

Lucas Agudiez Roitman / Eric Roberts

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Bibliographic information published by the German National Library:

The German National Library lists this publication in the National Bibliography; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de> .

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Imprint:

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ISBN: 9783668411098

This book at GRIN:

<https://www.grin.com/document/354900>

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The impacts and tradeoffs of technology, communism and inequality in the fiction of Brave New World

Lucas Agudiez Roitman and Eric Roberts, PhD.



Abstract

In Aldous Huxley's piece, "Brave New World", one can find multiple ideas taken from Marxist ideology; specifically from Marx' and Engels' Communist Manifesto. The role of technology is in both works related to the creation of multiple classes, although with different power structures. This paper will analyze to what extent technology is pertinent in the pursuit of utopia, drawing parallels from the Communist Manifesto (where technology, which leads to a particular mode of production is under attack) and the fictional piece, Brave New World (where technology also impacts the social order arguably negatively). The economic crisis of 1929, more commonly known as the Great Depression and Keynesian consumerist theory as a response to it, showed that there was a need for an alternative to address the shortcomings of capitalism. Socialism, was an enticing concept that not only sparked revolutions of nation states but also has become entrenched in modern culture.

Introduction

In utopian or dystopian literature, technology is a tool often used to subject citizens. This raises the question of whether technology helps to either intensify or diminish the gap between social classes. From reading *Brave New World* and the Communist manifesto, it is clear that the role of technology is plays an important role in the fiction. At a first glance, readers could concur that technology allows for a more efficient social control and maintenance of hierarchy. However, what was (both in the fiction and the manifesto) initially thought to be used as a means to achieve a utopian society, in reality ultimately leads to a dystopia. It can to be argued that although Marx and Engels did not specifically mention technology as a cause for the division in class, its product, which is the mode of production from the machines invented, leads to the formation of a bourgeois class and the centralization of power. In *Brave New World*, technology is meant to lead to a utopian society by facilitating divisions among social groups. Different castes are created and each one is designed in a different way. Every detail, from the babies' birth to their development is controlled by the "hatchery and conditioning center" in order to achieve the world controller's goals of a utopian society. For example, bioengineering is constantly applied to producing humans of different castes: each person is engineered in a way that prevents overqualification. To create unskilled labor, the world controller uses "oxygen-shortage for keeping an embryo below par".¹ This method of separating groups through technology initially appears robust, although the fact that exceptions exist within the society later suggests otherwise. The characters of Bernard Marx and Helmholtz Watson who yearn for either acceptance or isolation from their group are anomalies. They show that this system is not entirely perfect. This dissent between groups is predicted in the Communist Manifesto with the constant class struggles between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but where it differs from *Brave New World* is in how these anomalies are addressed. The Communist Manifesto states that with enough momentum the bourgeoisie will eventually be overturned by the proletariats.² However, this is not evidenced in *Brave New World*. Instead of an upheaval, readers see

¹ Huxley, Aldous. "Brave New World. 1932." London: Vintage (1998), page 12

² Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. The Communist Manifesto. Read Books Ltd, 2013

the proletariats, as personified by the characters of Marx and Watson, relenting or accepting the status quo, and being exiled from the society. Technology in this fictional case has failed in achieving a utopian society.³

State-backed Control

Technology is not only used in the creation of a perfect society but also for excessive thought policing by the state. In *Brave New World*, this is evidenced by the use of hypnopaedia and soma. The hypnopaedia indoctrinates citizens in a way that individuals are free but still conditioned to behave exactly as the world controller expects. An example of this conditioning is that lower caste babies, after being constantly fed the same combination of words, “grow up with what the psychologists used to call an 'instinctive' hatred of books and flowers”.⁴ The hypnopaedia was originally a tool invented to educate people while they slept. As the director of hatchery and conditioning said, “They thought that hypnopædia could be made an instrument of intellectual education”.⁵ However, its goal was finally corrupted and the process is now used in the book for psychological conditioning. This is a clear example of how technology originally meant for utopia ultimately leads to dystopia. What was initially thought to be a means to achieve harmony instead becomes a tool of manipulation, in which the lower caste are forever crippled and inferior to the higher classes.

