

**FEAR THE
FUTURE**

**Dystopia and Political Imagination
in the Twentieth Century**



MATTHEW BENJAMIN COLE

Fear the Future

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DYSTOPIA AND POLITICAL
IMAGINATION IN THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

Matthew Benjamin Cole

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To my teachers, with gratitude

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Introduction

Dystopia and Political Imagination

The marriage of reason and nightmare that has dominated the 20th century has given birth to an ever more ambiguous world.

—J. G. BALLARD¹

“The Concentration City,” one of the earliest published stories by English writer J. G. Ballard, deposits its readers on Millionth Street of a vast megalopolis referred to only as “the City,” an urban landscape so sprawling that even an incomplete street directory takes up three floors of a library and so dense that elevators extend thousands of levels upward and downward while space is sold by dollars on the cubic foot. The story’s protagonist, a young student named Franz M., is undergoing a psychiatric evaluation. Franz has become obsessed with finding “free space”—free “in both senses”—but this idea, he is assured, is “absurd,” “self-contradictory.”² The “accepted view,” Franz is informed, is that the City “stretches out in all directions without limits,” and when he attempts to test this theory by taking the railway as far west as possible he finds that ten days of travel have returned him to his point of departure not only in space but in time. “How this curvature was built into the system they can’t explain,” offers a police psychiatrist, “it seems to be some inherent feature of the City itself.”³

Ballard’s uncanny fable appeared in 1957, in the science fiction magazine *New Worlds*, then under the title “Build-Up.” Like many of Ballard’s works it depicts a kind of prison, though exactly what kind is harder to say. Some interpreters have read the story as cryptic biography, as Ballard spent two years of his adolescence in a crowded internment camp in Japan during the Second World War. Historical readings have emphasized the parallels between the City and the Nazi concentration camps: beyond the title, a startling aside reveals that the City’s slums are periodically sealed off and pumped full of cyanide, such that the City will eventually become “one

huge cemetery.” Alternatively, one character’s suggestion that the City only appears to be manmade, but is in fact “as old as time and continuous with it,” may indicate that Ballard’s prison is a metaphysical one, perhaps representing time itself. Or, alternatively, a vision of hell—the City suffocates in fire and fumes set by pyromaniacs in mad revolt, and its cryptic final sentence reads “\$Hell × 10ⁿ.”⁴

However, a more distinctive interpretive line is suggested by Ballard himself. His 1964 story “The Terminal Beach” follows the decline of a widower named Traven as he wanders the wreckage of a nuclear test site, its abandoned “Superfortresses” comprising another of Ballard’s concrete mazes—a “wilderness of weapons aisles, towers, and blockhouses”—wherein Traven seeks the perimeter but invariably returns, like Franz in the Concentration City, to the center.⁵ Traven proposes that the “island is a state of mind,” musing to himself that “if primitive man felt the need to assimilate events in the external world to his own psyche, 20th century man had reversed this process.” This is not the only instance in which Ballard insinuates that his cityscapes and synthetic landscapes embody mindscapes. In his 1975 novel *High Rise*, Ballard observes that “the ragged skyline of the city resembled the disturbed encephalograph of an unresolved mental crisis.”⁶ The conceit at play here is not just that environs like the City or the island represent the psychological turmoil of the twentieth century, but that they, like the real environmental, technological, and media landscapes of the age, concretize our dreams, illusions, fears, and fantasies, constituting, in a phrase Ballard used often, an “overlit realm” both seductive and appalling.⁷

Today, Ballard stands among the ranks of writers with a sensibility so recognizable as to merit an adjectival form, and, as with the Kafkaesque or the Orwellian, this is principally a testament to how indelibly he stamped his nightmares onto the popular imagination. “Ballardian,” as the *Collins English Dictionary* notes, means “resembling or suggestive of the conditions described in Ballard’s novels and stories, esp. dystopian modernity, bleak manmade landscapes and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments.”⁸ As with so many prophets of dystopia, Ballard has disciples who champion his prescience, who tell us that *he*, more perceptively than his predecessors Aldous Huxley and George Orwell or his contemporaries Philip K. Dick and Octavia Butler, anticipated so much of our present world.⁹

And they have a point: Ballard’s 1962 novel *The Drowned World* has been admitted retroactively to the canon of climate fiction, a 2015 film adaptation

of *High Rise* underlined the novel's relevance to an era of widening inequality and eat-the-rich populism (though Ballard has the rich eat themselves), while Ballard's final novel, 2006's *Kingdom Come*, examined the "ugly suburban fascism" of the twenty-first century a decade before Brexit, Donald Trump, and the new populist right.¹⁰ The novel's principal antagonist: a charismatic entertainer-turned-politician—a "flat-pack Fuhrer"—who spews jingoistic rhetoric and incites violence against immigrants. It's a scenario that can now scarcely be described as speculative, though its topical insights channel another of Ballard's long-running motifs: the subliminal violence of late capitalism, suffused and (barely) sublimated through consumerism and entertainment. Ballard had studied the great dystopias of his predecessors and judged Huxley's vision of soft totalitarianism most apt for the age.¹¹ And yet a work like *Kingdom Come* cannily indicates that the docility and subservience of a *Brave New World* may, in short order, be ruptured by something more like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s orgies of sadism. At the climax of Orwell's novel, the Party inquisitor O'Brien taunts Winston with an infamous pronouncement: "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face forever."¹² In *Kingdom Come*, Ballard delivers a parallel prophecy fit for the twenty-first century: "Think of the future as a cable TV programme going on forever."¹³ Of course, there are many other ways to think of the future. By now, you might be able to do Ballard one better—which is to say, you might be able to imagine something even worse.

We frequently hear the complaint that political thinking in our time suffers from a lack of imagination. But when it comes to producing images of the future with which to frighten and torment ourselves, who could accuse the twenty-first century of lacking ingenuity? Aside from apocalypses of the nuclear and ecological varieties, pressing enough to say the least, we also confront futures in which the species *Homo sapiens* survives but forfeits its humanity in the bargain. Designer children and eugenic caste systems, technologies that intrude on our innermost thoughts, a global resurgence of "neo-" feudalisms, despotisms, and slave economies dedicated to the wholesale exploitation of dwindling natural and human resources—these and far stranger possibilities now pervade the popular imagination. From social criticism and literary fiction to young adult novels and their inevitable cinematic adaptations, it seems that every future fit to depict now has a bit of *Brave New World* or *Nineteen Eighty-Four* about it. And these are the ones where we don't all burn, or freeze, or get wiped out when the artificial intelligence (AI) get frustrated with the limits of our DNA-based hardware.

Dystopia is the twentieth century's most distinctive and unsettling contribution to the political imagination, an innovation born of crisis and faltering hope. Its ancient ancestor, the utopia, had thrived in the philosophy, literature, and even the real social life of the preceding century. But in the wake of the First World War, and with the emergence of the first totalitarian regimes, European and American writers took a bleaker view of the human prospect. They began to imagine future societies of an altogether different sort: "negative utopias," sophisticated prisons for the human spirit. This tendency finds paradigmatic expression in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, and in *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* it yields two of the century's most influential novels. However, the dystopian impulse is by no means confined to the field of speculative fiction. In the postwar era, dire predictions about the likely course of social evolution can be found in the works of philosophers, sociologists, economists, and theologians. Like the novels that are more familiarly described as dystopian, these works depict degraded and dehumanized future societies and warn that the makings of such a world are already underway.

This book interprets twentieth-century political thought by attending to the pervasive influence of dystopian images, themes, and anxieties. It first explains why, after centuries of utopian speculation, late nineteenth and early twentieth century writers felt compelled to warn of dystopian futures, and then examines the role of dystopian thinking in postwar political thought.¹⁴ In addition to its primary goal of reconstruction and retrieval, the book makes a cumulative argument for the value of dystopia in orienting political thought toward the future, in contrast to interpretations that associate dystopia with a politics (or antipolitics) of pessimism, nihilism, or despair.¹⁵ Implausible as it may seem, one purpose of this book is to show that the dystopian outlook has had, and may continue to have, a constructive role to play in orienting our ethical and political thinking toward the future. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed a deluge of dystopias and an excess of apocalypses, and it would be easy enough to suggest that this was all symptomatic of a terminally hopeless culture. But I don't suspect this is the case. I would be much more worried about a culture that looked away from its future, that succumbed to nostalgia or presentism and paid no mind to the temporal horizon in which the consequences of our present action (or inaction) unfold. True, a sense of futurity nourished only by dystopias would be impoverished, but we will see that dystopian thinking is not parasitic on or exclusive of utopianism.

However, a qualified defense of what I refer to as “dystopian thinking” is only the secondary objective of this work, and for the most part I will withhold evaluative remarks and prioritize an explanatory account of the dystopian imagination and its influence on political thought. The primary goal of this book is to relate a pivotal sequence in the history of political ideas that has yet to receive the scholarly attention it deserves. Though the “death,” “decline,” “end,” or “exhaustion” of utopia was a major theme of twentieth-century political thought,¹⁶ political theorists have had little to say about the dystopian outlook that rose to prominence in the same period—or about the role of dystopias in the political imagination today. There have been numerous illuminating studies of dystopian literature,¹⁷ as well as a small number of intellectual histories that speak to the genealogies of utopian, anti-utopian, and dystopian writing in broader terms.¹⁸ But the story of dystopia as a chapter in the history of political ideas has not yet been told, nor has dystopian thinking been given its due as a mode of political theorizing.¹⁹

Whereas scholarship on utopian thought and politics has approached utopian literature as a single facet of the broader enterprise of utopian “social dreaming,”²⁰ the social nightmares that left such a vivid impression on the modern political consciousness have been comparatively neglected. And this goes to the heart of what makes dystopia a compelling and disconcerting phenomenon. We might begin by noting that the most influential dystopias—*Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—were written as extensions of serious social and political arguments raised by their authors in contemporaneous essays and significantly influenced the intellectual discourse on their respective themes from then on. As such, they deserve a place in the history of political ideas as well as in the literary canon.

If we accept the idea that dystopias are hypotheses about the future that can be found outside the fiction section, we will soon see how thoroughly the terrain of modern political thought is saturated by dystopian anxieties. Twentieth-century political thought has been, overwhelmingly and obsessively, a dystopian enterprise: anxious and critical, preoccupied with domination and dehumanization—an overgrowth of fear and negativity in a tradition whose classical themes were justice and the good. One need only survey the canon of European and American political thought. Among major twentieth-century thinkers we find a nightmarish panorama: Max Weber’s “iron cage” of bureaucracy, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s “administered world,” and Herbert Marcuse’s “one-dimensional” society; Jürgen Habermas speaks of a “negative utopia of technical control”

and Hannah Arendt of a society of “laboring animals”; Michel Foucault describes a “swarming of disciplinary mechanisms” and a “massifying” biopolitical regime.²¹ But this is only the outer edge of the abyss. During the 1940s and 1950s, the dominant interpretation of totalitarianism among its critics is a dystopia of “total control,” “total domination,” and “total terror.”²² In the second half of the century, characteristics of that dystopia are transferred to new specters: the mass society, the consumer society, the technological society or technocracy, which are diagnosed in terms of “total integration,” “total identification,” and a “totalitarian universe of technological rationality.”²³ Even as these concepts receded from prominence in the late twentieth century, the dystopian imagination continued to cast its shadow on accounts of freedom and domination that remain influential in political theory today.

In principle, dystopian thinking can be applied to any ideological or normative end, and the range of dystopian thought experiments has included visions motivated by both far-right and far-left critiques of society, as well as many kinds of humanistic social criticism. Nonetheless, the twentieth-century dystopias examined here all raise concerns regarding the future of human freedom. Further, all of the dystopias discussed are societies in which domination is deeply and permanently entrenched through modern techniques of organization and control. What is most significant about political thinking at this juncture is how it contrasts with the surfeit of utopian thought that initially emerged out of the Enlightenment. By the middle of the twentieth century, most European and American thinkers held that utopian prospects had been defeated or discredited and could no longer orient politics toward the future. Visions of progress and emancipation—even utopia—still animated the literature, thought, and action of anticolonial and national independence movements and still flickered among the radical discontents of European and American societies, but the mainstream of political thought looked skeptically upon these pursuits.²⁴ Hence, the reorientation of political thought around a *summum malum*, one that responds to the needs of an intellectual and political culture that is, if not thoroughly anti-utopian, then at the very least *postutopian*, is one of the major tendencies of political thought in the twentieth century. The characteristics of this *summum malum* are also unique in the history of political ideas. Whereas classical thinkers like Plato and Aristotle dwelled on the degeneration of regimes into anarchy, and Hobbes feared the collapse of the commonwealth into civil war, the specter that haunts the twentieth century is not disorder but what Eyal Chowder has referred to as “hyper-order.”²⁵ It is the danger of

a social order that ossifies into an unchangeable and unbreakable shell, its patterns of domination so deeply entrenched at the psychological, institutional, and cultural levels that it gradually becomes impossible to resist—not only in action, but, at the furthest extreme, even in thought.

For the intellectuals who confronted this danger but did not wish to renounce the values and ambitions of the Enlightenment, dystopian thinking underscored the necessity of finding new bases for freedom in social and political life. Though the critiques of totalitarianism, mass society, and technocracy focus on their own distinctive arrays of domination, each underscores a vulnerability in the human species that is brought to light by the understanding of human freedom as a contingent and revocable social condition rather than a guarantee underwritten by human nature. It then becomes an urgent task for the political thinker to identify the social conditions that would sustain freedom. This includes the formal political institutions that enshrine individual liberty and democratic self-rule but extends further to the social and psychological conditions that make individual and collective autonomy a positive possibility. Where the latter withers, the former becomes a hollow shell, or worse, an illusion fostering complacency. Securing freedom requires that individuals be able to develop into unique personalities rather than being treated as interchangeable members of a species, that social groups be able to exercise shared power over economic and political institutions rather than being subordinated to their impersonal forces, and that the future be seen as an open horizon whose possibilities are not foreclosed or predetermined. Dystopian thought makes us aware of all of this by describing how each of these conditions could be altered or averted. In doing so it underscores the urgency of safeguarding extant practices of ethical reflection and political action that can provide the basis for individual and collective self-determination, and of developing new ones.

From the overwhelming negativity of a century that frequently contemplated the extremes of domination emerges a positive, albeit fugitive and fragile, conception of human freedom. As an observation on the history of political thought, this underscores Bernard Yack's claim that we may overrate the importance of utopian ideals in structuring our normative thinking, both historically and practically speaking.²⁶ Yack excavates a lineage of critical social philosophy, extending from Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Friedrich Schiller, which is principally motivated by fears of dehumanization and the loss of human freedom. Rather than positing a specific image of the good society or the good life, it is what Theodor Adorno, one important heir in

that lineage, memorably called “damaged life” that sets the agenda for much of modern political thought.²⁷ Negativity may turn out to be an underrated resource for normative thinking. Stuart Hampshire remarks, in a similar vein, that while liberal theory tends to “think of great public evils as a falling away from the pursuit of justice or of the good . . . it is equally possible to interpret, and to understand, the things we consider good as being the prevention of great evils.”²⁸ By exploring the great evils to which modern societies are liable, dystopian thinking brings texture and tension to our thinking about such values as freedom, equality, and dignity that ideal theorizations alone cannot. Today, we fear dystopias of total surveillance, of class stratification entrenched by technology, of racial and ethnic nationalism, corporate oligarchy, and ecological collapse. Though it remains to be seen what, if anything, the canon of political thought can contribute to our confrontation with these prospects, we will better grasp the stakes of our own times, fraught with anxiety as they undoubtedly are, if we understand how the dystopian outlook has evolved to become one of the predominant fixtures of *our* horizon of expectations.

My interpretation of twentieth-century political thought therefore emphasizes the generative role of dystopian images, providing a clue as to how we might grapple with our own uncertain future in the absence of a utopian horizon. Does political thought lose some of its luster when deprived of those glittering edifices? It may well. The light cast by the dystopian imaginary is a dim one, to be sure, but it may still suffice to illuminate the shadowed corridors of our century. These are dark times. Perhaps we must adapt ourselves to see in the dark.

POLITICAL IMAGINARIES, DYSTOPIAN FUTURES

Rather than treating dystopia as a genre of fiction or even as a mode of social theorizing, this study proposes that dystopia is better understood as a *political imaginary*. Before establishing the argument of the book and its individual chapters, it may be helpful to say a bit about what political imaginaries are, in general terms, and what kind of political imaginary dystopia is, specifically. I follow Chiara Bottici in defining an imaginary as a “set of meanings, symbols, values, and narratives and representations of the world through which people imagine their existence.”²⁹ With this

in mind, we can understand the dystopian imaginary that emerges at the onset of the twentieth century as a distinct imaginative orientation toward the future.

The concept of the political imaginary, as I deploy it, draws from a broad discourse within the field of political theory that highlights the role of the imagination in political life, often via symbols, images, myths, and narratives. However, a political imaginary is not just a composite of such elements. Rather, theorists of political imagination propose that we understand the political imaginary, primarily, as a constitutive context within and against which distinct imaginative moves become possible and legible and, secondarily, as a resource that may be mobilized explicitly in certain forms of political argumentation and appeal. The theoretical basis for this account derives largely from works by Cornelius Castoriadis, Paul Ricoeur, and Charles Taylor.³⁰ However, in the last two decades, as the concept of the political imagination and the function of political imaginaries have become more prominent in political theory and the history of political thought, variations have proliferated, and important refinements have been introduced.³¹

In Ricoeur's influential account, a society necessarily "possesses, or is part of, a socio-political *imaginaire*, that is, an ensemble of symbolic discourses."³² These constitute the "*imaginary nucleus* of any culture," and structure the distribution of social roles, institutions, and identities.³³ Ricoeur thus conceives of the imaginary as an implicit feature of social life, asserting that "it is constitutive of a culture *before* it can be expressed in specific representations or ideas." This does not mean that aspects of the imaginary cannot be consciously grasped, explicated, or articulated, but rather that such appropriations of the imaginary, as in speech, writing, or art, draw on a prior depository of meanings in light of which specific works are comprehensible. Succeeding theorists of political imagination have developed congruent accounts foregrounding the way that socially shared expectations and imaginings structure our collective experiences of the world. For example, Taylor uses the framework of social imaginaries to describe "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations."³⁴ But whereas Taylor emphasizes the expectations that members of societies have of one another, my own emphasis is on the expectations that people have about the *future*—and not just their own, as individuals, but

the future of their societies and civilizations, even, at the grandest scale, the future of humanity as a whole.

Hence, the particular concern of this study is the way that the political imagination fills out a *space of possibilities*, that is, a set of both conscious and unconscious judgments about what is likely, probable, or possible.³⁵ Though I have deployed it with a different explanatory purpose in mind, the concept of a “space of possibilities” most nearly resembles Reinhart Koselleck’s notion of a “horizon of expectations,” which I invoke here and particularly in my discussion of the modern sense of “futurity” in chapter 1. As Koselleck explains: “At once person-specific and interpersonal, expectation also takes place in the today; it is the future made present; it directs itself to the not-yet, to the nonexperienced, to that which is to be revealed. Hope and fear, wishes and desires, cares and rational analysis, receptive display and curiosity, all enter into expectation and constitute it.”³⁶ But whereas Koselleck describes the horizon of expectations as a “metahistorical category,” my inquiry concerns the specific ways in which this horizon is imaginatively filled out with more or less concrete descriptions of the future.³⁷ Specifically, I want to account for why dystopia enters and eventually dominates the modern space of possibilities.

What makes this an important question for political theory? If we are to understand the history of our political ideas, we must attend to how this space of possibilities has conditioned political thinking, as well as the way that political thinkers have in turn narrowed or expanded the space of possibilities. Even possibilities that are remote—perhaps even those that are not, strictly speaking, possibilities at all—may have profound effects insofar as they shape the thought and judgment of an era. For example, the prospect of global nuclear war, which hung so vividly over the second half of the twentieth century (and which we would still relegate prematurely to history), was never made good on; as that specter grows more remote, some will no doubt want to argue that the cataclysmic possibilities of “mutually assured destruction” were overstated. And yet it is inarguably the case that this threat structured the political existence of billions for the better part of a century and continues, however less intensively, to do so today. A possibility, even a distant one, can be a powerful thing. It is an objective of my study to show that the entry of dystopian scenarios into the space of possibilities constitutes a significant event in the history of political ideas. And that is not just because some dystopian visions might turn out to be descriptively or predictively accurate, but more basically because political life transforms

once we start to interpret the present as a moment of choice between possible futures, some of which bode ominously for values such as freedom and human dignity.

Another way of putting it is to say that once the dystopian imaginary becomes prominent, the story within which we understand our political prospects fundamentally changes. Following Hayden White, Alison McQueen notes that an important function of the imaginary is to “fashion events and experiences into stories,” what she calls the “*emplotting* of our collective lives.”³⁸ McQueen’s specific concern is with the role of the apocalyptic imaginary in modern political thought, the way that imagining “an imminent and cataclysmic end to the known world” gives meaning to both past and future and furnishes the stakes of present political predicaments.³⁹ In some respects, the dystopian imaginary does similar work, as it too provides a way of narrativizing complex processes of historical transformation and contextualizing political thought and action within a broader temporal process. But there are also important differences between the apocalyptic and dystopian imaginaries.⁴⁰ While both dystopia and apocalypse imagine dramatic transformations, they diverge in how they depict the nature of the change and the consequences thereof. According to Benjamin Kunkel, “The end of the world or apocalypse typically brings about the collapse of order; dystopia, on the other hand, envisions a sinister *perfection* of order. In the most basic political terms, dystopia is a nightmare of authoritarian or totalitarian rule, while the end of the world is a nightmare of anarchy.”⁴¹ In apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic imaginaries, the world as we have known it comes to an end. The whole edifice of civilization is stripped away and society crumbles, leaving the survivors in a Hobbesian state. In the dystopian imaginary, society persists, forever entrenched and unshakeable, with the population either bullied into submission, *pace* Orwell, or pacified and indifferent, *pace* Huxley, or some of each.

With that in mind, we should also note a difference of historical pedigree. Apocalyptic imaginaries have been part of the mythical and religious traditions of many cultures going back to antiquity: Ragnaroks, Last Judgments, Second Comings. Though there are important premodern predecessors of the dystopia—such as the Jeremiads, prophetic warnings that implore the sinful to change their ways or face certain doom⁴²—the dystopian imaginary is characteristically modern, a dubious token of the twentieth-century’s darkened horizon of expectations. Utopias had thrived in the cultural imagination and, occasionally, even in real social life for centuries, but until the

end of the nineteenth century, no one had bothered to write of dystopia. The reasons why the turn of the century necessitated such a form of writing are complex and difficult to summarize, though chapter 1 of this study takes up the explanatory task. It is easier to say, at first, why no dystopias were written prior to modernity. This was because, up until the time of the Enlightenment, expectations about the possibility of enduring, human-driven change were narrowly bounded.⁴³ First, the idea of progress had to overtake the static and fatalist visions of history that had predominated in the ancient and medieval worlds. At that point, utopia could transform from heuristic to blueprint. Plato, for example, had located his ideal republic in speech, while Thomas More's *Utopia* was displaced spatially, on a remote island. The first utopia to be located in *the future*, to make utopia into "euchronia," was Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'an 2440*, published in 1771.⁴⁴ Once it is conceivable that the society of the future could be radically better than that of the present, it doesn't take long to get to the idea that it could also be radically worse. And only after the future becomes an open prospect could its closure become a source of existential dread.

The distinct genealogy of the dystopian imaginary is important to understanding the way dystopian narratives and images have been deployed as social criticism. Whereas apocalypses are sudden cataclysms that, according to McQueen, constitute "a moment of *rupture* in the apparent temporal continuity of history" and "a radical break that dissolves the distinction between secular and divine history," dystopian imaginaries dwell on Darwinian nightmares of social evolution.⁴⁵ And dystopian social worlds are always the outcomes of processes of cumulative and *human-driven* change, whether social, political, economic, or technological. Even when their depictions of the future are highly stylized or symbolic, as in much dystopian literature, we are meant to see how the outcome follows a more-or-less linear extrapolation from the present. Dystopian thought experiments deploy the "If This Goes On . . ." principle, with the "this" furnishing the connective tissue between present and possible future that gives dystopia its dual function as present-oriented social criticism and future-oriented prophecy.⁴⁶

In addition to considering how and why a diffuse dystopian political imaginary emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this study considers specific works of social thought that deploy dystopian images and narratives as social criticism. I refer to this enterprise, broadly, as *dystopian thinking*, and propose that we understand individual works of

dystopian thought—novels, polemics, social theories—as “acts of political imagination.” For the formulation itself I am indebted to George Kateb, who has described *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as “one of the most successful acts of political imagination ever made,” as well as to Judith Shklar, who described the dystopias of the twentieth century as “works of the political imagination that can and do awaken and warn and sometimes desolate us.”⁴⁷

These evocative phrases may be further clarified with reference to Sheldon Wolin’s work, which clarifies that individual acts of political imagination can contribute to a preexisting political imaginary, such that acts of political imagination may in turn shape the dominant political imaginary in which succeeding writers or thinkers are enmeshed. Wolin remarks that the “political imaginary” is the “product” of discrete acts or works of political imagination. At that point, there is the potential that “a particular political imaginary gains a hold on ruling groups and becomes a staple of the general culture” and further that “political actors and even the citizens become habituated to that imaginary, identified with it.”⁴⁸ Perhaps under-thematized here is the ways in which individual acts of political imagination always enlist or draw on prior figurations inasmuch—probably more so—than they innovate. For example, Huxley and Orwell, I will argue in chapter 2, could produce their acts of political imagination because they were able to draw upon a register of meanings, images, and narrative tropes that had been sedimented into the literary and political imagination over the preceding decades. And yet this does not preclude their acts of political imagination from powerfully critiquing the dominant imaginaries of the era. Meili Steele, for example, speaks of “literary argument through the social imaginary” that indicates “the novel’s capacity to make nuanced political claims through social imaginaries that are unavailable through models of public reason.”⁴⁹ Such a theorization aptly counterpoints the consensual view of the imaginary proposed by Ricouer and Taylor, pointing instead to an arena of imaginative conflict, “a space of critique and autonomy, not a communitarian bunker.”

So far, I have been treating the political imagination as an analytical concept, in keeping with the intent of this study. That said, taking political imaginaries seriously as structural features of political life introduces some distinctive normative questions, and indeed many scholarly works to which this study is indebted have attended to the imaginary dimension of politics as well as to what we might call the politics of imagination. Does an excess of imagination lead, as anti-utopians often fear, to totalitarian hubris? Or

does the renunciation of political imagination in the name of realism lead, in its own way, to hopelessness or disorientation?⁵⁰ Contemporary political theorists, for example, engage in a diagnostic conversation about the health or vitality of the political imagination, wherein the profusion of possibilities that challenge or extend beyond the status quo is taken as an important normative good—a precondition of emancipatory politics. In these formulations, the political imagination should be capacious, expansive: it matters that political actors feel that they inhabit an open space of possibilities. Thus, for example, Castoriadis laments “the complete atrophy of political imagination” and a space of possibilities narrowly constrained by the institutions and orthodoxies of the present.⁵¹ In a somewhat different context, Kateb has examined the liabilities of the political imagination, claiming that the imagination turns pathological both when it is “hyperactive” and when it is “inactive.”⁵²

I don't propose to answer these questions decisively, though I will offer some tentative reflections in the conclusion. However, two preliminary observations are in order. First, this second-order discussion of the uses and abuses of the political imagination is one that the dystopian thinkers surveyed herein are themselves acutely concerned with. Dystopian thought often rebukes the megalomaniacal imaginaries of totalitarianism and technological mastery, though it just as frequently laments the closure of the political imagination and the collapse of futurity into an endless present. Second, and related to this last claim, it is not the case, as has often been suggested by liberal and conservative commentators, that dystopian thought shares the anti-utopians' intent to chasten or domesticate the political imagination. Dystopian thinkers may contest specific utopian imaginaries, but almost none condemn utopianism as such. The suggestion I will develop below and in the succeeding chapters is that dystopia protests the closure of the political imagination that it has often been presumed to enact, and thus wields imagination in defense of imagination.⁵³

This interpretation of the dystopian imaginary challenges the conventional wisdom of political theorists, particularly the midcentury “Cold War” thinkers who read their own vendettas against political utopianism—which typically meant socialism and communism—into the dystopian imaginary. Liberals like Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper, conservatives like Jacob Talmon, and even chastened Marxists like Leszek Kolakowski have all asserted that utopianism leads inevitably to totalitarianism, and hence utopia becomes

dystopia.⁵⁴ This rests on an interpretation of utopianism that is itself tendentious: that utopias are *perfect* societies, and accordingly, static, totally planned blueprints to be imposed either by some revolutionary vanguard or cadre of social engineers. This is a rendering of the utopian imaginary that many influential utopians of modernity would, and did, contest. And insofar as it conflates dystopia with anti-utopia, it neglects a critical feature of the dystopian imaginary, which is the extent to which utopian and dystopian sensibilities have intermingled in the same minds, as evidenced by writers like H. G. Wells, Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell, whose complex bodies of work intimate both peril and possibility.⁵⁵ As scholars such as Krishan Kumar and Ruth Levitas have noted, dystopia is “intimately connected to the utopian impulse itself.”⁵⁶

If this ambiguity is one that scholars of utopias have acknowledged and grappled with, it seems hardly to have registered with political theorists and other commentators who still overwhelmingly associate dystopia with the abnegation of the political imagination and hostility to utopianism of any kind. Today we see a similar equation of dystopia and utopia from critics on the left who long for a reinvigorated political imagination and associate dystopia with its morbidity and with it the paucity of alternatives to neoliberal capitalism.⁵⁷ “This output of dark narratives,” writes Tom Moylan, “suppresses humanity’s social anxieties through a fatalist, anti-utopian inoculation,” “immerses people in nihilist pleasure,” and “sustains a disarming anti-utopian pessimism.”⁵⁸ Meanwhile, critics on the right welcome the dystopian turn as a corrective to left political utopianism. John Gray, for example, finds in the dystopian imaginary “prescient glimpses of the ugly reality that results from pursuing unrealizable dreams” and a necessary challenge to the utopian “fantasy” that humans can remake themselves and their world as they see fit.⁵⁹ The unifying assumption is that whereas utopianism acts as a stimulus to the political imagination, dystopia works along with the argument of anti-utopians to check the political imagination. To the anti-utopians this process is a necessary maturation of the political imagination, to the utopians, a forfeiture of its radical potential. It is this understanding of dystopia that I wish to contest, by showing that even as it shades into anti-utopian argument, dystopia makes its own radical and desperate appeal to the political imagination. Rather than aiming to discredit or domesticate the political imagination, dystopian thought warns against its closure, protesting the collapse of futurity and the forfeiture of human potential for creation and emancipation.

SOCIAL DREAMING, SOCIAL NIGHTMARES

So far, my discussion of the political imagination has been abstract, but the reader may already begin to grasp why this framework would be particularly useful for thinking about the role of the dystopian imaginary in politics. Scholars like Susan Buck-Morss and Duncan Bell have deployed the concept of the *dreamworld* to characterize the vivid political imaginaries stimulated by modern social dynamism. Per Buck-Morss, “the dreamworlds of modernity—political, cultural, and economic—are expressions of a utopian desire for social arrangements that transcend existing forms.”⁶⁰ However exhilarating, dreamworlds are not without their dangers, and Buck-Morss’s study shows that dreamworlds can become tools of force when they are co-opted into structures of power that work against the fulfillment of collective needs and desires. Likewise for Bell, who characterizes the nineteenth century as “a time of social dreaming” encompassing art, science, religion, and politics:

Thousands of novels, songs, poems, and sermons flowed from printing presses, reshaping the sense of the possible. Speculative fiction proselytizing concrete programs for remaking the world jostled with political commentary articulating fantastical visions of the future. New conceptions of society, of cultural life, and of humanity itself proliferated. Political imaginaries as well as literary genres were refashioned. The implications of emerging scientific knowledge and innovative technologies stood at the heart of this intellectual ferment.⁶¹

The language of social dreaming may strike some scholars of politics as eccentric, too precious for the hard-nosed work of the social scientist. But in analyses like those quoted above, we are meant to see how social dreaming extends from and interacts with material and cultural realities, how the waking, working life of an era manifests in hopes and fears, ideals and illusions. And if we want to understand why the last two centuries have experienced such vivid nightmares, we will have no choice but to take the dreamworld seriously.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the notion of social dreaming has enjoyed special prominence in the field of utopian studies. In a canonical essay, Lyman Tower Sargent defines utopianism *as* social dreaming, as “dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which

the dreamers live.”⁶² In Sargent’s typology, there are three important faces of utopianism: literature, social theory, and intentional communities, all of which entail the imaginative projection of “a non-existent society,” though some utopians, especially the architects of intentional communities, have attempted to make their nonexistent societies existent.⁶³ Like most scholars of utopia, Sargent considers dystopia an extension of, rather than a rebuke to, utopianism writ large, and as I elaborate in chapter 2, there are good reasons to follow this lead rather than insisting on a strict opposition between utopia and dystopia. On his account, the “eutopia or positive utopia” and the “dystopia or negative utopia” both fulfil the essential function of social dreaming: to map, to warn, to hope.

If we think of dystopia as being, like utopia, a multifaceted imaginary, as a broad category of modern social nightmares rather than a narrow category of literature and entertainment, the central conceit of this study should already be more legible. Any attempt to assert an overly strict parallel between utopia and dystopia will run into trouble, however. I have already suggested that there are dystopias of both literature and social theory, but what of the third face? Is there any parallel to the intentional communities of the utopian tradition? Has there ever been, or could there ever be, a “real” dystopia?

In the most significant work on dystopia yet published, intellectual historian Gregory Claeys asserts that dystopias are not necessarily fictions: dystopias can be “real, existing places” and “there are non-literary, empirical uses of the term.”⁶⁴ According to Claeys, a dystopia is “a society based upon fear,” a diminished sociability as opposed to the “enhanced sociability” of utopia.⁶⁵ One advantage of this account is that it provides both utopia and dystopia with substantive content, as opposed to the more nominalist view on which one person’s utopia may be another’s dystopia. But this typology isn’t without difficulties of its own. Some dystopian scenarios hypothesize sociability “enhanced” toward the complete obliteration of individuality, with *Brave New World* furnishing an archetypal example. Claeys acknowledges dystopias of this kind, but nonetheless takes as paradigmatic, both in literature and history, the totalitarian state and its historical antecedents, that is, varieties of despotism both modern and premodern. The result is a wide-ranging study into regimes of persecution, inquisition, and incarceration, as well as the “political religions” undergirding totalitarian regimes, which Claeys describes as dystopian societies driven by dystopian ideologies (even as he credits dystopian literature with exposing and attacking the “real” dystopias).

By contrast, this study foregrounds the *imaginary* and *critical* dimensions

of dystopian thinking. At the risk of overstating the differences in our largely compatible accounts, Claeys's work provides a clarifying foil in both respects. Per Claeys, we should understand totalitarian regimes and other modern forms of dictatorship as showing that dystopias exist in history as well as in writing, as do the historical antecedents of such regimes, wherein Claeys includes militarized societies like Sparta, slave civilizations both ancient and modern, tyrannies, prisons, and diseased spaces. By contrast, I emphasize that dystopian thinking always entails a leap beyond the real. Even where they occur as serious attempts at descriptive or predictive social thought, dystopias always project beyond factual circumstances, sometimes extravagantly so. Dystopias don't just describe the realities they inveigh against; they extrapolate the tendencies that they wish to criticize into an unknown future, often enlarging them for satirical effect. Dystopias may project *real possibilities*, and they often project possibilities that their authors take to be real, but they are nonetheless concerned with the possible as against the actual. This, I will argue, is an important function of dystopias: they illuminate our space of possibilities by inquiring into the limits of the possible.⁶⁶ Consider this their imaginative or speculative dimension.

The second dimension, closely related, is that dystopias have a critical or satirical dimension. Dystopian writing is, ultimately, a form of social criticism, and, following Sargent, it registers its criticism by depicting nonexistent societies that "the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived."⁶⁷ Dystopian writers don't just tell their audiences what the future will be like as a matter of fact, though most do believe that their predictions are, if not correct in the details, then at least capable of providing an insightful view of a possible future. They tell us about a future scenario that we must try to avoid, and, in describing it, bring pathological tendencies already at work in our own societies into view. In this respect, dystopias are much like the utopias that preceded them: they use an imaginary society as a vehicle for criticizing the present society. When Thomas More wrote *Utopia*, he admitted it was a vision that he could hope for more than he could expect. For the dystopian, the task is to articulate the possibilities we fear while there is still time to avoid them. When they work as intended, they are, to borrow David Brin's phrase, "self-preventing prophecies."⁶⁸ Hence, the design of totalitarian institutions (or concentration camps or penal colonies) would not qualify as dystopian, because the architects of such institutions advance them in earnest, not to satirize the current social order or to warn against its future trajectory.

To clarify the point, let us further consider the example of totalitarianism. I agree with Claeys that totalitarianism, particularly as it occurs to its critics, is the paradigmatic dystopia of the twentieth century. This is a point I will return to in chapter 3. But, on my account, the actual totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, or those that were alleged by their critics to be totalitarian, were not dystopias, nor were strictly empirical accounts of such regimes dystopian. Rather, totalitarianism featured in the dystopian imagination to the extent that analysts fixated on the possibility of *total control* that had not been realized in practice and was perhaps unrealizable in principle. It is revealing that, for many analysts of totalitarianism, Orwell's Oceania was a more influential case study than either the Nazi or Soviet regimes. Even as hard-nosed a realist as George Kennan could admit in 1953 that the "purest expression" of totalitarianism manifests "not in its physical reality but in its power as a dream or a nightmare," citing Franz Kafka, Orwell, and Arthur Koestler as exemplars.⁶⁹ Likewise for the philosopher Karl Jaspers, who wrote that "Orwell, in his fantastic and truthful utopian novel *1984*, has described the potentialities of this reality we have already with us, in rudimentary form."⁷⁰

Of course, no one denies that Orwell's novel is an exemplary dystopia, but what I want to illuminate here is how contemporaneous accounts of totalitarianism deployed the Orwellian image in nonfictional contexts. Most important among these for the political theorist is Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which defines totalitarian rule in terms of the aspiration to achieve total domination and the subsequent destruction of humanity's natural essence—a possibility that more sanguine critics of totalitarianism disputed at the time, and that has since been deflated by more sober assessments. For example, in a retrospective on *The Vital Center*, Arthur Schlesinger distances himself from the original book's subscription to a "mystical theory of totalitarianism popularized by George Orwell and Hannah Arendt" (though Schlesinger acknowledges that his work appeared before either *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and concludes that "the theory must have been much in the air").⁷¹ Per Schlesinger, "Orwell carried the inner logic of Stalinism to the end of the night. In so doing, he encouraged the theory of totalitarianism as unitary and irreversible, obliterating all autonomous institutions in society and reconstructing the human personality itself," while Arendt went further and "claimed as historical actuality what Orwell claimed as admonitory fantasy."⁷² From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, Schlesinger acknowledged that the

totalitarian states “were far less effectively monolithic than we believed; that the totalitarian project of remaking human nature was far less feasible than we thought; that totalitarianism in the pure and complete sense was inherently unattainable; and in consequence that the totalitarian states were not unchanging and unchangeable.”

Thus, in an important sense, I concur with Claeys that totalitarianism was a “real” dystopia, which is to say a dystopia that escaped the pages of speculative fiction and shaped the real terrain of political thought and action for much of the twentieth century. But even so, this dystopia, like all dystopias, was an imaginative and critical construct. I will argue in chapter 3 that some—not all—critics of totalitarianism, mass society, and technological society construed these social and political forms *as* dystopias, or *in* dystopian terms. Their accounts intermixed empirical, normative, and predictive concerns; in many cases ideological and even psychological motivations intervene as well. This is not in itself strange or pathological, as social scientists frequently deploy “ideal types” and “developmental constructs” to apprehend social reality.⁷³ And the fact that some accounts of these phenomenon proved overly speculative or even hyperbolic does not negate their insights as works of literary or philosophical social criticism. But they are works of the imagination, specifically, of the dystopian imagination, which is to say, they deal in the realm of social nightmares.

Such nightmares vary considerably based on their author and era, and like the possibilities projected by utopians, the anxieties that haunt the dystopian imaginary may shift over time and in response to new realities. Nonetheless, I will hazard a few generalizations about the substantive content of dystopia. As a formal construct, a dystopia is any account of a possible or at least plausible future society that serves as a warning to the present. But there is more we can say about the nature of these warnings without obscuring their variety. I have already noted above, using the apocalyptic imaginary as a foil, that dystopias extrapolate possible future societies from human-driven processes of social transformation. The effects of this transformation are also distinctive from the apocalyptic and utopian imaginaries that precede the dystopian imaginary. Dystopias of the twentieth century are fundamentally concerned with the eradication of human freedom as a political and social reality. They may depict fascist regimes, oligarchies, forms of bureaucratic collectivism and totalitarianism, or repertoires of brainwashing and behavioral engineering, but the inhabitants of dystopia are never free. In political terms, dystopia expresses a fear of domination, but in existential terms, the true danger is dehumanization. As I explain in chap-

ter 1 and emphasize throughout the study, one critical precondition of the dystopian imaginary is a post-Darwinian understanding of human nature, one in which “humanity” as we know it is understood to be contingent and mutable. This opens the possibility that “human freedom” or “human dignity” as we know them might be expunged. For the dystopian mind, this is an existential destruction of humanity as terrifying as the biological extinction of the human race, and it is not uncommon, as we shall see, to see dystopian thinkers invoke this parallel directly in the nuclear age.

To the concerns with domination and dehumanization, I will add a final characteristic concern, which is with the closure of the future. As theorists such as Koselleck and Niklas Luhmann have noted, the modern view of the future bequeathed by the Enlightenment is that of an *open future*, of possibilities for the development of human potential and the enactment of human creativity.⁷⁴ Modern utopias give form and direction to this potential and evince confidence in human agencies of prediction, planning, and control, though as a result the most deterministic expressions of modern utopianism may paradoxically give rise to their own kinds of closure.⁷⁵ Dystopian imaginaries dwell on the exhaustion or negation of the future, the voiding of its potential into a closed loop. Consider the images of the future with which this chapter began: a “a boot stamping on a human face forever,” “a cable TV programme going on forever.” These are dystopian negations of futurity, or, to use Jenny Andersson’s terminology, “non-futures.” Andersson deploys this concept in her commentary on Arendt, who she takes as an instructive example of a twentieth-century thinker who came to understand “the future as a fundamental problem for the ‘human condition.’”⁷⁶ This is seen in Arendt’s account of totalitarianism, “the totalizing nature of which lay precisely in its grasp on the human future. Through the negation of the plural nature of the future, totalitarianism projected *one future* that was also a *non-future* as the open character of the future was by definition a threat to totalitarian power.” Arendt maintained that this was true of totalitarian ideology—which purported to know the future—and of totalitarian terror—which tried to manufacture it. A variation on this fear lurks in Arendt’s criticism of behavioralism and “instrumentalist human rationality” more broadly, which also suggests a *nonfuture*.⁷⁷ Andersson calls this distinctively twentieth-century concern “the idea of the lost future.” On my interpretation, this is an apt vocabulary for apprehending the dystopian imaginary and its expressions. Anxiety for a lost future lies at the heart of the dystopian imaginary, and dystopias confront us with the nonfutures in which our present may yet terminate.

THINGS TO COME

The argument of the book is developed across four chapters, each of which seeks to distill a key moment in the development of the dystopian imaginary. The chapters alternate between wider-ranging surveys of intellectual history and more focused analyses of key intellectual figures in order to balance breadth and depth in the reconstruction. As such, the work combines contextual reading with close analysis of significant works. Since this is a study in political theory, the primary emphasis is on social and political thought, though there are forays into literature, psychology, sociology, and adjacent disciplines. The period on which the book is focused precedes the stricter specialization of the modern academy, and many of its protagonists are humanistic intellectuals who moved intuitively and sometimes capriciously among domains that are now more rigorously demarcated in scope and methodology. But even such a broad study has its limitations. Most notably, dystopian films are omitted from the study as are all but a few of the most important dystopian novels. A comprehensive account of the dystopian imaginary is beyond the scope of any single book, and my intention here is to tell a more limited story—but hopefully, also, a more novel and illuminating story—about dystopias in and as political thought.

Likewise, while the book pursues an expansive story of political ideas, ideas that were often articulated via sweeping notions of “modernity” and “humanity,” there is an important sense in which the dystopian imagination represents a nightmare particular to the Euro-American world, a crisis of confidence that plays out internally among liberal, socialist, and humanist heirs of the Enlightenment as they reassess their aspirations in the cold air of the twentieth century. But not all political imaginations were so thoroughly saturated with panoramas of domination and dehumanization. Among anticolonial and national independence movements of the twentieth century, the radical spirit of utopianism, egalitarianism, and liberation persisted, and such visions likewise informed movements for civil rights and black liberation in America that pressed against the narrow confines of postwar liberalism.⁷⁸ In and after the 1970s, feminist and ecological thinkers rehabilitated utopianism as a method of political critique and countercultural social vision, as in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974) and Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975). The dystopian imagination treated here is therefore more provincial than its own darkly grandiose figurations may initially suggest, reflecting the partiality with which twentieth-century

Euro-American intellectuals interpreted their own space of possibilities: what they hoped for, what they feared, and what they could not seem to imagine at all.

Within this broader context, readers will note that the study dwells extensively on Anglophone literature and thought, especially in chapters 2 and 3. This is a notable limitation of scope, but it is not an incidental one, nor do I believe it is disproportionate given the aims of the study. The most significant and influential works in the dystopian lineage were written and published in English and were most widely read by Anglophone audiences: this includes Wells's early dystopias, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Even Zamyatin's *We*, as noted in chapter 1, was initially published in English translation; it did not appear in the original Russian until 1952 and was not published in the Soviet Union until 1988. For that matter, much of the tradition of modern utopian writing out of which dystopia emerges is Anglophone as well: Thomas More, William Morris, Edward Bellamy, Samuel Butler, Wells again. Hence, Anglophone discourse is a major—though not exclusive or exhaustive—vector of dystopian thought and anxiety during the twentieth century. The strands of American and European postwar discourse detailed in chapter 3 also play out largely in English, owing in large part to the number of contributors who came to the United States from Europe and hence either wrote in English or found wide audiences when their works were translated into English. Hence, the Anglophone focus has a meaningful basis in the content of the study. At the same time, it is not intended as a strict demarcation, and I have tried to contextualize my claims as they are developed and avoid provincialism or false universalism. At numerous points in the study, I emphasize transnational and trans-Atlantic lines of influence and conversation, and French, German, and Russian writers play recurring roles in the book-length narrative.

Chapter 1, "The Modern Space of Possibilities," surveys the visions of future society and future humanity that have animated European thought since the Enlightenment. There, I characterize modern historical consciousness in terms of the relationship between "futurity"—the sense of existing within a dynamic and open-ended historical process—and "mastery"—the extension of human control over the natural and social environment. The dystopian imagination presupposes a sense of openness with regard to the future, and this perspective, at least insofar as it extends to the material and social conditions of human existence, is itself a relatively recent innovation. This sense of futurity develops over the course of the seventeenth

and eighteenth centuries, as the novel possibility of lasting, cumulative, and human-driven change of the natural and social environment is affirmed by breakthroughs in science, technology, industry, and politics. The future becomes an open prospect, though for the progressive thinkers of the late Enlightenment and their nineteenth-century utopian successors, its possibilities are still contained by the tendency to interpret history in terms of the continuous development of human powers. Only in the late nineteenth century, as confidence in the unity of technical and human progress falters, and the contingency of historical change is asserted by thinkers like Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Wells, does the society of the future come to be seen in the foreboding light of the dystopian imagination. Dystopian thinkers see the malleability of human nature and the contingency of social evolution as exposing an ontological vulnerability in our species; the society of the future may bring the human essence to full realization or deform it beyond recognition.

Chapter 1 concludes with two short studies that demonstrate how the dystopian imagination coalesces out of these tensions. First, I take up an exemplary instance of dystopian social thinking, namely, Max Weber's influential diagnosis of modern society as an "iron cage": the outcome of a rationalization process that has furthered the project of mastery, but at great cost to the integrity of the self and its cultural milieu. Weber fears that a society dominated by bureaucratic organizations will yield a new "type of humanity," pathologically dependent on their social order and incapable of free and responsible self-direction. I read Weber's account of the future society alongside Zamyatin's searing dystopian novel, *We*, a seminal work of modern fiction and arguably *the* paradigmatic literary dystopia, in which a massive apparatus of social engineering brings about the complete objectification and control of humanity. Both Weber and Zamyatin warn against the onset of a social order wherein rationality consists principally in the relentless efficacy of domination.

While chapter 1 is concerned with the emergence of the dystopian imaginary, chapter 2, "Utopia and Its Negative," triangulates the dystopian imaginary with the lineages of utopian and anti-utopian thought. After reconstructing the liberal critique of utopianism, with emphasis on the writings of Berlin, Talmon, and Shklar, I consider *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* against the backdrop of the anti-utopian turn and, in doing so, indicate the limitations of a generic opposition between utopia and dystopia. Though each of these canonical exercises in dystopian thinking exhib-

its a distinct critical orientation toward utopia, neither, I will maintain, is anti-utopian as such. Rather, I characterize Huxley's and Orwell's sensibility as one of negative utopianism. Not only do their dystopias project undesirable imaginary societies, but, if my argument is correct, then Huxley's and Orwell's enduring acts of political imagination must be understood in terms of their orientation toward an absent utopia. Which is to say that both wrote to underscore the urgent need for an alternative vision of society that could secure the freedom and dignity of each individual—a vision they felt compelled to call for even if they themselves could not fully articulate it.

