

Towards New Conceptual Terrain of Totalitarianism in Dystopian World through Zamyatin's We

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to introduce the concept of totalitarianism as a system meant to conquer the serenity of the world. Its doctrine is fear and violence, yet its creed is often confusing. It is either a theocracy lacking piety or a restrained secularism turning away from truth. This paper focuses on the new concepts spreading out during the twentieth century, where man has allowed himself to err with no pangs of remorse, and so, we cannot understand history without referring to politics, sociology, philosophy, and literature. Among the main findings this study has reached is that the world in the twentieth century lived through a real crisis: mass extinction, world wars, nuclear weapons, and post-Cold War conflicts. The shift from utopia to dystopia is well expressed in literature, which reports the deprivation of humanity thrown in a shell of menace every day in its present with awful expectations about a calamitous future.

Key Words: Utopia; Dystopia; Zamyatin; Literature; History.

الملخص:

تحاول هذه الدراسة تقديم مفهوم الشمولية كنظام يهدف إلى التغلب على صفاء العالم. عقيدتها هي الخوف والعنف، وغالبا ما تكون مربكة. إنها إما ثيوقراطية تفتقر التقوى أو علمانية مقيدة بعيدة كل البعد عن الحقيقة. تركز هذه الورقة على المفاهيم الجديدة التي انتشرت خلال القرن العشرين، حيث سمح الإنسان لنفسه بالخطأ دون أي ألم أو ندم، وبالتالي، لا يمكننا فهم التاريخ دون الرجوع إلى السياسة وعلم الاجتماع والفلسفة والأدب. من بين النتائج الرئيسية التي توصلت إليها هذه الدراسة أن العالم في القرن العشرين عاش أزمة حقيقية: الانقراض الجماعي، الحروب العالمية، الأسلحة النووية، وصراعات ما بعد الحرب الباردة. يتم التعبير عن التحول من اليوتوبيا إلى الواقع المرير ديستوبيا بشكل جيد في الأدب، الذي يبلغ عن الحرمان من الإنسانية الذي يلقي في قشرة من التهديد كل يوم في حاضرها مع توقعات فظيعة حول مستقبل كارثي.

Introduction:

As the French Revolution (١٧٨٩) spread panic and destruction around the world, the Bolshevik Revolution, (١٩١٧), First (١٩١٤-١٩١٨) and Second World Wars (١٩٣٩-١٩٤٥), and the Marxist doctrine (mid ١٩th century) also inaugurated the devil to rule again with the notion of communist society. Utopian thinking, in the current events of that century, was penetrated to embody negative and satiric thoughts to come up with dystopia. Critics often agree that “the new collectivist mentality was being satirized, with Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (١٩٢٠) becoming the most successful of the early twentieth-century dystopias” (Claeys, ٢٠١٧, p.٣٣٧) manifesting at the same time decades that marked a bleak history which allowed literature to breathe new concepts carried through the new dystopian genre.

Therefore, we cannot discuss utopia or dystopia as a political device, an error in the utopian outlook, or a literary genre without shedding light on the re-conceptualization of totalitarian regimes, social Darwinism, and technological eugenics that stimulate authors to enter a bad world regimented by the twentieth century’s static doctrines. The Russian writer Yevgeny Zamyatin truly made significant achievements to elucidate the change in thought and notion with artistic success. “If *We* is read today”, puts Richard A. Gregg, “it is less for its artistic merits (which are uneven) than for the boldness and ingenuity of its satirical concept (which are very great).” (١٩٩٦, p.٦٧)

I. The Twentieth Century: Foundation of Dystopia

Out of necessity, it is inevitable to pass by the arduous events of the twentieth century. In response to the deprivation of liberty, abolished equality, and the obsession with power and control, literature offered a typical kind of fiction which denounced the alleged utopian dream and exposed its dystopian nature. From Russian communism, Zamyatin penned a novel called *We* (١٩٢٠) to criticize the system of governance of the Soviet Union under the rule of Joseph Stalin. *We* is also considered as the genuine dystopian narrative, which is not thoroughly literary because it is also the outcome of merging politics with utopian ideas, i.e., Plato’s *Republic* (٣٧٥BC). The Greek philosopher represented an ideal distant place that

targets a perfect society based on isolation, classicism, conformity, and the one party.

The Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn who denounced despotism in the Soviet Union, described the twentieth century as “one of the most shameful centuries in human history” (qtd in Claeys ٢٠١٧, p. ١١٣). The dramatic scenes of tyranny and despotism ended the lives of millions. In politics, the ruling power was held by Hitler and Stalin. These systems marked the twentieth century. In Russia, after the Bolshevik revolution, the Soviet Union was first led by V. I. Lenin (١٨٧٠-١٩٢٤), then by Joseph Djugashvili, also named Joseph Stalin (١٨٧٩-١٩٥٣), which means a “man of steel”, lasted over seventy years, while Hitler ruled Nazi Germany with the hope to conquer the globe. However, at that time, Hitler and Stalin were regarded as the epitome of tyrants whose politics revolutionized and ruled a bulk of the world. Consequently, many followed the new colossal doctrine, which assessed new sorts of communities conducting to the abyss.

The Russian nation was based on a different understanding of enlightenment. Though Russians were keen on aristocracy and progress, the idea that the power of the state should be limited was not part of their plans. Accordingly, Chirot (١٩٩٤) “This resulted in a bizarre combination of pride in the uniquely Russian traits of the population mysticism, communalism and anti-individualism, Orthodoxy, servility, and ignorance.”(p. ٤٦), which could be exhibited later in Soviet ideologies.

Stalin is part of the hereditary dynasty of Russian rulers. Similar to Alexander the Liberator, the Russian intelligentsia, or Lenin, who “also made serfdom ever more onerous, crushed peasant protest, and humiliated the most enlightened members of the aristocracy who had reformist ideals” (p. ٤٧), Stalin built the Communist Party on these bases. According to Gregory Claeys, by ١٩٢٠, “the USSR had become an almost completely closed society where there was no way of knowing what was real or practiced elsewhere or how others viewed the Soviet system” (p. ١٥٤). The USSR had become a “dungeon” (Lyons, ١٩٣٧, P. ٥٢٤), a place of extreme darkness, a carcerotopia (Claeys, ٢٠١٧, p. ١٦٢), or “the illiberal one-party state” (Applebaum, ٢٠٢٠, P. ١١) based on Marxist-Leninist ideology.

١. Social Darwinism in History

The veer towards a dystopian history was also instigated by the biological revolution, which appeared in the mid-nineteenth century. *The Origin of Species*, emerging by Charles Darwin (١٨٥٩) made a global change in Europe. Though Darwin’s book served scientific aspects and was not intentionally intended for political or social

goals, it was regarded as an emphasis on the Inequality of Human Races (١٨٥٣), to use the social theorist Arthur de Gobineau's words. Thence, when theory blended with scientific advances, white superiority clamped its validity, and social hierarchy shaped new types of societies. Chirot regards that the overwhelming technological superiority of the "white races" over the rest of the world seemed to be explained by a kind of simplified Darwinism. (١٩٩٤, p. ٥٥). Therefore, the spread of Darwinism continued to be misinterpreted by a lot. The idea of Natural Selection was followed by Herbert Spencer to lead a liberal capitalistic world and established his "social-Darwinism". As a result of applying Darwin's theory of evolution to society, Herbert coined the term "the survival of the fittest" which raised the question of which group is to be considered weak and which one is to be considered strong. For Spencer and his proponents, the poor weaken the strong and curse the possibility of a perfect society that is revealed in literature as a utopia.

Over and above, Darwin's scientific theory and the notion of natural selection allowed the emergence of Eugenics which raised ethnic and racial problems. Eugenics introduced birth control as a solution to excessively inferior families. The movement was embraced by the most powerful nations, which served their interest, and was presented as an impetus to their deeds, including racism. As put by Chirot (١٩٩٤), "the popularized science of the late ١٩ and early ٢٠ centuries did not invent imperialism or racism, but it did give them the sense of infallibility and assurance that came with the cachet of « science »." (p. ٥٥). Anyone reading Atwood's dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale* (١٩٨٥) would directly link images of birth control or the "ceremony" with principles of Eugenics.

