

## **Intersection of Dystopian Literature and the Contemporary Themes of Cultural Anthropology**

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper is inspired by two trends in two disciplines – cultural anthropology, and the dystopian literature. Starting from the already established premise, that there exists a clear merging between these disciplines in what Stover (1973) calls anthropological science fiction, I am prompted to push the argument further. Instead of just arguing that the SF genre emerged greatly as a result of social science research and particularly of anthropology, I want to look at some of the contemporary problems that cultural anthropology deals with and merge it with the themes of this, now reemerging genre. The origins of the dystopian novel as predominantly SF (science fiction) writing, have been well analyzed. Its emergence goes back to around 1880, marked by the strong intervention of sciences in human life. To list but a few of the most prominent works of dystopian writing, by 1908, works such as Erewhon (Samuel Butler), Looking Backward (Edward Bellamy), as well as Hugo Gernsback's Modern Electrics SF magazine have been produced. What followed was an avalanche of writings, including Huxley, Orwell, Bradbery, etc. Many of these works, (Brave New World, 1984) focus on the consequences of technology and lack of ethics in using it on human life. Most of these dystopian novels, talk about the perils of technology, technocracy and its omni-controlling power. It is interesting to analyze then, that much of the contemporary problems that anthropology deals with in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, fall within the realm of dystopian literature. The rising trend of new dystopian novels, can offer foundations for a vision, whereby dystopian literature can offers a wide array of topics from which social anthropology can borrow in its active engagement with contemporary global issues and the new human condition. Stephen Collier and George Laikoff, in On Regimes of Living (2004), talk about the regimes of living, referring to a configuration of normative, technical, and political elements that are aligned with situations that present ethical problems – that is, when the question of how to live is brought to the surface. It is precisely, genome sequencing, stem cell research, biopolitics, the pharmaceutical marketing, that fall within the realm of new anthropological problems. Comparing the motives of dystopian literature (its reaction towards reality or the world as we know it), its questioning of the moral and human aspects of war, science, violence, technology, etc, with the most recent issues that contemporary cultural anthropology deals with, will be the primary focus of this paper. Its aim to show the strengths of this interdisciplinarity for a critical grasp of the contemporary human condition, will be but one motive of this work.*

**Keywords:** utopia, dystopia, cultural anthropology, biopolitics, technocracy, regimes of living.

## Introduction

This paper is inspired by the obvious merging, overlapping, and borrowing of themes in and between two disciplines – literature and anthropology, or more specifically, cultural anthropology, and the dystopian literature genre. Starting from the already established premise, that there exists a clear amalgamation between these disciplines in what Stover (1973) calls *anthropological science fiction*, I am prompted to push the argument further. Instead of just seeing the SF genre as one that emerged greatly as a result of social science research and particularly of the anthropological paradigms of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (especially in the UK and USA), I want to look at some of the contemporary problems that cultural anthropology deals with and merge it with the themes of dystopia - the now reemerging literary genre. Hence, it is interesting to analyze, that much of the contemporary problems that anthropology deals with in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, fall within the realm of dystopian literature. This can offer foundations for a deepening of the argument for the interconnectedness of these two realms. Namely that likewise, dystopian literature offers a wide array of topics from which the social anthropology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can borrow in its active engagement with contemporary global issues. In order to outline this multifaceted interdisciplinarity and the ways in which these two disciplines collide, but also inform each other, I will first briefly outline the origin and motives of the dystopian genre. I will then look at the cultural anthropology paradigms and themes aiming to diagnose where these disciplines fuse, and in what ways they borrow from and inform each other.

## The Origin, Content, and Inspiration of Dystopia

The origins of the dystopian novel as predominantly SF (science fiction) genre, have been well analyzed (Hillegas, 1974). Roughly speaking, the emergence of the SF genre goes back to 1880, at a time when science started powerfully intervening in human life, thus reshaping and redirecting the content of society. By 1908, the pivotal dystopian works such as *Erewhon* (Samuel Butler), *Looking Backward* (Edward Bellamy), as well as Hugo Gernsback's *Modern Electrics* SF magazine have been produced. This genre brings a radical literary change, in that it promotes scientific and technological innovations into independent units, which further play an important role in defining the events and the plot of the novel. Technology is therefore, no longer marginalized, nor is it some kind of a literary decor, but rather, evolves into a crucial factor, which influences the overall development of the plot. Needless to say that this brings to the fore, the diabolic power of the mindbending dialectics, the one according to which, at a certain point, everything turns into its exact opposite (Muhić, 1983: 28). Hence, as Muhić puts it, if in the beginning, technology enabled people to multiply their ability, it also made them highly dependent and thus incapacitated, once they were deprived of its privilege.