Even so, Huxley and Orwell left the twentieth century with something more useful than yet another addition to the catalog of unrealized utopias. Their bold thought experiments gave an age that had grown justifiably skeptical of such visions an alternative method for orienting itself toward the future. In chapter 3, "Paradigms of Dystopian Thinking," I attend to some of the specific social and political problems that provoked dystopian thinking throughout the twentieth century. Specifically, I identify three contexts of concern where discussion revolved around the *summum malum* of a closed future society in which individual and collective autonomy are subverted by insidious new forms of domination. The first focal point for this discussion is the debate over *totalitarianism* that gripped European and American intellectuals in the lead-up to and aftermath of the Second World War. In trying to make sense of the massive state tyrannies whose power and violence threatened to liquidate not only the political freedoms of their subjects, but much of their moral and intellectual autonomy as well, writers such as Orwell, Arendt, and the first-generation Frankfurt School theorists were forced to consider the future of Western civilization without reference to comforting narratives of progress. Even so, the experience of totalitarianism led to the projection of dystopias that were readily identifiable at the institutional level—but might it be possible that equally dismal futures awaited even those modern societies whose institutions were formally liberal and democratic? In the debates over the nature of *mass society*, which has roots as far back as Alexis de Tocqueville but was debated with new urgency during the 1940s and 1950s, and the possibility of a fully *technocratic* or *technological society*, which became a major concern during the 1960s, dystopian thinkers confronted menaces that could in no way be diagnosed as regressions to pre-modern forms of tyranny or barbarism. The utopian potential of egalitarian democracy and technological progress, according to thinkers as varied as Erich Fromm, C. Wright Mills, David Riesman, Jacques Ellul, Lewis Mum-

ford, and Herbert Marcuse, among others, may blind the citizens of capitalist democracies to the subtle and pervasive forms of domination operative in their own societies.

By synthesizing the recurring ideas and arguments from each of these contexts, I aim to clarify the consistent methodology and purpose that gives *dystopian thinking* its specificity as a mode of social thought. In doing so, I attempt to show how the specific experiences of the early twentieth century informed a broader philosophical hypothesis about the future of modern society. Fromm interprets the literary dystopia as posing the “philosophical, anthropological, and psychological” question, “Can human nature be changed in such a way that man will forget his longing for freedom, for dignity, for integrity, for love—that is to say, can man forget that he is human?”⁷⁹ Dystopian thinking begins when this outcome is admitted into the realm of possibility, if not probability. The exact extent to which this dehumanization of humanity is possible, and the means that would be required to bring it about, provide much of the subject matter for dystopian speculation. What makes dystopia a distinctively modern phenomenon is that the means in question—whether conceived of as primarily political, social, or technological—are recent innovations: bureaucratic and corporate organizations, techniques of mass communication and psychological manipulation, mass society with its pressures toward conformism and consumerism. In depicting possible futures in which the characteristically human capacities for free thought and action have been suppressed or eliminated, dystopias alert us to the potentially drastic changes in the human condition that may yet emerge from political, economic, and technological processes operative in the present. This is not to say that they deny the benefits of progress in these spheres. Rather, they try to reckon with consequences that may be difficult to recognize precisely because they are the subtle and long-term results of processes that yield immediate and obvious gains. But the dystopian thinker aims to show how these processes have nonetheless diminished the space for self-determination and subjected individuals and groups to new forms of domination.

Chapter 4, “Theorizing Freedom and Domination,” extends this story and reflects on the continued relevance of dystopian thinking to contemporary political theory. It explains how Arendt, Habermas, and Foucault each enlists and transforms the concepts of totalitarianism, mass society, and technocracy as a way of characterizing the negative potential of

modernity, and, further, how each articulates a distinctive conception of freedom in response. Admittedly, it is difficult to add anything novel to the dense secondary literature on each of these thinkers, and specialists more thoroughly acquainted with their bodies of work will have to decide if this section is adequate to the task. Even so, turning to their work seems the appropriate way to conclude the study—not only because of their ubiquitous influence on contemporary social thought, but because the lens of dystopia highlights important aspects of their thinking that are not undiscovered so much as hiding in plain sight. Their unique intellectual trajectories converge in depicting a society dominated by impersonal forces, in which omnipresent threats to freedom emerge out of rational forms of technology, industry, and social organization. They suspect that the development of such means, and their extension into nearly every facet of social life, yields a uniquely modern form of domination that is both all-encompassing and apparently irreversible. Among the tendencies that suggest a dystopian outcome for modern society are the relentlessness of cyclical production and consumption, the pervasiveness of state and corporate power, the domination of the public sphere by commercial media, the anonymous rule of bureaucrats and experts, and the pressure to conform that is imposed by disciplinary institutions even as it arises endogenously from the tendencies of mass society. Each of these tendencies makes humans into the passive objects of an indifferent and uncontrollable social process.

The book contributes to the study of these thinkers by offering new context for and analysis of the negative poles of their work, illustrating how distinctive visions of domination have in turn structured their vital contributions to political thought. Serious consideration of dystopian futures led Arendt, Habermas, and Foucault to articulate ideas of freedom that would be adequate to the unique perils of the modern world. While it would be an overstatement to say that any of them present convincing alternatives, utopian or otherwise, they do facilitate reflection on the political and ethical work from which such alternatives may be advanced. Each theorist draws our attention to a distinctive ensemble of political and ethical practices that enable, respectively, forms of collective and individual autonomy. These practices must be safeguarded against the encroachment of processes and institutions that subordinate autonomy to hierarchy, normalization, and manipulation of various kinds. For Arendt, this principally means the pres-

ervation of a public sphere in which speech and action can provide meaningful opportunities for underdetermined activity, and along with it, opportunities for citizens to encounter one another in their uniqueness. It is her conviction that we can only exercise our characteristically human capacity to reach out into the new under such circumstances. In Habermas' thought, freedom is first and foremost the capacity for autonomy that inheres in a social world governed by free and open communication. The dangers to this kind of autonomy, which is at once moral and political, are manifold: from the instrumentalizing procedures embodied by the market and the administrative state to the encroachment of technical rationality into the very fabric of socialization and interaction. And in Foucault's wide-ranging oeuvre, we see how the modern subject may yet find opportunities for self-creation and self-mastery even as he or she is constituted, in a great many respects, by the manifold techniques of a disciplinary society and its pressures toward normalization. For Foucault, what is at stake in such projects is not the retrieval of an antecedently true or authentic self, let alone of human nature, but instead the continual and critical reinvention of the self, and the emancipation of new possibilities for the future.

Dystopian thinking is not, however, exhausted by the intention to criticize the worst tendencies of modern societies. The overwhelming negativity of dystopia belies a positive project, an attempt to become articulate about the nature of human freedom and the conditions that sustain it. In dramatizing the outcomes that humanity must be certain to avoid, dystopian thinking also directs our attention to those aspects of our social and political life that must be preserved. By reading Arendt, Habermas, and Foucault as dystopian thinkers, I intend to show how serious consideration of dystopian possibilities structures their original and challenging accounts of freedom—accounts that must do justice to the novel and ubiquitous forces that threaten freedom in the modern world.

The conclusion, "Facing the Future," draws out the significance of dystopian thinking for politics and political theory today. There, I describe how dystopian thinking illuminates the role of the imagination in politics, the political concepts of freedom and domination, and the ethical concept of the human. And I suggest that dystopian thinking endures because it meets a need for an orientation toward the future that modern utopianism was once able to provide. As in the twentieth century, dystopias today engage novel forms of domination and dehumanization. I discuss some of the political, technological, and environmental dystopias that have recently vexed the

political imagination, drawing examples from discussions of authoritarianism, surveillance, “post-truth” politics, and the climate crisis. Though dystopian thinking ably highlights the dangers ahead, what of the alternatives? Do the crises of our day require a utopian mindset? Rather than rejecting or endorsing a revival of utopianism, I emphasize the unique critical and imaginative capacities of dystopian thinking.

CHAPTER ONE

The Modern Space of Possibilities

CHAPTER SUMMARY

With the early triumphs of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the modern world confronted its future from within a horizon of expectations that was being radically redrawn. The novel possibility of long-term, cumulative, and human-caused change in the basic structures of social life meant that the future appeared, for the first time, as an open prospect. None were more eager to embrace this prospect than the late Enlightenment thinkers and their utopian successors, who celebrated the world-transformative forces of science, technology, and industry as the means by which humankind would seize control of its destiny. Seen from the perspective of the early twentieth century, however, the future appears less as an entrancing horizon and more as a dizzying abyss. Indicative of this mood is a tendency to imagine the society of the future as a site of existential peril. I refer to this outlook, variously expressed in philosophy, literature, and even the nascent social sciences, as the dystopian imagination. It emerges as a response to shifts in the modern space of possibilities that bring new contingencies and vulnerabilities to light, and with them, new anxieties about the future of humanity.

The chapter first explains how the modern strands of utopianism, by which thinkers from Francis Bacon to Karl Marx oriented themselves toward the future, lost their persuasive power in the course of the nineteenth century as their underlying conceptions of history and human agency were thrown into doubt. When the future appears not merely open but unknowable, when progress can no longer be guaranteed or readily distinguished from decline, and humanity must contend with potentially dehumanizing social and historical forces, then utopian visions must surrender any pretense of inevitability. The dystopian imagination emerges in response to this predicament, as European intel-

lectuals contend with an uncertain future in which even the most enduring features of the human condition can no longer be assumed to persist. The chapter concludes by exploring two of the dystopian imagination's early, archetypal expressions—Max Weber's premonition of the "iron cage" of bureaucratic society and the totalitarian state depicted in Yevgeny Zamyatin's influential dystopian novel, *We*.

THE STORY TOLD HERE about the modern world and its image of the future is not easy to convey in brief. But the simplest way of plotting the journey is to draw the line between two stories of the future, the first written about the twenty-fifth century from the late eighteenth, the second about the twenty-sixth century from the early twentieth.

Louis Sebastian-Mercier wrote at the height of the Enlightenment and on the eve of the French Revolution, to an audience whose imaginations had been piqued by theories of progress. The Enlighteners believed something that would have been unbelievable in most ages of history: that they were creating, through their own powers and by the light of their own reason, a more perfect world. With his 1771 novel *L'an 2440*, Mercier became the first to conduct the type of thought experiment that writers like Jules Verne and H. G. Wells would popularize in the next century: he invited his readers to the society of the future. Mercier's narrator tours the Paris of the twenty-fifth century, where Enlightenment reigns. He learns that war, slavery, poverty, vice, and tyranny have all been eliminated, while art, science, and humanism flourish. Though seldom read today, *L'an 2440* was a phenomenon in its time, "one of the genuine best-sellers of the eighteenth century."¹

Exactly 150 years later, a Russian writer named Yevgeny Zamyatin offered his readers a glimpse of an altogether less inviting future. By the time he finished the novel that he called *My*, Zamyatin had been an engineer, a Bolshevik, a prisoner, an exile, and a dissident. Each of these experiences was reflected in his vision of the future. Like Mercier, Zamyatin foretold a future where reason prevails, but this is where the similarities end. In Zamyatin's *One State*, slavery is universal, art is eradicated, liberty is heresy, and the cultic regime of the Benefactor demands absolute obedience. All that resists is irrational, and all that is irrational must be destroyed. While Mercier's novel was a best-seller, Zamyatin's had to be distributed in secrecy; the former made its author a celebrity, while the latter made its author an enemy in his own land. Copies of Zamyatin's novel were smuggled to publishers in the United States and Czechoslovakia, with the novel first appearing in English under the title *We*.²

The century and a half that separates the two novels contains in miniature the story of the modern space of possibilities. It is a story in which the confidence of the European intellectual falls from its zenith to its nadir, in which the boundless hopes of progressives and revolutionaries curdle into something more ominous. In it, we find the origins of the dystopian outlook that would come to saturate the twentieth-century political imagination.

FUTURITY, MASTERY, AND MODERN UTOPIANISM

By describing modernity in terms of its space of possibilities, we emphasize its unique framework of expectations regarding historical change and continuity.³ In every era, our engagement with the world is shaped by shared expectations, both implicit and explicit, about what is possible, likely, or certain; about what can and cannot be accomplished through human action; and about the extent to which the social and natural world will persist between generations. We may even form expectations concerning the future of humanity as a whole: which fundamental features of the human condition are liable to change over time and which will remain constant. The general tendency of modernity's space of possibilities is expansion, such that more possibilities come into view and initially remote possibilities become, if not likely, then at least worthy of consideration. By the height of the Enlightenment, even utopian futures seem to fall within the bounds of possibility, but the confidence of modern utopian thinkers depends on an understanding of history and human nature that contains the possible within a narrative of humanity's progressive self-realization. As the intellectual scaffolding of modern utopianism is corroded by skeptical and pessimistic dissents during the nineteenth century, visions of the future that emphasize the precariousness of human freedom and dignity begin to emerge as well. To understand how the shifting contours of the modern space of possibilities eventually bring dystopian anxieties to the fore, we must attend to two dimensions along which modernity's expectations are decisively constituted: its sense of *futurity* and its project of *mastery*. Each these features initially contributes to the confidence of modern utopians, but later, in radicalized form, undermines their optimistic projections.

By *futurity*, I indicate modernity's awareness of existing within a dynamic and open-ended historical process. Because of this awareness, modern thinkers expect more change and less continuity in history, and they orient themselves toward a future that is expected to differ radically from the

past or present. Reinhart Koselleck suggests that designations such as “the modern age” or “the new age” (*Neuzeit*) indicate an altered state of historical consciousness in which the contents of our “space of experience” are no longer adequate to fill out our “horizon of expectations.”⁴ As a result, the present comes to be considered as a time of transition, and the future can be filled out with utopian expectations. But even as this sense of futurity becomes pronounced during the Enlightenment, most modern thinkers do not see the future as entirely undetermined. The future is, to a considerable degree, open, but this openness is bounded by notions of historical law. Only later does a radicalized sense of futurity, which emphasizes contingency and indeterminacy over patterned transition, allow dystopian projections to compete with utopian ones.

Mastery, on the other hand, refers to the modern aspiration to control nature and society through rational means.⁵ The mere possibility of change would not signify an open future in the absence of some capacity for human beings to intervene in and direct its course. But modernity’s space of possibilities is so expansive precisely because this period finds intellectuals acquiring confidence in their ability to know, predict, and act, and in doing so to reshape the natural and social environment. The assertion of control comes at a price, however, particularly when the object of control is society as a whole or the behavior of its individual inhabitants. In its radicalized form, the program of mastery is vulnerable to critics who emphasize the dehumanizing character of modern society. The familiar concerns that modern society is ordered in a way that reduces its members to numbers, to objects, to components of a machine or members of a herd are all variations on this concern, and all are, as we shall soon see, key tributaries that flow into the dystopian imagination.

The sense of futurity and the project of mastery are interrelated in many respects. They extend from early modernity, reflecting the accomplishments of Renaissance humanism and the ambitions of the Scientific Revolution, reach a peak of enthusiasm during the Enlightenment, and become increasingly radicalized and contested during the nineteenth century. The distinctiveness of the modern sense of futurity stands out even more starkly when compared with the historical consciousness of preceding eras. Prior to the seventeenth century, attempts to envision the “earthly future” were contained within a narrow frame of expectations.⁶ This does not mean that the future of humanity was not a live topic, but rather that it was addressed by religious and theological doctrines whose vision of the “future life” referred to

a separate order of reality. Changes in the material and social conditions of life were both infrequent and impermanent, while the course of human history was situated within cosmological visions that emphasized the fixity of nature and the cyclical passage of time. Ancient and medieval thinkers had understood change predominantly in terms of degeneration and decay, a temperament that persisted through the Renaissance and into the early modern period. Medieval Christians, for their part, contributed an eschatological view of history as progress toward an apocalyptic Final Judgment.⁷ This is an important point in the genealogy of the modern idea of progress, but modern progressivism and utopianism nonetheless depart from the eschatological schema of expectations in ways that are obscured by the influential “secularization thesis.”⁸ With respect to the dimension of futurity, moderns, even modern utopians, orient themselves toward an indefinite expanse of time. Condorcet, for example, looks out on an “ocean of futurity,” with no limitations, let alone “Last Things,” on the horizon.⁹ And with respect to the project of mastery, the realization of a utopian future is understood by moderns as a matter of human activity on an immanent plane—the unfolding of mundane rather than divine powers and intentions. Understood against this backdrop, the triumph of the Enlightenment conception of progress reveals itself not only in the normative appreciation of change signified by the modern enthusiasm for improvement, but, prior even to that, in the thoroughness with which it deposes static and fatalistic interpretations of history.¹⁰ How might modernity have accomplished this feat?

More than a century before intellectuals like Turgot and Condorcet offered systematic accounts of progress, the accumulation of scientific knowledge and its application to industry and social organization presented evidence of the growing human capacity to affect change in the material and institutional conditions of society. Developments in the arts and sciences instilled confidence in modern intellectuals that their efforts could improve the store of human knowledge and culture. As Hans Blumenberg indicates, the modern idea of progress begins to take shape as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as Nicolaus Copernicus, Galileo, and Johannes Kepler articulated an intergenerational program of research in astronomy that would advance scientific knowledge through the accumulation of observations over centuries. At the end of the seventeenth century, a no less revolutionary change in sensibility takes place in the field of art and literature, as the defenders of modern culture argue against the grain of Renaissance thinking that the outstanding art, scholarship, and inventions of their

times may rival or surpass the accomplishments of the ancient world. Out of the twin streams of science and culture, a powerful and general concept of progress begins to emerge, and along with it the modern equation of change and invention with improvement.¹¹ This can be illustrated, as Hans Jonas notes, by the fact that only in the course of the seventeenth century does it become common for “new” to be deployed as a term of praise in intellectual discourse.¹² From this point on, the moderns may view themselves as advancing continuously into a future that is both different from and superior to that which has preceded it.

As dynamism becomes a defining aspect of modern life, a new mode of reflection concerned with anticipating and directing the total course of social and historical change begins to emerge. At the threshold of the modern era, Niccolò Machiavelli declared that even the shrewdest of princes could only best Fortune half the time—to a significant extent, the future would always remain unpredictable, frustrating our attempts to know, plan, and act. With the philosophies of Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes, however, the modern project of mastery begins to take shape. By rejecting the classical doctrine of ends-in-nature, Bacon inaugurated a new understanding of knowledge that is oriented toward mastery of efficient causes, that is, toward prediction and control. In doing so, Bacon not only articulated the program that would bring science into the modern age, but along with it modernity’s characteristic conception of nature as available for human ends precisely by virtue of lacking any innate ends of its own.¹³ Scientific inquiry now promised to render the processes of nature amenable to understanding and prediction, eventually replication, modification, and control. René Descartes likewise averred that a properly scientific conception of knowledge would make humanity “masters and possessors of nature.”¹⁴ In *New Atlantis* (1626), a utopian fragment inspired by More, Bacon imagined a polity constructed entirely in the service of science, but Hobbes was the first to envision a science dedicated to the aims of politics. Though Hobbes suggests that science may furnish predictive knowledge to be deployed in political decision-making, his conception of politics as a scientific enterprise remains limited, in works like *Leviathan*, to the establishment of foundational truths about human conduct. It would fall to Hobbes’s successors to develop a program for extending the project of mastery to human affairs, and many of them—Condorcet, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Auguste Comte in one line of descent, Jeremy Bentham in another—take up the mantle of scientific politics with enthusiasm, pro-

posing to uncover the principles by which humanity could anticipate and direct the future course of social evolution.

Hence the modern utopian comes to see the future as a screen onto which any number of triumphal schemes can be projected. Turgot's reflections on the advancement of the human mind stop short of envisioning the future, but his claim that history could be understood as the ongoing perfection of humanity gave cause for optimism. On Turgot's account, and in Condorcet's more well-known elaboration, progress is an innate law of historical development that guides the transition between historical phases in much the same way that the laws discovered by Galileo and Isaac Newton guide the motion of physical bodies. Principally, progress is the accumulation of knowledge, which can be applied through the arts and sciences toward the reconstruction of the natural and social environment. Modern thinkers now view the present as a moment of transition. With the sense of futurity awakened, who could resist wanting to know what lay beyond the veil? At the height of the Enlightenment, the society of the future becomes a topic of widespread curiosity, and philosophers and novelists begin to imagine its possible forms. This is the context in which Mercier's *L'an 2440* appeared. Not only a catalog of Enlightenment aspirations, Mercier's work introduces a subtle but profound variation into the tradition of utopian speculation. Whereas Plato had Socrates and his interlocutors find their ideal polity in speech, and More sent Hythloday across oceans to find Utopia, Mercier was the first popular writer to suggest that utopia lay ahead in time, to be realized through human efforts.¹⁵

Decades later Condorcet would issue his own influential vision of the future characterized by indefinite social progress and human perfectibility. For Condorcet, "nature has fixed no limits to our hopes," and high among his own hopes was the perfection of what he called the "social art," a probabilistic science of society that would allow for institutions to be calibrated with mathematical accuracy and thereby to erode the "dominion of chance."¹⁶ His vision of a future society emancipated by science is amplified by Saint-Simon and Comte, his nineteenth-century followers. Comte argued that a scientific approach to politics would allow its practitioners to ascertain the shape of the future society that lay ahead of the present instability, and to expedite its realization. The forces of science and industry, which had nearly succeeded in destroying the old social order, would become the basis for the "positive" or "scientific" polity, a technocratic-socialist regime in which an elite of scientists, engineers, and managers would preside over a centrally planned

economy. Comte believed this outcome was inevitable; the only question was whether it would come about as the result of a managed transition or a blind and chaotic upheaval. Either way, Comte maintained that only a society based on science would make appropriate use of humanity's distinctive intellectual capacities. "It is in this philosophical sense," he writes, "that the most eminent civilization must be pronounced to be fully accordant with nature, since it is, in fact, only a more marked manifestation of the chief properties of our species—properties that, latent at first, can come into play only in that advanced state of social life for which they are exclusively destined."¹⁷

Though Marx wielded the label of utopian as an epithet for socialists who thought the future form of society was a matter of choice rather than of historical law, he belongs among the modern utopians in the sense that I have been using the term. Nonetheless, Marx's philosophy of history is more complicated than the linear notions of progress espoused by his predecessors. While Turgot and Condorcet judged their present the most advanced stage yet in a progressive sequence and Saint-Simon and Comte saw their time as a phase of disorderly transition, Marx held that the industrializing world of the mid-nineteenth century was a context in which humanity's powers had been simultaneously magnified and stripped away. The social world seemed to have turned against its members, acquiring a phantasmal sense of self-sufficiency. Marx writes that "this fixation of social activity, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations, is one of the chief factors in historical development up until now."¹⁸ However, Marx understood the autonomy of this "objective power" as an illusion produced by the divisions of capitalist society:

The social power i.e., the multiplied productive force, which arises through the co-operation of different individuals as it is determined by the division of labor, appears to these individuals, since their co-operation is not voluntary but has come about naturally, not as their own united power, but as an alien force existing outside them, of the origin and goal of which they are ignorant, which they thus cannot control.¹⁹

In his early writings, Marx called this condition of being separated from and antagonized by one's own powers "alienation," or estrangement. Its paradigmatic instance is the work performed by the proletariat, whose subsistence requires that they sell their labor into the system of industrial pro-

duction, and who are therefore transformed into objects or instruments of production. This “total loss of humanity” prepares the proletariat to perform their world-historical mission, as Marx wagers that the proletariat “can only redeem itself by a total redemption of humanity.”²⁰ Marx construes alienated labor as a “total loss of humanity” because his philosophical anthropology esteems creative production as humanity’s characteristic power. For as we add new objects and edifices of our own design to the world, we transform an initially inhospitable nature, erecting the civilizational artifice in which *human* nature takes shape. This is what Marx means when he says that “the entire so-called history of the world is nothing but the begetting of man through human labour, nothing but the coming-to-be of nature for man.”²¹ But for the alienated worker, production is not free or creative, indeed it is barely conscious. The predicament of the proletariat presents in concentrated form the predicament of humanity under capitalism, wherein the productive activity of the species has ceased to humanize the world and instead brought an “alien objective world” into being. The forces of production, whose continual development is the true constant amid the dialectical reversals of Marx’s philosophy of history, have been incubating in alienated form; having reached an unprecedented level of potency, what remains is for these forces to be seized by the proletariat and redirected toward the satisfaction of human necessities. To do so would not only emancipate the proletariat from their oppression, it would free humanity to create our future cooperatively and consciously.

Marx ultimately says little about the form of the future society, or what life will be like for its inhabitants. He instead emphasizes the openness and indeterminacy of human creativity at last unfettered from natural or historical necessity:

When the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc., created through universal exchange? The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity’s own nature? The absolute working-out of his creative potentialities . . . i.e. the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a *predetermined yardstick*? Where he does not reproduce himself in one specificity, but produces his totality? Strives not to remain something he has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming?²²

Within this “movement of becoming,” even communist society as sketched by Marx may be understood as transitional. In his early manuscripts, Marx described communism as “the positive transcendence of private property, or human self-estrangement, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man”²³ He adds that communism “is the necessary pattern and the dynamic principle of the immediate future, but communism as such is not the goal of human development—the structure of human society.”²⁴ Like his modern utopian predecessors, Marx anticipated the coming of a new society in which human nature was freed from the distortions of the present and the full capabilities of our species could at last be realized.

THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY AS A PROBLEM IN MODERN THOUGHT

The preceding discussion highlights a unique aspect of the modern utopian imaginary, wherein the realization of future possibilities and the redemption of humanity’s latent potential becomes a major theme of social and political thought. Earlier political thinkers had assumed the presently existing society as their essential context. Insofar as the future was a consideration, as, for example, in Machiavelli, who emphasizes the future reputation of the prince, or Hobbes, who emphasizes the endurance of the commonwealth over time, it is a future that is not expected to differ significantly from the present in terms of social structure or human psychology.²⁵ In the modern world, the future is of preeminent concern, and the present attains its significance primarily as a site of transition. This view could be both exhilarating and terrifying. However, the first thinkers to give serious thought to the society of the future also tell a reassuring story about it. For one, they assert that the nature of the future society can be known in advance: the philosopher of history or the scientific observer of social change can discern the laws that govern the transition between social forms and extrapolate at least the outline of the world to come. And though Condorcet, Comte, and Marx each describe a specific type of human activity necessary to emancipate the future from the past and present—gradual improvement in Condorcet, comprehensive reorganization in Comte, revolution in Marx—the three are unanimous in thinking the outcome inevitable. Condorcet argues that it would take a planetary cataclysm, something on the order of a meteor

strike that knocks the Earth from its orbit, to reverse the course of progress. Comte and Marx both declined to describe themselves as “utopians” because they associated the term with social reformers who viewed the form of future society as a matter of choice. While the deterministic view of history puts human agency in narrow confines, it also assures us that history inclines toward an improved, even ideal, form of social existence. The future might be delayed or expedited, but it eventually arrives.

Such accounts can only remain persuasive so long as the assumptions about the nature of social change that support them remain intact. Two such assumptions were subjected to intensifying doubt throughout the nineteenth century. First, the engines of modern dynamism—technological, economic, and political—came to be viewed by some dissenters as obstructions to, rather than expressions of, human powers. Second, the idea of an innate direction to history is challenged by Charles Darwin and those he influences. The confluence of these two views renders the future of humanity uncertain, opening radical possibilities for both ascent and descent—possibilities that we can see writers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Wells filling out as the nineteenth century draws to a close.

Even at the height of its influence, the idea of progress never commanded universal assent. Among Marx’s predecessors and contemporaries are numerous critics who share his concern with modern alienation, but not his confidence that history provides a solution. As Bernard Yack observes, Marx’s account of alienation is just one development in a line of argument initiated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which holds that “modern man is not fully human, and to become human man must get beyond the debilitating spirit of modern social interaction.”²⁶ Those who follow Rousseau in launching such criticisms have disagreed about which characteristics define humanity and which among them are suppressed or distorted in modernity, as well as about the sources of dehumanization. But the recurrence of this claim in modern thought indicates one of the ways in which the future of humanity can seem to be imperiled. This possibility is particularly disconcerting for progressive thinkers because it suggests that humanity’s capacity for change, what Condorcet called perfectibility and Marx called self-creation, is a vulnerability as well as an asset. Rousseau had already noticed this, describing the “faculty of self-improvement” as “the source of all human misfortunes.”²⁷ Rousseau thought that humanity corrupts itself as soon as it undertakes to improve its natural condition through civilization, and “falls by this means lower than the brutes themselves.”

While a revolutionary lineage extends from Rousseau to Marx, there is also a reactionary path from the Rousseauian problematic that forcefully critiques the technological, economic, and political currents in which modern utopians invested so much of their confidence. For Romantics such as Friedrich Schiller and Thomas Carlyle, modern society was dehumanizing insofar as it came to resemble the machines around which its economic life was increasingly organized. Carlyle, for example, argued that England was entering a “Mechanical Age,” an epithet that was meant not only to capture the increasing dependency on mechanical methods of production, but to describe the pervasive influence of mechanization on individual thought and behavior. In a Mechanical Age, individuals come to favor “rule and calculated contrivance” over creativity and initiative.²⁸ Becoming “mechanical in head and heart, as well as in hand,” they internalize the virtues of the machine: routine, efficiency, hierarchy.²⁹ Marx often used similar rhetoric to color his discussions of the industrial system, referring to it in the “scientific” *Capital* as a “mechanical monster whose body fills whole factories,” the laborers as its “countless working organs.”³⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville feared that the paternalistic state would acquit its subjects, much like Carlyle’s machines, of their ability to think and act of their own volition. His account of democratic despotism remains an evocative entry in the early history of dystopian thinking.

While cautiously supportive of the trend toward social equality, Tocqueville describes in detail the outcome he fears the most, wherein the relentless drive toward equality “levels” society such that the only source of social power is the state itself, which takes on the function of ensuring uniformity of opinion and behavior. Like many dystopian thinkers to follow, Tocqueville sets out “to imagine with what new features despotism could be produced in our world,” and the substance of his concern likewise anticipates many of the anxieties characteristic of the dystopian imaginary.

I see an innumerable crowd of like and equal men who revolve on themselves without repose, procuring the small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. . . . Above these an immense tutelary power is elevated, which alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyments and watching over their fate. It is absolute, detailed, regular, far-seeing, and mild. It would resemble paternal power if, like that, it had for its object to prepare men for manhood; but on the contrary, it seeks only to keep them fixed irrevocably in childhood. . . .

Thus after taking each individual by turns in its powerful hands and

kneading him as it likes, the sovereign extends its arms over society as a whole; it covers its surface with a network of small, complicated, pains-taking, uniform rules through which the most original minds and the most vigorous souls cannot clear a way to surpass the crowd; it does not break wills, but it softens them, bends them, and directs them; it rarely forces one to act, but it constantly opposes itself to one's acting; it does not destroy, it prevents things from being born; it does not tyrannize, it hinders compromises, enervates, distinguishes, dazes, and finally reduces each nation to being nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd.³¹

Social criticism rooted in religious rejection of materialism provides another important precedent for the dystopian imagination. For critics such as Søren Kierkegaard and Fyodor Dostoevsky, it was not simply machinery or capitalism or bureaucracy that was dehumanizing, but something more diffuse, an orientation toward the world that was fundamentally awry. Dostoevsky's novels probed the nihilism of a rationalistic and materialistic civilization. In *Notes from the Underground* (1864), his protagonist dreads a world demystified by the discovery of natural law, in which "all human actions will then be calculated according to these laws, like a table of logarithms . . . in which everything will be so precisely calculated and designated that there will no longer be any actions or adventures in the world" and "all possible questions will vanish in an instant."³² Premonitions like Tocqueville's and Dostoevsky's began to fill the gap between the critique of a dehumanizing modernity and the dystopian imagination to which it eventually contributes. As similar lines of thought multiply and intersect, the utopians begin to cede their early monopoly on depictions of the future society. By the end of the nineteenth century, intellectuals had forecast a range of disastrous outcomes for civilization. Charles Baudelaire imagines a dictatorship of the mechanics and "universal ruin" under the auspices of universal progress; Jacob Burckhardt fears an era of "long and voluntary subservience" to military-industrial tyranny; Pierre-Joseph Proudhon anticipates "serfdom" under the guise of mass democracy as well as "decay" and "dissolution" in social life.³³

Such anxieties would grow more persuasive as the notion of historical law experience its own crisis and the redemptive assurances of progressive philosophers confronted a new view of history that emphasized its essential contingency. To describe history as contingent is to assert that it lacks innate purpose or direction. Prior to the seventeenth century, the opposing view,

that history proceeds toward a predetermined end, had prevailed. Its most influential formulation is Aristotle's doctrine of final causes, which holds that all natural and human activities must be understood in terms of the end toward which they are oriented. Aristotle's account was embraced by the scholastic philosophers, for whom the idea of natural purposiveness complemented the Christian notion of a world created and directed by divine intentions. Bacon and Hobbes joined Descartes in attacking this synthesis, insisting that natural ends were illusory and that scientific explanation could only make reference to efficient causes. Teleological explanation receded in the natural sciences, but philosophers of history like Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel still attempted to discern natural ends in the development of human civilization. Nor had belief in Providence been rejected: it persists well into the nineteenth century, manifesting in thinkers such as Adam Smith, Tocqueville, and Lord Acton.³⁴

For their part, Condorcet, Comte, and Marx understood their philosophies of history as having progressed beyond teleology to a more scientific enterprise of extrapolation from historical law. In one sense, this self-conception is accurate. None of these thinkers assert that there is a final end to history; rather, they all expect the society of the future to go on changing indefinitely, though perhaps not in its basic structure. For this reason, Isaiah Berlin's claim that the main characteristic of utopias is that they are static does not apply to modern utopianism.³⁵ This dynamic view of history distinguishes the utopianism of the moderns from its eschatological predecessors. However, the laws of history that they purport to have discovered turn out to be, if not teleological, then at least unidirectional. They impute purposiveness to history by insisting that it must progress in accord with an underlying and largely unvarying pattern: the accumulation of scientific knowledge in Turgot, Condorcet, and Comte, and the continual heightening of productive powers in Marx. It cannot be known in advance how far humanity will progress along its historical course, but the course itself is consistent.

As this brief review suggests, the teleological idea of history is not conclusively defeated at one specific juncture; rather, it gradually falls out of favor in modernity as alternative views of history come to prominence. But no single blow to the doctrine was as great as the one delivered by Darwin's theory of evolution. By making a plausible case for natural selection as the mechanism by which distinct biological species, including the human species, emerge, Darwin removes the need for intentionality or telos in natu-

ral history. In the wake of Darwin's discovery, intellectuals found it difficult to endorse unidirectional theories of human history, or even to explain how change, now construed as random, could be understood in terms of a movement from lower to higher forms of organization. Marx, for his part, believed he had already accounted for Darwin's conception of history, even claiming that natural selection provided a "basis in natural science" for historical materialism in part *because* it refuted teleology so decisively.³⁶ But a historical law of progress like the one Marx invokes with respect to the forces of production is precisely the sort of antecedent causal force that a naturalistic account of history eschews. This sense of historical contingency is not the only way in which Darwin provokes the dystopian imagination. A Darwinian understanding of evolution also deepens the concern with dehumanization discussed above, for the contingencies it introduces into natural history extend to human nature as well. Once the doctrine of natural selection displaces the understanding of species as fixities, the notion that human nature establishes limits to the potential transformation of humanity is called into doubt.

Nietzsche and Wells are two of the turn-of-the-century writers who wrestled with the possibilities that Darwin brought into view. Nietzsche's interpretation of history as will-to-power follows Darwin's analogous idea of the struggle for existence, an influence Nietzsche acknowledged even as he took pains to distinguish the two concepts.³⁷ Nonetheless, Nietzsche, like Darwin, emphasizes contingency, arguing that to inquire into the evolution of "a 'thing,' an organ, a tradition" is to discover "a continuous chain of signs, continually revealing new interpretations and adaption. The 'development' of a thing, a tradition, an organ is therefore certainly not its *progressus* towards a goal. . . . instead it is a succession of more or less profound, more or less mutually independent processes of subjugation exacted on the thing." Nietzsche's point is that descriptions of change as "progress," "decline," or "development" always encode a value judgment about the trajectory of change. Nietzsche's skepticism toward the idea of historical progress is coterminous with his rejection of the Enlightenment and its democratizing, rationalizing, and humanizing agenda. As far as Nietzsche is concerned, rationalism and moralism tamp down the vital energies of individuals, diminishing their power and reducing "the beast of prey 'man' to a tame and civilized animal, a *domestic animal*."³⁸ Nietzsche is unable to see this process as anything but a long diminution of our most vital capacities for creativity and action. His aristocratic values—strength, vitality, power—contrast

sharply with democratic and egalitarian doctrines. This was true of many contemporaneous reactionaries, but Nietzsche's account adds a distinctively Darwinian twist insofar as it challenges the Enlightenment not only for its social or psychological consequences but, further still, for the physical transformation it enacts on the "evolving European":

Whatever term is used these days to try to mark what is distinctive about the European, whether it is "civilization" or "humanization" or "progress" (or whether, without implying praise or censure, it simply labeled Europe's *democratic* movement); behind all the moral and political foregrounds that are indicated by formulas like these, an immense *physiological* process is taking place and constantly gaining ground—the process of increasing similarity of Europeans.³⁹

Nietzsche believes that most Europeans are fated to succumb to this movement and all it entails: "a leveling and mediocratization of man."⁴⁰ In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–85), however, Nietzsche envisions an alternative, a bifurcation between the animalistic "Last Men" and a heroic "Overman" whose coming the book foretells but does not depict. Nietzsche believes that those who manage to cultivate their inner strength and break with the herd morality of modern Europe may yet forge a new future: visionaries, part artist and part tyrant, who stamp their values onto the world and in doing so reveal new vistas for human experience. Or perhaps even beyond it: Nietzsche likens humanity to "a rope over an abyss," linking a subhuman past with a superhuman future. When emphasizing such redemptive possibilities, Nietzsche can sound like Marx, anticipating the moment at which humanity steps decisively out of prehistory and begins to make its future. Nietzsche thus looks to his superior caste "to teach humanity its future as its *will*" and "to put an end to the gruesome rule of chance and nonsense that has passed for 'history' so far."⁴¹ Though Nietzsche can sound like Rousseau in his bromides against modern dehumanization, he scorns Rousseauian nostalgia for the primitive. If indeed we are to discover our nature, Nietzsche asserts, the way is *up*, not back.

Wells's contributions to the dystopian imagination—which includes "A Story of the Days to Come" and *When the Sleeper Wakes*, arguably the first popular works of dystopian fiction, both from 1899—also display the influence of Darwin's thinking. Wells absorbed Darwin's teachings from T. H. Huxley, with whom he studied biology, and for all of the technological con-

trivances that populate his works, his most enduring insights into the age of science are rooted in a Darwinian notion of evolution and the dangers and possibilities that it entails for humanity.⁴² In *The Time Machine* (1895), one of his most memorable thought experiments, Wells's time traveler fears the changes that time and evolution will have introduced, wondering as he steps out of his vessel, "What might not have happened to men? What if cruelty had grown into a common passion? What if in this interval the race had lost its manliness and had developed into something inhuman, unsympathetic, and overwhelmingly powerful?"⁴³ What the traveler witnesses is a bifurcation of the species similar to what Nietzsche envisioned, a future in which humanity has diverged into two successor races: the Eloi, rendered weak and childish by a smothering civilization, and the Morlock, a subterranean people who have become animalistic in temperament and intellect. In this instance, Wells was extrapolating from the class divisions that had become an inescapable feature of life, posing the question of where they might lead and arriving at an answer far from the classless utopia envisioned by Marx.

In his speculative writings, Wells acted as a surveyor of the possible futures that lay before the modern world, vacillating between utopian and dystopian visions. In his utopian mode, exhibited in works like *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and *Men Like Gods* (1923), Wells expanded on the intricate technocratic schemes of the utopian socialists, imagining beneficent world-states in constant pursuit of innovation. A Wellsian utopia is not a "permanent state" but an evolutionary process, "a hopeful state, leading to a long ascent of stages."⁴⁴ This, Wells wrote, was the nature of utopian speculation now that "Darwin had quickened the thought of the world." Occasionally, Wells's utopian projects even spilled into real life: for example, he campaigned tirelessly on behalf of the League of Nations, the closet analog to the cosmopolitan governments of his utopian writings. In his late career, the collapse of the League of Nations and the outbreak of the Second World War brought Wells's estimation of the human prospect to depths unmatched by even his darkest scientific fantasies. The dramatic nadir comes in *Mind at the End of Its Tether* (1945), wherein Wells broods over the possibility of humanity's auto-annihilation. Where Wells once prognosticated, he now sees the vicissitudes of history as defying prediction or narrative coherence, and he recounts his own confident futurism with scorn:

Of everything he asks: 'to what will this lead?' And it was natural for him to assume that there was a limit set to change, that new things and

events would appear, but that they would appear consistently, preserving the natural sequence of life. So that in the present vast confusion of our world, there was always the assumption of an ultimate restoration of rationality, an adaptation and a resumption. It was merely a question, the fascinating question, of what forms the new rational phase would assume, what Over-man, Erewhon or what not, would break through the transitory clouds and turmoil. . . .

The limit to the orderly secular development of life had seemed to be a definitely fixed one, so that it was possible to sketch out the pattern of things to come. But that limit was reached and passed into a hitherto incredible chaos. . . . Distance had been abolished, events had become practically simultaneous throughout the planet, life had to adapt itself to that or perish, and with the presentation of that ultimatum, the Pattern of Things to Come faded away.⁴⁵

By the time Wells wrote this rebuke of optimism, total war and totalitarian rule had brought despair out of the margins of European culture and into the intellectual and cultural mainstream. As doubts about the purposiveness of history and the integrity of humanity in modern society come to the fore throughout the nineteenth century, the guarantee that all will turn out well in the world of tomorrow ceases to be convincing. By the turn of the century, the modern world has once again adopted a fundamentally new attitude toward the future. Unbound by fatalism and unsupported by the scaffolding of historical law, the future is now truly open, and humanity is left to face the question of what it is to become. On this matter, Wells ventured the following guess: "That new animal may be an entirely alien strain, or it may arise as a new modification of the *hominidae*, and even as a direct continuation of the human phylum, but it will certainly not be human. There is no way out for Man but steeply up or steeply down. Adapt or perish, now as ever, is Nature's inexorable imperative."

RATIONAL SOCIETY IN THE DYSTOPIAN IMAGINATION: WEBER AND ZAMYATIN

At the outset of the twentieth century, the modern space of possibilities admits both possibility and anxiety. The intellectuals who contribute to the dystopian imagination project future societies in which human freedom is

suppressed, if not eliminated, and alienation is not overcome but consummated, inverting the predictions of the modern utopians. The societies they imagine also bear an eerie resemblance to those utopias: many dystopias depict the development of sophisticated techniques of social control that finely surveil, predict, and regulate the actions and interactions of individuals. In this regard, the success of the project of mastery gives cause for even greater uncertainty about the future of humanity itself.

Among the earliest and most penetrating accounts of this transformation and its likely outcome is Max Weber's analysis of European rationalism. Weber traces a nonlinear path from the Protestant Reformation, which, he argues, created some of the important cultural preconditions for the project of mastery, to the modern institutions of science, industrial capitalism, and the administrative state. The confluence of these institutions creates a world in which "one can, in principle, master all things by calculation."⁴⁶ Weber thought the future of society, its material and institutional conditions, was easy enough to foresee, but he questioned what would become of humanity under such conditions. To an underappreciated extent, Weber's work is meant to illuminate the future of humanity with respect to this question. A human science such as political economy, Weber argues, "investigates above all else the *quality of human beings* who are brought up in those social and economic conditions of existence."⁴⁷ Thus, Weber closes his study of modern capitalism not only with a description of the bureaucratic "iron cage" to which Europeans are increasingly subjected, but also with a question, "Who will inhabit this cage in the future?"⁴⁸

Weber's description of a future in which humanity is imprisoned by our own rationality resonates with many of his contemporaries, including the Russian novelist Yevgeny Zamyatin. Zamyatin's *We*, which laid the foundation for later dystopian novels such as *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, echoes Weber's predictions in several respects: the bureaucratic institutions that organize labor and social life for maximum efficiency; the breakdown of the individual personality under a regime of conformity; and the fundamental anxiety that such a life-order would constitute a radical break in the continuity of human experience. Despite the similarity of their concerns, Weber and Zamyatin reach different conclusions about the future of humanity. Whereas Weber, both as a social scientist and a polemicist, commits to realism, Zamyatin is skeptical that self-conscious realism can adequately map the modern space of possibilities, in which changes are often rapid, revolutionary, and unpredictable: "All realistic forms are pro-

jections along the fixed plane coordinates of Euclid's world. These coordinates do not exist in nature." A truly realistic realism, then, must project "along speeding, curved surfaces" embracing "displacement, distortion, curvature, nonobjectivity."⁴⁹ Thus, while Weber and Zamyatin depict substantively similar futures, they nonetheless represent differing employments of the dystopian imagination. Weber's dismissal of utopian and revolutionary expectations, no less than his critiques of impending bureaucratic serfdom, show how dystopian projections can be used to narrow the space of the possible, focusing attention on plausible extrapolations and the means available for coping with them. Confident that subjection is the only future available to humanity, Weber offers no sense of what humanity might aim for instead.

Zamyatin, by contrast, emphasizes the essential continuity of utopian and dystopian imaginings, a trait he shares with writers like Wells, Huxley, and Orwell. To imagine the future, per Zamyatin, is to disclose a domain of hitherto unrecognized possibilities, some cautionary and others aspirational. Zamyatin's dystopia is intended to show one of the outcomes that humanity might face, and in doing so, to raise the question of what alternative course might yet be plotted. Though he sees little cause for optimism in twentieth-century Europe, Zamyatin calls on artists and intellectuals to seek "vast philosophic horizons" and to pursue "the most ultimate, the most fearsome, the most fearless, 'why' and 'what next?'"⁵⁰

BUREAUCRATIC SOCIETY AND THE DISSOLUTION OF THE SELF: WEBER'S "IRON CAGE"

Overwhelmingly, what is produced by the economic, social, and political endeavours of the present benefits future generations rather than the present one. If our work is to have any meaning it lies, and can only lie, in providing for the *future*, for our *descendants*. But there can be no work in political economy on the basis of optimistic hopes of happiness. As far as the dream of peace and human happiness is concerned, the words written over the portal into the unknown future of human history are: "lasciate ogni speranza."

The question which stirs us as we think beyond the grave of our own generation is not the *well-being* human beings will enjoy in the future but what kind of people they will *be*.⁵¹

In the address quoted above, Weber confronts his audience with the possibility of a future society inhabited by an unrecognizable “strain of humanity” (*Menschentum*).⁵² Weber does not claim to know with certainty what the future of humanity will hold. And despite the moralistic tone of his rhetoric, his concern is not with whether future generations will share a particular set of values, but with whether it would be possible to acknowledge the succeeding generations as descendants at all, as inhabitants of a distinctive and shared “mode of life.” Specifically, Weber fears that the type of human personality he understands to have thrived in the modern West since the Reformation—free, responsible, and rational—will have no place in the emerging social order. This concern with the way that social orders structure and delimit the possible modes of personhood is present throughout Weber’s studies of modern and premodern societies. “Every order of social relations,” he explains, “is ultimately to be examined in terms of the human type which it, by way of external or internal selection, provides the optimal chances of becoming the dominant type.”⁵³

The type that interests Weber both historically and normatively is defined by a structure of personality that has emerged in the recent course of European history.⁵⁴ The defining characteristic of personality, as Weber understands it, is the direction of one’s conduct in accord with a consistent and unifying value. “Personality is a concept that finds its ‘essence’ in the constancy of its inner relation to specific ultimate ‘values’ and life ‘meanings,’” Weber explains, “which it stamps into purposes in its activities and this translates into teleological-rational action.”⁵⁵ The development of personality is also closely tied to Weber’s understanding of freedom. Unlike the romantic individualists who Weber’s critique of modernity sometimes resembles, Weber’s notion of freedom does not valorize spontaneity or denigrate routine behavior. Weber instead maintains that the development of a personality leads one’s actions more reliably toward the realization of one’s values, and in that sense creates a distinctive pattern of life. Nonetheless, Weber’s conception of personality is strongly individualistic, entailing value commitments “undistorted by outer compulsion or irresistible affects.” Weberian freedom is therefore signified by a relationship of integrity and self-constancy. Weber asserts that European culture since the Protestant Reformation has proven uniquely hospitable to the cultivation of the free personality. By comparison, many cultures and eras have supported conceptions of the self that de-emphasized worldly accomplishments and thus

made the realization of values in action a secondary concern. Weber argues, for example, that Confucianism and other Eastern religions have encouraged individuals to adapt to their circumstances rather than bending circumstances to their own ends. For Weber, such an individual fails to constitute itself as an autonomous personality: "An optimally adjusted human subject, rationalized *only* in the degree of adaptation required by a particular *Lebensführung* [lifestyle], has no systematic unity but is rather composed of a combination of useful individual qualities."⁵⁶ As we shall see, this adaptive self is in many ways similar to the structure of personality, or more aptly the lack thereof, that Weber criticizes in the context of bureaucratic society.