In history, causality is often investigated because events are elastic and extend from an action to a reaction that is infinite and colossal. The idea of supremacy raised by social Darwinism is the major motive behind the lust for dominance, based on enslavement, despot, and contempt of the inferior "other". For Nazism, the image of superiority cherishes the solidarity of the ideal group, which comes only from "the unity of blood" as it is quoted in Wickham Steed's *The Meaning of Hitlerism* (٤٢). Hitler's utopian outlook for Claeys is that "Utopia for Germany was to be dystopia for everyone else" (١٧٨)

II. Dystopian Growth from History to Literature

Back to the sphere of history, dystopian concepts found a concrete ground to settle their abstractions on. The genre that has been introduced in the mid-eighteenth, strode in the twentieth century. In common parlance, dystopian fiction is a peculiar paradigm of a fanciful state that goes amiss toward society, culture, religion, and politics. In theory, a dystopian universe espoused the belief that a perfect community can only be attained by tyranny, oppression, political chaos, restriction of norms and laws, as well as individual freedom. Thence, it is remarkable how oblique man went and how plainly he endorsed totalitarian intricacies. At this level, Claeys (٢٠١٧) argued that whatever we make of these attempts, we clearly cannot understand dystopia (or, indeed, utopia) without confronting this history.

Science fiction is probably the most popular genre that penetrates boundaries of space and time to reveal facts. It borrows spatial and temporal dimensions from the real world to reduce the socio-historical gap and relate closely to the ideology of the time. In utopian and dystopian fiction, ideology becomes a reflective method for modeling certain realities. The atrocity of the period resulted from the new-born ideologies, the deplorable systems of governance, or, more properly, from the widespread totalitarian regimes, the dreadful biological influx, and the grievous technological development. According to Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, the foundation of Marxism-Leninism as a Soviet ideology maintains a single rational reality proven by science, and in “the full elaboration of the underlying laws of nature in social life, there is little leeway for playing with philosophical-scientific ideas or speculating on “other realities.” (٢٣٦) These events have only alienated people out of their imaginative comfort zone that was provided by utopia; leading to the most tragic part in history. Writers of the era engaged in dystopian fiction to both treat and add insult to injury, “whereas utopias describe an escape from history, these anti-utopias describe an escape, or attempted escape, to history, which is to say, to the world of contingency, conflicts, and uncertainty.”(Quoted in Booker ٤). While history studies the past, dystopia addresses the current in a distant future.

Many writers labeled their works in dystopian *topos*. Which sometimes lament the decline of humanity, whereas others warn of the power structure of some accurate regimes. The ones who have guided the convoy of the genre were Yevgeny Zamyatin, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell who are worthy to be mentioned in order to adduce the last claim. Darko Suvin argues that “their critical works can be ready as parables of the Soviet intelligentsia’s struggle to maintain a utopian morality in an increasingly totalitarian world” (٣-٤). In fact, every dystopian fiction should owe to the Russian-banned writer Zamyatin. In his masterpiece *We* (١٩٢٠), he portrayed the totalitarian regime of Stalin in his fictitious society called the OneState.

Huxley tends to the biological phenomenon in his *Brave New World* (١٩٣٢), which portrayed a new form of society based on Eugenics and birth control, whereas Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (١٩٤٩) is about a futuristic society that is living in an endless war.

In these narratives, twentieth-century fiction rejected elements of utopia and denied the allegedly perfect place as impossible to exist or to take place. “(negative) texts like *We*, *Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have been far more prominent in modern literature than the positive utopias of earlier centuries.” (Booker ١٩٩٤, ١٧). These novels are extremely symbolic and allegorical for referring to accurate history dependent on social and political hegemony. In point of fact, the existence of dystopia is ascribed and stems basically from the idea of utopia. However, in an attempt to structure an ideal society, the human race went beyond expectations because there is a slight line between the two concepts, and that line has been crossed due to the cataclysms of man, especially when paranoids of holding power infused in his mind.

Although anti-utopias are utopia's derivative, and despite the fact that “the idea of utopia is frequently intertwined with notions of dystopia.” The latter is a sustained world of oppression and limitation of human freedom. The dystopian fiction exhibits a hierarchical system where the power is in the hands of the strongest, and the survival is for the fittest in the society. Freedom is shackled with conditions and laws passed by the authorities, i.e., Zamyatin's *One State* is made of glass to enable the government to direct its citizens. The notion of history, according to Zamyatin, is “one of oppositions and reversals, in which only the contradiction of accepted norms creates value” (٢٣٩). This refers to the ideology of Soviet science, which legitimates Marxist-Leninist practices, asserts Csicsery-Ronay.