Although it is predominantly H. G. Wells who is taken as the pivotal founder of the dystopian genre (Hillegas, 1974) with works such as *The Time Machine* (1895/1995), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896/1996), I am urged by Muhić's argument about the limits of such an approach. Namely, Muhić claims that a closer reading of works, such as Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888/1996) published earlier than Wells might shed a new light as per the first dystopian writings (Muhić, 1983: 68). Hence, although *Looking Backward* has been predominantly read as a utopian novel, the fact that the main protagonist, Julien West, after describing the perfect future society in the year 2000 (in which he woke up after a catatonic sleep), wakes up again, this time back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, renders the whole book as only a

dream. And although West again wakes up in the ideal world of the year 2000, his heated debates with his contemporaries about the corruption of that life while back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, certainly shakes the picture whereby Bellamy is an idyllic, utopian writer.

In terms of the general constituents of dystopia, one cannot but mention the skepticism and at times, overtly pessimistic vision regarding the pillars of civilization, such as progress and humanity. The pessimism regarding human evolution and the overall nature of human kind is clearly visible in the works such as *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. H. G. Wells is deeply convinced that the animalistic nature of humans is ontological, it is what defines us. Humans are artificially made creatures, while the role of God is taken by the mad vivisectionist, Dr Moreau. His allegedly well-thought of deeds for crossbreeding and making humans from animals, turn into tyranny, infliction of terrible pain, and infinite terror. Hilegas (1974) argues that the need of some kind of ethical control over the technological innovations also stands among the main constituents of the dystopian genre. H.G. Wells work *The Invisible Man* (1897) points to the inevitable danger of the ethical misuse/abuse of science. Likewise, Butler's *Erewhon* (1872/2008), located in a society, most likely somewhere in the New Zealand Alps, offers a radical critique of machines. This society, no longer has machines, but it has underwent a long history of intensive machinisation and automatization. Butler has drawn inspiration from Darwin's *Evolution of Species*, believing that his theory is well applicable on the machines as well. Hence, the machines are organic objects, a biological specimen, which, same as all other species fights to survive. The war then, is directed mainly and firstly against those with which, they, the machines, communicate the most. It goes without saying that *Erewhon* is about the war of men and machine, and the complexities of the relationship that men have created with machines.

Similarly, Forster's short story *The Machine Stops* (1909/2009) delivers the same visions of the future, technocratic society. The main protagonist, Kuno, argues that the human species has long since been brought to the level of absolute exhaustion, unable to live on the surface of Earth, because it became fully dependent on The Machine. Hence, in the final instance, it is only The Machine, which truly exists, as it is the one which makes both its survival, and the survival of the exhausted human kind, possible.

It is obvious that much of the inspiration for the dystopian writings stem from the content of society and social circumstances. The issues of empathy and the lack of it, the collision between the individual and the collective, the real vs the artificial, technology vs nature, as well as the lack of individual freedom and critical thinking (Bradbury, Dick, Asimov) are some of the main constituents of the fabric of dystopian novels.

## Cultural Anthropology and Dystopia

In his article written for the Australian Anthropological Society Conference in 1978, Samuel Geoffrey argues that there is a clear influence of anthropology on science fiction. To support this argument, he looks into the works of Sills (1968), Stover (1973), Mason (1974). He also looks at Yole Sills article *The International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, where she introduces the term "social science fiction". These authors base their arguments on the merging of much of the themes that cultural anthropology dealt with in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the themes of the then emerging dystopian genre. Stover (1973: 3) for instance, points to writings, which were clearly inspired by the questions (both anthropological and archeological) about the prehistoric man, such as Verne's *The Village in the Treetops* (1964 [1901]) and Well's story *Grisly Folk* (1968). Furthermore, the influence of primatological

studies, according to him can clearly be seen even in the dystopian movie production, such as the *The Planet of the Apes* serial.

And while Stover pushes more for the idea that prehistory and physical anthropology shaped much of the dystopian writing, Samuel Geoffrey argues, it was predominantly the cultural anthropological writings and ethnographies of Boas, Kroeber, Sapir, Murdoch and above all Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead. These works were mainly concerned with the analysis of societies as relatively static and stable entities. Similarly, science fiction grew into a genre, which started dealing with other cultures, or visions of different societies. In addition, the role of the anthropologist as a hero, as Samuel points out, served as an inspiration for the appearance of a main dystopian protagonist, who understands, interprets, collides with, rebels against, or interprets the current society or the vision of a future society.

My interest is in pushing this argument further. The avalanche of dystopian writings, including Forester, Huxley, Orwell, Bradbury, Zamyatin etc., focus on the consequences of subjugating human behaviour to the laws of the machine. We already saw that most of these dystopian novels, talk about the perils of technology, technocracy and its omni-controlling power. Moreover, dystopian fiction has remained critically and commercially successful throughout the twentieth century, inspiring new generations of contemporary writers such as Suzette Haden Elgin, Suzanne Collins, Zoë Fairbairns, and Vlady Kocinacich to continue and expand on the tradition not to mention its recent breakthrough among young adults.