The Occidental personality is therefore only one among many human types that emerges in the course of history, and insofar as it has enjoyed a brief period of predominance in modern Europe, this is mostly taken by Weber to be an accidental outgrowth of the Protestant Reformation and its associated practices of self-discipline, what Weber called "asceticism." He explains that "the Puritan—like every 'rational'—asceticism worked to enable man to maintain and realize his 'constant motives,' especially those that it itself 'trained' in him against the 'affects': thereby educating him, therefore, into a 'personality' in this formal-psychological sense of the word."⁵⁷ Weber sees the Protestant Reformation as such an important event in the history of the West because it leads certain Protestants, particularly Calvinists and Puritans, to infuse their worldly pursuits with ethical significance by orienting asceticism toward economic life. Weber argues in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that whereas Catholicism had left asceticism to the monasteries in the conviction that worldly deeds were irrelevant to the salvation of the soul, Protestantism connects work to salvation. Commitment to one's "calling" or "vocation" becomes an ascetic practice in its own right. A personality committed, above all else, to the spheres of business turns out to be a fortuitous development in European history, since the infusion of ethical significance into economic life allows the acquisition of wealth to become a legitimate and pressing concern and thereby provides a major impetus to the development of modern capitalist society. The ethical reorientation that takes place during the Reformation is of paradoxical significance in Weber's narrative of modernity. On the one hand, it contributes a strong ethical foundation to the individualistic values of modernity by giving rise to "the type of attitude which sees and judges the world consciously in terms of the worldly interests of the individual ego."⁵⁸ This attitude, which Weber calls "practical rationality," obtains a new ethical warrant after the

Reformation for the reasons discussed above. On the other hand, the infusion of human effort into the economic sphere contributes to the emergence of a new institutional order whose characteristic modes of organization obstruct the development of personality and the pursuit of ethical values.

In contrast to his utopian forebears in the field of sociology, Weber's account of history emphasizes contingencies, reversals, and unexpected transformations. Even Weber's notion of "rationalization," which can be misconstrued as a stand-in for progress, indicates a complex and even conflictual set of processes.⁵⁹ At various points in his body of work, Weber applies the concept of rationalization to developments in the spheres of law, religion, and culture, to the emergence of a scientific worldview (which he also calls "intellectualization"), and to the expansion of bureaucratic forms of social organization. And we have already encountered the "practical" rationalization of individual life-conduct accomplished through asceticism. Analytically, these various processes can be grouped together because each attempts a systematization of its subject domain, moving in the direction of predictability and control. But historically speaking, these processes bear no necessary relationship to one another, and indeed often conflict. Reflecting his absorption of Nietzsche's perspectivism, Weber held that "the history of rationalism shows a development which by no means follows parallel lines in the various departments of life," and indeed each of these can be said to "rationalize life from fundamentally different basic points of view and in very different directions."⁶⁰ Weber tells a story in which the rationalization of life-conduct prompted by the Protestant Reformation contributed to the broader rationalization of society under the market and the bureaucratic state. Protestantism therefore "did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order" including "the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all individuals who are born into this mechanism."⁶¹

Weber characterizes "modern culture, and specifically of its technical and economic basis" in terms of its demand for predictability and "calculability of results."⁶² Capitalists seeking to maximize their profits must be able to accurately calculate their costs and revenues, and such accounting is only possible when business is conducted under relatively stable conditions of production, distribution, and exchange. As a result, Weber alleges, capitalism provides a critical impetus for the development of the modern bureaucratic order: "The main inner foundation of the modern capitalist business is calculation. In order to exist, it requires a system of justice and

administration which, in principle, at any rate, function in a rationally calculable manner according to stable, general norms, just as one calculates the predictable performance of a machine."⁶³ However, the bureaucracy is not the only institution that serves to expand the realm of the calculable. The organization of the factory is also based on "rational calculation," such that "the performance of each individual is mathematically measured, each man becomes a little cog in the machine."⁶⁴

While Weber does have a particular concern with the workings of the administrative state, his concept of bureaucracy generalizes to those mass organizational structures of which the state "agency" and the private "enterprise" are each subtypes.⁶⁵ Bureaucracies are specialized institutions for translating knowledge into action. Each of their essential aspects—their hierarchical organization, their strict specialization of roles, and their use of general decision-making rules—facilitates the efficient application of available knowledge to politics and industry. Weber's understanding of bureaucracy is informed by his studies of ancient civilizations, and he seems to have been fascinated and disturbed by the massive bureaucracy of the Egyptians and its resemblance to the emerging bureaucratic order. Bureaucracy, then, is not peculiar to modernity, but Weber nonetheless maintains that the economic, cultural, and technology "complexity" of modern civilization makes bureaucracy necessary to an unprecedented extent.⁶⁶ Moreover, when compared to its ancient predecessors, modern bureaucracy "is distinguished by a characteristic which makes its inescapability far greater . . . namely rational, technical specialization and training."⁶⁷ And the bureaucracy has become so inextricably caught up in the provision of social services, the organization of communication, the policing of society, and other modern social functions that the "entire organization of providing even the most basic needs in life" would falter without it. For these reasons, Weber concludes that the modern bureaucracy is "unbreakable."

Despite its organizational advantages, Weber takes the expansion of bureaucracy to threaten freedom and depersonalize social interaction. As bureaucracy "develops more perfectly, the more it is 'dehumanized,' the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation."⁶⁸ This includes the ethical commitments that the individuals who comprise a given bureaucracy happen to hold. It is an aspect of bureaucratic professionalism to suspend one's personal convictions and dispense the

rules of the organization dispassionately. The impersonal quality of modern social relations also extends to the way that individuals understand their social roles. The “class of proprietors” who direct economic life at the most general level do so anonymously and from behind the scenes, substituting “an unknown, invisible and intangible power in the place of personal subordination” and “removing in this way the possibility of comprehending the relation of ruling to ruled in ethical and religious terms.”⁶⁹ Instead, the relations between loan recipients or debtors and their banks, employees and their employers, and all other economically rationalized social relations must be handled in accord with strict rules.

Thus, one of the major tendencies of modern society is the gradual displacement of ethical orientations as a basis for action, and the predominance of instrumental considerations. This is the phenomenon that Weber refers to as discipline: “the consistently rationalized, methodically prepared and exact execution of the received order, in which all personal criticism is unconditionally suspended and the actor is unswervingly and exclusively set for carrying out the command.”⁷⁰ Bureaucratic discipline in this sense opposes the *self-discipline* characteristic of the autonomous personality. One must either internalize the purposes of the organization or else learn to compartmentalize one’s ethical commitments and personal dispositions so as to prevent their interference. In either case, the bureaucratic discipline means distancing oneself from internally generated motives and acting on the basis of pre-given rules *as though they were one’s own*: “to execute conscientiously the order of the superior authorities exactly as if the order agreed with his own conviction.”⁷¹

A similar merging of the individual and the mass organization takes place under the auspices of discipline in the factory setting. Compared with the management of plantations in the pre-industrial world,

the organizational discipline in the factory has a completely rational basis. With the help of suitable methods of measurement, the optimal profitability of the individual worker is calculated like that of any means of material production. On this basis, the American system of “scientific management” triumphantly proceeds with its rational conditioning and training of work performances, thus drawing the ultimate conclusions from the mechanization and discipline of the plant. The psycho-physical apparatus of man is completely adjusted to the demands of the outer world, the tools, the machines—in short, is functionalized and the in-

dividual is shorn of his natural rhythm as determined by his organism; in line with the demands of the work procedure, he is attuned to a new rhythm through the functional specialization of muscles and through the creation of an optimal economy of physical effort.⁷²

To an even greater extent than the bureaucracy, the factory imposes an inflexible regime of disciplinary training on the operations of the body and the mind. Weber's analysis echoes Marx's account of alienated labor, and indeed it is possible to read such passages from Weber as expressing a complementary account of alienation. But whereas Marx takes alienation to be a function of the displacement of one's power to produce in accord with one's own desires, Weber typically emphasizes the *ethical* component, the displacement of one's convictions, and the structure of personality to which they contribute. Everywhere that uniformity and predictability are required, this sort of rationalization advances, reducing individuals to "uniformly conditioned masses" and restricting the importance of "individually differentiated conduct."⁷³ In one particularly dismal passage, Weber describes the factory as a "lifeless machine" and the bureaucracy as a "living machine"; the former has "the power to force men to serve it and thus to rule and determine their daily working lives" while the latter imposes discipline through "its specialisation of trained, technical work, its delimitation of areas of responsibility, its regulations and its graduated hierarchy of relations of obedience."⁷⁴ Together, Weber claims, the two machines are "manufacturing the housing of future serfdom."

Despite these affinities with Marx, Weber sees the subjection manifest in these modern institutions as being too deeply ingrained in modern society to be revolted against. The fact that the alienation of the laborer is not a privileged instance of alienation in his thinking, as it is in Marx's, contributes to this difficulty. The participants in any mass organization with disciplinary measures experience alienation, and Weber sees socialism as offering no alternative to this predicament. Indeed, since Weber argues that bureaucratic institutions respond to the complexity of modern societies, he anticipates that they will only grow more entrenched. To nationalize or socialize industry would not fundamentally resolve the "expropriation" of the workers; it would only extend the bureaucracy and facilitate the expropriation of the property-owning classes as well. As far as Weber was concerned, the benevolent feudalism of the United States, the welfare institutions of Germany, and the factory system of Russia all

presented variations on the same underlying structure of domination, a structure that was built into modern industrial society whether it was conceived of as socialistic or capitalistic. For this reason, Weber dismisses the expectation that socialism will shatter the iron cage of the modern industrial world.

Once these utopian horizons are closed off, the inhabitants of the modern world must peer into a future that is devoid of redemptive possibilities, and in which a disturbing evolutionary tendency is underway. Weber feared that the rise of bureaucratic society would ultimately lead to the dissolution of the personality and that the regimentation of modern society produces a human type conditioned for obedience. Weber laments this trajectory, and the complacency with which his contemporaries accepted the trade-off between freedom and efficiency:

It is as if in politics the spectre of timidity—which has in any case always been rather a good standby for the German—were to stand alone at the helm; as if we were deliberately to become men who need “order” and nothing but order, who become nervous and cowardly if for one moment this order wavers, and helpless if they are torn away from their total incorporation in it. That the world should know no men but these: it is in such an evolution that we are already caught up, and the great question is therefore not how we can promote and hasten it, but what can we oppose to this machinery in order to keep a portion of mankind free from this parceling-out of the soul, from this supreme mastery of the bureaucratic way of life. . . . The problem which besets us now is not: how can this evolution be changed?—for that is impossible, but what will come of it?⁷⁵

THE MATHEMATICALLY PERFECT LIFE OF THE ONE STATE: ZAMYATIN’S *WE*

One might read Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* as a response to exactly this question—“What will come of it?” Zamyatin, a satirist and novelist, explores more imaginatively the existential concerns regarding which Weber could only raise questions: the qualitative dimensions of human life in the iron cage of rationality. Today, *We* is best known for setting in motion the sequence of negative utopias that includes Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932),

Ayn Rand's *Anthem* (1938), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* (1952), among others. Each book offers an inside view of a future society that negates individual freedom and identity in the interest of social control. Zamyatin's seminal novel created this genre with nearly all its defining tropes in place by crystallizing elements of anti-utopian satire, Wellsian science fiction, and modernist literature.

Literary and philosophical attacks on utopianism have been as common in modern thought as the utopias to which they respond. Machiavelli's dismissal of ideal commonwealths and Edmund Burke's critique of revolutionary politics are two of the best-known calls for politics to turn away from utopian illusions and engage the human world in all its uncertainty. In general, anti-utopian thought warns that utopian aspirations are unattainable, undesirable, or too costly to implement. As More's *Utopia* and its many imitators became touchstones of modern thought, these anti-utopian sentiments are amplified in a new form of satire. Books like Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872) depicted societies that initially appear to be utopias, while slyly suggesting that utopia would be no place for humanity even if it could be found. Zamyatin seems to have been strongly influenced by Dostoevsky in particular, not only by the revolt against rationalism dramatized in *Notes from the Underground* but also by the saga of revolution gone awry in *Demons* (1872) and above all the parable of the Grand Inquisitor, with its scathing condemnation of a humanity that trades freedom and spiritual nobility for comfort. As industrialization and revolutionary forms of socialism and anarchism bring utopia tantalizingly within reach, the anti-utopian protest becomes louder and the contrast it insists on becomes more stark: we may live an imperfect life as human beings, or a perfect life as numbers, machines, or animals, free from strife but devoid of will or personality.⁷⁶ Zamyatin saw the danger of utopian radicalism firsthand, watching the Communist movement he had supported grow increasingly authoritarian and dogmatic in the wake of the October Revolution. *We*, which satirizes the idea of a "final revolution," was the first book to be banned by Soviet censors, a sign that the totalitarian future depicted in the novel was already coming into being. But it would be simplistic to reduce *We* to a reaction against socialism or Communism. *We* presents Zamyatin's vision of the future of modern society, and in that respect it concerns both the future of socialism and the future of capitalism. Zamyatin seems to have shared Weber's suspicion that both economic systems support variations on the same regimented and repressive industrial society.

In trying to extrapolate the features of the future society from the present, Zamyatin drew heavily on Wells. The overall character of Zamyatin's *One State*, a regimented, urban-industrial dictatorship with global reach, as well as many of its details, such as the apartment blocks, walls against nature, and the strange remnants of antiquity, resemble Wells's darker tales of the future, particularly "A Story of the Days to Come" and *When the Sleeper Wakes*, works that Zamyatin described as "utopias with a negative sign." Whereas later dystopian writers, notably Huxley, would describe their works as satires of the Wellsian utopia, Zamyatin was more attentive to the pessimism that punctuated Wells's early work, and thus he tended to read Wells more as a social critic than as a prophet of utopia. What Zamyatin found appealing about Wells's "socio-fantastic" tales was their capacity to depict the strangeness and wonder of the modern world.⁷⁷ To a large extent, the urban-industrial world of Wells's London still lay ahead of Russia, and so there was a real sense in which Wells offered dispatches from the future. By refracting the tendencies of a rapidly changing society through an imaginative prism, Wells created works that many read as pure entertainment, but which Zamyatin saw as a kind of myth or fairy tale for the modern age. Zamyatin himself frequently lobbied for an infusion of such fantastic sensibilities into modern Russian fiction, arguing against what he saw as the oppressive sterility of realist literature.⁷⁸ In a world whose wonders and terrors routinely outstripped the novelist's wildest imaginings, only the boldest visions stood even a chance of capturing the new reality.

The reality that Zamyatin is most concerned to invoke, however, is not principally sociological. *We* dramatizes a psychological and even spiritual predicament, examining the breakdown of the self under a totalizing system of social control. Thus, Zamyatin deploys a narrative technique that foregrounds the subjective experience of the future society: the entire novel is related via dispatches from the diary of its protagonist, D-503. This technique is replicated in passages of Rand's *Anthem* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, both of which echo Zamyatin's insight that writing becomes the last refuge of consciousness and self-reflection in a society organized by unthinking obedience. Stylistically, D-503's writings are terse, telegraphic, and largely devoid of wit or inventive expression, reflecting the extent to which he has internalized the dictates of the One State, wherein art, no less than engineering, is governed by virtues of efficiency and rationality. As the novel progresses and D-503 comes into conflict with the One State, his ability to translate his thoughts and feelings into words diminishes, and

thus the narrative point of view grows strained, even fragmented. What Zamyatin's novel depicts is not only an individual in conflict with the social order, but a consciousness in conflict with itself, a mind straining against its psychological fetters. We's attentiveness to the subjective dimension of experience shows its affinity with the modernist novels that were emerging in Europe and the United States during the early twentieth century, but Zamyatin's novel is one of the few to couple this sense of interiority with concerns that are essentially social and historical. D-503's crisis is a result of his attempt to live a human life under inhuman conditions. This attempt is not the result of romantic protest but of something that the protagonist, no less than the authorities with whom he comes into conflict, view as a birth defect. D-503 has been born with *a soul*; the evidence of this is that *he dreams*. Ironically, it is the totalizing demand for rationality that pushes the self past the limits of sanity.

We begins with a dispatch from D-503 that informs us of the One State's intention to extend its rationalizing mission beyond the confines of the Earth: he is an engineer, at work on the spaceship *Integral*, the means by which the One State will abolish "the primitive condition of freedom" and subjugate the known universe to "the beneficent yoke of reason."⁷⁹ Simply by recording his thought, D-503 experiences a level of self-awareness that seems to distance him from the collective. He resolves to produce a record of "what we think," but finds himself in conversation with something else: "It is I, but at the same time not I."⁸⁰ As the plot develops, D-503's burgeoning self-consciousness increasingly interferes with his ability to function within the constraints of the One State. First, however, he must introduce the reader to the "mathematically perfect life" that the One State makes possible, and its characteristic institutions. The defining feature of the One State, as with Weber's bureaucratic society, is that calculation rules every aspect of social life. Zamyatin also joins Weber in extrapolating a dehumanizing organization of labor from the scientific management of the modern factory, describing a regimented system of "Taylor exercises" that govern work performed "in million-headed unison."⁸¹ Though D-503 maintains that "Taylor was unquestionably the greatest genius of the ancients" (whereas Kant, Dostoevsky, and William Shakespeare, among others, are held in contempt), he notes that Taylor failed to extend his method "to all of life, to every step, to the twenty-four hours of every day."⁸² In the One State, this can be accomplished through the Table of Hours, which organizes the daily life of its subjects with relentless efficiency, down to their Personal Hours and sexual

relationships. D-503 insinuates that these aspects of life, which seem to indicate a stratum of personality that exists apart from the needs and wants of the collective, would have been abolished entirely if there was an effective means of doing so.

It is after engaging in a scheduled liaison with I-330 that D-503 finds himself succumbing to his atavistic emotional longings. D-503 recognizes that his attraction to I-330 is irrational and that his willingness to transgress the rules of the One State in order to see her again puts him in danger. By this point it has already been established that when something “unforeseen” or “uncalculated” transpires, the penalty is execution—or as it is called in the euphemistic lingo of the One State, “a celebration of Justice.”⁸³ The mathematically minded D-503 also shows a strong personal attachment to the rituals and strictures of his society, which keep his natural fear of what he cannot comprehend through formulae in check. One of the many dreams and reminiscences to which D-503 becomes vulnerable after meeting I-330 includes a reflection on his early education in mathematics. D-503 recalls learning that the square root of a negative one is an irrational number, a discovery that unsettles his faith in mathematical certainty. “The irrational number had grown into something foreign, alien, terrifying. It devoured me—it was impossible to conceive, to render harmless, because it was outside ratio.”⁸⁴ Despite his trepidation about the irrational forces within his own mind and body, D-503 finds that his passion for I-330 makes it increasingly difficult for him to conform. His first act of defiance is to fake an illness so he can meet up with I-330, but he also has his secret dreams, his writings: the symptoms of having a soul. D-503 undergoes a transformation that makes him an outsider to the great mass of the One State. When he tries to return to work, for example, he can only observe with detachment: “I watched the men below me move in regular, rapid rhythm, according to the Taylor system, bending, unbending, turning like the levers of a single huge machine.”⁸⁵ D-503 longs to join them, “shoulder to shoulder, welded together,” but he fears that he has already distanced himself from the group too extensively. “Never again would I merge into the regular, precise, mechanical rhythm, never again float on the mirrorlike, untroubled sea.”

As D-503 spends more time with I-330, he learns that she is part of a rebellion against the One State, though he himself is too fearful to take any part, or have even any real interest, in the cause. Despite his efforts to maintain self-discipline, D-503’s awakening leads him to rebel. During a mandated daily walk, he notices one woman has broken ranks with the group.

Initially, D-503 is stunned—he likens this trivial deviation from routine to a meteor strike in order to register his surprise. But he realizes that his overseers are moving in to whip the woman for her breach of order, and in that moment he believes that the woman is I-330, and so he leaps in front of her: “Without reasoning—is it allowed, forbidden, rational, absurd?—I flung myself toward that point.”⁸⁶ D-503 fears that his action made him conspicuous to the One State, but he is allowed to continue working on the *Integral*. Meanwhile, I-330’s rebellion is growing stronger; she even has the temerity to disrupt the “Unanimity Day” ceremony, which celebrates the (naturally) unanimous reelection of the Benefactor. Fatefully, for D-503, the rebellion also has designs on the *Integral*. I-330 and her comrades fear the completion of the Benefactor’s project, which would reduce the entire universe to “uniformity” and “psychological entropy.”⁸⁷ Earlier in the book, D-503 had declared that the One State was only a few steps away from “the ideal,” a social condition “where nothing happens anymore.”⁸⁸ I-330, however, wants to prove that things can still happen. She assures D-503 that “no one knows what tomorrow will be . . . Now all things will be new, unprecedented, inconceivable.”⁸⁹

But whereas I-330 finds this injection of uncertainty exhilarating, D-503 is frightened of what he cannot predict. All he can do is worry: “What will happen tomorrow? What will I turn into tomorrow?”⁹⁰ Eventually, D-503 agrees to undergo a “Great Operation” that will cure him of his affliction. This procedure involves the amputation of the imagination. Once the procedure is complete, D-503 is free of the hopes and fears that made his life so unbearably uncertain. At that point, D-503 is able to return to his normal life in the One State. Before long he is meeting with the Benefactor himself to discuss plans for the *Integral*. In a conversation evidently modeled on Dostoevsky’s parable of the Grand Inquisitor, the Benefactor lays out the rationale for his social order and strips away what is left of D-503’s faith in the rebellion. Anticipating all of D-503’s arguments, the Benefactor positions himself as the true lover of humanity, it is just that “true algebraic love of humanity is always inhuman.”⁹¹ The Benefactor can only live up to his name if he can presume that people want and need the same things, with all differences ignored. Then it becomes possible to make everyone happy. According to the Benefactor, this is all that his subjects, and indeed any human beings, have ever wanted. “I ask you: what did people—from their very infancy—pray for, dream about, long for? They longed for someone to tell them, once and for all, the meaning of happiness, and then to bind them to it with a chain.”⁹²

Unable to reply to the Benefactor's challenges, D-503 acquiesces to complete the *Integral* and return to his daily life. Before long he has forgotten about his strange internal awakening, about I-330, and about the rebellion. He once again inhabits a world where "everything is finite, everything is simple, everything is calculable."⁹³ At the end of the book, the One State is eliminating all trace of the rebellion: its leaders are being subjected to the same Great Operation that D-503 underwent, and the damage they did to the city walls on Unanimity Day is gradually repaired. This is the only way forward for D-503 now. "I am certain that we shall conquer," he writes by way of bringing his diary to a close. "Because Reason must prevail."

CONCLUSION

In the works of Weber and Zamyatin, we find the dystopian imagination fully coalesced. Each weighed the prospects for revolution and domination in the modern world and wagered, however much they might have hoped to be proven wrong, that the latter would prevail. In their writings, the rational society that had been hailed in various forms by Enlightenment progressives, utopian socialists, and Marxist revolutionaries assumes nightmarish form. While it may seem odd to read their work side by side, given that Weber wrote as a social scientist and Zamyatin as a novelist, we have seen above how frequently their lines of thinking converged in both diagnosis and prognosis. Taken together, they depict the rational society as a social science fiction, something that does not yet exist but is gradually creeping into the world, with little to stand against it. Each writer acknowledges that he can only speculate about the shape the emerging social order will take and the form of human life—if it can even be called human life—that will exist within its parameters. For Weber, it is a prison of steel, for Zamyatin, of glass; for both, it is a cruel reversal of the hopes that had enlivened the modern space of possibilities.

Despite these similarities, Zamyatin's pessimism was less total than Weber's. The latter thinker, as we have seen, renounced all faith in redemptive politics. While he observed the "intoxication" of revolution among his peers and students, Weber harbored no such enthusiasm. "Not summer's bloom lies ahead of us," he warned, "but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness, no matter which group may triumph externally now."⁹⁴ In the shadow of the bureaucratized world, heroism remained only in the

moral and intellectual integrity of the individual. Weber could offer nothing more than a clear-sighted and unsympathetic diagnosis of the perils that lay ahead. Zamyatin, for his part, kept faith in revolution, albeit a heretical kind that moved at once beneath and beyond the political sphere. Like I-330, Zamyatin believed that there is no “final revolution” beyond which a perfect order can be enjoyed, for “revolutions are infinite.”⁹⁵ He only rankled at the expectation that his imagination should be yoked to the production of useful propaganda. He believed he could do more to advance the principles that had inspired the revolution if he wrote to challenge “calcification, sclerosis, rust, moss, quiescence.”⁹⁶ This form of writing was “utopian, absurd—like Babeuf in 1797,” he admitted, but “it is right 150 years later.” Like the many writers who would follow him to dystopia, Zamyatin was making an appeal to the future. As it turned out, *We* wasn’t published in the Soviet Union until 1988, by which point it had already become a classic of world literature. Zamyatin may have intended his novel as a time capsule, but within a few years it would ignite the imagination of readers around the world, translated for audiences in the United States, France, and Czechoslovakia over the next decade. For one British writer, the book had taken on a nearly mythical status by the end of the Second World War. “I have at last got my hands on a copy of Zamyatin’s *We*,” wrote Orwell, who obtained a French edition in 1945.⁹⁷ The novel found an eager reader in Orwell, who had already devoured dystopias by Wells and Huxley, among others. He was by then brooding over his own dark vision of the future.

CHAPTER TWO

Utopia and Its Negative

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The eclipse of utopian thought and writing by dystopian novels like *We*, *Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has often been invoked as a stand-in for the epochal shift in mood precipitated by the political and technological horrors of the early twentieth century. In the postwar era, liberal theorists attacked the feasibility, likelihood, and desirability of political utopianism, arguing that it proceeded from a fundamental misunderstanding of the human condition, overestimating our knowledge and overextending our power. The skepticism toward utopian ideals that realist and conservative thought had counseled for centuries became the conventional wisdom of the twentieth century, especially for intellectuals who interpreted totalitarianism as an outgrowth of utopianism. From this vantage point, dystopia was not just a warning about the future, but specifically a warning about the perils of political utopianism and transformative politics.

This chapter further examines the relationship between utopia and dystopia, considering dystopia both as a critical counterpoint to the utopian imagination and as an extension thereof. It presents the anti-utopian turn in postwar thought as a backdrop against which to reconsider Huxley and Orwell's canonical dystopias and their appeal to the political imagination. With *Brave New World*, Huxley famously satirized modern utopianism; in the less discussed works that followed he called for social reorganization based on the humanistic values that his dystopia excluded, despite his fear that the modern world made this task impossible. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell's ascendant oligarchy carries out a counterrevolution to avert the realization of an egalitarian society, and the consummation of their totalitarian social order is premised on the eradication of utopian ideals from historical consciousness. Whereas anti-utopians declared and even celebrated the death of utopia, Huxley

and Orwell remained stewards of a utopian imagination they understood to be endangered by the worship of power and efficiency.

IN THE FIRST ACT of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as Orwell's protagonist Winston Smith begins the heretical task of keeping a diary, he contemplates the likely futility of the exercise, wondering: "How could you make an appeal to the future when not a trace of you, not even an anonymous word scribbled on a piece of paper, could physically survive?"¹ Winston persists because he conceives of the diary as a time capsule, a message "for an age that might be imaginary" and "to a time when thought is free."² Winston never manages to overcome his own fatalism—he knows that his rebellion against the Party will fail and that the cost will be his life—but his belief that there is a future worth fighting for, one whose possibilities are not exhausted by the present, gives him the resolve to write and, eventually, to act. It is the act of political imagination from which the rest of the novel proceeds.

Winston resembles his creator in many respects, but he never seems more like Orwell than in this early sequence, equipped with nothing more than his words and with nothing less than the future at stake. Orwell, like the other great dystopian writers of the twentieth century, was making his own desperate appeal to the future—his own act of political imagination. In 1947, already at work drafting *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell wrote that "the greatest difficulty of all is the apathy and conservatism of people everywhere, their unawareness of danger, their inability to imagine anything new."³ The same year, he wrote that the "business of making people *conscious* of what is happening outside their own small circle is one of the major problems of our time, and a new literary technique will have to be evolved to meet it."⁴ With *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell would try to awaken the political imagination from passivity. As Irving Howe would remark, Orwell "understood that the imagination is primarily the capacity for apprehending reality, for seeing both clearly and deeply whatever it is that exists."⁵ Dystopian writers must invent and exaggerate, must indulge the pessimism of the intellect to the extreme, but they do so with the intention of clarifying reality, perhaps in a manner that a more disciplined realism could not. Orwell, like Zamyatin and Huxley before him, fashioned the image of the future into a powerful instrument of social criticism, representing the dangers that lay ahead of the present and urging a change of course.

These three writers gave canonical form to what came to be called the "negative utopia" or "anti-utopia," a genre of political writing well suited to an

era of shocking political evils. In the postwar decades, mainstream political theorists proclaimed the death of utopia, and many such thinkers understood Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell to have written its epitaph.⁶ However, this rendering obscures the more demanding claim that these works make on the political imagination. Just as Zamyatin had concluded *We* with the surgical removal of the imagination, Huxley and Orwell would both warn against the foreclosure of the utopian imagination as a precondition of the dystopian *nonfutures* against which they intervened. “Negative utopia,” then, remains an apt description of these works, not because they themselves seek to negate utopia but insofar as they depict the consequences of its negation: the closure of the imagination and with it the future itself.

THE CASE AGAINST UTOPIA

If the modern space of possibilities was defined by the confluence of futurity and mastery that brought utopian futures into view, then the shattering of those expectations by the decades of total war and totalitarian rule seemed to inaugurate a new chapter of modernity. As indicated by the numerous commentaries on the “end,” “death,” “decline,” or “exhaustion” of utopia that proliferated during the postwar era, the exclusion of utopias from the modern space of possibilities emerged as one of the underlying conditions of political thought in the twentieth century. Though some writers feared that the death of utopia would yield a politics of passivity and despair, most European and American intellectuals—among them liberals, conservatives, and disillusioned socialists—agreed that the renunciation of utopia was a necessary maturation following an era when the political imagination had turned dangerously megalomaniacal. In some cases, novel experiences amplified realist and conservative critiques of utopianism that had been staked out centuries earlier, while in others they generated new lines of criticism that emphasized the drastically altered modern economies of technical and political power. Taken together, these critiques indicated a central contradiction of modern historical experience: that utopia had grown distant and perhaps even dangerous at precisely the historical juncture where its realization had been closest to hand.

The easiest task for the anti-utopian was to show that, given the recent course of world events, a utopian future could no longer be considered likely, let alone inevitable. The progressive and teleological vision of history that

had animated modern utopianism may have withstood the pessimism of the fin-de-siècle intellectuals, but it was no match for the historical record of the twentieth century. Arthur Schlesinger captured this irrevocable shift in expectations when he wrote that “nineteen hundred looked forward to the irresistible expansion of freedom, democracy, and abundance; 1950 will look back to totalitarianism, to concentration camps, to atomic war.”⁷ As a result, utopia could be seen as one casualty of the loss of confidence in progress, deprived of relevance insofar as its underlying philosophy of history had been discredited. Judith Shklar prefaced her own postmortem on utopianism by asserting that “no reasonable person can today believe in any ‘law’ of progress. In the age of two world wars, totalitarian dictatorship, and mass murder this faith can be regarded only as simple-minded, or even worse, as a contemptible form of complacency.”⁸

Perhaps utopia could have survived the death of progress. The type of utopianism that Marx rejected precisely for its voluntarism—wherein utopias are possibilities that can be realized or deferred *in* history rather than predetermined outcomes *of* history—could in theory remain viable without the scaffolding of historical law. But the case against utopia also included influential challenges to the coherence and desirability of utopian ideals. Critics of Marxism like Isaiah Berlin and Jacob Talmon targeted the metaphysical and epistemological underpinnings of utopianism, confronting the ambition to rationally order society with what they took to be the insuperable limitations of human nature and human knowledge. For Berlin, utopia signified the “idea of a perfect society,” formed in response to the ills of human history: a static and harmonious society free from danger, insecurity, injustice, violence, even want and physical toil, “in which all natural human wishes are fulfilled.”⁹ Hence Berlin understood political utopianism to rest on the assumption that all human problems could be solved by the construction of an adequately rational social order. Berlin argued that this worldview had received its most recent and significant stimulus from the Scientific Revolution, which suggested to the modern utopians that the rational mastery of human affairs could yield “a single, coherent, perfectly orderly system.”¹⁰

Likewise, for Talmon, utopianism meant “that one assumes as possible (or even expects as inevitable) an ultimate condition of absolute harmony in which individual self-expression and social cohesion, though seemingly incompatible, will be combined.”¹¹ According to Talmon, the *sine qua non*

of modern utopianism was a form of political rationalism based on the application of “abstract principles of reason” to society.¹² Thus, the radicalism of the French Revolution, expressed most prominently by the Jacobins, represented the dangerous allure of utopianism, and Burke’s critique was the starting point for a redemption of practical politics from the excesses of rationalism. Talmon bid those who would engage in politics to turn away from perfectionist programs and concern themselves instead with what he took to be the proper subject matter of political life: the “intractable material” of human nature, the “concrete data of experience,” and “the limitations inherent in any historical situation.”¹³ For his part, Berlin credited the Romantic critique of rationalism and its “interpretation of the world as a battle of perpetually new and ceaselessly conflicting wills, individual or collective” with dislodging the utopian ideal.¹⁴ “If some ends recognized as fully human are at the same time ultimate and mutually incompatible,” he wrote, “then the idea of a golden age, a perfect society compounded of a synthesis of all the correct solutions to all the problems of human life, is shown to be incoherent in principle.”¹⁵

If utopia could survive without progress, might it survive without perfection? Perhaps utopians could concede that their visions would only ever be approximated and still pursue them, as ideals, if not as blueprints.¹⁶ Anti-utopians, however, were deeply critical of what utopian enthusiasm had wrought in practice, and some argued that even a partial and piecemeal pursuit of utopia would prove dangerous. Berlin suggested that utopianism was ultimately incompatible with human freedom, and saw the profusion of negative utopias during the first half of the twentieth century as an expression of revolt against the coercion implicit in the ideal of utopian harmony:

From this time onward, believers in the possibility of social perfection tend to be accused by their opponents of trying to foist an artificial order on a reluctant humanity, of trying to fit human beings, like bricks, into a preconceived structure, force them into Procrustean beds, and vivisect living men in the pursuit of some fanatically held schema. Hence the protests—and anti-Utopias—of Aldous Huxley, or Orwell, or Zamyatin (in Russia in the early 1920s), who paint a horrifying picture of a frictionless society in which differences between human beings are, as far as possible, eliminated, or at least reduced, and the multi-coloured pattern of the variety of human temperaments, inclinations, ideals—in short,

the flow of life—is brutally reduced to uniformity, pressed into a social and political straitjacket which hurts and maims and ends by crushing men in the name of a monistic theory, a dream of a perfect, static order.¹⁷

By asserting a connection between utopian perfection and dystopian domination, Berlin spoke for the many political thinkers of his era who believed that the most significant consequences of Western utopianism had been the totalitarian experiments of Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and especially in the Soviet Union, where the revolutionary movement was most overtly utopian in its aims, and for that reason more sympathetic to Western intellectuals. Stalinist terror provided the major impetus for liberals and disillusioned socialists to turn against utopianism, with the Russian Revolution and its aftermath coming to play a role in liberal utopian thought analogous to the critique of the French Revolution in conservative thought.

For the anti-utopian thinkers of the left, right, and center who contended that the brutality of totalitarian regimes directly reflected the utopian ambitions of their ideological programs, two major suspicions had been confirmed. First, that the degree of coordination required to actualize a wholesale program of social transformation, let alone to impose the uniform standards of conduct characteristic of many utopias, demands an extreme centralization of power and a disregard for individual liberty. This type of argument is developed most extensively by liberal critics of utopia, with one prominent example being Karl Popper's argument against "utopian engineering," which highlights the dangers of pursuing social transformation on a massive scale, even in pursuit of admirable goods.¹⁸ Popper alleged that "the Utopian attempt to realize an ideal state, using a blueprint of society as a whole, is one which demands a strong centralized rule of a few, and which therefore is likely to lead to a dictatorship."¹⁹

And, second, that utopianism invites fanaticism on a scale that more modest political programs do not: as an ultimate end, utopia seems to justify all means, including the sacrifice of extant goods for remote possibilities, of the few for the many, of the present for the future. Berlin reasoned that once the possibility of utopia is accepted, "then surely no price is too heavy to pay for it; no amount of oppression, cruelty, repression, coercion will be too high if this, and this alone, is the price for ultimate salvation."²⁰ A variation on this argument also developed from the premises of conservative antiradicalism. Talmon, among others, alleged that the roots of "totalitarian coercion" lay in "that type of Messianic revolutionary experience, in which the past is viewed

as a completely dominated by the forces of evil, and the future—which will come after a violent break—as guaranteeing a world of harmonious perfection.”²¹ Among the most striking inquiries into this ethical and psychological terrain are works by the disillusioned socialists who witnessed firsthand as their revolution gave rise to terror and repression. Zamyatin’s cautioning against the quixotic longing for a “final revolution” in *We* falls under this heading, as does Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, which documented the guilt and anxiety of revolutionaries-turned-inquisitors who “felt in ourselves the whole weight of responsibility for the superindividual life to come.”²²

Decisive as the totalitarian phenomenon was for provoking this anti-utopian turn, antipathy toward utopianism was not limited to antitotalitarian thought. Some wagered that totalitarianism metastasized dangerous latencies that were also implied in the ideals of the industrialized, democratic world. Whereas political action and technological innovation had appeared to earlier generations as means for the rational reconstruction of society, many anti-utopians of the twentieth century extended the cultural pessimism of the nineteenth by interpreting their inner logic as one of mechanical regimentation and depersonalization. This sentiment, which Shklar termed “the romanticism of defeat,” rendered modern societies as sites of profound alienation:

The great tragedy of the present age is that history, society, and politics, for all their significance to our real self, press upon us unavoidably. The outer world is crushing the unique individual. Society is depriving us of our selfhood. The entire social universe today is totalitarian, not just some political movements and some states. Technology and the masses are the conditions of life everywhere today, and these, forming the very essence of totalitarianism, are the epitome of all the forces in society that have always threatened the individual personality.²³

While relatively few anti-utopians were so thorough in their pessimism, this sensibility speaks to the depth of disenchantment with progress and modernity writ large that inflected postwar thinking: a profound disquiet with the conditions of social life in “mass” or “technological” societies. If the progress of modern rationality had yielded an increase in alienation, then what could justify the assumption that further progress would lead to a solution? Might not the industrial and technological basis of industrial capitalism, with its concomitant “cult of efficiency” and its accompanying

technical ideals of perfection, eventually prove to be as rigid and dehumanizing as the political ideals animating totalitarian movements?²⁴ Part of what made totalitarianism so fearful to the Western intellectual was the suspicion that it merely intensified and exaggerated social pathologies to which every modern society was fundamentally susceptible. And to the extent that these tendencies were cheered along by would-be utopians, an anti-utopian mindset might prove necessary even in contexts seemingly well-insulated from totalitarian regimes and movements.

With such a variety of cutting arguments posed against utopianism, could anything be said in defense of the once robust tradition? Defenses of utopianism were rare during the twentieth century, but two German intellectuals, Ernst Bloch and Karl Mannheim, stand out for their insistence on the centrality of utopianism to the cultural and political consciousness of the modern world. But neither Bloch's nor Mannheim's defense of utopianism truly meets the critics of utopia head-on: neither conceives of utopianism as a static, harmonious, or perfect social order, and neither argues in favor of a centralized transformative program or revolutionary movement to implement one utopian scheme or another. For that matter, neither defends the specific political or technological manifestations of utopianism that distinguished modern utopianism from its ancient and Renaissance ancestors. Rather, they both move to submerge utopia as it was known to its critics within a wider body of cultural expression encompassing art, literature, myth, and religion, in addition to social and political thought. From this vantage point, it is possible to separate the critical and imaginative potential of utopianism, what Bloch called "the spirit of utopia" and Mannheim "the utopian mentality," from the particular aspirations of utopian thinkers, writers, and movements.²⁵ What mattered to Bloch and Mannheim was how utopian visions served to orient thought and action beyond the purely empirical world, holding open a space of possibilities capacious enough to sustain hope for a better, though never truly perfect, world. In Bloch's interpretation, utopia signifies the imagination of what is "Not-Yet," a method for anticipating future possibilities that reach beyond what is achievable or even comprehensible given present realities. It is less important to insist on the realization of such possibilities than to affirm the vitality of intellectual, political, and artistic works that bring them into view. Utopia then becomes a "principle of hope" and a perpetually "unfinished forward dream"—not a static program, but a dynamic horizon of expectations in which anticipation and achievement are related dialectically.²⁶ The same could be said for Mannheim, who defined utopia as a "mentality" that "transcends reality" and

“breaks beyond the existing order,” in contrast to the stabilizing ideologies that aim to close off the future in the name of the past and present.²⁷

Out of such arguments emerges a distinctive picture of human activity as an unending dialectic between the real and the imaginary, one in which the pursuit of utopia importantly structures the values and aspirations of reformers even as its definitive realization is continually deferred. The loss of utopia would then designate a dramatic restriction of human possibilities. It would risk erasing the gap between the real and the ideal that is the source of both frustration and hope in political life. Whereas anti-utopians like Berlin feared that utopianism could only culminate in the imposition of a static order on history and society, Mannheim believed that such an outcome was more likely to emerge from the loss of the utopian horizon:

The disappearance of utopia brings about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes no more than a thing. We would be faced then with the greatest paradox imaginable, namely, that man, who has achieved the highest degree of rational mastery of existence, left without any ideals, becomes a mere creature of impulses. Thus, after a long tortuous, but heroic development, just at the highest stage of awareness, when history is ceasing to be blind fate, and is becoming more and more man's own creation, with the relinquishment of utopias, man would lose his will to shape history and therewith his ability to understand it.²⁸

Arguments like Bloch's and Mannheim's contrast with those of their anti-utopian contemporaries, mourning the death of utopia and protesting the concomitant closure of the political imagination. Rather than dwelling on the traumas of the recent past, they were haunted by the loss of possible futures, potential never to be fulfilled and old dreams never to be realized. For all the grief that utopian politics had allegedly visited on the twentieth century, there were still those who believed in salvaging the spirit of utopia—the dystopia they feared was a void, the *nonfuture* to which humanity would be consigned once all utopian hopes came to ruin.

DYSTOPIAN CRITIQUE AND UTOPIAN POSSIBILITY: HUXLEY AND ORWELL

The preceding review demonstrates how thoroughly anti-utopian political thinkers assaulted the underlying premises of modern utopianism, includ-

ing their rejection of historical progress, of the coherence of utopian ideals, of the cost of pursuing utopian ideals both in terms of the means and ends, and finally of the desirability of a utopian condition even to the extent that it could be achieved or approximated. Though this may seem nearly exhaustive, there is one important aspect of the “death of utopia” that we have yet to consider: just as utopias were so decisively discredited in social thought, utopia also disappeared from literature. After Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backwards* and the many efforts of H. G. Wells, no utopian vision, fictional or theoretical, has captured the political imagination at large. For many anti-utopian thinkers, this was their case in point: utopias now seemed too remote from reality to be worth considering—and to the extent that they did intrude upon reality, they inspired more dread than hope. When novels such as *We*, *Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* came to notoriety, it was easy enough for them to be subsumed to this anti-utopian consensus: here were visions that could speak to the anti-utopian age, works that formally resembled their utopian forebears while spelling out the consequences of utopian hubris.

Unsurprisingly, then, many postwar intellectuals understood the first important works of what would later be called dystopian fiction as confirmation of their anti-utopian sentiments. In fact, before the term “dystopia” was popularized in the late twentieth century, most writers followed Berlin in referring to these works simply as “anti-utopias,” though “negative utopia” and “inverted utopia” were also common coinages.²⁹ Despite the terminological inconsistencies, everyone who engaged with these works seemed to recognize their structural and thematic similarities, as well as their status as an important turning point—or end point—within the tradition of utopian literature. In his early study of the “negative utopia,” George Woodcock, a friend and correspondent of Orwell, described the concept of utopia in terms similar to those used by Berlin, Talmon, and Popper: “a society permanently constituted and rigidly regulated according to a plan which its founders believe will serve the best interests of the people as a whole.”³⁰ Thus, Woodcock sees the new form of literature as emerging in response to a paradox, namely, that societies are becoming more utopian to the extent that they are increasingly planned and centrally controlled, but less utopian to the extent that this has not made their inhabitants happier. Writers like Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell aimed to intervene in this context with socially informed novels that were at once satirical—that is, critically engaged with their present circumstances—and prophetic, that is,

concerned with the shape of future society. But Woodcock sees these interventions as being closely tied to an anti-utopian agenda, "written by men who have looked closely at the reality which congeals out of the fantasies of the past, and who have rejected what they see."³¹ Likewise for historian Eugen Weber, who interpreted *We, Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as instances of "the anti-utopian novel, which uses the familiar utopian convention to express a mood of dread and despair occasioned by the results or the implications of utopian dreams."³² From the reticence of their authors to depict their own utopian alternatives, Weber concluded that they were "not just opponents of one utopian pattern, but opponents of the utopian heresy itself."³³ On the anti-utopian reading, dystopias depicted a demiurgic humanity that destroys the world in order to remake it and offered warnings against technological and political hubris in a Faustian key.

This equation of dystopia with anti-utopia weakened in the ensuing decades, as dystopian writing became a familiar fixture of intellectual and political discourse. On Shklar's reading, the dystopian novels signified a reinvigoration of the utopian tradition rather than its morbidity. Because Shklar values the utopia for its critical function, as a critique of the present, rather than a program for the future, she judges much of the modern utopian tradition sterile and unimaginative in contrast to its classical predecessors: "It is not until we come to the dystopias of the present that the imaginary society, now seen as a nightmare, regains some of its original literary verve. They too are protests, like the classical utopia novels."³⁴ As valuable to Shklar as their critical function is the fact that dystopias demur from the prophetic ambitions of political utopianism; dystopias on her reading are "works of the political imagination that can and do awaken and warn and sometimes desolate us, but they do not prescribe or tell us what to do." As an observation on novels like *We, Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Shklar's point stands, though the place of such novels within the wider oeuvre of their respective writers complicates the matter. In what remains the most encompassing study of utopian and utopian thought, Krishan Kumar distinguishes between the anti-utopian temperament (what I have referred to simply as anti-utopianism) and "the modern anti-utopia" or else "the formal literary anti-utopia" (which corresponds to what I have referred to simply as the dystopian novel). Kumar writes that "the modern anti-utopia is in an important sense also less than—even opposed to—temperamental anti-utopianism of this kind," noting Wells, Huxley, and Orwell as examples of writers "who had at least

as much of the utopian as the anti-utopian temperament in their make-up” and who together illustrated “that the anti-utopia is largely the creation of men for whom it represented the dark obverse of their own profound and passionate utopian temperament . . . born of a sense of frustrated and thwarted utopianism.”³⁵ Thus we are left with two competing interpretations of dystopia: one that emphasizes its essential hostility toward utopianism, and another that draws out its continuity with utopianism.

In the two sections that follow, I examine the relationship between utopia and its negative by taking up the most significant literary dystopias: Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In addition to defining the archetypal “technological” and “political” dystopias, these two novels also demonstrate distinct relationships between dystopia and utopia. On my reading, all dystopian writing depicts negative futures, but in anti-utopian dystopias, like Huxley’s, the dystopia extends from a utopian or pseudo-utopian program, while in pure dystopias, like Orwell’s, the dystopian social order serves overtly nefarious aims. George Kateb has insightfully referred to the former as a “false heaven,” the latter as a “real hell.”³⁶

In the hands of skeptical satirists like Zamyatin, E. M. Forster, and Huxley, dystopia provided a powerful method for criticizing the aims of utopians like Wells, whose blend of rationalism, socialism, and internationalism condensed the hopes and ambitions of political thinking since the Enlightenment into a progressive political mythology. Forster’s “The Machine Stops” (1909), *We*, and *Brave New World* do not reject this program outright, but instead attempt to demonstrate its inadequacy through a *reductio ad absurdum*. Each work depicts a society in which material insecurity and social conflict have been eliminated through comprehensive social engineering. The resulting societies are superficially utopian, but their fixation on technical criteria of perfection excludes humanistic values such as authenticity and autonomy.³⁷ Their warnings about the future indict modern utopianism from the standpoint of human dignity, implying that even a world of peace and plenty would be unacceptable if it did not leave room for individuals to make free and meaningful choices. This concern with the hazards of well-intentioned utopian schemes is absent in dystopias such as Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (1907), Katharine Burdekin’s *Swastika Night* (1937), and especially Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). The societies they warn against are not even superficially benign, but brutal and coercive, governed nakedly in the interests of a ruling cabal who care neither about the freedom nor

the material well-being of the masses. While the dystopian critics of utopia tended to be liberal humanists, London, Burdekin, and Orwell were committed to socialism and antifascism, and their anxieties about the future had less to do with utopianism gone awry than with the potential for a powerful elite to permanently entrench their domination.