In a ruinous atmosphere, dystopias divulge significant issues related to societal, political, environmental, technological, and individual matters. Common problems like hunger, global warming, suppression of individuals, and assaulted liberties through authoritarian sovereigns, have, subsequently, pushed ahead authors to address such issues effectively and intentionally. In his study of the nature of dystopia, Claeys (٢٠١٧, p. ١١٣) stated that “In both history and literature, ‘dystopia’ has been most frequently identified with the colossal tragedies of twentieth-century despotism.” Thus, in the selected corpus of the literary works related to this study, there is a number of elements which nest history within dystopian writings.

Synopsis of Zamyatin's *We* .١

Writing a dystopia was inculcated by the irresistible despotism and totalitarianism. In the beginning of the ٢٠th century, the Russian writer Y. Zamyatin unleashed his pen to create a new world in a way to depict his country's regime and to criticize it. *We* was his dystopian novel, the alpha and omega of the dystopian writings. However, Zamyatin's masterpiece did not blossom directly, for it was banned in the USSR. Under the rule of the Benefactor, *We* introduces the world of the One State that is built with glass in order to be exposed to the authorities and to enable them to keep further control over the lives of its citizens, including their jobs, their entertainment, their sleeping hours, and even birth control.

Using the first person narrative, Zamyatin echoes his story through his mathematician protagonist D-٥٠٣ who is himself under the thralldom of the norms and principles of his One State; a fictitious society whose members are not given random names but codes that identify them as numbers, and each number starts with a letter (consonants for males while vowels for females). As tradition dictates, this kind of regime is ordered and organized with unfamiliar policies. In a place where democracy is blurred, the One State regulates its citizens according to the perfect Table of Hours, which controls every aspect of their lives. However, in this scientifically and rationally harmonious polity, the hero in the novel narrative is the builder of the Integral which is a spaceship that would carry the One State to further limits. Eventually, things witness critical moments when D-٥٠٣ develops doubts and qualms about the perfect regulations of the Table. He meets the rebellious I-٣٣٠; a smart woman whose voice calls for an independent state where everyone is able to choose their own way of life. She tempts him to join her riot alongside the underground group beyond the Green Wall known as the Mephis. Thus, D-٥٠٣ is ensnared. Reaching the denouement of the story, dystopian writing often does not offer many options in its end. In fact, I-٣٣٠'s thirst for freedom draws her death by the Benefactor, while D-٥٠٣ has been lobotomized. The novel takes a fair share of the dystopian features. In many striking events and scenes, the dystopian state is the product of the authoritarian regime which imposes strict obedience to the government at the expense of one's freedom.

Rebuke in Zamyatin's *We* ٢

Under the premise of “the end justifies the means”, history records the thoughts of the main pro-communists who were firmly dedicated to their regime and eager to triumph at any rate. In this context, the Russian-German author and historian Lev Kopelev (١٩١٢-١٩٩٧) asserts, “our goal was the universal triumph of Communism, and for the sake of that goal everything was permissible__ to lie, to steal, to destroy hundreds of thousands and even millions of people, all those who were hindering out work or who could hinder it, everyone who stood in the way” (١١). Kopelev’s claim identifies the major principles of the communist party that some writers like Yevgeny Zamyatin could not criticize in a direct way for fear of being persecuted (and was indeed sent to exile for the rest of his life). Under the rubric of literature, the Russian writer of *We* used fiction to diagnose the situation in his country and questioned the validity of his regime.

Zamyatin, like many Russian writers, was greatly influenced by the leader of the “Slavophiles” Doestoevsky, who defended peasant commune and orthodoxy and criticized Western rationalism in his *Notes From the Underground*. His revolutionary ideas urged him to satirize the failure of communism and socialism to achieve idealism. The Soviet writer Alexander Voronsky believes that Zamyatin’s *We* is a tour de force, but “it is not a utopia. It is an artistic lampoon about the present and an attempt at a future prognosis as well” (٤٣). The novel *We* was not published in Russia until its English translation by Gregory Zilboorg in ١٩٢٤. When Zamyatin’s manuscript of *We* was received by the editor of Red Virgin Soil, Alexander Voronsky expressed his rebuke: “it’s a bit early to shoot at us with such satires. Somehow you don’t look where you ought.” He carries a comparison with Wells, who was not thoroughly negative towards communism: “Now take Wells, about whom you wrote so well and with such talent, he after all saw something positive and very big in us, the Communists, but you paint us only black.” Voronsky has overtly claimed his sharp disapproval of Zamyatin’s dystopia, whereas the latter did not fail to show the writer’s apogee towards the history of Stalinism and communism.

