of their moral decline and their pathetic meanness. Although the fourth-dimensionalist visions of the world of the future might be seen as a kind of dystopian warning, the contemporary state of British Society comes in for even harsher criticism. As in utopias and dystopias, the fictional narration serves to portray current social and political realities in

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

a critical light. However, the pragmatic Society advocated by the fourth-dimension-ists as an antidote to the human pettiness of politics can hardly be seen as a positive proposition on the part of the authors.

Indeed, it is difficult to determine how Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford related to the realities depicted in the novel. Was *The Inheritors* a desperate attempt to defend the status quo against the brutality that was to come in the not-too-distant future? Or was it perhaps an expression of their bitter conviction that things could not go on the way they were? It is noteworthy that the novel was dedicated to H.G. Wells, who had penned visions of the future that had similar overtones and were equally ambiguous. The novels of Wells, like those of his continuators – who, like Huxley, could also be his literary adversaries – cannot be definitively classified as utopias or anti-utopias. One has but to read *The Time Machine* or *a Modern Utopia* to see that they contain elements of both positive and negative utopias. It is as if Wells could not quite make up his mind as to whether the changes that were to come would bring humanity salvation or disaster.

It might well be that *The Inheritors* is a special kind of utopia that was written for a time of transition. While accepting the necessity of systemic change, it is neither positive nor negative, though it is filled with apprehension about the nature of the new world. The novel's narrator may well be the best literary expression we have of the standpoint of Conrad himself: disheartened by the realities of his day, he may well have been fascinated by the coming changes that were personified by the cold and pragmatic representative of the fourth dimension, though at the same time he would have been truly frightened by the thought that the future of the world really did belong to people like her.

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