Despite Orwell's well-known anti-Stalinism, the Cold War reception of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has left a distorted image of the book as an attack on utopian ideals and their revolutionary application. But as we will see, the totalitarian society it depicts is explained as the outcome of a *counterrevolution* meant to avert the realization of an egalitarian society and, further, to eradicate all utopian strivings from history and consciousness. For his part, Huxley's many retrospective commentaries on *Brave New World* emphasized the need for a humanistic utopian alternative, and his final work, *The Island*, doubled as an earnest utopian proposal and a rumination on the impossibility of its attainment. The Orwell of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the Huxley of *The Island* both dwell on the foreclosure of utopian possibilities, and in doing so exercise a paradoxical stewardship of the utopian imagination.

THE WELFARE TYRANNY OF UTOPIA: HUXLEY'S BRAVE NEW WORLD

Insofar as they embraced what I've called the project of mastery, modern utopians told a triumphal story in which humanity gradually assumed control of our destiny, building a better future by continuously increasing the power of our technology, the efficiency of our production, and the rationality of our social organizations. Huxley objected to modern utopianism because he believed it elevated these means to ends, and like Weber and Zamyatin before him he anticipated the emergence of a social order that was rational in its design but irrational at the level of individual experience. To make matters more difficult for critics such as Huxley, the vocabularies of materialism and utilitarianism that underpin so much of modern utopian thought defined human well-being in terms that largely excluded concepts such as freedom and meaning in favor of a more-or-less hedonistic construal of happiness. To object to material progress in the name of religious or even humanistic values seemed irrational, atavistic—what claim could such nebulous concepts have against the demonstrable improvements yielded

by science and industry? The values on which a defense of the individual's freedom might be mounted seem to be eroded just as it was most urgent to articulate them.

In this context, Huxley dedicated his many books and essays to defending something he knew to be anachronistic: a humanistic conception of freedom as self-cultivation, one that was radically individualistic even as it required, as Huxley would acknowledge, specific cultural and social conditions to be anything more than a fantasy. *Brave New World* (1932), Huxley's most enduring work of social criticism, makes its case for these values by demonstrating the absurdity of life in their absence. The novel's lone defender of freedom is "the Savage," a man out of time and context, and his arguments are met with dismissal by the architects of the future society—indeed, the Savage scarcely seems convinced of their merits himself. Instead, Huxley leaves the reader to contemplate a world in which these values have been rendered meaningless, driven out of practice and nearly out of consciousness because they can only interfere with the efficient planning and administration of a totally engineered society. Huxley makes his affinity with the anti-utopian outlook apparent from the outset of his novel. He chooses as his epigraph a missive from the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev: "Utopias seem to be much more attainable than one would have believed in other times. And we currently find ourselves faced with a different kind of antagonizing question: How can one avoid their definitive attainment?"³⁸ Precisely because utopias have entered the realm of historical possibility, Berdyaev calls upon "the intellectuals and the cultivated classes" to imagine nonutopian futures, societies "less 'perfect' and more free."

Huxley, like Orwell and many other writers of their era, took Wells as the exemplar of modern utopianism. When Huxley described his early work on what would eventually become *Brave New World* as a satire concerning "the horror of the Wellsian Utopia and a revolt against it," he did not mean the anxious, apocalyptic Wells of *The Time Machine* or *When the Sleeper Wakes*. Instead, it was the Wellsian amalgamation of scientific rationalism, Fabian socialism, and liberal internationalism that provoked Huxley's opposition, the Wells who had synthesized nearly every significant strand of modern utopian thinking into his vision of the rationally administered World State. In taking Wells as the point of departure for his own fable of the future, one with strongly anti-Wellsian implications, Huxley followed earlier humanistic critics of utopianism like Forster and Zamyatin. George Kateb has remarked that their trilogy of dystopian fictions, Forster's

"The Machine Stops" along with *We* and *Brave New World*, "contain almost every fear that utopian ends arouse. These works show utopian ends when carried too far and try to expose some dangerous implications of utopian thought."³⁹ In each fiction, nearly all of humanity has been subjected to a vast socio-technical apparatus that sustains its subjects materially and predestines them socially in a way that bounds individual choice and expression within narrow parameters. While *We* presages *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in its material austerity and flashes of repressive violence, Forster and Huxley drew inspiration from social trends in London and the United States to depict pseudo-utopias that are stifling but benign. Their mass cultures offer abundant options for consumption and entertainment, while their means of control are subliminal and nonviolent. Each person is free to behave as they want because their wants have been thoroughly conditioned in advance. However, Kateb is right to note that that these works "do not indict utopian ends as such." What they criticize is not utopianism but a certain kind of utopia that narrows the range of human values and straitjackets the humanity it purports to perfect.

The vision of the ideal society that emerges from Huxley's humanistic commitments offers a more capacious reading of human potentialities:

The humanist is one who believes that our human nature can and should be developed harmoniously as a whole. . . . For the humanist, then, the ideal society is one whose constituent members are all physically, intellectually, and morally of the best quality; a society so organized that no individual shall be unjustly treated or compelled to waste or bury his talents; a society which gives its members the greatest possible amount of individual liberty, but at the same time provides them with the most satisfying incentives to altruistic effort; a society not static but deliberately progressive, consciously tending toward the realization of the highest human aspirations.⁴⁰

For this reason, Huxley cautions skepticism of those who make their social ideals into unchanging absolutes. Utopians overstep their bounds when they promise not only improvement, but a final and permanent perfection of humanity. "This is why I disbelieve in the program of General Wells and the New Salvationists," Huxley remarked in one essay published just prior to *Brave New World*. "In theory I am all for man living scientifically, creating his destiny and so forth. But in practice I doubt whether he can. I

doubt whether any great scheme of human regeneration, of large-scale social Salvationism, can be carried through."⁴¹ This is not to say that Huxley had no use for utopian speculation—no one who disdained utopianism entirely would have spent so much of his career in conversation with the utopian tradition. But much as Zamyatin inveighed against doctrines of "final revolution," Huxley believed that utopian thinking served humanity best when it contributed to the patient pursuit of a better world. Utopias, he argued, "are really, and only, valuable as instruments of social change."⁴² Great progress can be made as humanity moves from one vision of utopia to another, but when a utopia becomes an *idée fixe* the reflexive relationship between ideals and reality, means and ends, is cut off prematurely. A utopia that never makes contact with reality is merely a daydream, while one that is imposed on reality in the manner of a blueprint may well become a nightmare.

However much the intellectual agenda of *Brave New World* was set by such philosophical questions, Huxley's novel derives its urgency and owes its influence to more proximate concerns. For the question of how the society of the future would be organized was being worked out not by philosophers or novelists but in the real social and material life of a rapidly changing world. His dystopian novel magnified aspects of society that had already come into being, resulting in a vision of the future at once alien and instantly recognizable. Many details of *Brave New World* were inspired by Huxley's visit to the United States, a visit that also motivated his first attempt at social prophecy, an essay called "The Outlook for American Culture."⁴³ "The future is the present projected," Huxley begins, and true to this motto the essay does not simply report on the American present but seeks to extrapolate how "the great facts of contemporary life—machinery, political and social institutions, education" would shape human life in the near future, with a special interest in how such facts "affect and are likely to go on affecting the inner life of man."⁴³ Huxley believed that America provided the ideal specimen for such an inquiry because the characteristic material and social conditions of modernity were there most advanced, such that he could pronounce, "The future of America is the future of the world." Huxley's observations are largely concerned with politics and economics: democratic institutions and mechanized industrial production, the intersection of which defined American culture to many European observers, as well as expanding access to education, leisure, and travel. With respect to each, Huxley invokes a law of diminishing returns, taking American culture to illustrate the turning point at which industrial democracy and its products no longer better humanity, and even contribute to its regression. Rather than yielding new

opportunities for self-cultivation, Huxley wagered that the Americanization of culture, work, and governance would lead to unprecedented homogeneity and conformity.

By this point, Huxley had already expressed his disdain for the philosophies of perpetual progress expounded by “the prophets of Utopia.”⁴⁴ He did not believe that humanity could be improved indefinitely, and instead invoked a principle of “Mendelian predestination,” by which he meant to indicate the natural limits of perfectibility. Beyond a certain point, he believed that humanity was helpless against its hereditary endowments, and as a result—rather like Wells before him—he evinced a disquieting fascination with eugenics.⁴⁵ While Huxley stopped short of advocating eugenics, he invoked the idea frequently in his essays to indicate the limitations of the Enlightenment philosophy of progress and its assertion that improvements in social and political institutions, particularly education, would allow humanity to surpass its moral and intellectual limitations. Biology, Huxley suspected, would continue to impose stubborn limits on perfectionist aspirations. Thus, he concluded that the utopian hopes of the Enlighteners would soon crash against the recalcitrance of their human materials, making it necessary to envision the future anew:

Contemporary prophets have visions of future societies founded on the idea of natural inequality, not natural equality; they look forward to the re-establishment, on a new and much more realistic foundation, of the old hierarchies; they have visions of a ruling aristocracy and of a race slowly improved, not by an improvement in the educational, legal, or physical environment . . . but by deliberate eugenic breeding. Such is our present future.⁴⁶

In the same essay, Huxley also mentioned the possibility of “a Machiavelian system of education, designed to give the members of the lower castes only such instruction as it is profitable for society at large and the upper castes in particular that they should have.” Much in these passages presages the social vision of *Brave New World*, but here Huxley does not seem especially perturbed by the vision of the future he is describing. Indeed, he seems to take a kind of grim pleasure in upending utopian expectations, reporting dryly on a counter-utopian future of permanent inequality.

These remarks notwithstanding, Huxley largely did accept that culture, not biology, was the decisive crucible in which the future would be forged. He maintained that the salient question to be posed about each new devel-

opment was whether and to what extent they would conduce to “the acquisition of culture,” which possibilities for “higher life” they would open up.⁴⁷ Per Huxley, culture is the context of ideas and practices in which individuals can realize their potential, a repository of meanings and symbolic resources that the individual can draw on in order to add richness and complexity to his or her inner life. Rather than seeing material progress as an end, Huxley insists that leisure, comfort, and prosperity are only good insofar as they provide individuals with opportunities for free self-cultivation. Whether or not these opportunities will be actualized depends on both the character of the individual and the wider social circumstances in which the individual’s cultural life is situated. True to his aristocratic and frequently elitist insistence on innate typological differences, Huxley asserts that significant portions of the population “do not want to be cultured, are not interested in the higher level. For these people, existence on the lower, animal levels is perfectly satisfactory. Given food, drink, the company of their fellows, sexual enjoyment, and plenty of noisy distractions from without, they are happy.”⁴⁸ This sketch of the hedonism made possible by consumer society contains most of the significant details of the lifestyle of the lower castes in *Brave New World*. But in his novel, Huxley emphasizes that the masses must be conditioned to accept such a lifestyle, rather than attributing it to an innate defect in their characters. This is a significant insight for Huxley’s critique of culture: while he believes that there are minorities in every society who are either innately attracted or averse to culture, the “great mass of human beings” are somewhere in between, and their determinate nature will be shaped decisively by their social context.⁴⁹

As a result, Huxley’s most severe criticisms with respect to mass culture are not for the masses themselves, but instead for the progenitors of “mass-produced ideas and mass-produced art” who lower the overall level of culture. In a healthy society, Huxley believes that the “play–instinct” that humanity indulges when not preoccupied with work and survival can be a powerful motive to create and experience culture. But when the potentially challenging and rewarding contents of culture—which for Huxley inevitably means high culture—are supplanted by trivial amusements, culture loses its potential to instruct and emancipate. Huxley also fears that the ready availability of entertainment will reward passive consumption rather than encouraging active creation, resulting in a culture dominated by the interests of “uncreating, lazy, bored people.” Worst of all, because mass culture is most profitable when it can be consumed by the largest possible

audience, the products of mass culture are infected with homogeneity—a homogeneity that they impress onto their consumers. This is what makes mass culture into the potent instrument of control that we see wielded in *Brave New World*: those who control the means of cultural production have the opportunity to “impose whatever ideas and art forms they please on the mass of humanity.”⁵⁰ Though Huxley frequently let his distaste for “the haters of culture” overwhelm his more humanistic sensibilities, he ultimately concluded that the true vandals of civilization were not the consumers of mass culture, but the producers, who intentionally standardize and vulgarize culture in the pursuit of profit. It is because of their cynical exploitation of mass audiences that culture declines even as literacy rates rise and leisure time increases and, ultimately, that so much human potential goes unfilled amid unprecedented opportunity for self-cultivation.

Similar conflicts between the economic criteria of efficiency, which demand stability and uniformity, and the humanistic values of self-cultivation, which are in principle oriented toward distinction and individuality, play out across the spheres of work and governance. In *Brave New World*, the society of the future is structured in accord with a totalizing philosophy of efficiency that Huxley calls “Fordism.” As a prophet of scientific management, “Our Ford” plays a role analogous to that of Taylor in Zamyatin’s *We*: the innovation of the future society is to make a comprehensive social philosophy out of the modern factory system. Just before *Brave New World* was completed, Huxley debuted his critical conception of Fordism in an essay characterizing what he took to be the philosophy of an inhuman future:

Fordism, or the philosophy of industrialism . . . demands that we should sacrifice the animal man (and along with the animal large portions of the thinking, spiritual man) . . . to the machine. There is no place in the factory, or in that larger factory which is the modern industrialized world, for animals on the one hand, or for artists, mystics, or even, finally, individuals on the other. Of all the ascetic religions, Fordism is that which demands the cruelest mutilations of the human psyche—demands the cruelest mutilations and offers the smallest spiritual returns. Rigorously practiced for a few generations, this dreadful religion of the machine will end by destroying the human race.⁵¹

Despite his antipathy toward Marxism, which he associated with vulgar materialism, Huxley echoed much of Marx’s discussion of alien-

ation in his own critique of Fordism. Rather than allowing each person to develop the full range of their physical and intellectual capacities, the specialized labor demanded under industrial conditions diminishes laborers by consigning them to narrow functions and subjecting them to technical criteria of evaluation: “Where there is too much specialization, too much of the organized division of labor, a man is easily degraded to the level of a mere embodied function.”⁵² Huxley feared that such standards would soon spread beyond the factory, giving rise to a society in which human beings would be valued “not as individuals, but as personified social functions.”⁵³ Elsewhere, Huxley spoke to the dehumanizing consequences of the industrial system, writing that “the machine demands mechanical efficiency, but mechanical efficiency is practically synonymous with human imbecility,” and asking, “Is a mechanized slave with atrophied powers of initiative a fully alive human being?”⁵⁴

If Huxley feared that industry could only support the existence of “a stupefied and aesthetically numbed human being, exactly like all other stupefied and aesthetically numb human beings,” he saw little hope that a democratic political system could do anything but compound cultural deficiencies. One of the hazards of democratic egalitarianism that concerned Huxley—as it had previous critics such as Tocqueville and contemporaries like José Ortega y Gasset—was that democratic culture made a virtue of homogeneity. Huxley’s skepticism toward democracy, which he claimed to support “materially” but not “intellectually,” indicated an anxiety about the type of leadership that could be expected from the opinions of the masses. In the future, however, he imagined that such distinctions might be rendered obsolete: the totally egalitarian society would elevate the “ordinary man” above “the exceptional man” and eventually drive the latter from existence, “for not to be ordinary will be regarded as a crime.”

While Huxley believed there was much in humanity that would resist the extreme regimentation and conformity of industrial society, he feared that the emerging social order was critically advantaged by new technologies of control. His fascination with such technologies, particularly those that might emerge from the nascent sciences of psychology, are evidenced in his notion of hypnopaedia, which is explored in both *Brave New World* and *Brave New World Revisited*. The construction of the term is revealing: in antiquity *paedia* referred not only to education in the conventional sense of the word, but to the complete process by which the individual was molded by his or her culture. In Huxley’s dystopia, this entire process takes place

beneath the level of consciousness, so that the individual is prevented from having any but the dimmest awareness of the exactitude with which his or her consciousness has been manipulated to fit the specifications of the social order. Huxley's imagination was vexed by the potential of propaganda and "systemic mass-suggestion," both of which he believed could be made "irresistibly effective" as the science of psychology grew more sophisticated.⁵⁵ For the same reasons, he concluded that the scientific discoveries that would come to define the twentieth century were not those related to the harnessing of atomic energy, but instead the advances in biology, physiology, and psychology that he saw as having the most potential to affect human individuals. They would enable, if pursued far enough, what Huxley called "the truly revolutionary revolution, beyond politics and economics"—that is, the conquest of the human mind.⁵⁶

Just as Huxley feared that the underlying logics of mass culture and industrial production militated against humanistic values, he saw in the scientific mindset—and especially in the desire to subordinate human life to scientific principles of predictability and control—a dangerous temptation, one that he found modern utopians guilty of indulging. "Science," he wrote in *Brave New World Revisited*, "may be defined as the reduction of multiplicity to unity. It seeks to explain the endlessly diverse phenomena of nature by ignoring the uniqueness of particular events, concentrating on what they have in common and finally abstracting some kind of 'law,' in terms of which they make sense and can be effectively dealt with."⁵⁷ Huxley described the search for scientific explanations of the world as one expression of an overarching "Will to Order" that also included the construction of metaphysical and theological systems. As purely intellectual pursuits, these projects were benign enough, but Huxley saw a danger in the temptation to apply the Will to Order to human affairs:

Here the theoretical reduction of unmanageable multiplicity to comprehensible unity becomes the practical reduction of human diversity to subhuman uniformity, of freedom to servitude. In politics, the equivalent of a fully developed scientific theory or philosophical system is a totalitarian dictatorship. In economics, the equivalent of a beautifully composed work of art is the smoothly running factory in which the workers are perfectly adjusted to the machines. The Will to Order can make tyrants out of those who merely aspire to clear up a mess. The beauty of tidiness is used as a justification for despotism.⁵⁸

Of course, this is precisely what Huxley had predicted in *Brave New World*. And it is not just stability, efficiency, or order that are invoked as justifications for the inhuman conditions of the Fordist society. "The people who govern the Brave New World may not be sane (in what may be called the absolute sense of the word)," Huxley explains, "but they are not madmen, and their aim is not anarchy but social stability. It is in order to achieve stability that they carry out, by scientific means, the ultimate, personal, really revolutionary revolution."⁵⁹

In *Brave New World*, Huxley synthesizes his disparate critiques of modern society and offers his own counter-utopian vision of what science, industry, and social organization will yield for the human future. Perhaps more unsettling than its well-known extrapolation of these tendencies is a self-critical anxiety that belies the more overtly didactic passages of the novel: What if the World Controllers are right, and there is no defense to be made of Huxley's cherished humanistic values? Mustapha Mond, who speaks on behalf of the World Controllers in the novel's climactic confrontation, informs the Savage that "civilization has absolutely no need of nobility or heroism. These things are symptoms of political inefficiency. In a properly organized society like ours, nobody has any opportunities for being noble or heroic. Conditions have got to be thoroughly unstable before the occasion can arise."⁶⁰ Whatever one may think of the Savage's eloquent defense of passion, courage, and self-denial, it is difficult to see why the comfort and security of millions should be exchanged so that the Savage can claim "the right to be unhappy."⁶¹ True to Mustapha Mond's dictum, the Savage is not so much a hero as a would-be-hero who has arrived too late to make a stand for his values, and his recognition of this fact is reflected in his eventual downfall. Huxley clearly intended his readers to shudder at the meaninglessness of the Fordist future, but in the Savage he offers an image of irrational revolt doomed to failure. Huxley imagined that as the grip of industrial civilization tightened, such revolts would become increasingly common. "With every advance of civilization the savage past will be more and more appreciated," he predicted, "and the cult of D.H. Lawrence's Dark Gods may be expected to spread through an ever-widening circle of worshippers."⁶² Though Huxley was clearly more sympathetic to the romanticist revolt than the rationalist utopia it opposed, he ultimately rejected it as well. As the conclusion of *Brave New World* indicates, he saw little more than defiant self-flagellation down that road.

In the works that followed Huxley would attempt to forge a new path. Reflecting in 1946 on what had already become his signature literary achievement, Huxley wrote that “the most serious defect in the story” was its failure to present a compelling alternative to the grim vision of the technocratic future and the fruitless revolt against it.⁶³ As he explained, “The Savage is offered only two alternatives, an insane life in Utopia, or the life of a primitive in an Indian village, a life more human in some respects but in others hardly less queer and abnormal. . . . Between the utopian and the primitive horns of this dilemma would lie the possibility of sanity.” From a social-philosophical standpoint, such a formulation would better represent the choices facing modern society, and from a literary standpoint, it might have equipped the Savage with a better set of arguments against Mustapha Mond’s rationalist defense of Fordism, hypnopaedia, and the rest.

Huxley imagined such a humanistic ideal many times throughout his career, though none proved as resonant as their dystopian inverse. Around the time he was writing *Brave New World*, Huxley was favorably inclined toward modern forms of aristocracy. In one passage, he described the “ideal state” as “one in which there is a material democracy controlled by an aristocracy of intellect—a state in which men and women are guaranteed a decent human existence and are given every opportunity to develop such talents as they possess, and where those with the greatest talent rule.”⁶⁴ The contrast between this mixed regime and the despotic aristocracy depicted in *Brave New World* is clear enough: in the novel, the majority of the population is deprived of opportunities to develop their talents, and even the ruling class cannot be said to free, as they must either take up the task of administering the Fordist society as it exists or accept a life of exile. By the end of the Second World War, however, Huxley was inclining toward a more radical alternative.⁶⁵ In the interwar years, he had spoken of the authoritarian state bureaucracies emerging in Germany, the Soviet Union, and China as “inadequate precursors” to his favored form of aristocracy, but the experience of the war as well as his observations on social developments in the democratic world convinced him that a critique of economic and political centralization was necessary if his humanist principles were to be vindicated. He now looked toward an alternative arrangement that he described as “a society of freely cooperating individuals dedicated to the pursuit of sanity.”⁶⁶ Its guiding principles would be as follows:

In this community, economics would be decentralist and Henry-Georgian, politics Kropotkin-esque, co-operative. Science and technology would be used as though, like the Sabbath, they had been made for man not (as at present and still more so in the *Brave New World*) as though man were to be adapted and enslaved to them. Religion would be the conscious and intelligent pursuit of man's Final End, the unitive knowledge of the immanent Tao or Logos, the transcendent Godhead or Brahman. And the prevailing philosophy of life would be a kind of Higher Utilitarianism in which the Greatest Happiness principle would be secondary to the Final End principle—the first question to be asked and answered in every contingency of life being: How will this thought or action contribute to, or interfere with, the achievement, by me and the great possible number of individuals, of man's Final End?

Eventually, Huxley explored these ideas in a utopian counterpart to *Brave New World* called *Island* (1962), which concerns the civilization of the Palanese, an imaginary people whose society pursues "the modest ambition to live as fully human beings."⁶⁷ Published thirty years after the first edition of *Brave New World*, and just one year before Huxley's death, the later novel reflected the constructive and critical commitments that had guided his career as a public intellectual, as well as his burgeoning interest in Eastern religion and the nascent countercultures taking root among the youth of the United States and Europe. It is the only work in which Huxley truly indulges the utopian side of his imagination—and, even then, the society he describes is a "tiny oasis of humanity."⁶⁸ Whereas the false utopia of *Brave New World* was devoid of both history and futurity, the Palanese take as their mission "to make the best of all the worlds, the worlds already realized within the various cultures, and beyond them, the worlds of still unrealized possibilities."⁶⁹ Neither elitist in structure nor dominated by the masses, the culture of Pala is "judged by what all the members of the community, the ordinary as well as the extraordinary, can and do experience."⁷⁰ Instead of a massive, centralized bureaucracy, Pala is "a federation of self-governing units," and instead of a meticulously planned existence, its members prepare for a life of "changes and chances . . . beauties and horrors and absurdities."⁷¹ To make room for both happiness and freedom, the Palanese must forego much that the modern world offers. In addition to renouncing large-scale political association, they do not conduct advanced research in chemistry or physics, nor do they engage in industrial production. As one of their spokes-

people puts it, the Palanese have always chosen “to adapt our economy and technology to human beings—not our human beings to somebody else’s economy and technology.”⁷²

All of this might seem an uncharacteristically conciliatory note for the perpetually skeptical Huxley to end his career on. But the Palanese soon learn that theirs is a utopia besieged. Though they have opted out of the military and economic structures by which so much of the world is governed, they cannot hold the outside world at bay. Eventually, a foreign power takes an interest in Pala’s natural resources, and the novel ends with the Palanese anxiously welcoming the colonists to the island. Speaking to the island’s monarch, the ambassador of the foreign power summarizes Pala’s dilemma, which for Huxley, is also the dilemma of the utopian ideal in modernity:

Pala was completely viable, I’d say, until about 1905. Then, in less than a single generation, the world completely changed. Movies, cars, airplanes, radio. Mass production, mass slaughter, mass communication and, above all, plain mass—more and more people in bigger and bigger slums or suburbs. By 1930 any clear-sighted observer could have seen that, for three quarters of the human race, freedom and happiness were almost out of the question. Today, thirty years later, they’re completely out of the question. And meanwhile the outside world has been closing in on this little island of freedom and happiness. Closing in steadily and inexorably, coming nearer and nearer. What was once a viable ideal is now no longer viable.⁷³

Thus, humanistic ideals cannot hope to survive by carving out enclaves from a world still governed by the logics of technology, industry, and militarism. The forces that lead to the dehumanization of modern life are global in their reach, and only by charting an alternative course as a civilization will humanity avoid the deadening banality of *Brave New World* and the apocalyptic horror of atomic warfare. Huxley’s dystopia and his utopia are two sides of the same dilemma, acts of political imagination meant to clarify the choice before us:

Indeed, unless we choose to decentralize and to use applied science, not as the end to which human beings are to be made the means, but as the means to producing a race of free individuals, we have only two alterna-

tives to choose from: either a number of national, militarized totalitarisms, having as their root the terror of the atomic bomb and as their consequence the destruction of civilization . . . or else one supranational totalitarianism, called into existence by the social chaos resulting from rapid technological progress in general and the atomic revolution in particular, and developing under the need for efficiency and stability, into the welfare-tyranny of Utopia.⁷⁴

A VISION OF THE TOTALITARIAN FUTURE: ORWELL'S *NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR*

Huxley had seen fit to warn that human freedom might soon be imperiled by the triumph of utopian programs that had seemed impossible just decades earlier. Looking out upon a European landscape that had once again been seized by violence on an incomprehensible scale, where huge swaths of the European population once again lived under repressive dictatorships with imperial ambitions, Orwell saw no danger that humanity would fall victim to its own rationality—or that there would be anything even superficially pleasant about the future of servitude toward which the world was headed. In a letter written during the thick of the Second World War, Orwell unfurled a competing vision of the future, one of several pieces from the 1940s that now reads as a loose pitch for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

I think you overestimate the danger of a “Brave New World”—i.e., a completely materialistic vulgar civilization based on hedonism. I would say the danger of that kind of thing is past, and that we are in danger of quite a different kind of world, the centralized slave state, ruled over by a small clique who are in effect a new ruling class. . . . Such a state would not be hedonistic, on the contrary its dynamic would come from some kind of rabid nationalism and leader-worship kept going by literally continuous war, and its average standard of living would probably be low.⁷⁵

In this short paragraph, Orwell lays out several of the most important themes of his own dystopian thought experiment: its hierarchical form and the distinct psychosocial means and motives that would secure its base of power. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the ruling party revels in the intoxi-

cations of power and violence. The novel is a nightmarish fugue of surveillance, warfare, torture, and persecution: where *Brave New World* presents its institutions with the bemused detachment of its soma-addled subjects, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* throws the reader directly into the paranoid consciousness of its protagonist.

How would Orwell have arrived at such a vision of the future? As with Huxley, Wells had exercised a powerful influence over Orwell's thinking about the future and its possibilities. Orwell described him as "a true prophet," with the qualification that the world since 1914 had largely diverged not only from Wells's utopian expectations but even from the broad outline of history as he had been capable of understanding it. In Orwell's judgment, Wells was too rational to comprehend the deeply irrational forces that had brought about the calamitous events of their times. His own rationalism left him ill-equipped to understand the appeal of a leader like Adolf Hitler, just as his confidence in progress blinded him to the endurance of superstition and barbarity in the modern world. Contra Wells, Orwell suggest that the "energy that actually shapes the world springs from emotions—racial pride, leader-worship, religious belief, love of war—which liberal intellectuals mechanically write off as anachronisms."⁷⁶ In Wells's vision of history, scientific rationalism was bound to triumph over such forces: "On the one side science, order, progress, internationalism, aeroplanes, steel, concrete, hygiene: on the other side war, nationalism, religion, monarchy, peasants, Greek professors, poets, horses. History as he sees it is a series of victories won by the scientific man over the romantic man." Such a dualistic view of civilization could not capture the terrifying reality of totalitarianism and total war, in which science had proven compatible with, even conducive to, the emergence of cult-like leaders presiding over neofeudal institutions, wherein "the order, the planning, the State encouragement of science, the steel, the concrete, the aeroplanes, are all there, but all in the service of ideas appropriate to the Stone Age." Orwell suggested that Wells had been closer to the mark with his early dystopian novel *When the Sleeper Wakes*, which forecast "a glittering, sinister world in which society has hardened into a caste system and the workers are permanently enslaved."⁷⁷ But the work he eventually came to esteem most—as a prophecy, if not as a literary achievement—was Zamyatin's *We*. Unlike Wells and Huxley, whose dystopias forecast an existence that was altogether purposeless, even for its ruling caste, Orwell saw in Zamyatin a writer who displayed an "intuitive grasp of

the irrational side of totalitarianism—human sacrifice, cruelty as an end in itself, the worship of a leader who is credited with divine attributes.”⁷⁸ Like Zamyatin, Orwell increasingly came to think that the society of the future would be no sterile experiment in social engineering, but rather something resembling “the sinister slave civilisations of the ancient world.”

Orwell’s interest in such visions of the future, the various “prophecies of fascism” arrayed in the speculative fiction of the earliest twentieth century, was motivated by his sense that novelists had anticipated the totalitarian menace in ways that serious philosophers and social thinkers had failed to do. However, his own prophecy of the future was not formed entirely in conversation with the fictional products of the dystopian imagination. Orwell’s engagement with the geopolitical prophecies of James Burnham also shaped the vision of the future he would advance in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In *The Managerial Revolution* (1941), Burnham projected the extreme centralization of political and economic authority as the irresistible tendency that would shape the political future.⁷⁹ Burnham posited that this tendency was furthest advanced in the bureaucratic dictatorships of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany but pointed toward the New Deal as evidence that the capitalist, democratic states would eventually have to centralize authority as well. In each case, a new ruling class of managers was the beneficiary, acquiring an unprecedented control over economic and political decision-making, and paving the way for a future in which all political systems would converge under the single heading of bureaucratic domination. Rather than criticizing this trend, Burnham suggested that the managerial system may well provide the most efficient resolution to the persistent problems of governing mass societies—and that if the ineluctable tendency of human societies was toward hierarchy and domination, then a managerial system may well be preferable to the alternatives.

Initially, Orwell was skeptical of such predictions. He detected at the heart of Burnham’s theory an uncritical and ahistorical conception of the power drive, one that he took Burnham to share with many realist thinkers. As a result, he argued, Burnham’s predictions were insufficiently critical of the interests of the managerial class, and his neo-Machiavellian conception of power in fact served as an ideological cover for those interests. Such a framework led thinkers like Burnham to “overrate the part played in human affairs by sheer force.”⁸⁰ In a remark that could well have applied to his own vision of power in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell objected that “Burnham is always fascinated by power, whether he is for it or against it, and he always

see it a little larger than life." What Burnham had not taken sufficiently seriously, then, was the possibility that "the Machiavellian world of force, fraud, and tyranny may somehow come to an end."⁸¹ Orwell, by contrast, believed that what he called "power worship" or "power hunger" was "only dominant in comparatively few people," and that a theory that naturalizes these dispositions as part of human nature is bound to offer a distorted view of the future by rendering oligarchic forms of domination inevitable. Orwell instead sought to historicize the emerging forms of domination:

True, drudgery persists; class distinctions are probably re-establishing themselves in a new form, and individual liberty is on the down-grade: but as these developments are now technically avoidable, they must have some psychological cause which Burnham makes no attempt to discover. The question that he ought to ask, but never does ask, is: Why does the lust for naked power become a major human motive exactly now, when the dominion of man over man is ceasing to be necessary? As for the claim that "human nature," or "inexorable laws" of this and that, make Socialism impossible, it is simply a projection of the past into the future. In effect, Burnham argues that because a society of free and equal human beings has never existed, it never can exist.⁸²

Thus Orwell concluded of Burnham's theory of power that "there is no strong reason for thinking that it tells us anything about the future, except perhaps the immediate future."

This makes it all the more striking that, within a year, Orwell had swung to a position of extreme pessimism that made Burnham's theory look palatable by comparison.⁸³ Though he still clung to the hope that the world would turn back from the precipice of nuclear war, the "worst possibility of all," which disturbed him even more than the prospect of a Third World War was the emergence and entrenchment of permanent totalitarian rule on a global scale—precisely the scenario he would explore in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.⁸⁴ In an essay published just before he began work on his dystopian novel, Orwell predicted a future geopolitical order structured by fear of the bomb and characterized by permanent war-footing and paranoia:

It would mean the division of the world among two or three vast super-states, unable to conquer one another and unable to be overthrown by any internal rebellion. In all probability their structure would be hier-

archic, with a semi-divine caste at the top and outright slavery at the bottom, and the crushing out of liberty would exceed anything that the world has yet seen. Within each state the necessary psychological atmosphere would be kept up by complete severance from the outer world, and by a continuous phony war against rival states. Civilizations of this type might remain static for thousands of years.

Orwell did not believe that this threat would be averted unless the public came to grasp the true danger of the world situation, and thus he set out to devise a new literary technique that could demonstrate the profound choice that lay before his generation. However, it is important to emphasize that Orwell's novel was intended to clarify a choice, that is, even at his most pessimistic he never concluded that a future like the one he describes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was already determined. In one of his last statements on the novel before his death, Orwell explained, "I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily *will* arrive, but I believe . . . that something resembling it *could* arrive. I believe also that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences."⁸⁵

Orwell therefore devised his dystopian thought experiment as an inquiry into the limits of totalitarian power, asking, Under what conditions would it be possible for a ruling party to establish absolute control over its subjects? As Orwell described it, totalitarianism itself entailed a bold and unprecedented experiment in social engineering. Taking seriously the possibility that this experiment might succeed, Orwell declined to conceptualize totalitarian rule as a variation on dictatorship or despotism as it had been known to history—for this would not do justice to totalitarianism, either to its radical ambitions or its technological capacities. As Orwell had written in 1939:

The terrifying thing about the modern dictatorships is that they are something entirely unprecedented. Their end cannot be foreseen. In the past every tyranny was sooner or later overthrown, or at least resisted, because of "human nature," which as a matter of course desired liberty. But we cannot be at all certain that "human nature" is constant. It may be just as possible to produce a breed of men who do not wish for liberty as to produce a breed of hornless cows.⁸⁶

Much in Orwell's construal of the totalitarian prospect, and the larger question pertaining to human freedom that it provokes, is reminiscent of Huxley. The two writers shared similar anxieties about the new technological forms of control, including the mass media and its potential to disseminate propaganda, as well as with the more remote possibilities of "mass suggestion," or large-scale psychological manipulation. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, this qualitative threshold is invoked in Goldstein's pamphlet, which explains that "even the Catholic church of the Middle Ages was tolerant by modern standards. Part of the reason for this was that in the past no government had the power to keep its citizens under constant surveillance."⁸⁷ By contrast, the Party has devised telescreens that allow them to monitor their population at all times and has taken an active role in the manipulation of public opinion through the media of mass communication, that is, print, radio, and television. As the pamphlet asserts, "The possibility of enforcing not only complete obedience to the will of the State, but complete uniformity of opinion on all subjects, now existed for the first time."⁸⁸ But it is Orwell's remarks on the possibility of a reconstituted human nature that go to the heart of dystopian thinking. In Orwell's usage, the very concept of human nature must be bracketed, as it represents an untested hypothesis, namely that there is some underlying ontological or psychological substrate that acts as a necessary constraint on human malleability. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, O'Brien, the Party's inquisitor and spokesman, argues for the opposite position. He repudiates the novel's protagonist, Winston, for "imagining that there is something called human nature which will be outraged by what we do and will turn against us."⁸⁹ On the contrary, he argues, "we create human nature. Men are infinitely malleable."

So far as the novel goes, O'Brien is proven correct: by the novel's conclusion, Winston has devoted himself fully to the Party and its cultic figurehead, Big Brother. But Winston's psychological transformation is not wholly attributable to the torture he suffers in the Ministry of Love, much less the captivity of the population at large. The consummation of total control rests more fundamentally on the Party's ability to engineer the thoughts of their subjects through the manipulation of history and language. It is these two accomplishments that allow the Party to "arrest progress and freeze history" so totally as to foreclose any possibility for change.⁹⁰ In *Brave New World*, the Fordist society teaches its subjects that "History is bunk," such that it is detached from any cultural memory of freedom.⁹¹ The society depicted

in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* goes further still: it does not simply ignore history, but fabricates it, establishing retroactively the historical narratives that suit their ideological mission. "From the totalitarian point of view," Orwell had observed, "history is something to be created rather than learned. . . . Totalitarianism demands, in fact, the continuous alteration of the past, and in the long run probably demands a disbelief in the very existence of objective truth."⁹² Both of these outcomes are depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Winston knows well that the Party has the means to remove his brief resistance from history. When the novel begins, he is an employee of the Ministry of Truth, revising history to correspond with the Party's ever-changing propaganda. The Party and their Thought Police can therefore threaten him with a kind of existential oblivion, to wipe his life and writings "out of existence and out of memory."⁹³

This is how the totalitarian regime of the future would seal its subjects within an "artificial universe of thought": first, by creating an artificial history, then by creating an artificial language, such that the very concepts by which reality is construed and discussed can be determined in advance. Orwell suspected that an artificial language would comprise the ultimate instrument of social control, as its devisors would be able to establish limitations on the possibilities of thought, tethering both private reflection and public discourse to orthodoxies and clichés incapable of sustaining critique. This fear is reflected in Orwell's concept of "Newspeak," the official language of Oceania, "devised to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc."⁹⁴ It is suggested in the novel's appendix that fleeting resistance like Winston's is possible, in part, because the version of Newspeak that the Party has disseminated is merely provisional. The "final, perfected version" would sustain an airtight system of control, reinforcing the "world-view and mental habits" favored by the Party while also serving "to make all other modes of thought impossible," "to *diminish* the range of thought."⁹⁵ For example, the notions of freedom and equality so central to liberal and socialist thought cannot be articulated in Newspeak, and therefore these ideologies can sustain no challenge to the Party's domination. "A person growing up with Newspeak as his sole language would no more know that *equal* had once had the secondary meaning of 'politically equal' or that *free* had once meant 'intellectually free,' than for instance, a person who had never heard of chess would be aware of the secondary meanings attached to *queen* and *rook*."⁹⁶ Whereas Huxley forecast a future in which the written words, and with them the ideals and strivings, of past generations would simply be forgotten, Orwell anticipated a crueler

mechanism for translating the world's literature into meaningless propaganda, incapable of soliciting feeling or reflection. Eventually, the individual's private vocabulary would follow suit, reducing thought to the frictionless manipulation of concepts that have been evacuated of any purchase on reality. "In the end we shall make thought-crime literally impossible, because there will be no words with which to express it," Winston is informed by his colleague at the Ministry of Truth. "The whole climate of thought will be different. In fact, there will be no thought as we understand it now."

Many of these ideas—Newspeak, Thoughtcrime, Big Brother, and the Thought Police—have endured in the lexicon of political discourse, tokens of how vividly Orwell imagined the mechanisms of control of which the totalitarian regime of the future might avail itself. Less well remembered than the means of control is the motive, which is never as clear as the utilitarian apologetics made on behalf of Huxley's Fordist society by its administrators. By contrast, the ends of the Party are presented as a mystery in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; according to the pamphlet the Party's "central secret" is "the original motive, the never-questioned instinct that first led to the seizure of power, and brought *doublethink*, the Thought Police, continual warfare, and all the other necessary paraphernalia into existence afterwards."⁹⁷ Orwell reinforces the centrality of this question by having Winston's reading interrupted just as Goldstein is preparing to disclose this motive. Contrary to the persistent tendency to interpret the novel as an anti-utopian work in the vein of *Brave New World*, the easiest explanation to rule out is that the Party seized power to create a utopia. During his interrogation, Winston proposes an explanation that echoes Huxley's: "That the choice for mankind lay between freedom and happiness, and that, for the great bulk of mankind, happiness was better . . . You are ruling over us for our own good."⁹⁸ O'Brien rejects this explanation with contempt: "Do you begin to see, then, what kind of world we are creating? It is the exact opposite of the stupid, hedonistic Utopias that the old reformers imagined."⁹⁹ Whereas Huxley's novel depicted a utopian imagination turned megalomaniacal, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the utopian imagination is only a flickering in the margins, all but extinguished.

From the Goldstein pamphlet, Winston learns of the utopian dreams that had, until recently, animated the political movement called socialism. "In the early twentieth century, the vision of a future society unbelievably rich, leisured, orderly, and efficient—a glistening antiseptic world of glass and steel and snow-white concrete—was part of the consciousness of every

literate person.”¹⁰⁰ This is the high-tech scientific socialism of H. G. Wells, the same vision that is carried to the absurd in *Brave New World*. But the contrast with the reality of life in Oceania could not be more apparent. Winston characterizes life in Oceania by “its bareness, its dinginess, its listlessness.”¹⁰¹ The world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is “a bare, hungry, dilapidated place compared with the world that existed before 1914, and still more so if compared with the imaginary future to which the people of that period looked forward.”¹⁰² If such ideals have no resemblance to the present conditions of life, they have also long lost their power as guiding forces for the Party’s totalitarian ideology. Goldstein’s pamphlet contrasts the present barrenness of the utopian imagination with the great stretch of human history, in which “idea of an early paradise in which men should live together in a state of brotherhood, without laws and without brute labor, had haunted the imagination for thousands of years.”¹⁰³ Orwell uses this language, nearly verbatim, in several pieces from the 1940s. In *The Lion and the Unicorn*, for example, he avers that the “whole English-speaking world is haunted by the idea of human equality” and likewise his essay on Koestler invokes “the dream of a just society which seems to haunt the human imagination ineradicably and in all ages, whether it is called the Kingdom of Heaven or the classes society.”¹⁰⁴ In each of these passages, Orwell renders utopia as a *haunting*—a spectral vision of the free and equal society that does not exist but might yet.

In the language of Goldstein’s pamphlet, the key historical actors are the Low, the Middle, and the High, distinct classes with distinct orientations toward the utopian imagination. Whereas the High seek to preserve their station and the Middle seek to usurp it, the Low are earnestly motivated by Utopian visions and aim “to abolish all distinctions and create a society in which all men shall be equal.”¹⁰⁵ The Middle make insincere use of utopianism, invoking “freedom, justice, and fraternity” to enlist the Low against the High before betraying them, though the pamphlet suggests that certain liberal and socialist revolutionaries of the Middle “partly believed” their doctrines.¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile, it is the High who repudiate utopianism altogether, arguing that “inequality was the unalterable law of human life” and offering instead the compensation of an “imaginary world beyond the grave.”¹⁰⁷ If for much of history the Middle and the High seemed to prevail, it is because the intellectual and material conditions of a classless society were not yet at hand. The nineteenth century furnishes the latter via “growth of the histori-

cal sense" that renders the "cyclical movement of history" both "intelligible" and "alterable."¹⁰⁸ More significant still are the technical developments of the twentieth century that obviate disparities of class and wealth. With the advent of machinery, "the need for human drudgery, and therefore to a great extent for human inequality, had disappeared . . . hunger, overwork, dirt, illiteracy, and disease could be eliminated within a few generations."¹⁰⁹ This means that for the Highs and the Middle who hope to occupy their station "human equality was no longer an ideal to be striven after, but a danger to be averted."¹¹⁰ In these passages, Orwell clarifies that the objective of the Party is not even superficially utopian—in fact, is explicitly anti-utopian. Ingsoc, the pamphlet asserts, has "the conscious aim of perpetuating *unfreedom* and *inequality*" and it aspires to "arrest progress and freeze history" such that "the High would be able to maintain their position permanently." Borrowing from Burnham, Orwell surmises that the beneficiaries of the neofeudal arrangement are a "new aristocracy" of Middles-turned-Highs: "bureaucrats, scientists, technicians, trade-union organizers, publicity experts, sociologists, teachers, and professional politicians." The ascendant social strata would be more disciplined than the decadent Highs but also "hungrier for pure power." Ingsoc, like the "Neo-Bolshevism" of Eurasia, is socialism stripped of the "Utopianism of past ages," a perversion that "rejects and vilifies every principle for which the Socialist movement originally stood."¹¹¹ As in the Soviet Union, oligarchical collectivism succeeds in abolishing private property, but not in collectivizing it, producing a form of state capitalism where property is concentrated in fewer hands and "economic inequality has been made permanent."¹¹²

But Orwell's nightmare regime has abandoned the utopian vision, seeking permanent hierarchy, not perfect equality. The Party therefore seeks to destroy the utopian ideal, even as a memory of an ideal or a future of the past. Two of *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* distinctive themes—the instrumentalization of language and the destruction of history—come into play as mechanisms for expunging utopian ideals from consciousness. The Party's artificial language makes egalitarian ideas inarticulable, even unthinkable. As *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* appendix explains, "*All mans are equal* was a possible Newspeak sentence . . . but it expressed a palpable untruth. . . . The concept of political equality no longer existed, and this secondary meaning had accordingly been purged out of the word *equal*."¹¹³ And by erasing history, the Party isolates their opposition from the historical lineage of egalitarian

struggles described in the pamphlet. As O'Brien explains, the Party does not "allow the dead to rise up," and its enemies must be "annihilated in the past as well as the future."¹¹⁴

Oceania, then, is no utopia, not even a corrupted one: its founding aims are not equality and freedom but permanent hierarchy and total domination; its core principle is not hedonism but sadism, "progress towards more pain."¹¹⁵ All of this is made clear in O'Brien's diabolic closing argument, which extols the "intoxication of power" as a self-sufficient end and the future as "a boot stamping on a human face—forever." In the end, O'Brien argues that the Party recognizes no motive but power itself:

The party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness; only power, pure power. . . . We are different from all the oligarchies of the past in that we know what we are doing. . . . The German Nazis and the Russian Communists came very close to us in their methods, but they never had the courage to recognize their own motives. They pretended, perhaps they even believed, that they had seized power unwillingly and for a limited time, and that just around the corner there lay a paradise where human beings would be free and equal. We are not like that. . . . Power is not a means; it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship.¹¹⁶

But if Orwell were to agree with O'Brien's explanation, that power is an end in itself, then it would seem he had given up on finding a truly satisfactory answer to the question he posed to Burnham: "*Why does the lust for naked power become a major human motive exactly now, when the dominion of man over man is ceasing to be necessary?*"¹¹⁷ I doubt whether *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is intended to confirm O'Brien's view of history or human nature. O'Brien, the novel suggests in places, is not an accurate reflection of what humanity is but, in keeping with the dystopian vision of the novel, a reflection of what humanity could become. He seems to be aware of this himself, as when he tells Winston, "If you are a man . . . you are the last man. Your kind is extinct; we are the inheritors."¹¹⁸ O'Brien is not bound by human psychology as we know it because he has been produced by an inhuman world of cruelty and domination. He is a warning, not an explanation.

Even if Orwell does not provide an answer to his own philosophical

question regarding the nature or origins of the power drive, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* does provide one compelling scenario for how a system in which power comes to be worshipped as an absolute might emerge, and of the bulwarks that totalitarianism would have to overcome in order to triumph. It is precisely at the historical juncture where egalitarian ideals stand a chance of being realized that the powerful will have the most incentive to rout the proponents of a free and equal society. Should the ruling classes avail themselves of the full range of technological and psychological controls, and should they fail to face opposition from the middle strata of society—the managers, the intellectuals—then it is possible they might succeed in permanently suppressing the emancipatory ideals that have motivated generations of reformers and revolutionaries. It is this final defeat of utopian strivings, more than the establishment of state surveillance or the centralization of the economy, that brings the terrifying, post-totalitarian world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* into the range of human possibilities.