Mass control is achieved not only through conditioning but also with “soma” drugs. Instead of showing lack of material items and luxuries as a symbol of stability, as in More’s *Utopia*⁶, *Brave New World* uses mass consumption as a means to keep the economy afloat.⁷ Individuals are subjected to drug use from an early age, so they become addicted to the “euphoric, narcotic, pleasantly hallucinant” substance and work hard in order to receive their periodic doses.⁸ Conditioning is also applied to push economic development through consumerism. For example, one of the most common hypnopaedic phrases described in the book is “ending is better than mending”.⁹ This is contrary to the *Communist Manifesto* in which the

³ Huxley, Aldous. "Brave New World. 1932." London: Vintage (1998)

⁴ Huxley, Aldous. "Brave New World. 1932." London: Vintage (1998), page 17

⁵ Huxley, Aldous. "Brave New World. 1932." London: Vintage (1998), page 19

⁶ More, Thomas, and Ralph Robinson. *Utopia*. No. 14. A. Murray & son, 1869

⁷ Huxley, Aldous. "Brave New World. 1932." London: Vintage (1998)

⁸ Huxley, Aldous. "Brave New World. 1932." London: Vintage (1998), page 37

⁹ Huxley, Aldous. "Brave New World. 1932." London: Vintage (1998), page 35

changes in technology (such as production chain machines) that catalyzed the new mode of production are meant to eventually mobilize classes to a proletarian revolution and not subjugate them to complacency infinitely.

Technology can also change moral values and religious views in Brave New World, where there is no room for religion. As the world controller says, "There used to be something called God", but there is none now, and instead, the new idol in Brave New World is Henry Ford.¹⁰ This is aligned with the Communist Manifesto's belief that religion is used as a tool for continued separation between the ruling and the ruled, but Marx and Engels would have disagreed with the idea of the World State replacing religion with an improved symbol. The installation of Henry Ford as an idol for the World State is merely a replacement of one cult for another. Although the world controller stated that religion is rejected, throughout the book readers can see elements of religion present. The shift from 'Lord' to 'Ford', the act of praying to the 'T' symbol as opposed to the Christian cross, and the rituals from soma are all elements found in religions. It is ironic to point out that in Brave New World, religion is replaced with Henry Ford, a symbol of industrialization. Marx and Engels would argue that technology is in this case merely a continuation of the oppression of the proletariat, and will therefore be unsuccessful in reaching a utopian society. There are a few characters that constitute the "misfits" of the story, who we are supposed to identify with, that approach their own society from a more critical point of view than other people in their environment. Huxley may be trying to communicate his opposition to social change and convey the idea that science, technology and the shift in moral values that often follows them may eventually lead to an extreme dystopian society too.

The class divide

The use of technology applied to advancing and controlling social change contributed to the separation of the world into two bigger social classes: those inside the system and those outside of it. In the case of Brave New World, those left outside the system are the savages. Since the savage reservation does not have all the technological advances that the rest of society has, the savages' customs, religion and moral values are completely different, which helps keep the rest of the world away from those "uncivilized"

¹⁰ Huxley, Aldous. "Brave New World. 1932." London: Vintage (1998), page 157

areas. "It's awful. We ought not to have come here" was Lenina's reaction (one of the main characters) after she visited the reservation.¹¹ This clearly exemplifies the tremendous impact that some part of society relying on technology can have over the rest of the world that does not take part in the technological utopian revolution, further dividing the classes and preventing social mobility.

Another example of how this utopia turned into a dystopia is at the end of the book, where a debate about the "best of all possible worlds" takes place. Mustapha Mond, the world controller of Brave New World, ironically, discusses his utopian society with John, the savage who was left outside the system to live in a dystopia. In that discussion they talk about how the idea of a different ethical system was a threat to society in Brave New World, as citizens needed to completely support the system. Mustapha Mond, the world controller, is reading a paper called "A New Theory of Biology" and says it "is novel and highly ingenious, but heretical and, so far as the present social order is concerned, dangerous and potentially subversive" since it discusses a notion of "purpose".¹² This is yet another example on how the utilitarian implementation of Mustapha Mond's utopia affects society in a negative way.

In the Communist manifesto, too, technology serves as an instrument of social control, providing a platform for labor to specialize, and leads to a dystopian social order. Industrialization allows for specialization of work and thus concentration of power. The bourgeoisie "has agglomerated population, centralised the means of production, and has concentrated property in a few hands. The necessary consequence of this was political centralisation".¹³ This centralization that Marx talks about is a result of the use of technology, which, as we have seen in Brave New World, enables for easier and more extreme control of society. This new class "cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, [...] and with them the whole relations of society"¹⁴ and thus, as in Brave New World, technology plays a crucial role in maintaining social hierarchy.