We is not a mere fictitious narrative, but it overtly expresses the ideologies of the epoch. For Zamyatin, dystopia is a means to approach sensitive issues like shame and failure to establish peace and co-existence through the allegedly utopian tradition. Kuznetsov on *Zamyatin* asserts that “anti-utopian novels try frantically to

destroy faith in the coming human happiness; they are shot through with hopeless historical pessimism and a zoological hatred for the people, for democracy” (١٩٩٣, p.٥٥). The major outcome of the Stalinist regime, according to Zamyatin’s account, was the fragmentation and dissociation of modern man, which led to alienation that “can be regarded essentially as the dissociation of the conscious and the unconscious, the rational and the irrational, in the psyche and life of the individual” (Collins, p.٧٠). In a dystopian society, unconsciousness menaces stability, whereas freedom instigates all sorts of evil. The more hegemony of the rational is imposed, crime and malevolence are reduced to zero. Zamyatin overtly expresses his ideological opposition to the prevailing government of the USSR, which identifies him as anti-Stalinist and anti-socialist. This image is depicted in the novel’s character, the Benefactor, who represents the supreme power in the OneState, a Stalin-like figure of dictatorship.

III. New Genre, New Concepts

To make a book à la mode, dystopia has become the key to coping with human fallacy and abuse of power. The genre as a concept altered radical changes to other concepts like freedom, memory, belonging, happiness, and even democracy and justice. Following Plato’s Republic, the structure of society highlighted serious division to embrace a hierarchy composed of Philosophers (the ruling class), Guardians (the working class), and workers (usually the hoi polloi). In this vein, Nell Eurich asserts that in such societies, the concept of leadership, for example, becomes dependent on intelligence and character, not nobility of blood or inheritance” (p.٦٣). The new conception of political structure put an end to the monarchical system to start new concepts in governance.

Be it utopia or dystopia, these societies are based on the concept of collectivism. Individual ambitions are disregarded for the sake of communal Specifically, happiness. Human beings work with a collective mentality and surrender their personal or individual feelings. By exploiting the human body and mind, the collectivist theory that is supposed to create the welfare of the group is irrationally used in a dystopian world as a justification for regiment and control.

In *We*, the whole populace is handed over to the Well-Doer: “the keys to the impregnable fortress of [their] happiness” (p.١٢٩). In such narratives, “they remind [them] that [they] are a united, powerful organism of millions of cell ... [they] are a united church” where “nobody is *one*, but *one of*” (p.١٦٦). They “are all so much

alike”; hence they “are *perfect!*” (p.٨). The collectivist notion echoed the concept of democracy in a dystopian fashion. Zamyatin, through *We* shaped a community that hollowed political collectivism. Certainly, this ideology recreates “democracy, in the sense of collective, conscious self-government” (Claeys, ٢٠١٧, p.٣٨٥).

The concept of freedom is ranked equally with crime because it threatens the possibility of happiness. Therefore, the OneState is based on the Table of Hours that schedules the activities of its citizens. It is the heart of the OneState, and the tool of control which restricts all sorts of freedom, as mentioned in the novel, “the dominator in the fraction of happiness is reduced to zero” (p.٢٢). It means that freedom is considered an enemy of serenity because humankind only lives happily when devoid of freedom. It is, in another vein, considered the impetus to commit crime as D-٥٠٣, the novel’s protagonist declared “freedom and crime are as closely related... if human liberty is equal to zero, man does not commit any crime. That is clear. The way to rid man of criminality is to rid him of freedom” (p.٣٤)

And so, the concepts that were once considered basics have become unknown to citizens in the futuristic world of *We*. This is directly related to the concept of totalitarianism, which transformed various notions into symbolic patterns to fit its agenda.

Conclusion:

“New maps of hell”, as Kingsley Amis uttered, were the main plot of the historical events in the twentieth century that appeared abundantly in dystopian writings. Yevgeny Zamyatin, with his tart attitude toward the Russian state apparatus, attempted to reveal errors and contradictions of Soviet society that were intended to be ideal. The motive behind the spread of dystopia is the aura of the epoch that reeked of tyranny, failed socialism, social Darwinism, and alienation. The scrutiny of *We* observes the turn in history toward new concepts of fear and terror to represent the social-political-economical-cultural power of modern ideologies.

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