Nineteen Eighty-Four, then, is not a warning against the excesses of the utopian imagination, but rather a warning against its abdication—Orwell's nightmare is also the abandonment of a dream. Orwell conceived of totalitarianism as an extreme form of oligarchy, wherein political hierarchy and material inequality would be permanently entrenched. Democratic socialism is, for Orwell, a diametrically opposing ideal: a society of equals. Orwell described totalitarianism as a modern descendant of the "slave empires of antiquity"; conversely, socialism represented "the last link in a chain of thought stretching back to the slave rebellions of antiquity."¹¹⁹ Orwell's gravest fear was that this chain would be broken. His protests against the abuses of socialism, at those who, in Spain, England, or the Soviet Union, corrupted the ideals of equality and social justice into ideological pretexts for their own claims to power, made him a favored voice among Cold War liberals opposed to utopianism in general and socialism in particular. But Orwell conducted these campaigns against socialism-in-practice precisely because he was determined to safeguard the egalitarian ideal against those who would corrupt it. As he had written in *Homage to Catalonia*:

In every country in the world a huge tribe of party-hacks and sleek little professors are busy trying to "prove" that socialism means no more than a planned state-capitalism with the grab-motive left intact. But fortunately there also exists a version of Socialism quite different from this. The thing that attracts ordinary men to socialism and makes them willing to

risk their skins for it, the “mystique” of Socialism, is the idea of equality; to the vast majority of people Socialism means a classless society, or it means nothing at all.¹²⁰

Orwell’s unwavering commitment to equality reflected his belief that, in a society where the grossest forms of hierarchy, dependence, and poverty had been alleviated, something approaching genuine human decency might be able to animate human interaction on a large scale. As such, Orwell himself never renounced socialism, and never gave up on the compatibility between egalitarianism and individual liberty. Indeed, he believed until the end that the creation of a society in which both principles were on secure footing was the only alternative to the great misery that both capitalism and collectivism had proven capable of generating.¹²¹ In the essay in which Orwell had first forecast the rise of the “super-states,” he concluded that a utopian alternative must be made viable if the future of abject domination was to be averted: “The only way of avoiding them that I can imagine is to present somewhere or other, on a large scale, the spectacle of a community where people are relatively free and happy and where the main motive in life is not the pursuit of money or power. In other words, democratic Socialism must be made to work throughout some large area.”¹²² As late as 1948, in a review of Oscar Wilde’s *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Orwell endorsed a revival of utopian thinking:

Wilde’s pamphlet and other kindred writings—*News from Nowhere*, for instance—consequently have their value. They may demand the impossible, and they may—since a Utopia necessarily reflects the aesthetic ideas of its own period—sometimes seem “dated” and ridiculous, but they do at least look beyond the era of food queues and party squabbles, and remind the Socialist movement of its original, half-forgotten objective of human brotherhood.¹²³

Like Huxley, Orwell came to see the choice between utopia and dystopia as something approaching a binary: to the extent that humanity failed to put its ideals into practice, their power as guiding forces and eventually even as minimal constraints would be eroded, leaving the future open for the worst abuses against humanity and reality. Orwell warns that we must strive for a world in which power is applied to the pursuit of freedom and equality, or

else we incline closer to the world of Oceania, Big Brother, and O'Brien—an oligarchy in which humanity is sacrificed on the altar of power.

CONCLUSION

By the time the novel that would immortalize Orwell was published, the man born Eric Blair was nearing the end of his life, hospitalized with complications from tuberculosis. It has been speculated that Orwell postponed critical medical care to complete *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, aware that it would be his final work, and that the novel's fatalism and fevered pitch—particularly in its almost psychosomatically affecting final act—are the impress of a writer resolved to invest the last of his mortal energies into his work. This probably tells us more about the novel's mythological status than it does about its contents, but regardless, Orwell was dead within six months of its publication. A statement issued by his publisher, Frederic Warburg, aimed to clarify Orwell's intentions, arguing that the novel described not what "will happen" but "rather what 'could happen' . . . The moral to be drawn from this dangerous nightmare situation is a simple one: *Don't let it happen. It depends on you.*"¹²⁴ This hardly resolves the many questions that *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* readers are left with: Did Winston truly love Big Brother at the novel's end? Would the proletarian revolution he hoped for ever materialize? And what of the novel's appendix, written in the past tense and implying that Newspeak was never completed—was this meant to imply the Party's eventual defeat?¹²⁵ In later editions of *Brave New World* as well as works like *Brave New World Revisited* and *The Island*, Huxley had the opportunity to reassess the predictive accuracy and critical purchase of his novel. It would fall to Orwell's readers to carry out that work with respect to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The panoply of intellectuals who took up this task in the ensuing decades is vast, including sympathizers, acolytes, critics both friendly and hostile—not to mention the countless lesser writers who have fashioned Orwell into a spokesperson for their own ideological ends. But one twentieth-century thinker who stands out for his enduring interest in Orwell and the emerging canon of dystopian writing is Erich Fromm, a German philosopher, psychoanalyst, and social scientist whose work was rooted in a humanist rendering of Marx and whose politics, like Orwell's, inclined toward democratic socialism. In 1961, Fromm wrote an afterword to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,

still standard issue in contemporary editions of the novel. There, Fromm sought to excavate the lasting power of *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* appeal to the future, which meant challenging familiar renderings of Orwell as given to despair—"He still hopes, but . . . his hope is a desperate one"—or a Cold War liberal—"it would be most unfortunate if the reader smugly interpreted 1984 as another description of Stalinist barbarism, and if he does not see that it means us, too."¹²⁶

Fromm grouped *Nineteen Eighty-Four* alongside *We* and *Brave New World* as a trilogy of "negative utopias . . . expressing the mood of powerlessness and hopelessness of modern man."¹²⁷ Acknowledging their differences of emphasis, Fromm ultimately read these works as converging on a singular question: "Can human nature be changed in such a way that man will forget his longing for freedom, for dignity, for integrity, for love—that is to say, can man forget that he is human?"¹²⁸ This question weighed heavily on Fromm. He believed that the answer suggested by Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell was an affirmative, that a world of total dehumanization was possible and moreover that it was where things were headed without a revolutionary change in the values and institutions of modern society. Fromm agreed, and he understood it to be the duty of the humanistic intellectual to call attention to this danger and chart an alternative course. As he took up this task in his own work, Fromm often saw fit to allude to Huxley and Orwell in particular. He was hardly unique in that regard. For many intellectuals in the middle decades of the twentieth century, these dystopian visions carried totemic significance, encapsulating the pathologies of modern society and disclosing a range of possible futures. The negative utopia held a dark mirror up to the modern world, and by looking into it, Fromm confronted a question that would haunt the twentieth century mind.

CHAPTER THREE

Paradigms of Dystopian Thinking

CHAPTER SUMMARY

During the middle decades of the twentieth century, dystopia escaped from the fiction section and ran rampant in postwar social and political thought. Beyond the immediate and pervasive influence of Huxley and Orwell, the stakes of three of the postwar era's characteristic concerns—totalitarianism, mass society, and technological society—were articulated through dystopian visions of the future. Intellectuals reflecting an array of disciplinary and ideological approaches sought to understand the trajectory of modern society by extrapolating its future; as dystopian thinkers, they sought to expose its pathologies by drawing them to their extremes.

The dominant rendering of totalitarianism in the 1940s and 1950s was dystopian insofar as it emphasized the possibility of total control—an unprecedented and perhaps unachievable ambition—and insofar as totalitarianism was taken to expose social, psychological, and structural vulnerabilities innate to modern societies. The idea of totalitarianism provoked intellectuals to confront the contingency and fragility of human freedom and with it the possibility of a system that not only dominates but dehumanizes its subjects. In succeeding critiques of mass society, prominent during the 1950s, and technological society, a major concern during the 1960s, analysts emphasized parallels with totalitarianism to challenge the complacency of industrial capitalist society in Western Europe and especially in the United States. In each context, the image of the future is a totalizing system of social control that suppresses individuality and collective agency—a closed future.

In surveying these discourses, this chapter uncovers the uses of dystopia for imaginative critique, examining some of the twentieth-century thinkers who deployed the image of the future to map the postwar space of possibilities, warn of its distinctive dangers, and direct urgency toward a narrowing but still vital field of alternatives.

IN THE LIFE AND WORK of Erich Fromm, one finds the shifting nightmares and dreamscapes of the postwar world crystallized.¹ In an intellectual climate shaped by Sigmund Freud's theory of mind and Marx's theory of society, Fromm was a practicing psychoanalyst and a democratic socialist, among the members of Frankfurt's influential Institute for Social Research. Fromm's pioneering work in social psychology, 1941's *Escape from Freedom*, drew disquieting existential lessons from the experience of Nazism. He argued that Soviet- and Nazi-style authoritarianism were the political consequences of a psychological void, and that they afforded a glimpse of modern society's deeply rooted pathologies. In doing so, Fromm anticipated works like his colleague Theodor Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality* and Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Like those writers, Fromm had seen the dread spectacle that would soon be called "totalitarianism" up close. He was a German Jew who fled his homeland amid Hitler's rise to power and eventually came to the United States, one among a generation of European refugees and exiles who transformed postwar intellectual and cultural life.

After the Second World War, Fromm scrutinized the social and psychological pathologies of contemporary industrial society in 1955's *The Sane Society*. There, he argued that "the West develops rapidly in the direction of Huxley's *Brave New World*, the East is today Orwell's 1984. But both systems tend to converge."² Converge on what? According to Fromm, "alienation," "automation," and "ever-increasing insanity."³ *The Sane Society* contributed to a wave of critical works in social thought, indictments of Western consumerism and conformity issued by Fromm's comrades-in-exile as well as by American sociologists like C. Wright Mills and David Riesman. In the next decade, Fromm adapted these concepts once more, this time to a critique of technological dehumanization that echoed critics such as Lewis Mumford, Jacques Ellul, and Herbert Marcuse. The intellectual zeitgeist had shifted once again, but as the opening passage of 1968's *The Revolution of Hope* indicates, Fromm's basic concern for the future had not, as he once again appealed to the prophets of dystopia and inveighed against a "new form of society . . . predicted in the form of fiction in Orwell's 1984 and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*."⁴

At each of these junctures, Fromm was just one of the prominent thinkers to deploy the dystopian rendering of the future as an instrument of imaginative critique. As he had noted in his afterword to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the question provoked by the negative utopias was a "philosophical,

anthropological, and psychological question, and perhaps also a religious one," and true to his point the future of humanity was now a significant topic of interdisciplinary debate. The negative utopias had speculated, in an imaginative mode, "that it is possible to dehumanize man completely, and yet for life to go on," and much of the story of postwar social thought extends from this hypothesis.⁵ The Western intellectual reaction to totalitarianism dwelled on the possibility of total control and the complete destruction of human freedom. This raises a concern that is both sociopolitical and existential: that freedom is not underwritten by human nature, that it is instead a contingent and revocable social condition.

For the intellectuals of Fromm's era, totalitarianism cast its shadow on all modern societies. They debated the extent to which its essential characteristics were latent within industrial capitalist democracies. If discourses on totalitarianism dwelled on possibilities of "total control," "total terror," and "total domination," they soon found analogues in critiques of mass and technological society foreboding "total identification," "total integration," and "technological totalitarianism." In each of these dystopias, the combination of closed institutions and conditioned individuals negates the dynamism and openness that once characterized the modern space of possibilities. The future becomes a void where possibility once beckoned. In short, it becomes a nonfuture. But so long as dystopia had not yet crossed over from possibility to actuality, one could still ask how the worst outcomes might be prevented, the direst trajectories reversed. Few of the thinkers surveyed here were optimistic about the task, but almost none were true fatalists: though it might require a revolution in the values and institutions of modern society, transformation was still possible, and the future could still be redeemed.

IN LEVIATHAN'S BELLY:
THE TRAUMA OF THE TOTAL STATE

Threatening to transform the modern state into an instrument of unlimited physical and even mental coercion, totalitarianism, in Orwell's enduring image, as well as in the formulations of the many intellectuals who shared his apprehensions, posed an unprecedented threat to human freedom in its relentless pursuit of total control. As influential as it proved in its time, the dramatic, Orwellian rendering of totalitarianism has been challenged by skeptics since the outset and deflated by subsequent empirical research. The

generation of intellectuals whose works made it one of the central terms of political thought during the twentieth century have been accused of over-interpretation, while historians and political scientists have raised doubts about the extent to which either Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union actually resembled the totalitarian model furnished by postwar theorists.⁶ These analytical deficiencies, no less than the concept's ideological deployment during the Cold War, have led many scholars to conclude that the concept is best consigned to history.⁷ Whether or not totalitarianism remains a fruitful concept for empirical research, it would be impossible to do justice to the political thinking of the postwar period without attending to it. Jeffery Isaac calls the idea of totalitarianism "the signal contribution of the twentieth century to political thought," while Wilfred McClay describes it as "our era's social and political *summum malum*."⁸ That the concept of totalitarianism articulated at this juncture has proven flawed should not prevent us from appreciating it as an innovative, imaginative response to a period of historic crisis. The concept represents the attempt of the best minds of a generation, including many who witnessed the atrocities of Nazism and Stalinism firsthand, to make sense of a terrifying new reality and to reevaluate the prospects for freedom in a world shattered by oppression and violence at a staggering scale.

The discourse on totalitarianism was, with few exceptions, motivated by fear, and treating totalitarianism as a product of the dystopian imagination allows us to ask not what totalitarianism is or was, empirically, but what it represented to the intellectuals who confronted it as a novel danger to the modern world.⁹ When the American Academy of Arts and Sciences convened its conference on totalitarianism in 1953, George Kennan opened the proceedings by remarking on the phantasmal character of totalitarianism:

When I try to picture totalitarianism to myself as a general phenomenon, what comes into my mind more prominently is neither the Soviet picture nor the Nazi picture as I have known them in the flesh, but rather the fictional and symbolic images created by such people as Orwell or Kafka or Koestler or the early Soviet satirists. The purest expression of the phenomenon, in other words, seems to me to have been rendered not in its physical reality but in its power as a dream or a nightmare. Not that it lacks the physical reality, or that this reality is lacking in power; but it is precisely in the way it appears to people, in the impact it has on the subconscious, in the state of mind that it creates in its victims, that to-

talitarianism reveals most deeply its meaning and its nature. Here, then, we seem to have a phenomenon of which it can be said that it is both a reality and a bad dream, but that its deepest reality lies strangely enough in its manifestation as a dream, and it is by this manifestation that it can best be known and judged and discussed.¹⁰

Kennan acknowledges that totalitarianism is as much a phenomenon of the political imagination as of politics, and from our vantage point it is still easier to appreciate the continuity between the “fictional and symbolic images” that Kennan associates with literature and the social scientific inquiries of Kennan and his contemporaries. Seeking to understand the totalitarian “state of mind,” Kennan’s cohort expressed as much interest in the ideological, psychological, and intellectual dimensions of totalitarianism as they did in its political and economic institutions. Among them were Carl Friedrich, who remarked that “totalitarianism is not only, nor even primarily a form of government . . . it engulfs the whole man who participates in it, and hence has its economic, sociological, and other aspects beyond the political and governmental,” and Hannah Arendt, whose influential book set out to distill the “basic experience that finds political expression in totalitarian domination.”¹¹ The central political institution of totalitarianism, the total state, might be its most conspicuous feature, but for Friedrich its function had to be understood in relation to an absolutist philosophy that he referred to as *totalism*, as for Arendt the state itself was secondary to the aspirations it expressed: a form of rule in which *total terror* is the means and *total domination* the end.

Indeed, the conceptual history of totalitarianism begins with the recoiling of the liberal imagination from the outsized ambitions of twentieth-century authoritarianism. Critics of Italian Fascism such as Giovanni Amendola described it as a *sistema totalitario* before cognates emphasizing the role of the state such as *lo stato totalitario* and *der totale Staat* became leitmotifs of Fascist and Nazi rhetoric, respectively.¹² Amendola and his liberal compatriots intended to highlight the monopolistic political aims of Benito Mussolini’s Fascist movement and the unscrupulous electoral practices—blackmail, intimidation, violence—by which they consolidated power and claimed the state as an instrument of the National Fascist Party. As the power of the Fascist movement intensified, so did the polemical weight of the “totalitarian” allegation. Amendola would soon write of a totalitarian “spirit” animating the Fascist movement “which will not allow any new day

to dawn that has not rendered the Fascist salute, just as it does not allow the present era to know a conscience which has not bowed the knee and confessed 'I believe.'¹³ Thus, as early as 1923, Amendola had touched upon the theme of total control that would vex later analysts and define totalitarianism as a dystopia. Fascism, he argued, "denies you the right to possess a conscience—of your own, not one imposed by others—and burdens the future with a mortgage heavy as lead."

As Fascism and Nazism gained ground during the 1920s and 1930s, totalitarianism emerged as an aspirational language of holistic, transformative rule, and the modern state as its distinctive instrument. Political philosophers such as Giovanni Gentile and Carl Schmitt explicated and justified in theory what Mussolini and Hitler were attempting in practice: the construction of an all-powerful state that would control every sphere of social life, from industrial production and the material conditions of life to education and the animating values of the nation. Looking out upon a Europe devastated by war and economic depression, Gentile and Schmitt concluded that the philosophy of limited government, with its liberal constitutions, parliamentary democracies, and bourgeois social norms, had failed to unify the people and realize their will in action. The new form of political association they envisioned would equip leaders like Mussolini and Hitler to resolve the European crisis by sweeping away the decaying institutions of the liberal state and transforming their societies into politically and spiritually unified totalities. That no regime approximated, let alone achieved, this ambition (least of all Fascist Italy, where the technical and organizational means lagged far behind the flamboyant theorization of the total state) should not prevent us from appreciating the importance of the aspiration to total control for the totalitarians themselves and also to their critics.

During the Second World War, the concept of totalitarianism attained new currency among European and American intellectuals as a formal antithesis to liberal democracy, against which the virtues of liberal constitutionalism, pluralism, and individualism could be defined.¹⁴ For many observers, the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 was the final piece of evidence for the "convergence theory" of totalitarianism, which stipulated that a single "totalitarian idea" had taken control of not only fascist France and Germany, where the theory of totalitarianism had incubated, but of the Communist Soviet Union, and perhaps, on some accounts, China, Japan, and Spain as well.¹⁵ Such regimes were distinguished by the rule of a single party, the centralization of political and economic authority under the national state, the sup-

pression of intermediary associations, and the use of terror and indoctrination to ensure the compliance of the citizenry. Commentators believed they were witnessing the emergence of a new type of state, a form of domination more pervasive and less vulnerable to resistance than any previous form of autocracy. Perhaps even more disturbing, for many intellectuals, than the totalitarian state itself was the “New Man” it set out to engineer. The literature of the period evinces a grim fascination with the possibility of “a new human type, totalitarian man” who accepts unquestioningly the dogma of the ruling party and becomes a willing executor of its ambitions.¹⁶

On this account, the totalitarian repudiation of limited government is a prelude to its true ambition, which is the destruction of individuality and the construction of a synthetic collectivity whose thoughts and attitudes, no less than its behavior, are shaped in accord with the totalitarian ideology. The controversy over the extent to which such total control was possible, and if so, by which means it might be achieved, animated much of the postwar discourse on totalitarianism. While some followed Orwell in emphasizing mechanisms of psychological control—ideology, propaganda, and indoctrination—others, particularly Arendt, saw the true nature of totalitarianism revealed in its overt and gratuitous use of terror. Both camps could be challenged by skeptics who doubted that total control was practically possible. Friedrich and his colleague Zbigniew Brzezinski argued in their seminal book *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* that “while it may be the intent of the totalitarians to obtain total control, it is certainly doomed to disappointment: no such goal is actually achieved, even within the ranks of their party membership or cadres, let alone over the population at large.”¹⁷ In addition, they maintained that the “ideologically motivated concern for the whole man” was not unique to totalitarianism or to modernity, as numerous regimes throughout history, from the Greek city states to the Muslim and Puritan theocracies, had sought to comprehensively shape the character of their citizens. But those who took the dystopian possibilities of totalitarian rule seriously were not comforted by the seeming futility of attempts at total control, fearing that new technical and organizational means would equip totalitarian regimes to succeed where their predecessors had failed. Orwell had warned, for example, that “the Inquisition had not the resources of the modern state. The radio, press censorship, standardized education, and the secret police have changed everything. Mass suggestion is a science of the last twenty-years, and we do not know how successful it will be.”¹⁸

Such disputes illuminate the significance of contributions by commentators like Fromm and his contemporary Erik Erikson, who deployed the nascent toolkit of psychoanalysis to probe the possibility of control over the mind itself. Both argued that totalitarian regimes could overcome the independent thought and judgment of their subjects by exploiting psychological vulnerabilities endemic to modern mass societies. Participation in the party and in auxiliary institutions offered a powerful new sense of identity, promising membership in a unified national community and the pursuit of a world-historical mission. The comprehensiveness and dogmatism of the totalitarian ideologies, precisely the same qualities that made them so disagreeable to liberal intellectuals, contributed to their appeal for those who sought reassurance from insecurities of social status and material well-being. As Fromm explained, “the psychological significance of Fascism” was how readily it exploited the “unconscious forces” of its subjects in order to secure their unquestioning obedience, particularly the “insecurity of the isolated individual” who feels cut off from the world and therefore exists in an “unbearable state of powerlessness and aloneness.”¹⁹ Paradoxically, Fromm saw this precarious condition as an outgrowth of the individualistic cultural currents that totalitarianism challenged. Fromm believed that the ideals of freedom and individuality that had been incubating in Western society and culture since the Renaissance were both a blessing and a burden, and he feared that many would just as soon surrender their sense of self to an overarching collectivity and rid themselves of the anxieties and responsibilities of autonomy.

Concurring in this regard was Erikson, who would eventually contribute the concept of the “identity crisis” to developmental psychology.²⁰ Erikson described the identity crisis as a period of struggle for self-definition that could be navigated successfully, leading to the emergence of a coherent and socially integrated sense of self, or unsuccessfully, leading to confusion, alienation, and antisocial behavior. Stretching the concept slightly, we might interpret Erikson’s contributions to the totalitarianism discourse as a predecessor of this notion, rendering the totalitarian movements as the pathological resolution of a collective identity crisis. Erikson described commitment to the totalitarian state as a psychological realignment that compensated for the loss of “wholeness” through “totalism.”²¹ Like Fromm, Erikson maintained that this mode of identity construction was most appealing to individuals who lacked a sense of stable identity, and most especially for the younger generations of Europeans who had never known stability: “Where

historical and technological developments severely encroach upon deeply rooted or strongly emerging identities (i.e., agrarian, feudal, patrician) on a large scale, youth feels endangered, individually and collectively, whereupon it becomes ready to support doctrines offering a total immersion in a synthetic identity (extreme nationalism, racism, or class consciousness) and a collective condemnation of a totally stereotyped enemy of the new identity."²² Succeeding psychological accounts of totalitarianism developed the hypothesis that total control could be achieved insofar as individuals subordinated their sense of selfhood and adopted a new identity defined by absolute obedience. To name two prominent examples. Adorno and his colleagues developed their characterology of "authoritarian submission" with reference to Fromm and Erikson, while the American psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton operationalized Erikson's concepts in his work on "thought reform" in the People's Republic of China.²³

These psychosocial analyses provide a clue as to why early representations of totalitarianism were so fixated on the image of the seemingly omnipotent leader and his "cult of personality."²⁴ Zamyatin's *Benefactor*, Orwell's *Big Brother*, and Koestler's *Number One* all depicted the totalitarian leaders as an object of idolatry, but such portrayals were not only the stuff of satirical literature. Journalists depicted Hitler as an orator so powerful as to exercise "personal fascination, almost hypnosis, which drew crowds and inspired disciples."²⁵ Commentaries on the Soviet Union have likewise emphasized the ubiquitous propaganda posters depicting Stalin as an archetypal "warrior and saviour."²⁶ On such accounts, the rhetoric and iconography of the dictator goes beyond persuasion or political allegiance and extracts a form of psychological submission that their followers subconsciously desire. The unconstrained political power of the dictator is mirrored in this ostensible hold over the mind, a power that commentators understood as irrational and likewise appealed to pseudo-scientific, mythic, and even supernatural concepts to explain.

And yet the psychological allure of these regimes evidently had its limitations. Everywhere Fascism, Nazism, or Communism claimed the totality of mind and society, they were met with resistance and insubordination. As such, persuasion, propaganda, and indoctrination represented only one pillar, the positive pillar, of totalitarian domination. Whereas psychological interpretations of totalitarianism emphasized the regime's ability to confer a sense of identity, terror signified the negative pole, the ability to unmake the self through violence. For thinkers like Arendt, who described terror as "the

essence of totalitarian domination," the totalitarian world was principally defined by its mechanisms of violence: the secret police and the extermination camp.²⁷ This concern for the dehumanizing consequences of violence are exemplified in Arendt's influential discussion of "total domination" and in Leo Lowenthal's preceding account of terror's "atomization of the individual."²⁸ Both writers suspected that the Nazi concentration camps expressed the secret blueprint for totalitarian rule, arguing that it was in these contexts of absolute terror and dehumanization that the aspiration to total control was most directly realized. Thus Lowenthal observed that "the difference between the effect of terror upon by the population within and without the concentration camp is one of degree rather than the kind," while Arendt maintained that the concentration camps were the "true central institution of totalitarian organizational power."²⁹

Lowenthal, a sociologist who, like Fromm, was affiliated with the Frankfurt School, developed his notion of "atomization" to convey the way that terror transformed its victims psychologically. Whereas Fromm and Erikson emphasized the sense of identity, stable if artificial, offered by totalitarian movements, Lowenthal argued that the subordination of the self to the collective would only deepen the individual's sense of anxiety and loneliness. This is because the individual's membership in the collectivity is conditional on their obedience to a set of rules that is both rigid and arbitrary. When all communication and association is monitored for signs of dissent, and one must always suspect the eyes and ears of the secret police, acquiescence becomes a routine instinct, as Lowenthal explains:

Terror accomplishes its work of dehumanization through the total integration of the population into collectivities, then depriving them of the psychological means of direct communication. . . . The individual under terrorist conditions is never alone and always alone. He becomes numb and rigid not only in relation to his neighbor but also in relation to himself; fear robs him of the power of spontaneous emotional or mental reaction. Thinking becomes a stupid crime; it endangers his life. The inevitable consequence is that stupidity spreads as a contagious disease among the terrorized population. Human beings live in a state of stupor—in a moral coma.³⁰

If such "psychological repression" was ubiquitous under totalitarian rule, Lowenthal believed that atomization was taken to its furthest extreme in the

concentration camps, where the environment and interactions of the imprisoned could be controlled entirely. He read prisoners' accounts of life in the camps as illustrating how "creative faculties of fantasy, imagination, memory, become meaningless and tend to atrophy where they can no longer bring about any desired change in the individual's fate."³¹ Total control could be established only on this condition of utter hopelessness and passivity, insofar as the camps had brought about the "breakdown of the personality" and the "transformation of the individual, whose essence is continuity of experience and memory, into a unit of atomized reactions."³²

Arendt's analysis of the camps alleged a similarly radical destruction of the prisoners' humanity, a paradoxical outcome of the megalomaniacal totalitarian effort to "transform the human species."³³ She took this ambition to be revealed in the deterministic visions of history on which the totalitarian regimes had converged: in the Soviet Union, a historical materialism that culminated in the emergence of a classless society, in Nazi Germany, a pseudo-naturalistic evolutionary process that would give rise to a master race. The totalitarian movement thus imagines itself as the executor of historical law that will "produce mankind as its end product." But mankind can only be "produced" if it is a passive subject, and thus on Arendt's account terror must prepare the way for total domination by destroying political freedom. As Arendt explains it, terror strips away the possibility of free movement, association, or communication, and thus eliminates the preconditions for resistance that thwart ordinary tyrants:

By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them; compared to the condition within its iron band, even the desert of tyranny, insofar as it is still some kind of space, appears like a guarantee of freedom. Totalitarian government does not just curtail liberties or abolish essential freedoms; nor does it, at least to our limited knowledge, succeed in eradicating the love for freedom from the hearts of man. It destroys the one essential prerequisite of all freedom which is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space.³⁴

Though it might succeed in eliminating the political space for freedom, Arendt did not think terror was sufficient to fulfill the metaphysical ambitions of totalitarian rule. Even so, she did not conclude that total control was impossible. The concentration camps occupied such an important position in Arendt's theoretical account of totalitarianism because she

believed they fully realized the possibility of total domination that the regime could only approximate in the wider society. If the hypothesis that such an outcome was possible stood at the center of the totalitarian experiment, the camps were “the laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified.”³⁵ Since total control could not be accomplished so long as subjects maintained their capacities for autonomy and spontaneity—that is, any semblance of their freedom—it would be necessary to carry out a still more fundamental reshaping of the human being:

Total domination, which strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual, is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never changing identity of reactions, so that each of those bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other. The problem is to fabricate something that does not exist, namely, a kind of human species whose only “freedom” would consist in “preserving the species.” . . . The camps are meant not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something that even animals are not.³⁶

In the world outside the camps, Arendt hypothesized, individual spontaneity might endure the death of political freedom. But those imprisoned in the camps could be separated from everything that gave them personality or character, from every context in which their free will could manifest itself in spontaneous action. Though Arendt did not believe that this could be accomplished anywhere except in the concentration camps, she nonetheless maintained that these experiments in dehumanization provided “the guiding social ideal of total domination in general.” And while she would go on to argue that much in the human condition as we have known it militated against this grotesque ambition, she rejected the argument that anything in humanity’s nature could act as a safeguard against the possibility of total domination. “The success of totalitarianism,” she wrote, would mean “the radical liquidation of freedom as a political and human reality.”³⁷ If this dystopian outcome were to be realized, Arendt warned, “it will hardly be con-

soling to cling to an unchangeable nature of man. . . . Historically we know of man's nature only insofar as it has existence, and no realm of eternal essences will ever console us if man loses his essential capabilities."³⁸

Not all observers of totalitarianism accepted this dystopian rendering of totalitarianism. The philosopher Eric Voegelin, whose rebuke to Arendt elicited the response just quoted, argued that any account of totalitarianism that took seriously the possibility of "changing human nature" failed to engage critically with the most dangerous aspect of the totalitarian ideology.³⁹ More apt, Voegelin argued, was to characterize the totalitarian project as one of destroying human nature, and he insisted that the stakes of this disagreement were more than semantic—to concede that humanity is as malleable as the totalitarians believe, he feared, was "politically dangerous" and even tantamount to "complicity in murder." From his vantage point, Arendt's account had ceded to "a metaphysics of the creation of humans by humans," precisely the article of the self-aggrandizing totalitarian faith that intellectuals ought to challenge.⁴⁰ Likewise, Riesman objected that the dystopian vision of totalitarianism found in Orwell and Arendt was over-interpretation that exaggerated totalitarianism's power to restructure mind and society.⁴¹ Striking a note of caution that could apply to much dystopian thinking, Riesman warned that "we may subtly succumb to the appeal of an evil mystery; there is a long tradition of making Satan attractive in spite of ourselves."⁴² However successful totalitarian regimes might be in destroying their organized political resistance, they could not stamp out all forms of disobedience—and here Riesman had in mind not only the altruism exhibited by those who sheltered the persecuted or helped them to flee their countries, but even those who engaged in bribe-taking or organized black markets. Such acts of rebellion demonstrated how radically the systems of indoctrination and repression had fallen short of their goal of restructuring the personalities of their subject populations, and, in Riesman's optimistic account, how short they would inevitably fall. The error in the dystopian rendering of totalitarian regimes was that it underestimated the mental adaptability and resourcefulness of their subjects:

It assumes that men can be readily manipulated and controlled, either as the earlier utopians thought in pursuit of some greatly uplifted state, or as the more recent anti-utopians such as Huxley and Orwell have thought, in pursuit of vulgarity and beastliness. . . . Thus we run into

a paradox. On the one hand, we think men can be adjusted into some Brave New World because of fundamental human plasticity and flexibility, while on the other hand we do not see that men's ability precisely to fit, part-time, into such a world is what saves them from having to fit into it as total personality. . . . their view of men as plastic allows them to suppose that the totalitarians will change all that and transform men into automatically socialized creatures like the ants.⁴³

Riesman's competing analysis of totalitarianism highlighted the shortcomings of its system of domination, attending to the myriad ways in which the totalitarian regimes were resisted and sabotaged by noncompliant subjects. He warned that the power of dystopian accounts of totalitarianism should not lead us prematurely "to assume that totalitarianism possesses the kind of psychological pressure system pictured by Orwell in the sadistic but symptomatic book, *1984*."⁴⁴ In reality, Riesman argued, subject populations continued to circumvent the authority of their oppressors, in ways that showed they could not be forced to completely accept the new social order, "not so much in practical life as in mental obeisance, in refusal to internalize the system's ethical norms."⁴⁵ Thus the experience of everyday life under totalitarian rule not only failed to support the dystopian hypothesis, but it spoke to a deep strain of psychological resilience, rooted less in the potential for heroic revolt as in "sheer unheroic cussed resistance to totalitarian efforts to make a new man."⁴⁶

In the decades to follow, the susceptibility of totalitarian regimes to both internal resistance and external pressure would be amply illustrated and, correspondingly, the hyperbolic rendering of totalitarianism was gradually supplanted by more sober accounts. During this period, intellectuals and social critics in America and Western Europe gradually shifted their attention from the threat of totalitarianism abroad to dystopian possibilities contained within. Totalitarianism depicted one cataclysmic outcome for modernity, but it also prompted social thinkers to attend to the ways that similar political, psychological, and technological trends might yet work, more subtly but perhaps also more pervasively, against individuality and democracy in the ostensibly free world. In the following decades, totalitarianism came to be seen by many critics as an exaggerated form of modernity's latent pathologies, a black mirror that reflected harshly on societies that, having avoided the most overt forms of domination, might yet fall victim to their own complacency.

FEAR OF THE MASSES:
AUTONOMY IN THE ERA OF CROWDS

If the discourse on totalitarianism drew on the Orwellian stream of the dystopian imagination, then the fear of an emergent mass society reflected Huxleyan concerns. When Huxley himself revisited his dystopian classic in 1958, he remarked on how quickly America and Europe had come to resemble his *Brave New World*, warning that “even in the those countries that have a tradition of democratic government, this freedom and even the desire for this freedom seem to be on the wane.”⁴⁷ He believed the greatest dangers to individuality and democracy were not overt forms of coercion and repression, but forms of nonviolent manipulation that could undermine the autonomy of the individual even as they preserved an illusion of free choice. “It is perfectly possible for a man to be out of prison, and yet not free,” Huxley cautioned, “to be under no physical constraint and yet to be a psychological captive, compelled to think, feel and act as the representatives of the national State, or of some private interest within the nation, want him to think, feel and act.”⁴⁸ Huxley was far from being alone in this conclusion, as *Brave New World Revisited* appeared at the end of a decade in which social scientists had been preoccupied with the decline of autonomy under the conditions of what was typically referred to as *mass society*.

Critics of mass society argued that the freedoms and liberties it afforded belied conditions that undermined the development of an autonomous personality, leaving individuals to express a “pseudoindividuality” that is in fact meticulously scripted, or to vacillate between “anomie” and “wan conformity.”⁴⁹ In still other formulations, the individual is supplanted by the “mass man,” a “degraded state of the human” that more closely resembles an “automaton” or a “cheerful robot” than an autonomous person.⁵⁰ By the end of the decade, the concept of mass society had become such a dominant motif that, in 1960, Edward Shils would characterize it as “a specter . . . haunting sociologists” and Daniel Bell could describe it as “probably the most influential theory in the Western world, Marxism notwithstanding.”⁵¹ Each of these scholars registered their skepticism about a concept that often seemed to express an inchoate dread about the conditions of modern society—what Bell called an “ideology of romantic protest” motivated by a “sense of the radical dehumanization of life”—rather than any specific program of critique or reform. Like the concept of totalitarianism, which described its subject in terms of a conceptual limit rather than an empirical manifestation, mass

society functions in social thinking as an ideal type, one in which descriptive, predictive, and normative elements intermix with varying degrees of precision. But, as William Kornhauser argued in the same year that Bell and Shils issued their critiques, "the idea of mass society has a very rich history as a conception of the *specific* tendencies that undermine freedom in the modern world," such that, wielded precisely, it could serve as a diagnosis for pathological tendencies in modern society and even illuminate those countertendencies that would need to be set against them.⁵²

The dystopian critics of mass society suggested that it trended, more gradually than totalitarianism but no less effectively, to the destruction of autonomy and individual identity. There is some truth, then, to Bell's generalization that the critics of mass society were concerned "less with the general conditions of freedom in society than with the freedom of the *person* and with the possibility, for some few persons, of achieving a sense of individual self in our mechanized society."⁵³ And yet the most perceptive critics of mass society connected their concern with subjective experience to the structural causes and consequences of alienation and conformity. The American sociologist C. Wright Mills encapsulates this idea when he argued that mass society would gradually transform the individual into a "cheerful robot," a passive and compliant personality who appears to do just as he or she pleases but is deprived of meaningful opportunities to deliberate and choose.⁵⁴ Mills describes this possibility in language that echoes Arendt's account of totalitarianism, for like Arendt he detects complacency, not reassurance, in the idea that freedom is a matter of internal nature rather than of social structure:

We know of course that man can be turned into a robot, by chemical and psychiatric means, by steady coercion and by controlled environment; but also by random pressures and unplanned sequences of circumstances. But can he be made to want to become a cheerful and willing robot? Can he be happy in this condition, and what are the qualities and the meanings of such happiness? It will no longer do merely to assume, as a metaphysics of human nature, that down deep in man-as-man there is an urge for freedom and a will to reason. Now we must ask: What in man's nature, what in the human condition today, what in each of the varieties of social structure make for the ascendancy of the cheerful robot? And what stands against it?⁵⁵

Not only does Mills's line of questioning convey the stakes of a dystopian mass society, his comments on how the "sociological imagination" might be deployed to address this problem clarify the utility of dystopian thinking. As a social critic he labored to convey "that felt threat to social values—such as those of freedom and reason—that is the necessary moral substance of all significant problems of social inquiry."⁵⁶ Absent such a perspective, Mills feared that intellectuals would vacillate between complacency and an "unspecified malaise" that takes such values to be threatened but without any comprehension as to how or why.⁵⁷

Though the conception of freedom animating such accounts would be transformed considerably by the 1950s, the opposition between freedom and mass society descends from an aristocratic-elitist strain of thinking that emerged during the eighteenth century.⁵⁸ As with the antiutopian outlook considered in the preceding chapter, the diagnosis of modern society in terms of the "masses" or "mass society" traces back to the conservative intellectual response to the French Revolution, that dramatic confrontation between the institutions and values of the aristocratic social order and the great majority of the population whom they oppressed or excluded.⁵⁹ Aristocratic critics of mass society reacted against the expansion of education and the franchise, which enabled mass participation in political and cultural life while eroding the privileged position of traditional elites.⁶⁰ From the elite point of view, the movement toward democratic equality appeared as a leveling of social distinctions, one that provokes a crisis of authority and raises new possibilities for political despotism and cultural decline. Hence, reactionary thinkers like Burckhardt protested that "so long as the masses can bring pressure on their leaders, one value after another must be sacrificed: position, property, religion, distinguished tradition, higher learning."⁶¹ In Tocqueville's more balanced appraisal, the movement toward equality of conditions introduced new opportunities as well as new dangers. And yet Tocqueville still feared that aristocratic ideals such as liberty and excellence would be casualties of the movement toward equality.⁶²

These intellectuals, and those who carried their skepticism toward mass society into the twentieth century, ultimately feared that the general population would prove incapable of effective self-rule, and that the opinion of the masses could not provide an adequate basis for political authority. Even so, the masses could not simply be ignored. The fear of an all-powerful and all-consuming mass was memorably expressed in Gustave Le Bon's 1895 book

The Crowd, which prophesied that “the age we are about to enter will in truth be the era of crowds. . . . The divine right of the masses is about to replace the divine right of kings.”⁶³ In Le Bon’s estimation, the crowd is a mob that expresses its power in strikes, demonstrations, and riots, overpowering the elites through sheer force of numbers. While Le Bon conceded that the individual constituents of the crowd were rational, he maintained that the crowd could only constitute itself insofar as the individuating judgments and opinions of these members were suppressed. Where a well-defined group or class might be capable of pursuing its interests rationally, the crowd must prioritize unanimity and obedience. Similar lines of argument occur in José Ortega y Gasset’s *Revolt of the Masses* (1930), which presents the increasing power of the masses as a danger to the cultivated taste and judgment of “select minorities.”⁶⁴ Ortega y Gasset channels a Nietzschean antipathy toward the masses that construes them as the enforcers of a herdlike conformity: “The mass crushes beneath it everything that is different, qualified, and select. Anybody who is not like everybody, who does not think like everybody, runs the risk of being eliminated.”⁶⁵ In introducing this existentialist concern for the endurance of the authentic individual amid the self-enforcing uniformity of the crowd, Ortega y Gasset anticipates the social-psychological concern with autonomy that would animate midcentury dystopian renderings.

In the early twentieth century, these accounts of mass behavior were taken up with new urgency by intellectuals seeking to comprehend the sudden and unexpected political upheavals brought about by Fascism, Nazism, and Communism. Le Bon’s hypothesis that the typically languid masses could be inflamed into action by demagogues and charismatic leaders proved influential among later analysts who examined the way that totalitarian “mass mobilization” turned the institutions of mass democracy toward despotic ends. Ortega y Gasset himself was among the first to link these phenomena, describing Fascism as a “movement of mass-men” and “the most palpable manifestation of the new mentality of the masses, due to their having decided to rule society without the capacity for doing so.”⁶⁶ Though the masses played an important role in totalitarianism as theorized by Fromm, Arendt, and their contemporary Emil Lederer, their accounts did not reduce totalitarianism to mob rule and offered a more nuanced sociology of where the masses, this new actor on the scene, had come from. These writers suggested that the mass society had emerged as traditional communities were transformed by urbanization and industrialization, while the masses themselves were distinguished precisely by their indistinctness: their lack of

belonging to any social group or class that could provide a sense of identity and social status. The masses are “amorphous,” “atomized, isolated,” “lonely,” “self-alienated and suggestible”—and it is this precariousness that leaves them vulnerable to the appeal of totalitarian leaders.⁶⁷ According to Arendt, the “total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty” demanded by totalitarian movements “can only be expected from the completely isolated human being who, without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances, derives his sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement, his membership in the party.”⁶⁸ Thus, totalitarianism can only take root where masses have been or can be created. But by virtue of their atomization, the masses are in no position to assert themselves spontaneously or forcefully in the political sphere as the earlier accounts of mass behavior would suggest. Rather, the masses are available to be mobilized by elites through propaganda; in a sense, they are an instrument of totalitarian rule, and a source of power in democratic political systems, but not an independent driver of policy or ideology. As Kornhauser explains, mass society refers to “a set of conditions under which democratic institutions are vulnerable to totalitarianism, rather than as a set of conditions underlying totalitarian institutions.”⁶⁹

Assuming the cataclysmic politics of totalitarian mobilization could be averted, then what becomes of the mass society? In the dystopian rendering, mass society is still fragmentary and atomized, still experiencing a crisis of authority and community, but these are thematized less in terms of their political consequences than their social-psychological ones. Though the political institutions of representative democracy and the economic institutions of free market capitalism are supposed to enshrine the individual’s capacity for choice, critics of mass society allege that in the most significant domains of social life, the individual’s autonomy is undermined and their choices are preempted, if not predetermined. Individuals are barraged with cues, particularly from the media but also in their workplaces and families, that encourage them to conform with behavioral expectations, to choose from and be content with the options presented to them in their political life, to be “productive” in the sphere of labor and a “consumer” in the marketplace. As Fromm argued, individuality is not curtailed by an identifiable *they*, but rather by an “*It*”: “profit, economic necessities, the market, common sense, public opinion, what ‘one’ does, thinks, feels.”⁷⁰ These exigencies are “invisible” and “unassailable”—as Fromm asks, “Who can rebel against nobody?”—and they constitute a form of authority that does not issue

commands, but can “suggest,” “coax” and “manipulate.”⁷¹ This “It,” however, is nothing more than the aggregated judgments and expectations of discrete individuals. Like Marx, Fromm suggests that we confront an alien social force that emerges out of our own activities. The type of authority that pervades a mass society, according to Fromm, “is not overt authority, but *anonymous, invisible, alienated authority*. Nobody makes a demand, neither a person, nor an idea, nor a moral law. Yet we all conform as much or more than people in an intensely authoritarian society would.”⁷²

This form of authority is sustained by a mechanism that Fromm calls “automaton conformity,” which exists when individuals adapt uncritically to the expectations of their social groups. Fromm’s understanding of human psychology led him to the conclusion that this type of behavior would not need to be compelled; rather, conformity would alleviate the anxiety and loneliness endemic to mass society. The anonymous authority of social expectations, expressed in “public opinion” and “common sense,” are so powerful because of our profound readiness to conform to the expectations everybody has about ourselves and our equally profound fear of being different.⁷³ Fromm’s explanation for conformity in mass society parallels his account of totalitarianism insofar as both involve “mechanisms of escape” from modern alienation. Obedience to authority, whether overt or anonymous, is an adaptive response to an unmet psychological need for orientation and identity. But it is ultimately, Fromm wagers, a self-defeating strategy, one that affords individuals no opportunity to develop or express their own personality, or to exercise their own capacity for reason and choice. This is to leave the distinctive potential of our human existence unexplored: “The person who gives up his individual self and becomes an automaton, identical with millions of other automatons around him, need not feel alone and anxious anymore. But the price he pays, however, is high; is the loss of his self.”⁷⁴

As this analysis indicates, the question that concerned Fromm and other social scientists regarding the prospects for autonomy in mass society could not be answered simply by referencing the “negative freedom” of the individual. They wanted to know if the individual in mass society would be able to acquire the positive capacities for free decision-making and exercise them in practice, or if the unique pressures of such a society would eventually work to suppress that potential. To answer such questions, Fromm deployed the analytical concept of *social character*, by which he referred to the “the essential nucleus of the character structure of most members of a group, which has developed as the result of basic experiences and the mode of life

common to that group."⁷⁵ Fromm's core insight is that the traits and dispositions that predominate in any society will reflect its material conditions and distinct modes of socialization. In this respect, he acknowledges that individual character always adapts to social conditions, such that being autonomous is never a matter of forming one's own self in isolation from society and its expectations. But not all social conditions and, as a result, not all social characters are equally compatible with the exercise of freedom. Under the right conditions, the individual might be able to navigate the pressures of modern society with a sense of integrity, but dystopian visions of mass society emphasized trends toward submission, conformity, and alienation.

Not all observers of mass society shared the trepidation of its dystopian critics. Shils, though loath to use the term, defended so-called mass society for its inclusivity and stability, arguing that modern societies were incorporating larger portions of the population into their central political and cultural institutions, and, contra Fromm and Mills, that they had created conditions more conducive to political self-determination and individual self-expression than any previous form of society. "People make choices more freely in many spheres of life," Shils argued, "and these choices are not necessarily made for them by tradition, authority, or scarcity."⁷⁶ Dystopian critics of mass society could accept this assessment insofar as it captures the many barriers to autonomy that existed in premodern societies. However, their arguments highlight an unsettling paradox: that just as conditions favorable to individuality have come into place, the development and exercise of autonomy has been short-circuited by new social and psychological pressures. Fromm argued that "although man has rid himself from old enemies of freedom, new enemies of a different nature have arisen; enemies which are not essentially external restraints, but internal factors blocking the full realization of the freedom of personality."⁷⁷ Accordingly, the individual may enjoy a wide range of free choices, but, to use Fromm's formulation, lack the *power* to choose, or to use Mills's, lack the capacity for reasoning that would make such choices meaningful. Mills, for his part, argued that the "it has become evident to us that *all* men do *not* naturally *want* to be free; that all men are not willing or not able, as the case may be, to exert themselves to acquire the reason that freedom requires."⁷⁸

Similar concerns resonated even in more restrained analyses of mass society. Several important works blending social science with social criticism emerged out of Fromm's program, such as Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), both of which

considered the emergent social character of American society in light of patterns of association and organization that they took to diminish autonomy.⁷⁹ Riesman, a student and patient of Fromm's, made the most influential use of the social character hypothesis with his portrait of the "other-directed" personality, even as he softened his mentor's critique of American society and politics.⁸⁰ For Riesman, the other-directed personality, though in principle capable of either autonomy or conformity, was deeply susceptible to the pressures of public opinion, which were increasingly amplified and disseminated through the mass media. In Whyte's book, which frequently echoes Weber's account of bureaucratic society, the principal obstacle to autonomy is the predominance of mass organizations, whose internal hierarchies and large memberships require that the individual subordinate his or her judgment.⁸¹ If these works and their characteristic concern with what Wilfred McClay has called the "collectivism of the mind" bore resemblance to Huxley's vision of the Fordist society, Huxley himself took these lines of inquiry as confirmation that his dystopian prophecy was coming true, and sooner than he had originally anticipated.⁸² In *Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley cites Mills, Fromm, and Whyte as confirming his hypotheses, and he understood Whyte in particular to have shown that "a new Social Ethic is replacing our traditional ethical system—the system in which the individual is primary. The key words in this Social Ethic are 'adjustment,' 'adaptation,' 'socially orientated behavior,' 'belongingness,' 'acquisition of social skills,' 'team work,' 'group living,' 'group loyalty,' 'group dynamics,' 'group thinking,' 'group creativity.'" ⁸³

But Riesman and Whyte, while critical of contemporary society, did not descend to Huxleyan levels of pessimism. They argued that the institutions and values of modern society could be reconfigured in ways that accommodated greater individuality. Riesman, for his part, emphasized that the other-directed personality was not by nature a conformist and still had the "opportunity to become autonomous."⁸⁴ In Riesman's typology, other-direction is the social character that predominates in advanced modern societies, and it refers to the tendency of individuals to interpret and adjust to their social role by being "sensitized to the expectations and preferences of others"—this is the successor to the premodern mode of "tradition-direction" that is oriented by authoritative communal norms and the early modern mode of "inner-direction" in which the individual is oriented by an "internalized set of goals" acquired early in life.⁸⁵ Each of these social characters has the potential for both creative and conforming behavior, and it is not the case that the

autonomous person must find themselves in constant revolt against society. According to Riesman, “The ‘autonomous’ are those who on the whole are capable of conforming to the behavioral norms of their society—a capacity the anomics usually lack—but are free to choose whether to conform or not.”⁸⁶ In practice, however, Riesman observes that the other-directed person seems to vacillate between “compulsive adjustment” to the expectations of others and anomic debilitation resulting from actual or perceived failure to adjust accordingly. Though he judges them “less total and relentless” than their totalitarian counterparts, Riesman nonetheless argues that democracies are not without their own “enemies of autonomy.”⁸⁷ Citing Fromm, he argues that “the diffuse and anonymous authority of the modern democracies is less favorable to autonomy than one might assume. One reason, perhaps the chief reason, is that the other-directed person is trained to respond not so much to overt authority as to subtle but nonetheless constricting interpersonal expectations.”