¹¹ Huxley, Aldous. "Brave New World. 1932." London: Vintage (1998)

¹² Huxley, Aldous. "Brave New World. 1932." London: Vintage (1998), page 118

¹³ Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. The Communist Manifesto. Read Books Ltd, 2013, page 21

¹⁴ Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. The Communist Manifesto. Read Books Ltd, 2013, CR page 20

Utopia or Dystopia

In Brave New World, the bourgeoisie, trying to create their utopia, subjects the proletariat to inhumane work. The bourgeoisie is a portion of society that takes advantage of technological developments. As Marx states, because of “the extensive use of machinery, and to the division of labour, [the proletariat], rather than being benefitted by this industrialization, becomes an “appendage of the machine“.¹⁵ The purpose of industrialization and technology, as we know, is to optimize processes and relieve humans from repetitive tasks, but in practice, as Marx notices, not everybody can be part of the group that relies on the machines, and instead, proletarians become themselves part of “the machine”. This is an example on how a few people’s utopia (the bourgeois technology and its advantages) is causing a dystopia for the rest of society.

Again, it can be seen, in the Communist manifesto, dystopia is necessary to achieve utopia. When Marx says the “bourgeois want all the advantages of modern social conditions without the struggles and dangers necessarily resulting therefrom”, he is implying that the “struggles and dangers” of society were caused specifically by modernization and industrialization.¹⁶

The notion that a utopia implies a dystopia is still present when Marx says “private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population; its existence for the few is solely due to its non-existence in the hands of those nine-tenths”, because the Communist manifesto is presenting us with a zero-sum theory of how the world works, where abundance of wealth for the bourgeoisie implies lack of wealth for the proletariat.¹⁷ In relation to Brave New World, there is a perceived notion that the World State is a utopia but only in the eyes of those in power. John, the ultimate outsider of both worlds in the end sees that there can never be a true utopia regardless of with or without the presence of technology and this leads to his tragic death.

¹⁵ Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. The Communist Manifesto. Read Books Ltd, 2013, CR page 22

¹⁶ Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. The Communist Manifesto. Read Books Ltd, 2013, CR, page 37

¹⁷ Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. The Communist Manifesto. Read Books Ltd, 2013, CR, page 28

Conclusion

Technology is a tool that allows for greater extremes, both in efficiency and in power concentration. It is used for extreme control, without the need for democratic support. When trying to achieve a working utopia, technology causes dystopia to occur.. From both *Brave New World* and the *Communist manifesto*, society tends to polarize into those two groups: the ones living in utopia and the ones living in dystopia. A question that arises is whether there is a concession between these two extremes, in these two thought experiments. The reason for this divergent theory may be that technology allows for greater extremes, and that the authors fear technology and its repercussions on society in the future are too immense to be taken lightly.

Although in *Brave New World* “the machine” is a centralized government, in our real society we may still be part of a collective set of behaviours that create a society with similar characteristics to what the *Communist manifesto* described. In the same way as in *Brave New World*, in our society, there still exists the illusion of “freedom of choice” too: in which society is constantly exposed to countless advertisements, our own form of hypnopaedic control. This is encouraged, for the most part, by advances in technology that come up with new ways of advertising and contaminating visual and auditory spaces. We grow up conditioned to act as the “bourgeoisie”, those in power, intended society to act. In the *Communist manifesto*, it is not a totalitarian government but “the bourgeoisie” as a group, who manage to control the proletariat through the use of technology.

Technology leads to both a utopia and a dystopia for different sectors of the society. In the Communist Manifesto, although technology leads to an increase in productivity and output, it generates perpetually growing inequality. In *Brave New World*, Huxley shows that the organization of society is designed to make most people content (perhaps the majority) but there are several individuals with different value systems who oppose said society and views it as dystopic. Both the Communist Manifesto and *Brave New World* are meant to act as a warning or prediction for what the authors were perceiving at the moment and how they thought the world would turn out. Although Huxley, Marx and Engels approach their fears from

different ideologies and perspectives, they agree on a variety of issues and make the common argument that promising advances in technology can eventually lead to dystopia.

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