Therefore, it is interesting to analyze, that much of the contemporary problems that anthropology deals with in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, fall within the realm of dystopian literature. This can offer foundations for a strengthened and somewhat reversed argument, namely that dystopian literature offers a wide array of themes and critical insights on the human condition from which social anthropology can borrow in its active engagement with contemporary global issues. In the final instance, we are urged to see, how these two disciplines can continue assisting each other in their analysis and engaged criticism of cultures and societies.

### **Contemporary Anthropological Themes and Dystopia**

Paul Rabinow, an eminent American anthropologist has been quite known for much of his work in Morocco and the changes and social shifts brought about in the society by the colonial and post-colonial regimes. Recently however, he shifted much of his work on molecular biology and genomics filtered through the lens of bio-politics and bio-security (Agamben, Foucault). His shift in the area of research fields marks his dedication to dissect modernity in all its shapes - as a phenomenon, and a problem, which results in a variety of ways of coming to terms with it. Hence, it is a phenomenon encompassing those who seek ways to live with its diverse forms, or resist it and its projects. As he puts it, anthropology should actually be taken up as a practice of studying the form that the mutually related aspects of knowledge, thought, and care gain through the shifting relations of power. In his *Midst Anthropology's Problems* (2006), Rabinow is deeply engaged with the theories of Foucault, Deleuze, Dewey and embarks upon the investigation of the forms the *anthropos* is being given today. In this light, he brings into attention the fact that today we cannot question the growing scope of market relations and commodification of things previously outside the monetary value. What worries him is the inexistence of a *logos*, rationality, ontology, a form of knowledge and a way of understanding and coming to terms with the *anthropos*/the man of today. The most distinctive innovations of the *anthropos*, as Rabinow (2006) puts it, is in the realm of technological developments, that is, genome mapping and bioethics. Genome is the entirety of organism's hereditary information and the new modes of genome sequencing are

as he puts it forms through which the individual and the collective identity is being violated, and pirated (p. 45). The concerns with the human rights, the new forms of being humans or *anthropos* and the mechanisms of sciences and biotechnologies, changing the meaning of life, are further discussed by many other anthropologists.

Stephen Collier and George Laikoff, in *On Regimes of Living* (2006), talk about the *regimes of living*, referring to a configuration of normative, technical, and political elements that are aligned with situations that present ethical problems – that is, when the question of *how to live* is brought to the surface. It is precisely, genome sequencing, stem cell research, biopolitics, the pharmaceutical marketing, that fall within the realm of new anthropological problems. There is an incredibly interesting and thought provoking element in the fact that much of the themes of dystopian literature as we saw (its reaction towards reality or the world as we know it), its questioning of the moral and human aspects of war, science, violence, technology, etc, overlap with the most recent issues that contemporary cultural anthropology deals with.

Much of the recent questions in cultural anthropology are about how to live posed in relationship to technology and biopolitics (understood in a Foucauldian sense as the practice of modern national states and their regulation of their subjects through techniques for the subjugations of bodies). Power, he argued is exercised at the level of life. He also proposes a bipolar scheme of the biopolitics: one is seeking to maximize the forces of the human body, making it economic, docile, and hence efficient. The second one relates to the drilling techniques, normalizing and regulatory controls, introduced through a biopolitics of the population and controlling birth, morbidity, mortality, longevity. Biopolitics became a more or less rational attempt to intervene on the vital characteristics of human existence.

To name but one example, we will look at Kushik Sunder Rajan's *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic* (2006). This is an anthropological study based on a multi-sited ethnography of genomic research and drug development marketplaces in the United States and India. His fieldwork was conducted in biotechnology labs and in small companies in the United States and India between 1999 and 2004. The beginning of the biotechnology industry as Rajan points out, can be traced back to the 70s and 80s. The new technoscience was a recombinant DNA technology (RDT), which is a set of techniques for cutting up and joining together DNA molecules in the lab. The RDT followed by an emergence of biotechnology companies, which in turn led to further research in the life sciences and biotechnology.

Rajan argues that capitalism and life sciences are coproduced but also puts forward the idea that life sciences are *overdetermined* by the capitalist political economic structures within which they emerge. So for instance, while labs can send each other DNA information for free, at the same time, there is an increased protection of information as private property both among corporate biologists as well as academic scientists. He suggests that this could arise from the fact that these academic scientists are actually or potentially corporate entrepreneurs on the side. The university that employs these scientists seeks to protect their intellectual property as a corporation would.