In a media-saturated society, these expectations are represented and reinforced in radio, newspapers, television, and other forms of mass communication. Analysts of totalitarianism had taken up propaganda as a central mechanism of power, but the critics of mass society were among the earliest social thinkers to turn their attention to the way that the emergent mass media was transforming the bases of power and authority in democratic contexts. For theorists such as Mills, it is precisely their role as the audience for mass communications that constitutes the masses, a position that accentuates their vulnerability to manipulation by political and economic elites. Alongside these elites, mass societies see the rise of “the propagandist, the publicity expert, the public-relations man” as a new kind of power player, one who can steer “opinion-making” processes and produce popular support or opposition.⁸⁸ Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), another best-selling work of sociology and social criticism, sought to expose the forms of psychological manipulation embedded in modern advertising techniques, as well as to show how those techniques had begun to migrate into politics as officials sought ways to monitor, predict, and even control the formation of public opinion.⁸⁹

While these accounts raised concerns about the extent of manipulation, they stopped short of predicting the total fabrication of the mind envisioned in works like *Brave New World*. A stronger version of this hypothesis was pursued by two of Fromm’s colleagues, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, in their infamous attack on the “culture industry” as a tool

of “mass deception.”⁹⁰ Their trenchant critique channels Huxley’s depiction of a homogenous and stupefying mass culture wherein entertainment, not propaganda, is the most important mechanism of social control. On their analysis, the rising standard of living and the availability of consumer goods has only increased “the powerlessness and pliability of the masses,” while a “flood of precise information and brand-new amusements make people smarter and more stupid at once.”⁹¹ The resemblance to Huxley’s novel is not incidental. Horkheimer and Adorno, along with their colleagues in the Frankfurt School, discussed Huxley’s *Brave New World* frequently and seriously during the summer of 1942, just as they were beginning work on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). As Richard Wolin notes, the members of the Frankfurt School evinced an “obsessive fascination” with the novel and “endowed Huxley’s dystopian prophecies with nearly evidentiary status . . . if one wanted to gain insight into the future shape of consumption-driven mass society, there was, it seemed, no better point of reference.”⁹² Even so, the only direct references to Huxley in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* are critical. Horkheimer and Adorno insist that their critique of mass culture is distinct from the elitist criticisms of the masses, that their concern “is not culture as a value, as understood by critics of civilization such as Huxley, Jaspers, and Ortega y Gasset,” but rather the necessity of confronting a culture that dulls the critical consciousness and contributes to the maintenance of an “unjust society” and brings us to the threshold of a “totally administered world.” Likewise, their analysis of the culture industry uses the aristocratic theory of a mass society as a foil, as Horkheimer and Adorno reject “the sociological view that the loss of support from objective religion and the disintegration of the last precapitalist residues, in conjunction with technical and social differentiation and specialization, have given rise to cultural chaos.”⁹³ What they fear is not the outbreak of anarchy, but of stifling conformity in culture as well as in the material conditions of life. Culture “is infecting everything with sameness,” and the media comprises a closed universe, “unanimous within itself.”

Whereas critics of mass culture argued that the intellectual and aesthetic standards of the elites would be debased by the demands of the masses, Horkheimer and Adorno assert that the opposite is true—that the commercial imperatives of mass cultural production compel the pursuit of ever-wider audiences, and as such it is the culture industry itself that constitutes and then addresses its product to a mass audience. “The more strongly the culture industry entrenches itself, the more it can do as it chooses with the

needs of consumers—producing, controlling, disciplining them.”⁹⁴ It is for this reason that “pseudoindividuality reigns” in mass society, even in the context of an industry that supposedly enshrines the choice of the consumer.⁹⁵ According to Horkheimer and Adorno, mass culture has not facilitated individuation, but forced individuals to identify with the stereotypes presented in advertising and entertainment. The individual becomes complicit in his or her own commodification, attempting “to turn oneself into an apparatus meeting the requirements of success, an apparatus which, even in its unconscious impulses, conforms to the model presented by the culture industry.” In one of its darkest moments, their analysis concludes that the masses will sooner adapt to this semblance of individuality than rebel against it: “The hope that the contradictory, disintegrating person could not survive for generations, that the psychological fracture within it must split the system itself, and that human beings might refuse to tolerate the mendacious substitution of the stereotype for the individual—that hope is in vain.”⁹⁶ What distinguishes Horkheimer and Adorno’s radical critique from more individualistic arguments against mass society is that they see this kind of conformity as being actively induced, rather than as an incidental byproduct of mass society, and that they therefore interpret the culture industry as a mechanism of *political* control, one that effectively stabilizes the structure of advanced industrial capitalism and hides it behind an “ideological curtain.”⁹⁷

Horkheimer and Adorno were among the first to draw attention to the political function of the emerging mass media, a line of argument that would seem prescient during and after the 1950s when the culture industry was strengthened by the sudden ubiquity of television, which succeeded in saturating American homes within the span of a decade.⁹⁸ It is to an American public inundated by mass media that Mills addressed 1956’s *The Power Elite*, which investigated the relationship between the conditions of mass society and the structure of power and political decision-making in America.⁹⁹ Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Mills inverts the aristocratic critique of mass society such that “those who have supposed the masses to be all powerful, or at least well on their way to triumph, are wrong,” citing Le Bon, Ortega y Gasset, and Lederer as examples.¹⁰⁰ Together, “The Culture Industry” and *The Power Elite* demonstrate the emergence of a radical and reflexive critique of mass society that emphasizes the manipulation of the masses by elites: the masses, on this view, are pacified and powerless, atomized and submissive. Mills’s arguments nonetheless unfold from a distinct normative basis, presenting an imminent critique of American democracy. Richard Bellamy

has noted that “the ideas of the ‘masses’ and of ‘mass society’ were embedded within accounts of social organization and behaviour that challenged the models of individual agency and rationality traditionally associated with democratic decision-making,” and Mills provides an illustrative example of how the critique of mass society transforms from an elitist anxiety about mob rule to a pointed critique of elite domination.¹⁰¹

Mills develops his image of the mass society against the democratic ideal of a “community of publics,” wherein public opinion emerges from unconstrained and uncoerced discussion among citizens and is then realized in institutions. Mills suspected that the ideal of “The Great American Public” had become an ideological fiction, “a fairy tale . . . not adequate even as an approximate model of how the American system of power works.”¹⁰² According to Mills, the transformation of the public into masses is chiefly an effect of mass communication. Mass communication skews “the ratio of the givers of opinion to the receivers” and reduces “the possibility of answering back an opinion without internal or external reprisals being taken,” such that an active, critical role in public deliberation becomes less feasible and citizens instead become passive consumers of the media.¹⁰³ Mills argues further that mass communication relieves the public of its independent relationship to institutions, such that “institutional authority, with its sanctions and controls, penetrates the public.” Against the ideal of the autonomous public, Mills anticipates an extreme wherein “the public is terrorized into uniformity by the infiltration of informers and the universalization of suspicion. . . . the formal structure of power coincides, as it were, with the informal ebb and flow of influence by discussion, which is thus killed off.” He notes that archetypes for this method of administering public opinion include “the late Nazi street-and-block system, the eighteenth-century Japanese kumi, the Soviet cell structure,” examples that clarify the connection between his dystopian rendering of mass society and totalitarianism. Indeed, Mills make this connection explicit, arguing that though these extreme forms of manipulation have not yet been realized, American society has “moved a considerable distance along the road to the mass society,” and that “at the end of that road there is totalitarianism.”¹⁰⁴

Mills then alleges that the mass media, having created the conditions for elite domination, also becomes the most important mechanism by which this domination is maintained, as elites invest heavily in advertising and public relations in order to “control, manage, manipulate, and increasingly

intimidate" the public.¹⁰⁵ Whereas Fromm associated mass society with the anonymous authority of public opinion, Mills's vision of mass society is one in which authority gives way to manipulation. If authority is voluntarily obeyed, manipulation, on Mills's definition, "is the 'secret' exercise of power, unknown to those who are influenced."¹⁰⁶ A truly authoritarian society, then, would not need manipulation since the power of the dictator or ruling party would be openly acknowledged. And a truly democratic one would not condone manipulation. But manipulation becomes a critical form of power in contexts where the elite seeks to rule while maintaining the illusion of democratic legitimacy:

Manipulation becomes a problem wherever men have power that is concentrated and willful but do not have authority, or when, for any reason, they do not wish to use their power openly. Then the powerful seek to rule without showing their powerfulness. They want to rule, as it were, secretly, without publicized legitimation. It is in this mixed case—as in the intermediate reality of the American today—that manipulation is a prime way of exercising power. Small circles of men are making decisions which they need to have at least authorized by indifferent or recalcitrant people over whom they do not exercise explicit authority. So the small circle tries to manipulate those people into willing acceptance or cheerful support of their decision or opinions—or at least to the rejection of possible counter-opinions.¹⁰⁷

Mills's vision of mass society is part of a wider inquiry into the American power structure, and he ultimately sees the eclipse of the public as concurrent with the centralization of power under an economic, military, and political elite whose institutions monopolize effective decision-making ability. In this there are echoes of Tocqueville's warning about democratic despotism, but he does not share Tocqueville's optimism regarding the role of voluntary associations in tempering the centralization of power. Such institutions, on Mills's account, are either themselves unwieldy bureaucracies or are too small to exert influence on decision-making:

The effective units of power are now the huge corporation, the inaccessible government, the grim military establishment. Between these, on the one hand, and the family and the small community on the other,

we find no intermediate associations in which men feel secure and with which they feel powerful. There is little live political struggle. Instead, there is administration from above, and the political vacuum below.¹⁰⁸

As with totalitarianism, the concept of mass society soon fell out of favor among social scientists, but this is not because the problems it illuminated had been surpassed. Its key hypotheses about the political and psychological dimensions of modern society, particularly the role of the mass media in the exercise of power and the formation of the self, remained critical topics of social scientific inquiry and cultural criticism throughout the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile, twentieth-century literature is rich with satirical takes on the compulsions of a media-saturated consumer society.¹¹⁰ Like most dystopias, mass society presented a simplification, but the anxieties it expressed were not easily shaken, even as the material and social conditions that gave rise to these critiques continued to transform at an accelerating pace.

THE MECHANIZED MIND: TECHNOLOGY AND MASTERY

Having made influential contributions to the study of totalitarianism and mass society, Fromm, like many intellectuals, later turned his attention to a third dystopia. His 1968 book, *The Revolution of Hope*, opens with the following admonition:

A specter is stalking in our midst whom only a few see with clarity. It is not the old ghost of communism or fascism. It is a new specter: a completely mechanized society, devoted to maximal material output and consumption, directed by computers; and in this social process man himself is being transformed into a part of the total machine, well fed and entertained, yet passive, unalive, and with little feeling. With the victory of the new society, individualism and privacy will have disappeared; feelings toward others will be engineered by psychological conditioning and other devices, or drugs which also serve a new kind of introspective experience.¹¹¹

Once again, the contours of the dystopian future had changed, but as in his previous writings, Fromm did not counsel despair. The subtitle of his work,

"Towards a Humanized Technology," pointed the way toward an alternative future. It also raised important questions about the relationship between humanity and technology: How had technology become *de*-humanized?

Though the technological dystopia became an important motif of social thought during the 1960s, concerns about the rate and direction of technological progress, and the ends toward which these powers might be put, had not sprung up from nowhere. As Fromm notes, the canonical dystopian novels gave an important role to technology. In *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, technology is principally an instrument of control: Zamyatin's "procedure" for the removal of the imagination and Orwell's telecreens come to mind. Even so, these novels depict societies where technology has regressed everywhere that it does not serve the interests of the ruling caste. Thus, the One State and Oceania are both primitive and modern, with technology playing little role in the daily lives of their subjects except to instill fear. In *Brave New World*, however, the twentieth century was given a glimpse of a dystopia that is thoroughly technological, not only in its methodology of control but also in its governing philosophy. Huxley describes his dystopia as one in which science and technology are not used "as though they had been made for man," but instead, "as though men were to be adapted and enslaved to them."¹¹² Likewise, the dystopian images of totalitarianism and mass society each had their technological components. The centralized state, whether total or administrative, the means of mass communication, whether used principally for propaganda or for advertising and entertainment, were common features in both totalitarianism and mass society. In their seminal analysis of totalitarianism, Friedrich and Brzezinski noted that the totalitarian regimes depended on modern technology not only in "weapons and communications" but also for surveillance, that is, "the supervision and control of movement," as well as for the construction of a command economy, which "presupposes the reporting, cataloging and calculating devices provided by modern technology."¹¹³ Insofar as "the trend of technological advance implies the trend toward greater and greater size of organization," they argued, "totalitarian societies appear to be merely exaggerations, but nonetheless logical exaggerations, of the technological state of modern society."

Dystopian critics of technology made a stronger claim: not that technology could prove conducive to totalitarianism, but that technology was itself transforming the advanced industrial democracies into a new form of totalitarianism. The dystopia of "technocratic totalitarianism," much like the

images of mass society that preceded it, afforded the administrative state an important role, but more as a reflection of and response to underlying technical imperatives than as an independent driver of policy or ideology.¹¹⁴ This dystopia achieves totality without indoctrination or terror, but rather through the sheer pervasiveness of technology. Marcuse's critique of advanced industrial society is emblematic in this regard:

By virtue of the way it has organized its technological base, contemporary industrial society tends to be totalitarian. For "totalitarian" is not only a terroristic political coordination of society, but also a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests. It thus precludes the emergence of an effective opposition against the whole. Not only a specific form of government or party rule makes for totalitarianism, but also a specific system of production and distribution which may well be compatible with a "pluralism" of parties, newspapers, "countervailing powers," etc.¹¹⁵

Marcuse aimed to demonstrate that advanced industrial capitalism is no less "totalitarian" than Communism or Fascism: in the latter, power is monopolized by an overbearing political cult that compels obedience through terror, in the former, by an unceasing system of production that induces passivity through manipulation. Marcuse's diagnoses was expanded on by the American historian Theodor Roszak, who argued that totalitarianism describes any society in which "a system of politics devours the surrounding culture;" its hallmark is not any particular ideology, but "the attempt to bring the whole of life under authoritarian control."¹¹⁶ He therefore argued that under the technocratic system that was developing in the industrial democracies, totalitarianism would be "perfected," "because its techniques would become progressively more subliminal," and therefore more difficult to resist. Left to run its course, this process would lead humanity into an "era of social engineering" wherein "the total human context which surrounds the industrial complex" is reorganized for maximum efficiency and control.

That technological society should emerge as the dominant dystopian image of the late twentieth century represents a remarkable inversion of the modern utopian hopes for rational progress and mastery. In the first chapter, we saw that utopian socialists like Saint-Simon and Comte had envisioned the rule of a benevolent technocracy composed of managers, engineers, and scientists. Though Engels articulated his "scientific" program in opposition

to his utopian forebears, his own description of the incipient classless society nonetheless maintained that “the government of persons” would be replaced by “the administration of things, and by the conduct of the processes of production.”¹¹⁷ Engels argued that the state, having seized the means of production on behalf of the proletariat, would no longer intervene in society to defend property through coercion in the manner of the bourgeois state, but instead restrict its purview to the management of production and the distribution of goods. Nor had the program of technocratic rule been forgotten in the twentieth century. During the Great Depression, intellectuals like Thorstein Veblen in the United States and Walther Rathenau in Germany had argued on behalf of a technocratic system of governance, in which the management of human affairs would be largely delegated to engineers, the elites presumably most qualified to coordinate technical and economic activity of such scale and complexity.¹¹⁸ Since then, variants on the technocratic model had been championed by an eclectic cadre of progressive and reactionary figures. What unites the various advocates of technocracy throughout modernity is their conviction that the rational application of knowledge can yield not only a mastery of nature, but of the contingencies of social and political life as well.

Dystopian critics of technocracy counter this appraisal in two crucial respects. The most prominent argument is that the control that modern technology offers over human conduct is experienced by those subjected to it as domination and, at its most extreme, dehumanization. This is one of the major premises of the Huxleyan lineage in the dystopian imagination, and of arguments against the project of mastery as it is realized under totalitarian conditions, as Arendt’s account of total domination illustrated. But there is another argument that is distinct to the critique of technology, which poses a paradoxical outcome to the project of mastery. In this case, the very instruments by which enlightened humanity is to have asserted control over nature and society slip gradually from our grasp, rebounding back on us in ways that we feel powerless to prevent. Technology, seemingly autonomous, escapes from human control.¹¹⁹ This line of criticism was pioneered by the French philosopher Jacques Ellul in *The Technological Society* (1954). Ellul wrote that “everything today seems to happen as though ends disappear, as a result of the magnitude of the very means at our disposal.”¹²⁰ In his influential account, technological progress had become a self-sustaining process whose ends were increasingly located in the distant future, rather than in response to proximate needs, and articulated only in the arcane language

of specialists, incomprehensible to the ordinary person. Ellul described the outcome of this process much as Huxley did, as one in which technology no longer serves any cognizable human end and humanity is instead “progressively absorbed” into an ever-expanding technological system.¹²¹ What is at stake in this scenario is not the domination of a class or party, as the formulation of “technocracy,” a regime ruled by experts, would suggest. Slightly closer to the mark is the increasingly autonomous “technostructure” that John Kenneth Galbraith describes in *The New Industrial State* (1967).¹²² The system that Galbraith describes is a massive planning apparatus, consisting of managers and engineers distributed throughout various private and public firms, that is somewhere between an interest group, a political class, and a self-propelling bureaucratic system. It is not the case that any of its constituents can, strictly speaking, “control” the direction of technological progress; rather, they are each borne along by imperatives emerging from other parts of the structure. The technostructure seeks autonomy for itself, and however much its constituents profit from their position, their ability to direct the apparatus is limited. Nonetheless, Galbraith, a progressive economist, thought it possible that understanding the social forces at work in the technostructure would render it amenable to democratic control.

By contrast, dystopian thinking about technology began from the premise that, as Roszak argued, technocracy is not merely a “power structure,” but instead “the expression of a grand cultural imperative.”¹²³ The roots of technological domination would then lie within the project of mastery itself and mark the end point of a process in which reason has been narrowed to rationality: a purely instrumental logic of means and ends, capable of positing methods for control but not for articulating substantive values for the conduct of individuals or the structure of societies.¹²⁴ When Marcuse, for example, argued that the “totalitarian universe of technological rationality is the latest transmutation of the idea of Reason,” he meant to indicate the inextricable connections between modern progress and the forms of domination encroaching on advanced industrial society.¹²⁵ Roszak concurred, describing technocracy as a “transpolitical phenomenon following the dictates of industrial efficiency, rationality, and necessity.”¹²⁶ To critique technology or technocracy, then, was not simply to criticize any given innovation, or even the whole ensemble of technological innovations, nor was it to object to the rule of an expert class of technocrats. To do so would prioritize the superficial manifestations of technological domination over the underlying structural forces that impelled

modern society toward technological dystopia. Whether conceptualized, as by Marcuse, as “technical rationality,” as by Ellul, as “technique,” or as in the American historian Lewis Mumford’s writings, as a program of “mega-technics,” dystopian critics contended with what they understood to be a malign externalization of modern rationality itself.

The dystopians therefore envision a future in which the project of mastery has been completed, but only insofar as humanity now counts itself among the material to be mastered. Fromm offsets his message of revolutionary hope with a description of “the dehumanized society of 2000 AD,” while Ellul’s exceedingly pessimistic book concludes with “A Look at the Year 2000” in which the entire world is run like a single giant factory, its functioning guaranteed by a massive bureaucratic apparatus for planning and control. “Enclosed within his own creation, man finds that there is ‘no exit,’” he warns, “that he cannot pierce the shell of technology to find again the ancient milieu to which he was adapted for hundreds of thousands of years.”¹²⁷ Mumford’s *The Myth of the Machine* (1966) likewise envisions a “uniform, all-enveloping, super-planetary structure, designed for automatic operation” in which “man will become a passive, purposeless, machine-conditioned animal.”¹²⁸ It is with such visions in mind that the critics of modern technology set out to expose the emergent pattern of domination, locating its roots in our past and tracing out its implications for our future. Mumford and Ellul, among the earliest and most influential critics, both present a narrative in which technique begins as a force bound to and by the cultural forms of life that it serves, and both conclude that in the modern age we are threatened by a technical system whose scale and power has allowed it to break free of such boundaries and become a determinative context for all human activities.

Ellul holds that the source of domination in modern life is not technology as such, but the principle of organization that inheres in and guides the development of technology. In his influential species of technological determinism, *technique*—the orientation toward efficient control—gradually transgresses the traditional boundaries that govern where, when, and for what purposes it may be used and eventually comes to dominate every sphere of society and culture. The historical dimension of Ellul’s project endeavors to explain how the ensembles of techniques once relegated to functional roles in work, military, medicine, and other specialized contexts now come to be a unified system to which all other goals and practices are subordinated. Writing from the standpoint of the mid-twentieth century,

Ellul makes a significant advance over preceding analysts such as Marx, who focused on the role of the machine in the process of production, and Carlyle and Siegfried Gideon, whose discussions focused narrowly on “mechanization,” by looking to the larger “technical phenomenon” of which machinery is a single component. In Ellul’s rendering, technique and organization, which he defines as technique applied to social, economic, and administrative life, are the determining forces in activities that go well beyond the sphere of production.¹²⁹ The hallmarks of organization are impersonality, a division of tasks, and methods for resolving issues in advance—all methods, which as Weber so presciently noted, make the mass organization into a kind of machine in its own right. In a society that is so thoroughly dominated by technical processes, human beings become cogs in the vast machinery of production and administration. Thus, even as technique liberates humanity from natural necessity, it imposes its own “artificial necessity” that compromises the autonomy of individuals, that is, their ability to rationally select and pursue their own ends.¹³⁰

Ellul wagers that our ability to tolerate the emerging social order, with its artificial environments, tempos, stressors, and stimuli, will depend on our willingness to make ourselves the subjects of techniques for adjustment and enhancement. He imagines a future in which this is accomplished, at the species level, through genetic engineering and, at the individual level, through a massive industry of pharmaceuticals. But the area that is most worrying to Ellul is the new field of “human techniques” that are tasked with adapting human beings to the transformed technical milieu. Human techniques become necessary because human beings cannot adapt quickly enough to the demands of the modern social order. The artificial environment contrasts harshly with the evolutionary conditions of our species and gives rise to psychological anxiety and alienation. When human technique succeeds, it overcomes these tensions, but in Ellul’s estimation this is not a triumph, but rather a step toward the final subordination of humanity to its products. This is because human techniques render individual human beings as fungible resources, interchangeable units of productivity who will adapt themselves to whatever end is required by the imperatives of efficiency. In this sense, Ellul subsumes the critique of mass society, viewing “massification” as a necessary step in the preparation of the human material for a totally artificial existence.¹³¹ “Who is too blind to see that a profound mutation is being advocated here? A new dismembering and a complete reconstitution of the

human being so that he can at least become the objective (and also the total object) of techniques."¹³²

The final outcome of this "mutation" is envisioned in the closing chapters of Ellul's book, which predicts a "dictatorship of test tubes rather than of hobnailed boots."¹³³ Ellul expected that, by the year 2000, humanity would have begun space colonization, would subsist on synthetic foods and pharmaceuticals, would greatly expand before eventually stabilizing its population, and would regulate collective hygiene through efficient inspection and control. This image of the future is not another entry in the catalog of "philosophic utopias," Ellul warns, as all of this is within the purview of serious scientific minds. In describing the uses of electronic messages and genetic engineering, Ellul claims to have uncovered a "future Huxley never dreamed of," but from our vantage point the resemblances seem more striking: a genetically encoded caste system, techniques of mental manipulation that bypass consciousness—nothing Ellul describes would be out of place in the Hatching and Conditioning Centers of *Brave New World*.¹³⁴ So too for Ellul's contention that this bland utilitarian existence would have to be maintained through the continuous centralization of administrative power, "a worldwide technological dictatorship which will allow technique its full scope and at the same time resolve the concomitant difficulties."¹³⁵ This, Ellul claims, is the implicit political ideal of those who forecast a new, technologically enabled Golden Age. And as in Huxley's novel the technicians and scientists who would produce such a future will believe it a utopian triumph, taking satisfaction in the infinite refinement of their techniques. Perhaps life in this society could still furnish a sense of "happiness," but Ellul questions what this could mean, absent a substantive concern with culture as a context for human flourishing. If human technique can adjust individuals to any environment, then happiness of the kind sought by the social engineers, which ultimately is contentment rather than flourishing, can be guaranteed under any conditions. The philosophical upshot of Ellul's thought experiment, then, is the emptiness of happiness as an end of human effort: it has no intrinsic substance, and it is possible to imagine a society that is both happy and utterly inhuman.

Much in the substance of Ellul's dystopian vision resonates in Mumford's depiction of the "megamachine" that modern civilization has built around itself. But whereas Ellul's view of technique as an autonomous and inhuman force seems to leave no prospect for a redemption of modern

society, Mumford's analysis emphasizes that other forms of technological society are possible. This potential is illustrated in Mumford's 1934 *Technics and Civilization*, a pioneering work in the social-philosophical analysis of technology.¹³⁶ In it, Mumford argues that technics are "an element in human culture," animated by our ideals, shaped by our cultural norms, and reaching back to shape our ideals and values in kind.¹³⁷ Technology therefore appears to Mumford as an ambiguous and underdetermined force, capable of interfacing with human beings and their cultures in many different configurations. While Mumford criticizes much of the role of technology in modern society, the tone is not overwhelmingly dystopian, and the book ends with the optimistic proposal that the closer integration of humanity and technology might yield a new "biotechnics" in which technology serves and enhances human life, rather than dehumanizing and depersonalizing the human world in the manner of modern machinery.¹³⁸ During the 1960s, however, Mumford would revisit these questions in a darker work called *The Myth of the Machine*. Writing amid the Cold War nuclear stalemate, Mumford now proposed that modern technology expressed a pattern of "megatechnics" that pursued the total conquest of nature and the substitution of an artificial habitat for the organic environment. Mumford's narrative describes the machine not in terms of modern automation but as a method of organization that has been attempted in human societies since antiquity: he mentions as an example the pharaohs of ancient Egypt and the coerced labor used to build the pyramids. Megatechnical schemes have since recurred throughout history, differing in their sociotechnical configurations but sharing the ambition to control nature and humanity. Mumford's history traces the emergence of power, order, predictability, and control as ends-in-themselves, imposed by divine command and military coercion on subjected populations in the premodern world, and now imposed upon the modern world by mechanization. This pathological development has been allowed to take root, he argues, because we have come to accept a distorted image of humanity and human history. The interpretation of our past in terms of the current notions of progress and mastery has served mostly as a justification for our current obsessions, and as such a "widened interpretation of the past is a necessary move toward escaping the dire insufficiencies of current one-generation knowledge. If we do not take the time to review the past we shall not have sufficient insight to understand the present or command the future: for the past never leaves us, and the future is already here."¹³⁹

The continual advancement of megatechnics, Mumford wagers, will

not simply be a consequence of the power or prestige of technology, but of the inability of modern civilization to formulate any competing values. For Mumford “the most striking thing about this power complex is its studious indifference to other human needs, norms, and goals; it operates best in what is, historically speaking, an ecological, cultural and personal lunar desert.”¹⁴⁰ In order to bring technology back into the ambit of human values, Mumford believes we must retrieve a normative conception of humanity and its relation to technology, such that we have some ideal that can be opposed to the dominance of the megamachine. Mumford’s humanistic alternative rests on his appreciation of “ritual, art, poetry, drama, music, dance, philosophy, science, myth, and religion,” which is to say, “the symbolic activities which give significance both to the processes of work and their ultimate products and consummations.”¹⁴¹ Mumford thus rejects the characterization of humanity as *Homo faber*, writing that “there was nothing uniquely human in tool-making until it was modified by linguistic symbols, esthetic designs, and socially transmitted knowledge.”¹⁴² By contrast, Mumford argues, “What is specifically and uniquely human is man’s capacity to combine a wide variety of animal propensities into an emergent cultural entity: a human personality . . . man is pre-eminently a mind-making, self-mastering, and self-designing animal.”¹⁴³ Thus, the action of human beings on themselves, individually and socioculturally, is the main story of human development, one that precedes, determines, and directs our material and technological efforts. Mumford argues that the cultivation and expression of human potential is the end to which technics ought to be oriented—and he agrees with Ellul that history furnishes examples of how this can be done. He notes, for example, that the integrity of technics and culture is intimated by the Greek *tekhne*, encompassing both industry, which responds to objective needs, and fine art, which responds to subjective needs. From this point of view, the physiological and behavioral transformation of the human being via technics is the main accomplishment of civilization—the use of technics for life in general rather than specifically for work or for power. Mumford argues that humanity set out “to give form to a human self, set apart from his original animal self by the fabrication of symbols—the only tools that could be constructed out of the resources provided by his own body: dreams, image, and sounds.”¹⁴⁴ Modern technology may aid us in this task, but it cannot replace it or fulfil it independently.

Marcuse’s critique of advanced industrial society echoes many of these underlying concerns and is premised on a similar narrative of rational mas-

tery gone awry. However, his vision takes on a more radical political character, both in terms of diagnosis and prescription. His distinctive account of technological domination emphasizes that technical rationality is a *political* rationality, one that evolves in tandem with the specific political and economic structures of industrial capitalism. In this respect, he concurs with his colleagues Horkheimer and Adorno, who wrote, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that the “adverse effects” of technological progress “should not be attributed to the internal laws of technology itself, but to its function within the economy today.”¹⁴⁵ The “comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom” that Marcuse set out to expose is produced by new forms of technical control whose ultimate purpose is to insulate the social order against radical political change.¹⁴⁶ Marcuse’s critique also draws inspiration from American critics of mass society, noting “the vital importance of the work of C. Wright Mills” in addition to Whyte and Vance Packard: “To be sure the lack of theoretical analysis in these works leaves the roots of the described conditions covered and protected, but left to speak for themselves, the conditions speak loudly enough.”¹⁴⁷ Marcuse, however, seeks to expose the roots and to illuminate the alternatives, describing his “critical theory of contemporary society” as “a theory which analyzes society in the light of its used and unused or abused capabilities for improving the human condition.”¹⁴⁸ Marcuse understands his contribution to consist in bringing to consciousness this “choice between historical alternatives,” beginning with the revelation that “the experience, transformation, and organization of nature as the mere stuff of domination” is but one “specific historical project” to which competing projects may be opposed. Thus, *One-Dimensional Man* entertains both utopian and dystopian futures for modernity. The dystopian hypothesis is that “advanced industrial society is capable of containing qualitative change for the foreseeable future,” while the competing utopian hypothesis is that “forces and tendencies exist which may break this containment and explode the society.”¹⁴⁹

Marcuse insisted that “utopian possibilities are inherent in the technical and technological forces of advanced capitalism and socialism” and that the “rational utilization of these forces on a global scale would terminate poverty and scarcity within a very foreseeable future.”¹⁵⁰ But the most insidious consequence of technical control is that it drives the possibility of such a future from consciousness. This is what it means to render thought “one-dimensional”: to constrain the political imagination to the reproduction of what already exists. Whereas Marx had been confident that the intolerable conditions of the industrial proletariat would lead them to revolution, Marcuse elaborates on the fear expressed by Horkheimer and Adorno, namely,

that the historical problem of alienation has been resolved by an ideological and technical system that cultivates those needs that it is capable of meeting and designates all others as irrational. Thus, industrial society may become “richer, bigger, and better,” in a way that defuses the impetus to radical politics, even as it brings humanity to the threshold of nuclear war and ecological catastrophe.¹⁵¹ According to Marcuse, the greatest obstacle to liberation is the efficacy with which technological progress and economic affluence suppress dissent, leading individuals to identification with the system as opposed to experiencing alienation from it:

This immediate, automatic identification (which may have been characteristic of primitive forms of association) reappears in high industrial civilization; its new “immediacy,” however, is the product of a sophisticated, scientific management and organization. In this process, the “inner” dimension of the mind in which opposition to the status quo can take root is whittled down. The loss of this dimension, in which the power of negative thinking—the critical power of Reason—is at home, is the ideological counterpart to the very material process in which advanced industrial society silences and reconciles the opposition.¹⁵²

Marcuse, then, is well aware that revolt will appear irrational so long as the terms of technical rationality are taken for granted, that “the alternatives are Utopian.”¹⁵³ But he believes that the utopia must be demanded nonetheless. He imagines critical thought and radical politics as progressing in tandem, in a “dialectic of liberation” that depends “in the first place on the prevalence of the vital need for abolishing the established systems of servitude; and secondly, and this is decisive, it depends on the vital commitment, the striving, conscious as well as sub- and un-conscious, for the qualitatively different values of a free human existence.”¹⁵⁴ On this point, Marcuse echoes the humanistic critics of technology, but the revolution he calls for is not merely one of values. New ways of thinking will of course be necessary, but the yoke of social control will only be broken by large-scale collective action—a political revolution beginning with the refusal of the system and demanding nothing less than total liberation. In terms of his practical political involvement, Marcuse associated this vision of liberation with the protest of the student counterculture of the 1960s, whose opposition to the materialistic values of society seemed to embody his call for a Great Refusal. As he wrote in his 1969 “Essay on Liberation,” in a dedication to the student activists of the United State and Europe:

The young militants know or sense that what is at stake is simply their life, the life of human beings which has become a plaything in the hands of politicians and managers and generals. The rebels want to take it out of these hands and make it worth living; they realize that this is still possible today, and that the attainment of this goal necessitates a struggle which can no longer be contained by the rules and regulations of a pseudo-democracy in a Free Orwellian World.¹⁵⁵

Marcuse understood the tumult of the 1960s as a period of prerevolutionary radicalism out of which a “new sensibility” was being articulated: “the period of enlightenment prior to material change—a period of education, but education which turns into praxis: demonstration, confrontation, rebellion.”¹⁵⁶ Roszak, too, saw the youth movement as the best chance to challenge the dominant technocracy. “If the resistance of the counterculture fails,” he concludes, “I think there will be nothing in store for us but what anti-utopians like Huxley and Orwell have forecast.”¹⁵⁷

Though he affirmed much in Marcuse’s account of modern society and agreed that nothing short of a revolutionary effort could redeem it, Fromm envisioned an altogether different type of revolution: a revolution of values that would lead to the *humanization* of technology. Fromm argued that the predicament of modern society was that the project of mastery led to a “one-sided emphasis on technique and material consumption” at the expense of “humanistic values.”¹⁵⁸ He interpreted this situation as the outcome of two dogmas that elevated technology above all competing values: first, that whatever is technically feasible must be done, and second, that efficiency and output must be maximized at all costs. To humanize technology in this context would mean subordinating technological progress and economic growth to some substantive ethical criteria, some vision of human flourishing that would serve as a new end for technical development. Ellul, for his part, had been bitterly pessimistic about the prospect of humanizing technology, calling it a “a pious hope with no chance whatsoever of influencing technical evolution.”¹⁵⁹ But Fromm believed that the fatalism of thinkers like Ellul followed from their focus on the internal logic of the technical system and lack of emphasis on “the human system” out of which it emerges and with which it interacts.¹⁶⁰ Whereas Ellul saw technology as an autonomous adversary, Fromm follows Mumford in describing a dialogical relationship between humanity and technology, and he doubted that technique could penetrate the human mind as thoroughly as Ellul and Marcuse feared. Humanity has “specific needs . . . developed in the last few thousand years of his history . . .

which make him different from the animal as well as from the computer,” and their manifestation as “dissatisfaction with our present way of life, its passiveness and silent boredom, its lack of privacy and its depersonalization, and the longing for a joyful, meaningful existence” are signs that we have not yet fully succumbed to the demands of the technical system and may act to reshape it. To Fromm, what was needed was “a movement which combines the wish for profound changes in our economic and social practices with changes in our psychic and spiritual approach to life,” and as a public intellectual Fromm endeavored to stimulate such a movement through a variety of both radical and reformist projects that shaped the political horizon of the New Left.¹⁶¹

For this desire to manifest itself in social change would require hope that a different kind of social structure is possible. What is important to realize, Fromm argues, is that hope is not passive anticipation of improvement or deliverance, but rather confidence in our ability to act and intervene in our own fate. Ironically, then, the casual faith in progress, no less than the fantastic projections of utopian thought, may contribute to hopelessness rather than working against it. When the anticipation of a utopian future becomes a kind of promissory note that offsets our passivity and powerlessness—the future as compensation for the present—then hope is hollow. But if utopian aspirations can become a roadmap for action, then the future could once again become an open prospect.

CONCLUSION

Despotic cults with mind-altering powers, humans made into robots, world-swallowing machines running of their own volition: What are we to make of a political imaginary so populated? Reviewing Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Riesman remarked that “it is to science fiction, rather than to the more humane Utopias of the past, that we must look for the extremities of the totalitarian’s belief that, while nothing may be in itself meaningful, everything is possible.”¹⁶² And so it would seem for the postwar era more broadly, whose dystopian visions encapsulate a period of crisis and imaginative critique.

Though the threat of atomic warfare hung ominously overhead, the social and political thinking of the era was more dystopian than apocalyptic, less concerned with the possibility of human extinction than with a kind of existential oblivion: the dehumanization of humanity. But if these were

intensely foreboding decades, they were also intellectually generative ones, yielding classic works of social scientific and humanistic social criticism whose concepts and hypotheses remained relevant throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. As we have seen, the dystopian constructs of totalitarianism, mass society, and technological society were not purely analytical constructs or even ideal types, nor were they precisely predictive depictions of the future. Dystopian thinking blends these functions with the imaginative intention to plumb the limits of the possible and the critical intention to expose the pathologies of the present. Cast in the dim light of dystopia, the contours of modern society reveal the distinctive arsenal of subjection and domination with which we continue to contend: the gross extremes of state and corporate power, manipulation through mass media propaganda, invasive and instrumentalizing technologies, subliminal pressures to conform and consume.

The spectacle of totalitarianism provoked the dystopian sensibility to new extremes of saturation, but the dystopian imagination, we learned, preceded the era of totalitarianism and it endured beyond it too. Friedrich and Brzezinski acknowledged that totalitarianism “could have arisen only within the context of mass democracy and modern technology,”¹⁶³ and in ensuing decades intellectuals considered whether these constitutive elements of Western societies might incline toward their own dystopic extremes. Or, as Arendt explained:

If it is true that the elements of totalitarianism can be found by retracing the history and analyzing the political implications of what we usually call the crisis of our century, then the conclusion is unavoidable that this crisis is no mere threat from the outside, no mere result of some aggressive foreign policy of either Germany or Russia, and that it will no more disappear with the death of Stalin than it disappeared with the fall of Nazi Germany. It may even be that the true predicaments of our time will assume their authentic form—though not necessarily the cruelest—only when totalitarianism has become a thing of the past.¹⁶⁴

For Arendt, arguably, totalitarianism never fully became a thing of the past. But having survived the “cruelest” of modern predicaments, she would in time turn her intellectual powers to the “authentic” dangers of the age.

CHAPTER FOUR

Theorizing Freedom and Domination

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Dystopia cast a long shadow over the political imagination of the twentieth century. Political theorists in the second half of the century contemplated freedom and domination within a space of possibilities transfigured by real and potential cataclysms and deprived of utopian prospects. Illuminated by the dim light of dystopia, modern society appeared as a vast array of impersonal forces, threatening to overwhelm the individual and collective agency of its subjects and negate the future as a horizon in which human freedom might unfold. This chapter traces the dystopian imaginary through the works of arguably the three most influential political theorists of the last century: Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and Michel Foucault, each of whom derives critical insights from the discourses on totalitarianism, mass society, and technocracy while advancing innovative accounts of power, freedom, rationality, and domination.

For Arendt, the encounter with totalitarianism clarified a modern paradox of omnipotence and powerlessness that would remain central to her postwar theorizing. Her efforts to resuscitate the public realm as a space of freedom responded to the political and existential perils of an age where the prodigious powers of the state, science, and technology loomed over a void of public agency and a culture of consumerism and passivity. Public freedom was also a central concern for Habermas, who sought to vindicate the practical rationality of self-determining citizens from the instrumentalizing rationalities of technocracy, bureaucracy, and the market. From his early encounter with the technocratic projects of the postwar right to his late reflections on the perils of genetic engineering, the dystopia of technical control has remained a critical foil for Habermas' vision of emancipation. Foucault, meanwhile, describes a strategic confrontation between modern society, with its "political technologies" of disciplinary and biopolitical power, and a modern subject

wielding “technologies of the self” to discover and actualize degrees of freedom. Foucault’s construal of freedom is fugitive, and his politics are defensive rather than redemptive. Taken together, the political and ethical practices of freedom described by each thinker go beyond the liberal-democratic concerns with individuality or democracy: they seek nothing less than the emancipation of the future as a site of possibility.

IF *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) was Arendt’s World War II book, reflecting the apocalyptic climate of the 1940s, then *The Human Condition* (1958), its successor and Arendt’s most enduring contribution to political theory, can be read as her Cold War book, capturing the diffuse anxieties of a restive era. Orwell had predicted that a nuclear stalemate between the United States and the Soviet Union would yield a “peace that is no peace”; for the Arendt of *Origins* “the anticipation of a third World War” hung over the world “like the calm that settles after all hopes have died.”¹ And yet it is not the specter of war that haunts *The Human Condition*. Rather, Arendt invokes a more ambiguous, though in her reading no less ominous, token of the times: the 1957 *Sputnik* launch, which inaugurated the Space Age and brought to reality “what up to then had been buried in the highly non-respectable literature of science fiction.”² For Arendt, the fact that a man-made object now orbited the earth was an event “second in importance to no other, not even to the splitting of the atom.”³ The ambitions of the Space Age represented, in her view, the revolt of modern science against the human condition, and if the age of atomic warfare betokened the possible end of life on earth, the new era hazarded a kind of existential oblivion. Arendt would elaborate on this point a few years later, describing “the conquest of space” as an ambition that would lead to the “mutation of the human race” and contemplating a future in which “the stature of man would not simply be lowered by all standards we know of, but have been destroyed.”⁴ Evidently, the existential perils introduced by the encounter with totalitarianism had not abated—they had simply taken a new form.

Arendt had suggested that totalitarianism was the most overt and violent outgrowth of dystopian tendencies deeply written into modernity. The encounter with totalitarianism, which had threatened “the destruction of humanity” and even begun that destruction, afforded dark knowledge: “without the fictitious world of totalitarian movements, in which with unparalleled clarity the essential uncertainties of our time have been spelled out, we might have been driven to our doom without ever becoming aware

of what has been happening.”⁵ The insight, which Arendt shared with dystopian thinkers like Orwell and Fromm and defended against critics like Riesman and Voegelin, that freedom is a fragile and revocable civilizational achievement rather than an intrinsic feature of human nature, lies at the heart of her neo-republican conception of politics as a bulwark against domination.⁶ In succeeding works, her concern that political freedom would be suppressed by instrumentalities of violence and coercion did not dissipate, but Arendt increasingly focused on a new danger: that the public realm in which such activities unfold would be smothered by cyclical processes of production and consumption. As in her vision of total domination, the “society of laboring animals” that she predicts as the dystopian outcome of modern mass societies entails the suppression of the potential for free activity in favor of predictable mass behavior. *The Human Condition* climaxes with the revelation of this incipient social form, which for Arendt forbodes “the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known”; it is revealed in the book’s final pages, and it is the payoff toward which Arendt’s analyses of action, work, and labor cumulate.⁷ Opposed to this is the public realm, a space for individuation and self-determination. The protagonists in Arendt’s long view of political history—the ancient Athenians and the American revolutionaries, for example—demonstrate the potential of the public realm, but also its fragility.

Though dystopia remains strongly associated with Arendt’s era and the intellectual climate of the Cold War, she was hardly the last political thinker to theorize freedom in the shadow of dystopia. The critical social theorists of the postwar era inherited a political imaginary cratered by the extremes of totalitarianism and total war, one in which ominous possibilities beckoned from all directions: the commodifying logic of the market, the instrumentalizing rationality of the bureaucratic state, the technocratic schemes of experts and would-be social engineers. The most ambitious and influential efforts to map this terrain were undertaken by the German social theorist Jürgen Habermas, who took up the mantle of the Frankfurt School of critical theory and followed Arendt in theorizing the public as a site of redemption for modernity, and his occasional rival Michel Foucault, the French “historian of the present” whose works trace a sprawling modern regime of domination.⁸ Their works evince a Weberian concern with the ambiguities of rationalization, and likewise their signal contributions to political theory and social thought extend from their efforts to find a way out of the iron cage. For Habermas, the future promised by the Enlightenment has not yet

been exhausted, and collective emancipation through democratic politics remains a viable task. Foucault's outlook is more skeptical: freedom as he understands it can be exercised, but perhaps only in the margins, through discrete moments of creative resistance.

Taken together, the works of Arendt, Habermas, and Foucault fundamentally reimagine the work of politics. There is much that they and their respective disciples disagree on, and yet each gives powerful expression to a conception of freedom that only exists in its exercise, and that must continually be defended against and disentangled from an array of dominating and dehumanizing forces. They present us not with a binary choice between utopia and dystopia, but an ongoing task wherein self and social world must be continually re-created. To take up this work is to give freedom its future.

THE ABYSS OF THE POSSIBLE:

ARENDT AND THE REPUBLICANISM OF FEAR

Arendt's read on the postwar era was dark but not despairing. Belief in "unavoidable doom," she wrote, obscured the stakes of the present just as surely as "reckless optimism."⁹ To emphasize the dystopian dimension of Arendt's thinking puts emphasis on what commentators have called her "republicanism of fear" rather than her "republicanism of redemption" or of "hope," but both dimensions of her political thought must be acknowledged.¹⁰ After all, Arendt was not content to argue that we should value the public only as a safeguard against the worst possibilities of our times. She emphasizes throughout her work that the public realm and the forms of speech and action that it supports sustain the highest capacities of humanity and allow us to realize our noblest aspirations. The public is a kind of theater, a "space of appearances," where we can disclose our individuality, discover opportunities for acting in concert, and leave a legacy of words and deeds that will outlast our deaths.¹¹ And yet it is impossible to mistake Arendt's concern for the *fragility* of freedom, and of the public world in which it unfolds. To foreground the dystopian dimensions of Arendt's thinking, then, is not necessarily to read her as a pessimist who thought that freedom *would* be destroyed but rather as a political thinker preoccupied with the possibility that freedom *could* be destroyed.

Arendt addresses *The Human Condition* to "a new and yet unknown age," proposing "a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point

of our newest experiences and our most recent fears.”¹² Its opening pages present a panorama of possibilities for the “future man”: a surreal, science-fictional landscape in which humanity seeks to “escape from imprisonment to the earth,” to “create life in the test tube,” and to “extend man’s life-span far beyond the hundred-year limit.”¹³ Arendt imagines futures in which speech and thought lag behind the formulas of science so severely that “we would indeed need artificial machines to do our thinking and speaking” and “become the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible no matter how murderous it is.”¹⁴ The rise of automation, too, Arendt perceives as a “threatening event,” as it aims to supplant human labor without bringing any “higher and more meaningful activities” into view—transmuting the dream of emancipation into a nightmare of obsolescence.¹⁵

If these passages find Arendt at her most speculative, indulging the futurist preoccupations of her era and the ambient malaise of the dystopian imagination, they also prepare the way for the central argumentative task of her book. The danger Arendt seeks to illuminate is not fundamentally borne of technology or even politics, though it has implications for both, but rather the elusive phenomenon that she refers to as “world alienation.”¹⁶ Arendt argues that world alienation is a centuries-long process extending from the Scientific Revolution, and thus predates the midcentury perplexities provoked by space travel, biotechnology, cybernetics, and automation. Nonetheless, the opening of *The Human Condition* reflects some of Arendt’s central preoccupations. The sense that humanity is increasingly estranged from our creations, what Arendt often calls our “artifacts,” is a key symptom of world alienation; that we feel ever more subordinated to our own products is a reflection of the paradox of “omnipotence” and “powerlessness” that characterizes Arendt’s view of modernity—what she refers to in *On Violence* as “the impotence of power.”¹⁷ Though *The Human Condition* finds Arendt focused on technologies of production, she elsewhere extends this concern to technologies of destruction. The threat of nuclear warfare, though not a central topic in any of Arendt’s works, is a backdrop to her writing in this era, the most conspicuous example of power begetting precarity.¹⁸

In the mid-nineteenth century, Marx had written in similar terms about the widening gulf between humanity and its fabrications, and a century later the enlargement of productive and destructive powers to the colossal scale that Mumford called “megatechnics” had widened the chasm precipitously. But, like Marx, Arendt maintained that to focus only on the scaling of power

would obscure the cause of estrangement.¹⁹ When Arendt writes of “world alienation,” she means the vanishing of the shared world, the one constituted intersubjectively through speech and action, and along with it, the bases of power, freedom, and action. It is because of this process that machineries of production, arsenals of war, satellites, spaceships, and the rest seem to stand apart from and over humanity, rendering us powerless amid the objective manifestations of previously undreamt power.

As Hannah Pitkin has observed, this “widespread apocalyptic feeling of public helplessness in the face of looming disaster” is one of Arendt’s signature concerns, and to contend with her work requires that we “take Arendt’s sense of foreboding seriously.”²⁰ However greatly, then, the texture and topos of Arendt’s concerns changed in the post-totalitarian epoch, the riddle of power provoked by totalitarianism remained. Arendt’s work as a political theorist endeavors to show that the public realm, the authentic basis of power, erodes in proportion to humanity’s alienation from the world, and that the major trends of modernity, particularly those that embody the modern conception of power—the rise of government dominated by bureaucracy, of social life dominated by production and consumption, of science deployed for the prediction and control of human behavior—in fact render us powerless. This dystopian vision of modernity extends an account of domination that Arendt formulated in response to totalitarianism, wherein uniformity (the destruction of *plurality*) and isolation (the destruction of *worldliness*) erode power and freedom—which are, in Arendt’s understanding coextensive, and will persist or perish in tandem. Totalitarianism may only recently have been the *summum malum* of the age, but it is mentioned only once, and passingly at that, in *The Human Condition*.²¹ That does not mean its specter had been exorcised. In Margaret Canovan’s assessment, “virtually the entire agenda of Arendt’s political theory was set” by her reflections on totalitarianism.²² Arendt maintained that writing about totalitarianism had allowed her to “asses the possibilities of total domination and to catch a glimpse into the abyss of the ‘possible’”; though she rarely uses the term “domination” outside the context of totalitarianism, her critique of mass society deploys analogous patterns, similar imagery, and parallel logic.²³

As such, Arendt’s analysis of totalitarianism yielded insights that structured her later thinking about freedom and domination in modern society, the most important being that freedom depends on the human plurality that totalitarian terror had sought to destroy. Plurality, in Arendt’s usage, refers to the condition of being a distinct individual among other individuals, and

it distinguishes humans from other animals, which are merely interchangeable members of their species.²⁴ Total domination, meanwhile, represented the totalitarian ambition “to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual,” and to fabricate “a kind of human species whose only ‘freedom’ would consist in ‘preserving the species.’”²⁵ Likewise, Arendt says of terror that it “substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality has disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions.”²⁶ The metaphor of constriction draws attention to the way in which terror destroys “the living space of freedom” by preventing human interaction. “By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them,” Arendt explains. “It destroys the one essential prerequisite of all freedom which is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space.” It is this space, in Arendt’s theorization of the public, in which people can come together to constitute a common world. Without this capacity, they are left in a condition of isolation, and as Arendt maintains in all her reflections on politics, the isolation of citizens from one another is the condition most favorable to despotism. Freedom is destroyed as a political reality when it “lacks the worldly space to make its appearance.”²⁷

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt explains how mass society produces its own patterns of uniformity and isolation. Her dystopian rendering of “the laboring society,” in which humanity persists as a passive and undifferentiated “animal species,” may be understood as a variation on the mass society thesis wherein the principal sources of domination are conformity and an ever-accelerating cycle of production and consumption.²⁸ To suggest a symmetry with totalitarianism, and specifically the total domination that was engineered in the Nazi extermination camps, may seem hyperbolic. It would indeed be an exaggeration to say that Arendt feared the same outcome could result from the subtler degradations of mass society, for even as she worried that mass society would reduce its inhabitants to “laboring animals,” total domination went further still, “transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something that even animals are not.”²⁹ Even so, Arendt’s claims about mass society are frequently startling. For example, she writes that “mass society, where man as a social animal rules supreme and where apparently the survival of the species could be guaranteed on a world-wide scale, can at the same time threaten humanity with extinction.”³⁰

Arendt’s description of mass society is also highly idiosyncratic com-

pared to those recounted in the preceding chapter. Initially, Arendt does not seem to affirm the strong association between conformity and mass society emphasized by critics like Fromm, Riesman, and Mills. She argues that conformity is not unique to mass society, and that is in the nature of society as such, or what she sometimes refers to as “the social,” to demand conformity.³¹ Society itself, she writes, “tends to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement.”³² This social world needs to be hemmed in by the private, on one side, and by the public, on the other; the former provides a shelter from the pressures of conformity, while the latter provides a space for individuation. So long as these conditions are in place, the pressures of the social will not become absolute. But when Arendt expresses anxiety about the “unnatural conformism of mass society,” she has in mind something qualitatively different from the ordinary effects of the social.³³ First, Arendt understands mass society as a context in which the reach and power of conformity has been amplified and universalized. As in her contemporaries’ accounts, Arendt maintains that the leveling of social distinctions produces an atomized society in which the abstracted expectations and judgments of public opinion become ubiquitous. Thus, “with the emergence of mass society, the realm of the social has finally, after several centuries of development, reached the point where it embraces and controls all members of a given community equally and with equal strength.” Second, Arendt claims that the scale of mass societies strengthens the incentive to conformity, since deviation from norms will stand out more starkly against a large number who behave uniformly. “Large numbers of people, crowded together, develop an almost irresistible inclination toward despotism, be this the despotism of a person or of majority rule,” she notes, adding that as numbers increase, so do “conformism, behaviorism, and automatism in human affairs.”³⁴

Arendt further alleges that a mass society is one in which “behavior has replaced action as the foremost mode of human relationships.”³⁵ The latter, for Arendt, is free, spontaneous and unpredictable, which is to say human, while the former is construed as herdlike and animalistic. Here, Arendt’s critique of mass society intersects with her criticism of the behaviorist theories then advanced in the social sciences, exemplified by B. F. Skinner’s controversial argument that human activity could be understood simply by reference to its conditions and its consequences—that given these, the outcomes would follow automatically. Arendt, for her part, argues that human beings only “behave” in this fashion under conditions of domina-

tion. When she described the destruction of spontaneity in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she mourned the loss of “man’s power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to the environment and events.”³⁶ Likewise, Arendt fears that behaviorism’s theoretical distortions, which “reduce man as a whole, in all his activities, to the level of a conditioned and behaving animal,” gain plausibility in modern societies because “mass society has devoured all strata of the nation and ‘social behavior’ has become the standard for all regions of life.”³⁷ As Arendt argues:

The unfortunate truth about behaviorism and the validity of its “laws” is that the more people there are, the more likely they are to behave and the less likely to tolerate non-behavior. Statistically this will be shown in the leveling out of fluctuation. In reality, deeds will have less and less chance to stem the tide of the behavior, and events will more and more lose their significance. Statistical uniformity is by no means a harmless scientific ideal; it is the no longer secret political ideal of a society, which, entirely submerged in the routine of everyday living, is at peace with the scientific outlook inherent in its very existence.³⁸

And elsewhere: “The trouble with modern theories of behaviorism is not that they are wrong but that they could become true, that they actually are the best possible conceptualization of certain obvious trends in modern society.”³⁹

But this is not the extent of mass society’s threat to freedom. Insofar as mass society leads to an increase in uniformity, it deprives humanity of the experience of plurality, wherein individuals with distinct perspectives encounter one another in the context of a shared world. “What makes mass society so difficult to bear,” Arendt elaborates, “is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate, and to separate them,” remarking on the “weirdness” of a situation where humanity would “no longer be separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible.”⁴⁰ Such descriptions indicate another parallel between Arendt’s accounts of mass society and totalitarianism. In the latter context, Arendt described terror as an “iron band” that “presses masses of men together” and fuses them into one being.⁴¹ She suggests that the same can occur “under conditions of mass society or mass hysteria,” wherein “all people

suddenly behave as though they were members of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of his neighbor."⁴² When human beings no longer occupy and express distinct perspectives on the world, then they are "deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them" just as much as if they were isolated. "They are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times. The end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective."

Further, the subsumption of public life by social life sets the stage for the phenomenon that Arendt refers to as "the emancipation of labor."⁴³ This, initially, does not seem so ominous, but as with mass society and the social, Arendt has her own idiosyncratic definition of labor. By labor Arendt means the activities that sustain "the life of the species," cyclical processes concerned with production and consumption, or what Arendt sometimes refers to as the human metabolism with nature. Arendt's remark that under total domination, humanity's only concern would be the preservation of the species is our first clue that she takes something to be grossly awry in modernity when she notes, for example, that "through society it is the life process itself which in one form or another has been channeled into the public realm."⁴⁴ When the public realm is dominated by these life processes, that is, with consumption and production, then Arendt argues it has lost its vital function as a realm for free action. Labor may be more natural than action, but for Arendt there is nothing characteristically human about it, which is why she argues that in mass society each person is "not truly a human being" but "a specimen of the animal species mankind," and further, that the "unnatural growth, so to speak, of the natural" poses a vital threat to human civilization.⁴⁵

For all her criticisms of modernity, Arendt never longs for a return to nature. Rather, she is a civic humanist in the sense that she attaches great significance to the cultivating effects of civilization.⁴⁶ The artificial world created through generations of human effort creates the conditions under which humans can act freely, as this can only occur where the incessant demands of the life process are held at bay. As Arendt explains elsewhere, "Where men live together but do not form a body politic—as, for example, in tribal societies or in the privacy of the household—the factors ruling their actions and conduct are not freedom but the necessities of life and concern for its preservation."⁴⁷ It is the predominance of such concerns, and their

crowding out of the space for action, that Arendt takes to the central source of domination in the laboring society, and that leads her to project her most dystopian rendering of the future:

The last stage of the laboring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life had actually been submerged in the over-all life process of the species and the only active decision still required of the individual were to let go, so to speak, to abandon his individuality, the still individually sensed pain and trouble of living, and acquiesce in a dazed “tranquilize,” functional type of behavior. . . . It is quite conceivable that the modern age—which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity—may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known.⁴⁸

Once this process of degeneration has been set into motion, Arendt sees little chance that it will be stemmed or reversed. Arendt held no confidence in Marx’s proposal to emancipate humanity from labor through the construction of a classless society, or the possibilities, entertained in her time by thinkers like Marcuse, of achieving such emancipation through automation.⁴⁹ Even if machines took over the production process, humanity would still face the necessity of consumption, which Arendt characterizes as a form of labor. Indeed, with possibilities for action decreasing under the conditions of mass society, Arendt wonders if such a society would have anything left to do *but* consume. “Painless and effortless consumption would not change but would only increase the devouring character of biological life,” she speculates, such that humanity “would be free to ‘consume’ the whole world and to reproduce all things it wished to consume.”⁵⁰ The material things of the world “would appear and disappear daily and hourly in the life process of such a society,” and the “durability” of the human world would be worn away. If worldlessness, as Arendt argued in the context of totalitarianism, is a precondition of total domination, then the phenomena that Arendt has uncovered in mass society would be of grave concern. Arendt had already gestured toward these prospects near the end of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, writing that human beings are subjected to an unbearable isolation “in a world whose chief values are dictated by labor, that is where all human activities have been transformed into laboring,” precisely because

each person is treated "as an *animal laborans* whose necessary 'metabolism with nature' is of concern to no one."⁵¹ These are the isolated and lonely masses who, Arendt wagers, are most vulnerable to totalitarianism.

Just as the crucible of totalitarian terror had clarified the fragility of the common world, mass society betokened its own form of worldlessness, signified by the gradual disappearance of the public realm. Arendt writes that "the term public signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it," and that the public includes "the affairs which go on among those who inhabit the world together," which means that there cannot be a public world when each of its potential inhabitants is concerned only with the essentially private business of production and consumption.⁵² Further, "the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself," which means that the public realm becomes unreal when all perspectives are merged into the uniformity of a social mass. And finally, insofar as to "live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common," there cannot be a public in the extreme case of the laboring society, which has neither world nor things, but a continuous flux of fungible goods that are made only to be consumed on demand. Though Arendt is not sanguine about the role of technology in modern life, its consequences are epiphenomenal with respect to her overarching criticism of mass society. From her perspective, the question is not "whether we are the masters or the slaves of our machines, but whether machines still serve the world and its things, or if, on the contrary, they and the automatic motion of their processes have begun to rule and even destroy world and things."⁵³ In this sense, the disappearance of the public takes the form of a vicious cycle, as it is both a cause and an outcome of mass society. And to the extent that the public falls into decay, the capacities by which it might be retrieved are diminished as well. Without the public, the trend toward uniformity grows stronger, because it is within the public sphere that human beings have an opportunity to disclose themselves to one another in their "uniqueness," and to experience what Arendt calls the "paradoxical plurality of unique beings."⁵⁴ Through public action and speech, "men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities, and thus make their appearance in the human world."⁵⁵

Here we may return to the paradox of power that connects Arendt's thinking about totalitarianism and mass society. Arendt wagers that the

widespread sense of powerlessness that characterizes twentieth-century life reflects the dissipation of the public realm and the opportunities for collective action it provides. According to Arendt's formulation in *On Violence*, "Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert" and power "disappears," "vanishes" when the group from which it originates disperses.⁵⁶ On this account, the public realm is a precondition of power, the circuit through which it is channeled, and its loss can only result in a void of power and a yawning gulf between the citizenry, from whom authentic power must be derived, and the edifices and artifices that stand in for power. The institutions of bureaucratic government and the implements of state violence, for instance, are less embodiments of power on Arendt's understanding than fossilized residues, machinery of coercion that has long since lost any genuine relationship to the power of the people. Likewise, the marvels and horrors of modern science and technology may accelerate, but this power, as we shall see, is divorced not only from public agency but, in Arendt's understanding, from the human point of view altogether.

Terror represents one strategy for filling the void of power, the strategy of violence. "Terror is not the same as violence," Arendt explains, "it is, rather, the form of government that comes into being when violence, having destroyed all power, does not abdicate but, on the contrary, remains in full control."⁵⁷ Totalitarian regimes indicate the extremes to which this process can progress, but the strategy of terror is by no means limited to these contexts. Arendt describes the tear gas attack against Berkeley students during the People's Park demonstrations in 1969 as one example and the police assault on the demonstrators at the 1968 Democratic Convention as another, each demonstrating how "the loss of power becomes a temptation to substitute violence for power."⁵⁸ Arendt doubts that a reign of terror can persist for long, but its effectiveness in the short term depends "on the degree of social atomization" that can be inflicted—that is, on the extent to which citizens can be separated from one another and prevented from acting together.

Alternatively, the void of power may be filled by the relatively banal reign of bureaucratic administration, which is analogous to terror to the extent that it, too, presides over an atomized society, bloating and expanding in proportion to the "disastrous shrinkage of the public realm."⁵⁹ This option is perhaps less startling, but Arendt suggests that this form of domination poses its own threat to freedom in passages that echo the accounts of Tocqueville and Fromm:

In a fully developed bureaucracy, there is nobody left with whom one can argue, to whom one can present grievances, on whom the pressures of power can be exerted. Bureaucracy is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act; for the rule by Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant.

For example, when Arendt speaks of “the impotence of power” in the context of the United States, she means to indicate how the “monopolization of power” by centralized administration “causes the drying up or oozing away of all authentic power sources in the country” and leads to a curious predicament in which the institutions that claim power are paralyzed.⁶⁰ The paradox of power is also revealed by the ongoing disaster of the Vietnam War, which prompts Arendt to remark that “we can control the most complicated processes with a precision that makes trips to the moon less dangerous than ordinary weekend excursions; but the allegedly ‘greatest power on earth’ is helpless to end a war, clearly disastrous for all concerned, in one of the earth’s smallest countries.”⁶¹

As this comparison indicates, the deficit of political power and public action stands out more sharply when juxtaposed to the realms of science and technology, where power is abundant and the capacities for action are far-reaching. While the opportunities for political action narrow to irrelevance, the future is increasingly determined “by man acting into nature, creating natural processes and directing them into the human artifice and the realm of human affairs.”⁶² If the power of science seems remote from human interests, perhaps even alien or hostile, it is not simply because science is conducted apart from the public. For Arendt, the worldview of modern science must by necessity be detached from the human experience of the world, as it attempts to objectify and control the world from an external vantage point. That Arendt interprets this as a dystopian tendency is most pronounced in her skepticism, even hostility, toward the modern social sciences, which on her account “hope to close the gap between our scientific mastery of nature and our deplored impotence to ‘manage’ human affairs through an engineering science of human relations.” If this “sounds frightening,” Arendt suggests, “it is only because they have decided to treat man as an entirely natural being whose life process can be handled the same way as all other processes.” Meanwhile, the cosmic powers manipulated by physicists and engineers risk the physical destruction of the human world. Arendt is haunted by the real-

ization that such outcomes are of no interest to scientists: "The simple fact that physicists split the atom without any hesitations the very moment they know how to do it, although they realized full well the enormous destructive potentialities of their operation, demonstrates that the scientist *qua* scientist does not even care about the survival of the human race on earth, or, for that matter, about the survival of the planet itself."⁶³ Modern science, then, has made all of humanity, and increasingly all of the natural world, subjects in an ongoing experiment whose outcome is unknown to all.⁶⁴

How should humanity confront this great unknown? "Never has our future been more unpredictable," Arendt lamented at the outset of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, but she nonetheless cautioned against the impetus to pursue certainty, predictability, and control.⁶⁵ "Unpredictability is not lack of foresight, and no engineering management of human affairs will ever be able to eliminate it," she cautioned.⁶⁶ "Only total conditioning, that is the total abolition of action, can ever hope to cope with unpredictability. And even the predictability of human behavior which political terror can enforce for relatively long periods of time is hardly able to change the very essence of human affairs once and for all; it can never be sure of its own future." To pursue certainty in human affairs therefore expressed a misguided will to mastery that negates the radical potential of human action, which is to say, freedom. Such admonitions express Arendt's distinctive critique of political utopianism, which on her account imposes a "model" or "blueprint" on reality, as though human beings were a raw material to be sculpted, and that imagines that the human world could, as in the fabrication of an object, be "entirely determined by the categories of means and end."⁶⁷ Arendt believes that to approach politics in this way invites political violence. But more than that, it jeopardizes the distinctive internal good of action, namely, its freedom and indeterminacy. When one makes in accord with a predetermined scheme, then "what guides the work of fabrication is outside the fabricator and precedes the actual work."⁶⁸ This would entail that the outcome of our efforts had already been decided in advance. In Arendt's typology of human activities, only fabrication has "a definite beginning and definite predictable end."⁶⁹ By contrast, labor, "caught in the cyclical movement of the body's life processes, has neither a beginning nor an end," while action "though it may have a definite beginning, never, as we shall see, has a predictable end."⁷⁰ To succumb to the utopian temptation would be to substitute one kind of domination for another. Arendt demurs from such ambitions and insists that her writings "do not attempt to design some sort of utopian future."⁷¹

Though there is a sense in which her vision of the public is “utopian,” it is only in the imprecise sense that any ideal can be called a utopia. But Arendt’s vision of the public does not try to prescribe in advance the ends that freely acting citizens should pursue, only to remind them of the conditions under which they will have the capacity for action to begin with.

But turning away from this kind of utopianism does not require that we turn away from the future altogether. For Arendt, this would be impossible, as humanity always lives “in the interval between past and future.”⁷² Rather, abandoning the projects of mastery, the idea that we might *make* our future, ought to allow a more authentic sense of futurity and of responsibility for the future. Arendt illuminates this orientation toward the future in her account of “world-building,” which entails commitment to the future without implying the power to determine it and that seeks to foster the stability of the world *amid* uncertainty. According to Linda Zerilli, Arendt posits “our collective activity as world building: as sustaining, renewing, and expanding the network of tangible and intangible relations, of what counts as an object of shared concern, not just in the sense of our shared view of it but also our awareness of the different perspectives in which the object can be seen and understood.”⁷³ When Arendt discusses “world-building” in *On Revolution*, for example, she doesn’t mean the instrumentalism of homo faber or the construction of a preplanned utopia.⁷⁴ Rather, world-building means establishing and committing to preserve a space of freedom, “constituting a stable worldly structure to house, as it were, [the] combined power of action.” Hence Arendt construes world-building as innately future-oriented, insofar as the “world-building capacities of man concern always not so much ourselves and our own time on earth as our ‘successor,’ and ‘posterities.’”

The generativity of human action is, in Arendt’s depiction, nothing short of miraculous: it is the power to build something new. As she explains it, “The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amount to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle.”⁷⁵ And Arendt believed, in the dark hour when humanity faced the twin perils of totalitarianism and the atomic bomb, that precisely such a miracle was needed.⁷⁶ If the discernible trajectory of the modern world struck Arendt as ominous, her hopes rested on the proposition that something unexpected might yet happen, that humanity might not arrive at its end but instead discover a new beginning. Arendt reminds us that “the periods of being free have always been relatively short in the history of mankind,” and yet “what

usually remains intact in the epochs of petrification and foreordained doom is the faculty of freedom itself, the sheer capacity to begin."⁷⁷

ANTINOMIES OF A RATIONAL SOCIETY: HABERMAS BETWEEN UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA

Toward a rational society: this phrase, which provides the title for a collection of Jürgen Habermas' early writings on science, technology, and politics, may initially scan as programmatic, but it expresses the social theorist's ambiguous read on the modern prospect.⁷⁸ Habermas does not doubt that a more rational society lies ahead, but the process by which it will emerge and the final shape that it will take remains undetermined. Will the rational society express the best hopes of the Enlightenment, wherein human freedom advances side by side with scientific knowledge and technological power? Or will it be rational in the sense of Weber's iron cage or Marcuse's one-dimensional society? Looking out on the contentious political climate of the 1960s, Habermas saw tendencies toward both futures, monitoring closely, as had Marcuse, the confrontation between student radicals and the increasingly technocratic university—not because he believed the students would lead a revolutionary effort, but because he saw their protest as a microcosm of the conflict between the democratic public and the expanding administrative state. Two decades later, he would reflect that the situation remained obscure. While the utopian promise of a "humane, egalitarian, and at the same time libertarian" society seemed an ever more remote possibility, the outlines of an altogether more dystopian outcome were omnipresent and impossible to ignore:

Today it seems as if the utopian energies have been used up, as if they had withdrawn from historical reflection. The horizon of the future has now narrowed itself and in doing so has fundamentally changed both the *Zeitgeist* and politics, at least in Western Europe. The future is occupied with the merely negative; on the threshold to the 21st century we find the terrifying panorama of a world-wide threat to the interests of life in general; the spiral of the arms race, uncontrolled proliferations of automatic weapons, structural impoverishment of developing countries, unemployment and growing social imbalance in the developed countries, problems of overburdening the environment, and the nearly catastrophic

operations of high technology are the catchwords that penetrate by way of the mass media into public consciousness.⁷⁹

Modernity had come to a crisis of confidence, Habermas concluded, and at this critical juncture its political and intellectual leaders offered varieties of helplessness: either complacent apologia for the status quo, trafficked under the auspices of realism, or the totalizing skepticism of postmodern thought. Neither position would fulfil the need “to find orientation determined by and directed toward the future.”

One might expect Habermas to respond to this predicament by offering his own utopian project, and, indeed, many interpreters have taken Habermas' notion of the ideal communication community to serve precisely this function.⁸⁰ Habermas himself has rejected this reading, denying that his theory of communicative action “proposes, or at least suggests, a rationalistic utopian society” and explaining that he does not regard “the fully transparent,” “homogenized,” or “unified” society as an ideal and does not wish to suggest any other ideal.⁸¹ Debates over the theoretical role of Habermas' ideal notwithstanding, Habermas is right to insist that he has never proposed the communicative ideal as the modern utopians did their own, that is, as a vision of the future to be worked out in real historical and political life. Habermas understands the importance of what he calls “utopia-inspired speech,” noting that people “do not fight *for* abstractions, but *with* images”; at the same time, he cautions that attempts to politically realize utopias result in “the kind of consequences which our neo-conservative friends have realized.”⁸² If utopian imagery has its place in the political arena, it nonetheless does not fall to the social theorist to prescribe a utopian future, and Habermas therefore endorses what he calls a socialist tradition of “abstinence” with respect to utopianism. Social theory as Habermas understands it has no basis from which to “project desirable forms of life into the future” and should instead focus on “criticizing existing forms of life.”⁸³

What Habermas prescribes in theory, he has also demonstrated in practice, as his thinking has evolved at several critical junctures in response to dystopian visions of modernity—“negative utopias” that condense the tendencies he wishes to criticize in the present. The most significant of these, the *summum malum* that recurs throughout Habermas' body of work, is a variation on the technocracy thesis. Though some of what Habermas has written about the expansion of the public sphere and its subsequent desecration by economic interests reflects the influence of mass society theory,

it is the specter of technocratic domination that has manifested itself most vividly and frequently throughout his intellectual development.⁸⁴ It first appears in his writings on the dangers of “technocratic consciousness” from the 1960s, in many ways setting the agenda for his mature theory of communicative action and the anxieties it expresses about the “colonization of the lifeworld” by systems.⁸⁵ And Habermas has continued to confront this possibility in the twenty-first century, warning against the potential for the “technological domination” of human nature through genetic engineering and exposing “the lure of technocracy” as it occurs in European politics.⁸⁶ Each of these threats replicates the internal logic of the technocratic phenomenon as Habermas understands it, and at each instance he responds to the threat by enlisting concepts that originated in his early critique of technocracy.

During the 1960s, Habermas associated technocracy with two distinct theses—Ellul’s warnings of incipient technological domination and the reactionary agenda of German conservatives such as Arnold Gehlen and Helmut Schelsky.⁸⁷ We have already seen that Ellul envisioned a dystopian scenario in which technique detaches from the cultural and political determination of human societies before finally absorbing humanity into the technical system. Schelsky’s vision of technocracy is less apocalyptic, but it shares foundational assumptions with Ellul’s. In “Man in Scientific Civilization,” Schelsky wrote that “modern technology requires no legitimacy; with it man ‘rules’ because it functions,” the political consequence of which is that “the statesman is not all ‘decision-maker’ or ‘ruler’ but rather analyst, planner, executor. Politics in the sense of normative will-formation falls in principle outside of these realms.”⁸⁸ For Schelsky, then, the promise of technocracy is precisely what Ellul perceives to be the threat: that the entire social system would be steered by technological imperatives and managed by administrators whose role is to anticipate and accommodate said imperatives rather than to direct them. Technocratic ideology displaces moral and political deliberation with calculations of efficiency. Habermas perceives this political vision as a threat to democracy, arguing that it can only lead to the “the depoliticization of the mass of the population and the decline of the public realm as a political institution.”⁸⁹ Underlying this political danger is an existential threat, nothing less than the dissolution of the underlying moral grammar of human society and “the disappearance of the difference between purposive-rational action and interaction from the consciousness not only of the sciences of man, but of men themselves.”⁹⁰

The dystopian critics surveyed in the preceding chapter understood technocracy as the dystopian reversal of the modern project of mastery. So, too, in Habermas' account, which locates the intellectual origins of technocracy at the threshold of modern social thought. He alleges that Hobbes set the agenda for the displacement of politics by science, contrasting the modern Hobbesian "social philosophy" with the classical Aristotelian account of "politics" along three dimensions. First, the new science of politics "aims at establishing once and for all the conditions for the correct order of the state and society . . . independently of place, time and circumstances."⁹¹ Second, it conceptualizes "the translation of knowledge into practice, the application" as a technical problem in which the goal is to produce "correctly calculated generation of rules, relationships, and institutions." And, third, as an outcome of the first two suppositions, "human behavior is therefore to be now considered only as the material for science. The engineers of the correct order can disregard the categories of ethical social intercourse and confine themselves to the construction of conditions under which human beings, just like objects within nature, will necessarily behave in a calculable manner." What emerges is a vision of politics that eschews questions about the content of a good life and instead prioritizes the discovery of technical solutions to practical necessities such as stability and survival. Habermas maintains that this shift predates even Hobbes and can be traced back to the arch-realist Machiavelli and the ur-utopian More, each of whom Habermas reads as aspiring to deploy technical knowledge in response to the contingencies of social and political life. It is only with Hobbes, however, that political prescriptions carry "the scientific precision of *calculated technique*."⁹² Habermas' genealogy of modern political rationalism also demonstrates his skepticism toward the utopian programs with which it has frequently intersected. Habermas alleges that, beginning with More and moving forward to Marx, utopian thought has been guilty of a "productivist bias . . . namely, the idea that scientific control over nature, and labour to transform it, is in itself liberating."⁹³ From More on through Bacon, Saint-Simon, Comte, and Marx, Habermas interprets modern utopianism as a stream of thought that has largely explicated and justified the technocratic program.

Though Habermas may have been less vexed by the dystopian character of modernity than his Frankfurt School predecessors, his early work insists on the negative potential of technocratic domination to bring about severe and pathological distortions in social life and even consciousness. "The corresponding danger of an exclusively technical civilization," he writes, "can be

seen clearly: it is threatened by the splitting of consciousness and the division of human beings into two categories: the social engineers and the inmates of closed institutions."⁹⁴ Habermas then feared that the technocratic paradigm was gaining momentum among capitalists and socialists alike, with the former fetishizing the rationality of the market and the latter the administrative state. Common to these programs is the intention to "bring society under control in the same way as nature by reconstructing it on the pattern of self-regulating systems," an intention that Habermas rejects as both undesirable and unattainable because it would require "closing off the only dimension that is essential, because it is susceptible to humanization, as a structure of interaction mediated by ordinary language."⁹⁵ Such a project could only be thinkable under the conditions of "technocratic consciousness," that is, without regard for the foundational importance of nontechnical communication and interaction.

Habermas argues consistently that this vision is not only far from being realized, but is also in principle unrealizable, since it is founded on a category error about the nature of social action. And yet his early works are preoccupied with this social science fiction because he takes it to reveal the implicit political ideals of the technocratic age. The technocrats seek to replace politics as such with "a central system for social control," "an automaton" that could resolve moral-political controversies, "cybernetically, that is, by 'itself.'"⁹⁶ This, according to Habermas, is "the negative utopia of technical control of history," and it "serves as an ideology for the new politics, which adapted to technical problems and brackets out practical questions."⁹⁷ If we follow this "technocratic intention" to its logical conclusion, then, Habermas argues, we will arrive at an outcome in which

man can not only, as *Homo faber*, completely objectify himself and confront the achievements that have taken on independent life in his products; he can in addition, as *Homo fabricatus*, be integrated into his technical apparatus. . . . According to this idea the institutional framework of society—which previously was rooted in a different type of action—would now, in a fundamental reversal, be absorbed by the subsystems of purposive-rational action, which were embedded in it.

To the extent that this model could even be approximated, Habermas suggests it would require forms of "behavioral control" and "psychotechnic manipulation" that would preempt autonomous moral reflection, yielding an

“increase in adaptive behavior” and eventually the wholesale “destructuring of the superego.”⁹⁸ Already, Habermas argues, moral autonomy “is increasingly supplanted by conditioned behavior, while large organizations as such are increasingly patterned after the structures of purposive-rational action. The industrially most advanced societies seem to approximate the model of behavioral control steered by external stimuli rather than guided by norms.” Habermas sees the pervasive manipulation of electoral, consumer, and leisure behavior as evidence that even areas where freedom and choice are celebrated may succumb to “the manipulative compulsions of technical-operational administration.”

Despite its initial implausibility, then, Habermas cannot deny that “certain developmental tendencies” point toward the realization of this negative utopia. Peering into the future, Habermas anticipates increasingly more sophisticated physical, psychological, and even “biotechnic” methods of control that could lead to the total objectification of humanity. He speculates:

If this occurred, old regions of consciousness developed in ordinary-language communication would of necessity completely dry up. At this stage of human engineering, if the end of psychological manipulation could be spoken of in the same sense as the end of ideology is today, the spontaneous alienation derived from the uncontrolled lag of the institutional framework would be overcome. But the self-objectification of man would have fulfilled itself in planned alienation—men would make their history with will, but without consciousness. . . .

I am not asserting that this cybernetic dream of the instinct-like self-stabilization of societies is being fulfilled or that it is even realizable. I do think, however, that it follows through certain vague but basic assumptions of technocratic consciousness to their conclusion as a negative utopia and thus denotes an evolutionary trend that is taking shape under the slick domination of technology and science as ideology.⁹⁹

As Habermas’ thought evolved in response to new theoretical considerations and emergent social and political issues, this encounter with technocracy remained foundational. Following his initial criticism of technocratic consciousness, Habermas set out to formulate more clearly the categories of rational-purpose (that is to say, technical or instrumental) activity and the alternatively competing and complementary form of rationality that he calls interaction, later communicative action. In the transitional works that fol-

lowed, Habermas developed his contention that human reason and action could be characterized in terms of these two complementary structures, each of which corresponds to a “knowledge-constitutive interest” as well as to a set of social systems. Habermas identifies the knowledge domain of the natural sciences and their application in technological research with the structure of “purposive-rational action,” which corresponds to the activity of *work* and the social dimension of *systems*. As a category, purposive-rational action includes both “instrumental action . . . governed by technical rules based on empirical knowledge” and “rational choice . . . governed by strategies based on analytic knowledge.”¹⁰⁰ Both instrumental action and rational choice realize defined goals under defined conditions. Technique and strategy are matters of means, and they can only be deployed when ends are defined or assumed—these operations are not themselves useful for selecting among ends. By contrast, the structure of “communicative action” corresponds to *interaction* and the social dimension of the *lifeworld*. This is the mode of cognition that orients social behavior, that is, “symbolic action . . . governed by binding *consensual norms* that define reciprocal expectations about behavior and which must be understood and recognized by at least two acting subjects.”¹⁰¹

By stimulating the development of Habermas’ core social-theoretical postulates, the critique of technocracy sets the agenda for Habermas’ mature theory of communicative action and the anxieties it expresses about the “colonization of the lifeworld” by systems. In *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), Habermas therefore contends that the rationalization of modern societies, in the Weberian sense, is a process of technocratic rationalization. It refers specifically to the extension of the structure of purposive-rational action: the enhancement of techniques and strategies, and the perfection of means and methods for control. Hence, modern societies are increasingly structured by two important systems, the state and the market, which respectively deploy two kinds of media, administrative power and money, to overcome integration problems when consensus cannot be reached through communicative processes. This is not intrinsically problematic, as there can be compelling justifications for social action that bypasses processes of deliberation. The critical thrust of Habermas theory of communicative action, however, is that this tendency is now developing to a pathological extreme, much as the negative utopia of the cybernetically steered society had suggested. In the process that Habermas refers to as the “uncoupling of system and lifeworld,” the state and the market exercise ever

greater influence on society while marginalizing processes of open communication among citizens along with the distinct bodies of practical knowledge and value that they articulate. Eventually, their operations are only accessible to and manipulable by elites who have access to power and money. But even the elites cannot fully account for the consequences of systemized actions once they are uprooted from the exchange of reasons that characterizes communicative rationality. As Habermas explains:

Media such as money and power attach to empirical ties; they encode a purposive-rational attitude toward calculable amount of value and make it possible to exert generalized, strategic influence on the decisions of other participants while bypassing processes of consensus-oriented communication. . . . Demystified media of communication such as money and power connect up interactions in space and time into more and more complex networks that none has to comprehend or be responsible for. If by responsible we mean that one orients one's actions to criticizable validity claims, then a "de-worlded" coordination of action that is unhinged from communicatively established consensus does not require that participants be responsible actors.¹⁰²

Habermas offers both moral and pragmatic reasons to be wary of such developments. What he has more recently referred to as the "commodification" and "bureaucratization" of the social world can have a range of negative consequences, from undermining the legitimacy of a system that gradually loses its relation to the values and interests of the people who comprise it, to the sense of alienation and subjection that comes from inhabiting a social world "colonized" by systems.¹⁰³ One consequence stands out as especially significant given the wider ethical concerns of Habermas' thinking, and this is the way in which the predominance of money and administrative power lead to a degradation or devaluation of the social solidarity that sustains communicative action.¹⁰⁴

While Habermas has been well equipped by his social theory to diagnose these trends, he has found it more difficult to explicate the moral and ethical rationale for his critique. Throughout his career, Habermas has avoided arguing for substantive ethical positions for the same reasons that he has avoided utopian speculation—he believes that the advancement of concrete visions of the good life or the good society is a task for the par-

ticipants in a specific lifeworld context, not for the theoretician who tries to stand over and apart from it. Moreover, Habermas accepts the burden of what he calls “post-metaphysical” ethics, as a result of which he avoids general speculation about what makes a human life worthwhile and suggests instead that such questions can only be answered by specific individuals within specific cultures. Even so, Habermas has occasionally moved to clarify his ethical thinking, largely in response to critics like Charles Taylor who, while sympathetic to Habermas’ critique of modernity, have challenged him to explicate its normative underpinnings.¹⁰⁵ Habermas has offered two responses. The first, a *minimalist ethics*, seeks to explicate only that ethical content already presupposed by the idea of communication as a core human competence, and from that basis argues that some nexus of values incorporating autonomy and solidarity is essential to any form of human social life. Habermas presents the minimalist position as such:

The same medium, linguistically mediated interaction, is both the reason for the vulnerability of socialized individuals and the key resource they possess to compensate for that vulnerability. Every morality revolves around equality of respect, solidarity, and the common good. Fundamental ideas like these can be reduced to the relations of symmetry and reciprocity presupposed in communicative action. In other words, the common core of all kinds of morality can be traced back to the reciprocal imputations and shared presuppositions actors make when they seek understanding in everyday situations.¹⁰⁶

The other strategy, alluded to above, is a *negative ethics*. This is how Habermas suggests a negative ethics might be carried out:

Can one formulate concepts like universal justice, normative rightness, the moral point of view, and the like independently of any vision of the good life, i.e., independently of an intuitive project of some privileged but concrete form of life? Noncontextual definitions of a moral principle, I admit, have not been satisfactory up to now. Negative versions of the moral principle seem to be a step in the right direction. They heed the prohibition of graven images, refrain from positive depiction, and as in the case of discourse ethics, refer negatively to the damaged life instead of pointing affirmatively to the good life.¹⁰⁷

In Habermas' provocative entry into the twenty-first-century controversy over genetic engineering, we can see each of these lines of thinking come to fruition, as Habermas once again finds the moral infrastructure of the life-world besieged by a colonizing technical rationality and once again contemplates a negative utopia wherein the characteristically human mode of conduct expressed in moral consciousness and communicative action would be eliminated. In this case, the dangerous instrumental rationality that Habermas confronts is not refracted through the seemingly autonomous logic of bureaucratic or market institutions, though he does again fear that we will find ourselves initiating a sequence whose consequences no one will be able to account for. Rather, Habermas sees his nemesis as a kind of technological domination rooted squarely in the modern project of mastery. "From the perspective of experimental science," he observes, "this technological control of human nature is but another manifestation of our tendency to extend continuously the range of what we can control within our natural environment."¹⁰⁸

The younger Habermas had written ominously of "future possibilities for detaching human behavior from a normative system linked to the grammar of language-games and integrating instead into self-regulated subsystems of the man-machine type by means of immediate physical or psychological control."¹⁰⁹ More prescient still, he had suggested that "behavioral control could be instituted at an even deeper level tomorrow through biotechnic intervention in the endocrine regulating system, not to mention the even greater consequences of intervening in the genetic transmission of inherited information." When Habermas initially made these predictions, he seemed convinced that he had allowed his imagination to drift to a pole of extreme negativity, anticipating futures that vividly condensed the trends he opposed in modern society, while resting assured that they went well beyond the probable, perhaps even the possible. But with modern genetics fast approaching the threshold of eugenic technologies and all the dire commercial and political applications they might find, Habermas' confidence in the resilience of communicative action is shaken.

Habermas notes that genetic engineering technologies have developed too quickly for the public to engage in informed deliberation, yielding a dangerously unregulated field of research that raises disquieting possibilities. Self-styled posthumanists anticipate a technological emancipation from the human condition as we have known it, heralding a merging of humanity and machine that will allow those with the means and will to attempt to transcend their mundane social and biological existence:

To illustrate the technologically assisted life processes of the human organism, engineers draw up visions of man and machine fused into a production plant subjected to autoregulated processes of supervision and renewal, permanent repair and upgrading. In this vision, self-replicating microrobots circulate in the human body, combining with organic matter in order, for instance, to stop ageing processes or to boost the functions of the cerebrum. Computer engineers, as well, have not been idle, contributing to this genre by drawing up the vision of the future machines which mark flesh-and-blood human beings as a model doomed to extinction. These superior intelligences are supposed to have overcome the flaws of human hardware. As to the software, which is modeled on our brains, they promise not only immortality, but unlimited perfection.¹¹⁰

And yet this is nearly a best-case scenario: a techno-libertarian playground for those who want to pry at the limits of human nature. What truly concerns Habermas is the possibility that humanity will obliterate itself in the process of technological enhancement and self-instrumentalization:

Whether these speculations are manifestations of a feverish imagination or serious predictions, an expression of displaced eschatological needs or a new variety of science-fiction science, I refer to them only as examples of an instrumentalization of human nature initiating a change in the ethical self-understanding of the species—a self-understanding no longer consistent with the normative self-understanding of persons who live in the mode of self-determination and responsible action.¹¹¹

For all that this image echoes the earlier dystopia of technical control, the threat that Habermas discerns to human nature here is unique—if not in intention, then in the possibility of execution. His ultimate anxiety is that the basic moral norms underpinning human interaction will deteriorate as the distinction between person and object is blurred. Even benign applications of human enhancement technologies defy what Habermas takes to be an intuitive distinction between the grown and the made—between what must be respected for its rudimentary subjectivity and what can be freely disposed of—and that this will lead to undesirable biopolitical outcomes, namely, the callous instrumentalization of entire generations of human beings, who will be designed and manipulated at the level of their genetic nature, without ever knowing what of their spontaneous potential they have

lost in the bargain. The already significant power of the present generation over the next would then expand to the point of gross asymmetry. “Not without reason,” Habermas warns, “we worry over the possible emergence of a thick intergenerational web of actions for which no one can be called to account, because it one-sidedly cuts vertically through the contemporary network of interactions.”¹¹² What might the consequences entail? A new structure of action that rescinds the distinction between the person and object, a potential suffocation of the novelty and unpredictability—what Arendt called natality—that comes with each new generation, and the internalization of the objectifying view by the engineered, who may well lose the psychological basis for their own autonomy if they cannot see themselves as their own persons.

One might say, to borrow a well-worn phrase, that Habermas was awakened from his dogmatic slumber—where he had once taken the mode of communicative rationality and the ethics of autonomy and solidarity it implied as an unproblematic background condition of human life, a foundational structure of the human experience as we knew it, now he confronted a situation where the dystopian possibilities were no mere heuristic or rhetorical tool. At this juncture, questions about the value of human existence and the ethical foundations of human dignity cannot be bracketed. This much Habermas concedes when he writes that “postmetaphysical abstention runs up against its limits in an interesting way as soon as questions of a ‘species ethics’ arise. As soon as the ethical self-understanding of language-using agents is at stake *in its entirety*, philosophy can no longer avoid taking a substantive position.”¹¹³ The debate about how to conceptualize and respond to such dangers goes beyond “this or that difference in the great variety of cultural forms of life, but on those intuitive self-descriptions that guide our own identification *as human beings*—that is, our self-understanding as members of the species.”¹¹⁴ The question Habermas poses is whether “the instrumentalization of human nature changes the ethical self-understanding of the species in a way that we may no longer see ourselves as ethically free and morally equal beings guided by norms and reasons.”¹¹⁵ And with that, “the original philosophical question regarding the good life in all its anthropological generality appears to have taken on a new life.”¹¹⁶ But even if this were the case, on what basis could Habermas, or any other philosopher, discern an answer?

A thoroughgoing modernist, Habermas hopes to resolve these quandaries without falling back on dogmatism or traditionalism—an attempt to

reassert the sanctity of the species on purely religious, grounds, for example. Rather than looking to premodern modes of thought and belief to underwrite a “reenchantment of inner nature,” Habermas offers a characteristically modern and stubbornly antifoundationalist response wherein moralizing human nature “would itself be a political act of self-referential moral action,” an instance of “*modernity having become reflective*,” and “seeking to guarantee the *conditions* under which the practical self-understanding of modernity may be *preserved*.”¹¹⁷ Habermas does not presume that we moderns will come to any belated realizations about the human essence or the purpose of our existence. But we can begin by recognizing the stakes of our predicament, and how it underscores the fragility of our species. From that vantage point, we may begin to discover the cultural and intellectual resources that would support “the assertion of an ethical self-understanding of the species which is crucial for our capacity to see ourselves as the authors of our own life histories and to recognize one another as autonomous persons.”¹¹⁸

After all, Habermas has maintained, as explicated in his minimalist position, that dignity and vulnerability go hand in hand, and that morality responds to the fragility of the human species by mitigating the physical and psychic vulnerabilities that we suffer as intersubjective creatures whose security and esteem are bound up with one another. It is in that context that Habermas has argued for a notion of “equal respect for the dignity of each individual” that gives a degree of “inviolability” to each.¹¹⁹ However, this inviolability only inheres so long as we continue to comport ourselves within “the web of intersubjective relations of mutual recognition” that constitute our communal attachments. This is the conception of ethical life that, Habermas maintains, was always presupposed in the notion of moral autonomy, and it is this vision of ethical life that he has variously termed solidarity and human dignity. Human dignity as Habermas understands it is a kind of “relational symmetry”: “It is not a property like intelligence or blue eyes, that one might ‘possess’ by nature; it rather indicates the kind of ‘inviolability’ which comes to have a significance only in interpersonal relations of mutual respect, in the egalitarian dealings among persons.”¹²⁰ On Habermas’ account, human dignity has and needs no foundations stronger than the mutual recognition of our intersubjectivity: It is through our socialization into a moral community and its norms that we develop subjectivity and personal identity. Considering the socially situated nature of our dignity also sheds new light on the concept of autonomy. Reflecting on the possibility of a future characterized by pervasive instrumentalization of human beings, we

are better positioned to appreciate that autonomy “is a precarious achievement of finite beings who may attain something like ‘strength,’ if at all, only if they are mindful of their physical vulnerability and social dependence.”¹²¹

As Habermas’ confrontations with each “negative utopia” have clarified, to engage in dystopian thought experiments is to “adopt the perspective of a future present” and evaluate the present dilemma from that standpoint, and then to respond to the specific vulnerabilities that it reveals.¹²² Habermas has, for example, discussed the possibility of “a political practice designed to realize the conditions necessary for a dignified human existence,” and dystopian thinking could help bring such preconditions into view by forcing us to recognize their mutability: “For the self-evident nature of elementary background assumptions to crumble, it takes the unanticipated emergence of surprising alternatives.”¹²³ None of this is to suggest that dystopian thinking can respond to all moral dilemmas. In the last analysis, Habermas’ reflections on the moral crisis provoked by the specter of eugenics brings him face to face with the same question that he has repeatedly confronted, albeit in more arid intellectual climes, regarding the moral foundations of his theory: “Why—if biotechnology is subtly undermining our identity as members of the species—should we *want* to be moral?”¹²⁴ The same question could be posed with respect to the usurpations of democratic autonomy by technocratic administration, or even with respect to the question, Why should we *want* to be free? Such a question cannot be answered by moral philosophy alone. More substantial commitments are needed. The best Habermas can do is gesture toward the horror of the “moral void” and the unbearable “coldness” of a human existence without the ethical buffer of dignity. Where theory reaches an impasse, Habermas instead submits his final appeal to the imagination.

THE CIRCUITRY OF SOCIAL POWER: FOUCAULT’S POLITICAL TECHNOLOGIES

Of the three thinkers discussed in this chapter, perhaps it will be least surprising to suggest an affinity between Michel Foucault and the dystopian imagination. Foucault’s gothic fixations—madness, confinement, isolation—run rampant across his work. His influential rendering of the disciplinary society posits the social world as a “carceral archipelago,” an array of prisons and prison-like institutions for the production of “docile

bodies.”¹²⁵ Dystopian anxieties related to normalization and surveillance, among other forms of mental and physical entrapment, define Foucault’s oeuvre, and he shares the concern that has been traced since the first chapter of this book: that modern rationality has coalesced into a “cruel, ingenious cage” for the self.¹²⁶ Foucault also extends the paradigms of dystopian thinking described in the previous chapter. His vision of the biopolitical state that administers a homogenized social body is reminiscent of much in mass society thinking, and like the critics of technocracy he attends to the intricate relationship between technique, knowledge, and domination.¹²⁷ Perhaps the greatest difference between Foucault’s sensibility and that of the dystopian is his disinclination to speculate about the future. On the contrary, Foucault endeavors to expose the subliminal violence that already pervades our ostensibly civilized epoch, and as such his missives often register as an alarm sounded too late. The modes of domination he asks us to imagine do not lay off in a near or distant future, but creep out of the recent past, leaving us “trapped in our own history.”¹²⁸ Foucault protests this landscape, but he is uninterested in utopianism or revolutionary politics, and his investigations uncover hidden logics of domination in seemingly progressive and humanitarian reforms. And unlike the wary humanists who warn us about what humanity, as a species, is in danger of becoming, Foucault seems troubled by what we already are—and finds particularly disturbing the suggestion that what we are exhausts the parameters of what we can be.