Finally, Rajan takes on a challenging analysis of the concepts such as “life”, “capital”, “fact”, “exchange”, and “value” and argues that life sciences represent a new phase of capitalism, and consequently, biotechnology is a form of enterprise inextricable from contemporary capitalism. Life becomes a calculable market unit, and that structures the terrain on which biotech and drug development companies operate. Clearly, there is a major revisiting and questioning of ethics in science, one the most prominent themes that we saw emerging continually in the dystopian genre. Finally, genomics and biotechnology is a game played in the future in order to generate the present that enables the future. Life becomes a

calculable market unit, and that structures the terrain on which biotech and drug development companies operate.

There is a clear distrust in the ethics of science and the new technologies in other contemporary anthropological writings as well. Much of the dystopian themes such as individual freedoms and reaction against totalitarian regimes, also resonate strongly in many contemporary anthropological writings (Roitman, 2006). Nikolas Rose and Carlos Novas in the *Biological Citizenship* also talk about biopolitics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To begin with, they go back to Foucault and the work on the clinic. The scope when the object shifts, that is, the body becomes an object of the clinical gaze, is the type of work that they are looking to do. The first distinction that they make is the shift from molar to molecular. The molecular is a style of thought. Visualization is the key through which we shift from the molar to molecular. It is a series of techniques. The text continues with a discussion about the technologies of optimization and makes a claim that whereas before there was biology in the depth, the shift to molecular goes into flattening. Hence, if before we could understand the deeper laws behind us, understanding the genetics, means that everything is immediately accessible. There is also a general shift in pharmaceuticals and medicine from curing disease to actually controlling vital processes.

Sara Franklin (2006) is also engaged in discussing the issue of stem cell research as a “global biological” activity. The whole apparatus of scientific and technological study of cells takes place in a transnational, global space, related to what can be referred to as the global capital. Yet, she notices that the cell research can be organized in any kind of cultural, social, and economic context, while the repercussions would still be global. Even the way in which we understand and intervene in life will hence, change. The key infrastructural premises for the stem cell research are, according to Franklin the specific distribution of scientific expertise and global capital. At the same time, the ethical regulations implemented through the political contexts of the individual countries are a key segment of the assemblage of elements through which, such a research can be articulated. Finally, the genetic research will have serious repercussions on the ways life is understood in general. Hence, such research can lead to a revision of the long-term established assumptions about the irreversibility of aging. In addition, the advancement of therapeutical methods can lead to problems in the sphere of political regulations and ethical applicability on both the individual and the collectively.

### **The Future of the Dystopian and Cultural Anthropology Intersection**

In line with the above-mentioned discussion on the crossbreeding of themes of the dystopian genre and the contemporary anthropological points of interest, it is worth mentioning that once Marxism was out the picture, as a tool for critical and/or discursive analysis, anthropologists thought studying anything related to technology was evil. Similarly to much of the themes in the dystopian literary genre, ethics and technology were seen in opposition. Ethics and value are accepted as opposed to modern rational forms. There is an obvious urge among contemporary anthropologists to break that schism now and to bring these new technologies in relation to ethics. Authors such as Aiwa Ong, Collier, Laikof, Rabinow, are attempting to dismantle the approach that technology is bad and resistance is good. Anthropologists all have to write, and opposing it brings them closer to cultural studies. This is clearly a reaction to the previous anthropological paradigms, which did not want to deal so much with technology (both as machines and as politics). Contemporary anthropologists on the other hand claim that anthropology has to be engaged with the question of modernity, power, and politics, which is intertwined with technologies.

Similarly to the dystopian genre, contemporary anthropology does not so much focus on how technology changes culture, but rather that these variables preserve their own modes, but it is the interaction that allows for certain things to happen. These technologies come to friction with politics and ethics. It is the interaction between these that is brought to attention in the above-mentioned writings, similarly to the ways a dystopian novel would portray the effects of such an interaction.

Taking all these into consideration, perhaps it would be interesting to outline the future paths of the interaction between the SF/dystopian genre and anthropology. One of the key arguments of this paper is the idea that there are venues for the future cooperation of both, where especially anthropology would find much use from the works and visions of fiction. As Geoffrey (1978) points out, Ian Langham (1978) has argued that invented cultures, or invented variations of otherwise real cultures, can help anthropologists perform a thought-experiment, which would help them test the consistency and coherence of the methodological assumptions behind their theories. Moreover, the visionary aura that enwraps SF writing, the projections on to how the future might look like, can shift the anthropologists' thinking and turn it forward, adding more creativity and imagination. In addition, the melancholy that embraces much of the forecasts for the future in the dystopian literature can be diversified with the themes and findings of cultural anthropology regarding technology, regimes, ethics, and modes of living. Likewise, the complex, at times, predictable, yet multilayered changes that current societies undergo and the versatility of alternatives in the future are something that anthropologists can learn a lot from the SF/dystopian literature.

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