For any of the above reasons, Foucault would register as a provocative figure in modern intellectual life. But his enduring contribution to contemporary thought is not merely one of style, or even ethos, as appropriate as that might be given Foucault’s final resolve to subvert disciplinary society through radical acts of self-making. Rather, Foucault has transformed our understanding of power and domination, and at the same time permanently unsettled many of our conventional ideas about the forms that freedom might take. Certainly, Foucault does not follow Arendt or Habermas in articulating a model of public freedom or collective action. His work frequently points to the limitations of such strategies, their tendency to expand and intensify the web of disciplinary power and paradoxically enmesh the self still deeper in its machinations. At least, this is the conclusion that Foucault’s genealogies of power seem to suggest. And if Foucault himself often rendered these findings in sanguine understatement, his critics—and some of his more enthusiastic acolytes—have often underlined their apocalyptic implications.¹²⁹

Foucault's flights between humanism and nihilism continue to vex his interpreters just as they did his contemporaries. But as we have seen throughout this book, such vacillations are a common outgrowth of the dystopian imagination, which often finds humanism pushed to the brink: scouring the iron surfaces of modernity for footholds wherein freedom might take its stand. What if we were to consider Foucault's infamous accounts of the disciplinary society as a form of dystopian writing, or to put it slightly differently, as a dystopian period within his oeuvre? In his writings of the 1970s, particularly those that take the genealogy of power as their central concern, Foucault pushes the analysis of power to the extreme, purporting to uncover analytically that which he fears existentially. In doing so he clarifies opportunities for resistance and even freedom of a kind that mean more than a pushing up against narrowing walls. As Eric Paras has suggested, "Foucault created the twentieth century's most devastating critique of the free subject . . . the notion of the end of subjectivity had offered a kind of cold clarity, as well as an immensely thought-provoking lens through which to view the world."¹³⁰ But Paras argues that the later Foucault sought new insights, eventually dissolving his earlier framework in order to affirm subjectivity and "the primacy of human liberty."

Just as Foucault's early works treat more esoteric subjects than his social-critical writings to follow, Foucault's politics of the time were muted, even quietist.¹³¹ Foucault was hostile toward "engagement" throughout much of the 1960s, though he was eventually awakened by the radicalism of 1968.¹³² At this juncture Foucault's activism and scholarship both become pointed against carceral institutions of normalization, discipline, and confinement.¹³³ In the early 1970s, Foucault cofounded the Prisons Information Group and led its efforts to publicize conditions in French prisons. During this time, his lectures at the Collège de France examined theories and institutions of punishment in terms of disciplinary power, laying both the topographical and conceptual foundations for *Discipline and Punish*.

Foucault's subsequent investigations make a cumulative case that to exist under the conditions of modern society, or to be what Foucault would call a modern subject, is to exist amid a plethora of intersecting networks of power "which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body."¹³⁴ Foucault's "micro-physics of power" offers a typology of various kinds of modern power and the processes and strategies by which they operate. Where so many dystopian thinkers focused on the extremes of totalitarian domination or its social and technological analogues, Foucault interprets power as

diffuse, capillary, and trained with microscopic precision on the individual body and mind. It manages us not in terms of our consciously held political ideologies and need not even interfere with our rights or political freedoms as we typically understand them. On the contrary, Foucault asserts that power “can sometimes be found reaching down into the fine fabric of society,” and to the extent that it pervades social relationships—“production, kinship, family, sexuality”—it functions less like Arendt’s crushing iron band of terror and more like a fine-meshed net, made formidable as a constraint by the interweaving of strands that could be broken or ignored on their own.¹³⁵ Thus, Foucault encourages us to reconceptualize domination along the following lines:

that power is co-extensive with the social body . . . that relations of power are interwoven with other kind of relations . . . that their interconnections delineate general conditions of domination, and this domination is organized into a more-or-less coherent and unitary strategic form; that dispersed, heteromorphous, localized procedures of power are adapted, re-enforced and transformed by these global strategies, all this being accompanied by numerous phenomena of inertia, displacement and resistance; hence one should not assume a massive and primal condition of domination, a binary structure with “dominators” on the one side and “dominated” on the other, but rather a multiform production of relations of domination.¹³⁶

Foucault’s account complicates the diagnoses of power carried out by previous social theorists. In contrast to the Frankfurt School tradition, carried out by Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas, Foucault is not content to diagnose a rupture between instrumental rationality and some larger or more encompassing rationality—be it aesthetic or communicative or something else. “I would not speak about *one* bifurcation of reason but more about an endless, multiple bifurcation—a kind of abundant ramification,” he once said in response to a question about Habermas. “I do not speak of the point at which reason became instrumental.”¹³⁷ Not only does this have implications for the diagnosis of domination—since communicative or in Foucault’s parlance discursive rationalities might still be bound up in regimes of domination—it also has a concrete bearing on how to respond, insofar as Foucault would, in his late career, attempt to vindicate the *techne* that Arendt and Habermas both attacked for its relentless encroachment

in modernity. As always with Foucault, power is defined in its exercise, a rendering both adversarial and opportunistic.

As such, Foucault directs our attention to a complex and ever-evolving terrain of power. Among the diverse techniques and rationalities of power, Foucault nonetheless generalizes that, starting during the seventeenth century, “power over life” evolved around two poles, the disciplinary and the biopolitical:

One of these poles—the first to be formed, it seems—centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the *disciplines: an anatomo-politics of the human body*. The second, formed somewhat later, focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanisms of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population.¹³⁸

For Foucault, it is critical to understand that disciplinary power is “non-sovereign power, which lies outside the form of sovereignty.”¹³⁹ This means there is a dissociation between power and the institution of the state, and more generally, between power and violence, which is typically the prerogative of the state. Further, the code defined and enforced by discipline is not the law, *per se*, but rather the norm. By virtue of these characteristics, sovereign power has also typically been constrained within liberal philosophies of rights. But one cannot claim rights against society as such, or its norms, nor against the expert discourses and disciplinary techniques that constitute the social body, which means that constraining disciplinary power raises new challenges for political theory. Though Foucault frequently discusses the “economic-political” register of power, he also found political economy in the Marxist sense inadequate. In places, Foucault’s account of discipline echoes Marx’s analysis of the factory, but Foucault does not reduce power relations to the division of labor and like Habermas he insists that bureaucratic socialism provides no alternative to the pathologies of modern rationality.¹⁴⁰

What then is disciplinary power? Foucault explains variously that disci-

plinary power “permits time and labor to be extracted from bodies,” “is constantly exercised by means of surveillance,” functions through “a tightly knit grid of material coercions,” and functions “to increase the subjected forces and to improve the force and efficacy of that which subjects them.”¹⁴¹ Foucault’s most enduring account of disciplinary power emerges from his discussion of Bentham’s Panopticon, “a technology of power designed to solve the problems of surveillance.”¹⁴² Foucault muses that the Panopticon “is regarded as not much more than a bizarre little utopia, a perverse dream—rather as though Bentham had been the Fourier of a police society.”¹⁴³ But in Foucault’s rendering, this forgotten and failed utopia of early modernity established the covert blueprint for modern disciplinary power, “a design of subtle coercion for a society to come.”¹⁴⁴ This is Foucault’s early insight into utopias: they are imaginaries that shift the real around them, fictions that rewrite reality.¹⁴⁵ To live in the present is to live among the fragments of these partially realized utopias, to have our sense of self and subjectivity constituted by their logics. The disciplinary society is the shadow of the Benthamite utopia, which in its efficiency and modularity clarifies the internal logic of a range of institutions:

The Panopticon . . . must be understood as a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men. No doubt Bentham presents it as a particular institution, closed in upon itself. Utopias, perfectly closed in upon themselves, are common enough. As opposed to the ruined prisons, littered with mechanisms of torture . . . the Panopticon represents a cruel, ingenious cage. The fact that it should have given rise, even in our own time, to so many variations, projected or realized, is evidence of the imaginary intensity that it has possessed for almost two hundred years. But the Panopticon must not be understood as a dream building; it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form. . . . it is in fact a figure of political technology.¹⁴⁶

Foucault maintained that the Panoptic scheme had been exported throughout modern societies, in disciplinary institutions that included not only prisons but hospitals and schools. That the title of Foucault’s book translates more literally to *Surveil and Punish* indicates this intimate relationship between surveillance and discipline. Foucault is not the first dystopian thinker to express a preoccupation with Bentham’s machinery of sur-

veillance. Aldous Huxley, for one, protested that Bentham's blueprint sought to mechanize humanity, a task which it was doomed to fail:

The real horror of the situation in an industrial or administrative Panopticon is not that the human beings are transformed into machines (if they could be transformed they would be perfectly happy in the prisons); no, the horror consists precisely in the fact that they are not machines, but freedom-loving animals, far-ranging minds, and God-like spirits, who find themselves subordinated to machines and constrained to live within the issueless tunnel of an arbitrary and inhuman system.¹⁴⁷

Contrast Huxley's horror at the failure of the Panopticon with Foucault's clinical account of its effectiveness. To Foucault, the genius of the Panopticon is that it *can* work—it can transform its subjects, and make them, if not automatons, then at least participants in their own domination:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers.¹⁴⁸

Foucault's account of surveillance may also call to mind Orwell's dystopia—the all-seeing eyes of Big Brother remain, alongside the Panopticon, one of the central political metaphors for the surveillance society. The major contrast is that Orwell envisions a centralized state surveillance apparatus, whereas Foucault attributes surveillance to a decentralized network of state and nonstate institutions. That acknowledged, Foucault's claim that the Panopticon is continuous in its effects even when it is discontinuous in its application resonates with one of Orwell's important insights into surveillance. In the opening paragraphs of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, just after the telescreen has been introduced, Winston reflects: "There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. . . . You had to live—did live—in the assumption that every sound you made

was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized.”¹⁴⁹ In both instances, the key effect of surveillance is the way it forces the surveilled to internalize a relationship of domination and regulate their own behavior accordingly. As David Lyon notes in his seminal study of the surveillance society, neither Orwell nor Foucault is principally concerned about what we might call “privacy” but rather with the way surveillance encodes a relationship of power.¹⁵⁰

In this way, the Panopticon illustrates the intimate relationship between surveillance and subjectivity. For as indicated above, Foucault understands modern disciplinary power to work most effectively *in* and *through* the consciousness of the subject, who internalizes its dictates, and perhaps, at the extreme, can no longer tell them from his or her own. Foucault’s unease with identity stems from his suspicion that subjectivity is always enmeshed in relationships of power, such that the line between freedom and domination nearly vanishes:

This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word “subject”: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to.¹⁵¹

One way of appreciating Foucault’s refined concept of domination is to compare it with Arendt’s notion of total domination. Arendt’s account seems the very definition of a “massive and primal condition of domination,” which may well be appropriate for the unique context of totalitarianism, but Foucault might question the conclusions that arise when such a concept of domination structures the analysis of mass society. For example, whereas Arendt describes the normalization that occurs in mass society as a nearly automatic outgrowth of social life, a sort of herd instinct to which one cannot help but succumb under mass conditions, Foucault’s account of normalization specifies “a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal,” “mechanisms of power” that “brand” and “alter” the deviant.¹⁵² Nor, for that matter, must domination seek to immobilize or to destroy space, as in Arendt’s imagination. Foucault

imagines regimes of power that solicit and even expedite our movement, making us more productive and efficient, enhancing us rather than degrading us, structuring space rather than obliterating it.

This much is true, at least, if we remain focused on Foucault's account of disciplinary power, which purposively shifts the locus of political rationality from the state to society. But whereas Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power extends the dystopian motif of surveillance, his successive investigations into what he calls biopolitical power reflects the enduring importance of totalitarianism. The extent to which Foucault's writings reflect the antitotalitarian gestalt of French politics in the 1970s has often been overlooked by political theorists.¹⁵³ Foucault completed *Discipline and Punish* against the backdrop of the "gulag," which, following the French publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* in 1974, became a synecdoche for Stalinism and Soviet rule. Foucault borrowed Solzhenitsyn's titular metaphor for his own discussion of the "carceral archipelago," by which he meant to convey "the way in which a form of punitive system is physically dispersed yet at the same time covers the entirety of a society."¹⁵⁴ Foucault's contemporaries, among them Bernard Henry-Levy, Andre Glucksmann, Claude Lefort, and Pierre Rosanvallon, also dedicated considerable attention to Solzhenitsyn, arguing that the dispatch from the gulag was a watershed moment for the French left, occasioning a rebuke of Stalinist and Maoist sensibilities and a pivot toward anarchist, libertarian, and broadly antistatist forms of socialism.¹⁵⁵ As for Foucault, the abuses of power perpetrated by the Nazi and Soviet regimes did much to provoke his concern with power—as he explains in one interview, the question of power "began to be raised in its nudity" in the 1950s, provoked by these "two gigantic shadows," the "two black heritages" of Nazism and Soviet Communism.¹⁵⁶

While Foucault's concept of disciplinary power emphasized the individual subject, his notion of biopolitics gestures toward "a new technology of power" that emerges in the nineteenth century and departs from the disciplinary paradigm insofar as it is exercised at the level of the population.¹⁵⁷ These techniques do not apply to "man-as-body" but instead to "man-as-species," they are not "individualized" but instead "massifying."¹⁵⁸ What Foucault describes is the politics of population, its management and control, which includes policies aimed at measuring and controlling fertility, hygiene, and public health. Viewed from the biopolitical paradigm, the governed population is "a body with so many heads," an image that resonates with Arendt's figuration of the mass society as a single enormous person.¹⁵⁹

Foucault, like Arendt, is concerned with the way that biological processes enter into the public realm and in doing so orient the state toward its subjects as a species such that it governs them as a collective biological unit.¹⁶⁰ Also like Arendt, Foucault notes that this context entails distinctive patterns of normalization—whereas he initially linked normalization to disciplinary power, he later maintains that a “normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centered on life.”¹⁶¹ Foucault’s suspicion of the state and his conviction that its biopolitical rationality must be contained reflect a skepticism of power inflected by the traumas of totalitarianism. For Foucault alleges that “a formidable power of death” is the “counterpart” of power over life, that it is “as managers of life and survival, of bodies and the race” that modern states wage wars and massacres, even “visit such holocausts on their own populations.”¹⁶²

In this context, Foucault makes two moves that we’ll recognize from the preceding survey of dystopian paradigms. First, while Foucault characterizes the Nazi state as a singular confluence of sovereign, disciplinary, and biopolitical paradigms—“an absolutely racist State, an absolutely murderous state, and an absolutely suicidal State”—he also accepts the convergence theory of totalitarianism advanced by dystopian critics such as Arendt and Orwell.¹⁶³ Foucault alleges that socialism “has made no critique of the theme of biopower . . . it has in fact taken it up, developed, reimplanted, and modified it in certain respects, but it has certainly not reexamined its basis or its modes of working.”¹⁶⁴ Foucault alleges that the Soviet’s treatment of the mentally ill, criminals, and dissidents exemplify a eugenic social hygiene analogous to the Nazi’s racial eugenics. Foucault also performs the move that is most characteristic of the dystopian construal of totalitarianism, arguing that it expresses a latent potential that all industrial Western societies contain. While “fascism and Stalinism expanded their efforts to hitherto unknown dimensions . . . it cannot be denied that, in many respects, fascism and Stalinism simply extended a whole series of mechanisms that already existed in the social and political systems of the West,” including “the organization of great parties, the development of political apparatuses, and the existence of techniques of repression such as labor camps,” all of which Foucault attributes to “the heritage of liberal Western societies.”¹⁶⁵ Foucault returns to this point in 1982, arguing that these two “diseases” of power “used and extended mechanisms already present in most other societies . . . in spite of their own internal madness, they used to a large extent the ideas and devices of our political rationality.”¹⁶⁶ The upshot of this analysis is not that

Western societies face a forced march to overt or covert totalitarianism, but rather a call to vigilance. Foucault goes so far as to describe philosophy as a kind of vigilance against the “excesses of political rationality” and of “political power,” arguing that “we should not need to wait for bureaucracy or concentration camps to recognize the existence of such relations.”

But once these relations are recognized, how are we to respond to them? Despite his reputation as a radical, Foucault never showed much interest in the politics of utopia, revolution, or liberation, and his stance toward the institutions of modernity could be surprisingly conciliatory. By the late 1970s, Foucault arrived at an appreciation—if not a total endorsement—of political liberalism and economic neoliberalism. For example, Foucault takes pains to differentiate his analysis from those that maintain that neoliberalism is an insidious regime of domination, “Solzhenitsyn on a world scale.”¹⁶⁷ Rather, he paints it in a sympathetic light: a form of governmentality that creates space for experimentation. He is not persuaded by the dystopian dyspepsia of the right with respect to the welfare state. Nor does he put weight on lurid accounts of the police state that render it as a totalitarian regime in the waiting. This, he maintains, is unhelpful with respect to the real abuses of the state. Liberalism, as a politics of limiting, counteracting, and constraining the state through a doctrine of rights and liberties, comes into play here as a way of domesticating its powers, offering “a form of critical reflection on governmental practice.”¹⁶⁸ The emergence of biopolitics, and of what Foucault will term the “police state” with its “disciplinary dream” of observation and control, elicits a defensive critique from liberalism, for it entails an expansion of governance, whereas “liberalism, on the other hand, is imbued with the principle: ‘One always governs too much’—or at least, one should always suspect that one governs too much.”¹⁶⁹ Liberalism, for Foucault, is a “technology of government” based on the principle that the “necessity and usefulness” of government “can and must always be questioned.” And in that regard, it is a political theory well suited to the dystopian imagination, as it is perpetually on guard against the extension of power. In this construal, liberalism is not simply another mode of governmentality, but a kind of counter-governmentality, not an “unrealized utopia” but a “tool for the criticism of reality: criticism of a previous governmentality from which one is trying to get free; of a present governmentality that one is trying to reform or rationalize by scaling it down; or a governmentality to which one is opposed and whose abuses one wants to limit.”¹⁷⁰ Likewise, in 1979, Foucault remarks that the “rules that exist to limit [power] can never

be stringent enough, the universal principles for dispossessing it of all the occasions it seizes are never sufficiently rigorous. Against power one must always set inviolable laws and unrestricted rights."¹⁷¹

Similarly, Foucault's affinity for neoliberalism follows from his conviction that its political technologies may open new spaces for self-determination beyond the intrusive managerialism of the state. Under neoliberalism, the market and the sphere of civil society are relatively open sites of experimentation wherein the excesses of government can be evaded. In contrast to the "regimentation" of the police state, which endows government with the right and responsibility to maximize its subjects' productivity through disciplinary and biopolitical power, neoliberalism imagines that productivity is generated precisely in the spheres of social and economic life where the state intervenes least. Foucault saw neoliberalism as the opportunity for a "massive withdrawal with regard to the normative-disciplinary system," wherein the state is permitted to structure its subjects' environments and incentives but not their identities.¹⁷² If Foucault's appraisal of the liberal order sounds benign, it's important to clarify that it is not utopian or triumphalist and does not spell the end of domination. Rather, liberal and neoliberal political logics are, as Foucault stresses, *technologies*, pieces of equipment. Their utility is that that can be wielded to mitigate more extensive kinds of domination and open space for degrees of independent self-constitution.

Hence, the late Foucault turns his inquiries from "political technologies" to "technologies of the self"—from discipline and governmentality to *self-discipline* and *self-government*. Foucault now speaks of individual subjects and their capacity to take an active role in their own constitution. Late in his career, Foucault offers the understated concession that he has *perhaps* "insisted too much on the technology of domination and power."¹⁷³ What Foucault has called "technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject" meet "technologies of the self which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves."¹⁷⁴ What the two technologies have in common is that they both serve the "training and modification of individuals" in terms of the acquisition of certain skills and attitudes. But while the edifices of disciplinary power try to make the individual serve the interests of a productive apparatus or a regime of knowledge, individuals may be able to devise techniques for crafting themselves in their own image—to pursue

their own ethical, spiritual, or aesthetic self-cultivation. In addition to technique and technology, Foucault deploys the conception of an *art* of the self. “What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life,” he remarks. “But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?”¹⁷⁵

Foucault’s pivot from theorist of power to philosopher of freedom provokes difficult questions. Following decades in which he laid bare the vast techno-political machinery of modern domination, Foucault responded not, as many hoped and expected, as a theorist of resistance, but as a kind of ethicist. When a critic like Charles Taylor declares that “Foucault disconcerts,” what he has in mind has less to do with the expansive modalities of domination that Foucault set out to unmask in the early and middle stages of his career, but with the apparent normative paucity of Foucault’s later ethical stances.¹⁷⁶ Having argued that our selfhood, or “subjectivity,” is yet another effect of power, and that the “truth” was little more than a token in the sprawling discursive formations of power/knowledge, what then could Foucault offer us that would be helpful in the cause of emancipation? Assuming that one finds Foucault’s analyses persuasive, or even plausible, what would be left to emancipate? In preceding chapters, we saw that most dystopian thinkers opposed humanistic ideals to the political, social, and technological trajectories they sought to criticize. The move to invoke a *characteristically human* mode of free thought or action—acknowledging considerable variance in how such freedom is conceptualized—united thinkers as disparate as Marx, Huxley, Fromm, and Mumford, as well as Arendt and Habermas. What makes Foucault an outlier and provocateur in this context is his reticence about such maneuvers. As he explained in one of his final interviews, “What I am afraid of about humanism is that it presents a certain form of our ethics as a universal model for any kind of freedom. I think that there are more secrets, more possible freedoms, and more inventions in our future than we can imagine in humanism as it is dogmatically represented on every side of the political rainbow: the Left, the Center, the Right.”¹⁷⁷ Foucault instead calls for a “critical ontology of ourselves . . . conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophic life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.”¹⁷⁸ The goal of this practice is not to discover a true self, or an authentic self, that can then be excavated from the prison of power. Instead, Foucault exhorts us to take up a set of

practices on ourselves, variously defined as techniques, aesthetics, and ethics, but all of which are geared toward the invention or production of the self. This Foucault understands in opposition to a humanistic project in which we aim to uncover our true nature and “liberate man in his own being.”

Technologies of self-government, aesthetics of self-cultivation, an ethos of permanent critique: through this succession of vocabularies, Foucault does not arrive at a final philosophy of freedom, but he does experiment with freedom’s possibilities, and his exhortation to those who wish to be free—or, at least, freer—is that they do the same. But whereas the radical Foucault of the late 1960s and much of the ’70s spoke of resistance, even a renewed sense of revolution, the late Foucault seems hardly to consider freedom as a *political* possibility. As late as 1982, Foucault admitted that he could offer no “program for the future” because “even with the best of intentions those programs become a tool, an instrument of oppression.”¹⁷⁹ Here, Foucault extends one of the signature lines of antiutopian argument, and the examples he provides—the pathways from Rousseau to the terror, from Marxism to Stalinism—would fit squarely with the antiutopian liberalism of a Berlin or Talmon. For his part, Foucault is content to defamiliarize the institutional and ideological schema in which we live and “to show people that they are much freer than they feel.” While Foucault declines to offer a program *for* the future, the future is still of concern to him because its possibilities have not yet been exhausted.

CONCLUSION

How do we theorize freedom and domination in the shadows of a dystopian century? As one might expect, the latter concept, domination, turns out to be the most prominent. Political thinkers of the late twentieth century offer lavish accounts of the pathologies of modern society, its unprecedented dangers, its vast array of overt and subliminal methods of subjugation. At times it seems that modern society is nothing more than the totality of these strategies. Freedom is a more elusive concept. It often lives in the gaps that modern relationships of domination haven’t filled yet. It is fugitive, in the sense that Sheldon Wolin uses the word, expressed in fleeting moments of possibility, but as soon as it is not being actively exercised, atrophies or vanishes altogether.¹⁸⁰ It is in this dimension of twentieth-century political thought that we can most clearly discern the influence of the dystopian imagination.

We saw that, for Arendt, the development of a consumer society entails a breakdown of public life. To lose the locus of human connectivity in this way means to lose the possibility of power. As Arendt describes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *On Violence*, regimes of terror unmake public power through violence and persecution. But the future she describes in *The Human Condition* is one where power breaks down not because citizens are forcibly isolated from one another, but because they have become indifferent to one another—too absorbed in the solitary cycles of labor and consumption to attend to or participate in the public realm, while the modest possibilities of political life are dwarfed by the Faustian powers of science and technology. With respect to Habermas, the issue was how to rescue the moral-political capacities of the public from encroaching technocratic post-politics. Habermas' thinking enshrines a robust account of public autonomy rooted in the capacity for open communication, but such capacities are always in danger of being overwhelmed by the instrumental logics of the market and the bureaucratic state. In the twenty-first century, which Habermas alone of the thinkers surveyed here lived to see, these dangers have not been surpassed but rather have taken new forms: the globalized technocracy of neoliberal capitalism and the technological instrumentalization of humanity at the genetic level. The story as Foucault tells it is more complicated. Some of the tendencies Foucault problematizes overlap with those discussed by Arendt and Habermas, but he does not develop his account in terms of the diminution of public agency. Foucault is famously elusive about the normative basis of his thinking, but putting that aside, even his descriptive tendencies veer toward the individualistic: the subject, the body, the soul, the self—these are the sites of confrontation with the modern machinery of power. His criticisms of this machinery do not invoke countervailing ideas of democracy, and Foucault rarely speaks of public agency. To the extent that he conceptualizes possibilities of self-rule or self-government, they do not seem to be shared endeavors: to assert mastery over one's own life is ambition enough.

These well-worn contrasts aside, Arendt, Habermas, and Foucault all insist on the dimension of *futurity* as a critical component of our orientation toward the political world. Habermas writes of modernity that "it is the epoch that lives for the future, that opens itself up to the novelty of the future."¹⁸¹ Against a darkening horizon, Arendt, Habermas, and Foucault each seek to redeem this promise. The futures they intervene against are, as we have seen, *nonfutures*, voids of possibility that erode our creative and collaborative capacities, and these are often borne of a specific orientation

toward the future that seeks mastery, prediction, and control. The choices they clarify are not only choices between freedom and domination, but between openness and closure, action and determinacy, or, as I have put it, future and nonfuture. These are the stakes of the present, and the world of tomorrow, with all its peril and potential, is daily taking shape around us. As Habermas remarks, “the future has already begun.”

Conclusion

Facing the Future

Supposing we are to survive to the end of this dreary century, what will we have become of us, our societies, “the human condition”? Having no talent for prognostication, I have preloaded my crystal ball with prophecies loosely adapted or stolen outright from recent bestsellers, not all of which I found in the fiction section. As Rod Serling used to say on *The Twilight Zone*, “witness if you will.”

The year is 2122 and the Earth has been thoroughly baked and flooded. The atmosphere is choked with carbon dioxide and the world’s coastal metropolises are underwater. So much of the world’s population has been displaced that hundreds of thousands of refugees now survive on an artificial continent, a vast floating favela, sealed out by desiccated nation-states that have embraced authoritarian nationalism in politics and austerity and strict rationing in economics, while imposing strict limits on reproduction and immigration.¹

Or: It’s 2151 and no one has much idea what the climate is like anymore, at least not in the wealthiest countries, where most people spend their days in virtual spaces—vastly preferable to the hot, crowded mess outside, with its drugs, pandemics, police raids, and terror plots. The livelihood of a virtual serf depends on their willingness to be an endlessly exploitable source of data, their private thoughts not only known but anticipated by cutting-edge algorithms whose gradual perfection and extension into all areas of life is the Apollo program of the new corporatocracy.²

Or: It’s 2233, but most people don’t know what year it is because calendars and clocks and most other ways of marking time belong to the great scrap heap of civilization, along with electricity and indoor plumbing, not to mention all forms of government. There aren’t many people left, but no one even remembers which horseman did the culling—a plague, a war, an ecological cataclysm? Or so it goes for those left on the surface of the ruined

Earth. Watching the carnage from their bunkers, with provisions for at least another century, are the fraction of the population who had the resources to secure themselves from the disaster: an enclave of genetically optimized heirs who consider themselves *Homo superior*.³

Though my study of the dystopian imagination leaves off at the close of the twentieth century, precisely as the recent history of political thought gives way to a familiar present, even a cursory glance at the politics and culture of the twenty-first century reveals that dystopia has hardly lessened its grip on the political imagination today. Around the world democracy is in danger of being hollowed out by corporate oligarchy, neoliberal technocracy, and ethnonationalist authoritarianism.⁴ Fake news and other forms of disinformation are disseminated freely in the corrupted informational ecosystems of the old and the new media, and “climate genocide” is an increasingly likely fate for the inhabitants of soon-to-be-uninhabitable islands. Given the ubiquity of such dismal daydreams, and the impressive literary and intellectual pedigree of the minds from which they issue, to hold out any kind of optimism about the future can seem contrarian at best, complacent, even complicit, at worst. If the future isn’t at least starting to freak you out, you must not be paying attention.

When I began writing the first version of this study as a doctoral student in the final years of the Obama administration, the topic of dystopia seemed a quirky and quixotic pursuit for a political scientist. My own dystopian imagination was vexed by widening inequality and ossifying oligarchy in the aftermath of the Great Recession; by both a globalized neoliberal technocracy that seemed to subvert the possibilities of democratic self-determination and the rising ethnonationalist backlash on the New Right; by the long shadow of the war on terror and the regimes of occupation, torture, surveillance, and automated warfare to which it gave rise; and by the looming climate crisis, widely touted as a generation-defining challenge with apocalyptic stakes by the very world leaders who continued to leverage the future by extracting and burning fossil fuels at historic rates. As a student of political theory, I began to wonder what, if anything, the canon of political thought could tell us about these predicaments, and I found myself drawn to the dark contours of twentieth-century political thought, which I came to see as a period of crisis and creative renewal much like our own moment. While many on the left called for a revitalization of the utopian imaginary, I found myself drawn to skeptical temperaments and critical sensibilities. At the same time, I was unmoved by the revival of realism in political theory,

which seemed to lack the ambition and imaginative verve that had drawn me to the intertwining lineages of critical social theory and political literature.

For as I immersed myself in the arcana of political theory, I also pursued an extracurricular education in speculative fiction. As an undergraduate, reading Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*—an author I recalled fondly thanks to my childhood visits to Earthsea—had awakened me to speculative fiction's capacity for bold and visionary political thought. Always an avid reader of contemporary literature, I noticed a strange sensibility creeping into the literary fiction that I favored for free reading. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, there had been a major revival of dystopian and apocalyptic fiction drawing on a panoply of technological, political, and ecological doomsday scenarios. Works like Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) established the trend of "serious" literary novelists, whose preceding works had been largely realist, now populating their novels with bioengineered chimeras, sentient clones, and marauding cannibal hordes. In short order, these would be joined by Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013), Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (2014), Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016), Omar El Akkad's *American War* (2017), and countless others besides. At the same time, classic works of speculative fiction—from perennials like *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) to cult favorites by J. G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick, and Octavia Butler—benefited from popular rediscovery and critical reevaluation. And this is to speak only of the relatively high-brow examples. There is also a parallel canon of young adult dystopias, some of which, like Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* (2012) trilogy, became influential well beyond their target demographic. In comic books, video games, and young adult novels, dystopian or post-apocalyptic worlds were practically a default setting. *The Walking Dead* (2010), by some measures the most popular television series of its decade, offered a bleak saga of survival in a world overrun by bloodthirsty zombies and often bloodthirstier humans, while acclaimed streaming series like *Black Mirror* (2011) and later the adapted *Handmaid's Tale* (2017), perfectly timed for the year of historic Women's Marches, delivered dystopian drama in bingeable portions. Later adaptations of Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (2015), Phillip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2020), and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2021) posit alternate histories of resistance against fascist and white supremacist caste systems prematurely consigned to history.

These last examples speak to a turning point in the story of the dysto-

pian imagination, one that occurred just as I prepared to defend my dissertation and begin my academic career at the Harvard Writing Program. In the days and months that followed Donald Trump's election as president of the United States, many Americans expressed the uneasy sentiment that they were living in a dystopian novel—and a rather unsubtle one at that. After a campaign in which Trump made brazen appeals to the racial and ethnic resentment of his overwhelmingly white supporters and broadcast his “dubious allegiance to democratic norms,” he secured victory via the Electoral College despite receiving three million fewer votes than his opponent in what has been called “the most stunning upset in American history.”⁵ In response, the burgeoning grassroots opposition movement that came to be called “The Resistance” organized, demonstrated, and donated millions to civic watchdog organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union and to elected officials who promised to fight Trump's agenda.

They also read, and by and large what they chose to read were dystopias. *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* saw drastic increases in sales between Trump's election and his inauguration, as did comparatively unsung works like Sinclair Lewis's 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here*, in which a Trump-like demagogue establishes a fascist regime in America.⁶ Alongside its fictional counterparts, even as dense and foreboding a work as *The Origins of Totalitarianism* made a run up the charts: whereas Arendt's study typically sold about fifty copies a week, it was suddenly selling 800.⁷ Signs inspired by dystopian novels—“Make Atwood Fiction Again,” “1984 Was NOT an Instruction Manual”—could be spotted at the Women's Marches that followed Trump's inauguration. Opinion columnists debated which dystopian novel most accurately reflected the new political climate.⁸ For many readers, these works were talismans against complacency, ways of warning that things could—and absent concerted effort, would—still get worse. Bryan Sansome, an independent bookseller from Austin, Texas, observed that “these classic dystopian novels are actually leading people to buy books in our activism section. . . . It's taken people from going, ‘Okay, we know we're in this dystopian frightening world,’ to going ‘Okay, what do we do about it?’”⁹

But it was not only Trump's opponents who believed themselves to be standing between a fragile present and the dread future into which it might imminently collapse. Steve Bannon, the political strategist who orchestrated Trump's surprise victory, had long championed a lesser-known work of future fiction: Jean Raspail's 1973 novel *The Camp of the Saints*, which has

been described as “a xenophobic explosion of a racist novel about hordes of unassimilable brown people entering Europe.”¹⁰ In an allegory so thin as to make Orwell or Atwood seem subtle by comparison, Raspail has fleets of migrants from Calcutta force their way into France and then proceed, by rapid reproduction and all manner of murder and mayhem against the white European population, to establish themselves as a demographic majority (all of this is, naturally, abetted by the European left). In short order, calamity descends upon the globe. The novel concludes as Switzerland, the last majority white nation on earth, opens its borders. As early as 2001, the Southern Poverty Law Center had identified Raspail’s novel as “the favorite racist fantasy of the US anti-immigrant movement,” and Bannon frequently invoked the novel to suggest that migration to Europe and the United States constituted an “invasion.”¹¹ His colleague Stephen Miller, Trump’s senior policy advisor and the architect of the administration’s far-right, anti-immigrant policies, also takes the novel to be prophetic. Leaked e-mails between Miller and staff at Bannon’s right-wing news site, *Breitbart*, show that Miller encouraged the site to lean into white nationalist rhetoric and ideology, including the suggestion to attack the pope’s call to welcome refugees by “point[ing] out the parallels to *Camp of the Saints*.”¹² Seen from one angle, then, the political conflict between the first Trump administration and the Resistance was a fight between possible futures, between a vision of dystopia and vision of apocalypse, with each faction seeking to avert the future they fear most.

Some commentators worry that the fiction of fear has become yet another commodified arm of the entertainment industry, where grim futuristic settings and aesthetics are as likely to advance slick nihilism as any kind of coherent social protest.¹³ And yet there is no shortage of examples where dystopian fiction has succeeded in motivating precisely the stance of resistance that critics suggests it will quash. From Washington, DC, to Belfast to Buenos Aires, demonstrators have donned the crimson robes and white bonnets of Atwood’s handmaids to protest in defense of reproductive rights.¹⁴ For these demonstrators, the final meaning of the novel lies in its slogan of defiance—“*don’t let the bastards grind you down*”—not in its lurid scenes of violation and subjugation. Likewise, some of the readers who responded to Trump’s inauguration by stockpiling their own dystopian libraries may well have intended to curl up, helpless and hopeless, but it seems just as likely they sought to be forewarned and forearmed by those who, give or take a few details, seemed to have

seen it coming. This was vividly illustrated by a homemade sign from the Women's March, one of many to go viral, which depicted the spines of several dystopian novels in marker pen: *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Hunger Games*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Brave New World*, *The Giver*. And above this small library of dystopias, in bold letters, her message of resistance: "I've read the books. I don't want to live them."¹⁵

If dystopia reached a seemingly unsustainable level of saturation in the 2010s, the bubble, it turns out, has yet to burst. Take Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a representative case. Having already seen a resurgence in 2013, following Edward Snowden's revelation of the National Security Agency's secret mass surveillance program, and in 2017, following a Trump spokeswoman's attempt to present "alternative facts" to an incredulous public, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* seems also to be a prophetic novel of the 2020s. After the storming of the US Capitol in January 2021 and Trump's subsequent suspension from Twitter, readers turned to Orwell to understand the strange political nexus between DC and Silicon Valley. In 2022, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its equally relentless war of propaganda, Russian readers made *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the year's best-selling novel, and the second-best selling book overall.¹⁶ And Trump's re-election in 2024 precipitated another boom in sales for *The Handmaid's Tale*, along with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Fahrenheit 451*.¹⁷ The seemingly endless appetite for such works, both contemporaries and classics, indicates a public concerned with the questions that dystopian thinking has always hinged on: *What if? What next? What now?*

Such a deluge of dystopias makes it difficult to generalize about their role in the political imagination. The topography of dystopia is more complex and varied today than it was in the twentieth century, less monolithic in its concern with totalitarianism and its analogues, more like what Solzhenitsyn and Foucault would call an "archipelago" of nightmare cityscapes and nowhere nations. By way of conclusion, I will survey some of the most notable fixtures of this landscape and hazard some final points, extending from the concerns pursued in the previous four chapters, regarding the dystopian imaginary of the twenty-first century and its contribution to political thinking. I organize these points along three intersecting axes: first, domination and the politics of freedom; second, dehumanization and the politics of the human; and, finally, utopia and the politics of imagination.

The dystopian imaginary of the twentieth century fixated on extremes of political, psychological, and technological domination, and dystopian

thinkers honed these anxieties through thought experiments that plumbed the “abyss of the possible.” In the twenty-first century, dystopian thought likewise surveys novel forms of domination, offering an anticipatory critique of the present by extrapolating its possible futures. Though dystopian thought is often criticized for being fatalistic, it’s important to recognize that dystopias are calls to vigilance, which implies choice, or at the very least, indeterminacy. As Ian Shapiro has written in his own study of freedom and domination, “Dystopias figure in utopian thinking partly to incorporate and emphasize the human capacity for choice; they speak to our proclivity to believe that our fate is in our hands.”¹⁸

If totalitarianism was the dominant political dystopia of the twentieth century, then the most apparent contemporary analog is what scholars and analysts have called “The New Authoritarianism,” exemplified in autocratic regimes like Vladimir Putin’s Russia and Xi Jinping’s China and declining democracies like Viktor Orbán’s Hungary.¹⁹ They are often sophisticated in their use of information and communication technologies, especially new media propaganda and surveillance, and generally prefer manipulation to coercion.²⁰ While overt autocracy exists, regimes like Orbán’s are pioneering pseudo-democratic systems in which sham elections can consolidate power and legitimacy but are mostly useless to contest it. But this is only to say what we know of authoritarianism in its present incarnations. Dystopian accounts venture ahead, anticipating new patterns of domination against which twenty-first-century defenders of freedom will have to be on guard. Beyond the democratic-constitutional and civil-libertarian concerns, the fact that contemporary authoritarianism intersects with other worrying trajectories of technological domination provokes consideration of possible futures that even the citizens of liberal-democracies will have to confront in due course. Some of the scholars and thought leaders who have informed my thinking about these subjects may disagree, but to my mind a neo-Cold War mentality will not serve the cause of freedom well. Such Manichean and self-congratulatory frames, which pit “the Free World” against its enemies, obscure the real and pressing danger that democratic backsliding, invasive surveillance, “fake news” propaganda, and the like not only “can happen here,” but have happened and are happening. After the Trump administration culminated in a coup attempt abetted by right-wing media, complacency about the vulnerabilities in our political culture and institutions might as well be complicity. Fortunately, the most perceptive critics of the new authoritarianism have understood this, and

without wading into the equally unenlightening terrain of false equivalencies, have looked to our authoritarian contemporaries to understand our own space of possibilities, much as Orwell, Arendt, and their peers found in totalitarianism a black mirror of Western modernity.

Take, for example, the relationship between authoritarianism and what is now called “post-truth politics.”²¹ Orwell, who channeled his fear that “the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world” into *Nineteen Eighty-Four’s* vision of a ruling party whose “collective solipsism” subsumes past and present to an ever-fluctuating stream of propaganda, has often been hailed as a prophet of this predicament.²² As has Arendt, for whom “the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between the true and the false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.”²³ But more contemporary lenses are available as well. Peter Pomerantsev, among the key analysts of the authoritarian “war against reality,” has credited his shrewd analyses of political propaganda to his experience in that most ignominious of contemporary entertainment mediums: reality television.²⁴ He maintains that television is a central pillar of Putin’s regime, allowing the Kremlin to script political debates such that they provide entertainment and the illusion of competition, while ensuring that opposition candidates and their critiques stay within narrow bounds. But you don’t need state-run media to turn politics into televised entertainment—pursuing commercial rather than statist motives, the United States’ 24-hour news cycle has accomplished much the same, which perhaps goes some way to explaining why a reality television celebrity so cannily manipulated the medium on his way to the White House. The resemblance has not escaped Pomerantsev, or another of Putin’s fiercest critics, Masha Gessen. Both Pomerantsev and Gessen argue that Trump emulates Putin’s disregard for factuality, using blatant lies to distract and demoralize his opposition, to test the loyalty of his allies, and to give supporters epistemic permission to dismiss criticisms and even empirical facts.²⁵ As niche-marketed, microtargeted political media enters our televisions and our social media feeds and deepfake technology becomes more convincing, politics seems likely to move into a postfactual universe un tethered from any shared sense of reality. In the future, authoritarian leaders may not even need to silence dissent: they will simply drown in it out in a cacophony of digital noise.

We might also consider another Orwellian fixation, the great emerg-

ing networks of state surveillance that allow authoritarian regimes unprecedented power to monitor and control their citizens. The most staggering of these projects is the Chinese surveillance state, which, in conjunction with the government's Social Credit System, has in recent years been portrayed in Western media and by human rights watchdog organizations as a kind of real-world dystopia.²⁶ A network estimated to include over 700 million surveillance cameras—more than half of the surveillance cameras in the world—and databases storing billions of facial images along with DNA, iris scans, and voice prints allows the state to combine the breadth of what Foucault called biopolitics with the precision of what he called discipline.²⁷ This data enables the state to construct minutely detailed profiles of individual citizens, to monitor their physical movements and social interactions, and to penalize them for infractions that might include anything from jaywalking to political dissent. As journalist Kai Stritmatter highlights in his investigation, the Social Credit System harnesses the power of big data to define good citizenship in terms that are quantifiable and updated in real-time, with real consequences.²⁸ And this is to speak of relatively ordinary life in China's cities. At the extremes, the system has the potential to become still more invasive, and to combine with more brutal and familiar forms of oppression. Journalist Geoffrey Cain's chilling investigation highlights the intensive application of surveillance in China's Xinjiang region, home to millions of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Muslim minorities, who face "torture, brainwashing, and indoctrination" amid "the largest internment of ethnic minorities since the Holocaust."²⁹ Xinjiang has also been the laboratory in which China experiments with extremes of surveillance: it is where China deployed its first regionwide iris database, for example, and rolled out an "Integrated Joint Operation Platform" to aggregate data from police checkpoints, cell phones, cameras, and other sources. This hi-tech campaign of policing and persecution is not an exception, but an ominous token of the future. Arendt argued that the concentration camps were the central political institution of the Nazi regime, even if a minority of the nation ever stepped inside them, because they went the furthest in enacting the logic of total domination that totalitarianism sought to generalize. Likewise, the technologies developed in Xinjiang, by both Chinese and Western technology firms, are increasingly common across China, across Asia, and across the world. "Algorithmic policing" is a growing field that seeks to predict and prevent crime before it happens—aspiring to do with data what Philip K. Dick had to imagine psychic precognition to enact in "The Minority Report."³⁰

In the United States, documents attained by the American Civil Liberties Union revealed that the FBI and the Pentagon have been actively researching facial recognition software capable of identifying individuals from street camera footage as well as aerial drones.³¹ And while a small number of states and cities have moved to ban such technologies, the federal government has signaled its intention to move forward with facial recognition technologies, despite concerns about privacy, accuracy, and bias against people of color.³²

As new technologies penetrate more deeply and systematically into our institutions and even our interior lives, we may soon discover, as the dystopian thinkers surveyed here argued in their times, that the degrees of freedom afforded by liberal democratic institutions are inadequate without a secure social and psychological basis for autonomy. The ambition of midcentury thinkers like Fromm to “humanize technology” is now carried forward by organizations like the Center for Humane Technology, which asserts the necessity of preserving “cognitive liberty” as intrusive apps and individualized ads—now on our screens, perhaps before long made even more immediate by wearable neurotech—make it harder to tell our own thoughts from those that are pushed to us by various algorithms.³³ One work that stands out for its perspicacity in this context is Shoshana Zuboff’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, which beyond providing an essential overview of the new political economy of corporate surveillance, offers a capacious theorization of the novel forms of domination to which an information civilization is vulnerable. Zuboff theorizes the emergent form of power under the rubric of “instrumentarian power,” drawing both analogy and disanalogy with the totalitarian dystopia. As she explains, “Totalitarianism was a transformation of the state into a project of total possession. Instrumentarianism and its materialization in Big Other signal the transformation of the market into a project of total certainty, an undertaking that is unimaginable outside the digital milieu and the logic of surveillance capitalism.”³⁴ Zuboff’s strategy of argument echoes the dystopian thinkers surveyed in chapter 3, as she extends the “total possession” of the totalitarian state into an analogous “project of total certainty,” using the cultural memory of totalitarianism (if not its empirical reality) as a way of making a qualitatively new threat comprehensible and thus providing a handle on an incipient and all-consuming regime of domination that is unprecedented in history. As Zuboff explains:

[S]urveillance capitalism departs from the history of market capitalism in surprising ways, demanding both unimpeded freedom and to-

tal knowledge, abandoning capitalism's reciprocities with people and society, and imposing a totalizing collectivist vision of life in the hive, with surveillance capitalists and their data priesthood in charge of oversight and control. Surveillance capitalism and its rapidly accumulating instrumentarian power exceed the historical norms of capitalist ambitions, claiming dominion over human, societal, and political territories that range far beyond the conventional institutional terrain of the private firm or the market. As a result, surveillance capitalism is best described as a coup from above, not an overthrow of the state but rather an overthrow of the people's sovereignty and a prominent force in the perilous drift toward democratic deconsolidation that now threatens Western liberal democracies.³⁵

But the issue Zuboff raises goes beyond exploitation or even de-democratization. This is indicated in her call to action: "Only 'we the people' can reverse this course, first by naming the unprecedented, then by mobilizing new forms of collaborative action: the crucial friction that reasserts the primacy of a flourishing human future as the foundation of our information civilization." Despite her insistence that surveillance capitalism departs in significant ways from the logic of totalitarianism, that Big Other's machinations are distinct from those of Big Brother, Zuboff frequently references Orwell and Arendt in her analysis, and I believe this furnishes an important insight into the stakes of her argument. The problem she wants to bring into view is not simply a problem of political, economic, or technological domination, though this would be bad enough. Like the dystopian thinkers she channels, Zuboff maintains that, at the extremes, domination shades into *dehumanization*. Critical social theory has given us a number of vocabularies that intimate this connection, from Marx's "thingification" to successive accounts of commodification, instrumentalization, and objectification.³⁶ All of these processes indicate the transformation of social life and individual persons into something nonhuman, passive—a resource to be exploited or a tool to be used. Hence, Zuboff subtitles her book "The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power." To defend the political, economic, or psychological freedom of the twenty-first-century subject is ambitious enough as a practical matter, though it is a project that fits within the normative horizons of many liberal and left political projects. But the invocation of a *human future*, and the implication that the reign of surveillance capitalism would yield an *unfree and inhuman future*, takes the argument into distinctively dystopian territory.

Following the political philosopher Hans Jonas, I want to suggest that dystopian thought can contribute to a positive politics of the human. By making us aware of the vulnerabilities in what Habermas called an “ethical conceptions of the human,” dystopian thinking underscores the importance of asserting just such a conception, and even provides insight into what such a conception must consist of. This is no small feat, given that the cogency of “the human” as a category and, relatedly, the possibility or desirability of defending any normative conception of the human, has been challenged from a variety of anti-essentialist, antihumanist, and posthumanist positions.³⁷ This is fraught territory, and the arguments raised are not easy to counter. They range from prudent insights about the difficulties and occasional dangers of articulating the human as an array of substantive value positions, to more rhetorically and theoretically flamboyant arguments for the deconstruction, displacement, or transcendence of the human. Into this fray, where theoretical arguments typically lead to aporia or impasse, dystopian thought enters a distinctive appeal to the imagination.

The ethical claims raised by the dystopian critic can be clarified with reference to what Jonas has called the “imaginative-anticipatory *heuristics of fear*.”³⁸ Jonas developed this concept as part of his own ethics of responsibility, which he intended to respond to the unique ethical stakes of modernity, what he termed the problem of an endangered future. His inquiry is fundamentally concerned with how to make responsible use of our power to reshape the natural and human world through technology, and Jonas himself notes that science fiction is an exemplary source of “well-informed thought experiments, whose vivid imaginary results may assume the heuristic functions here proposed.”³⁹ The question, then, is how are we to guide our actions responsibly given the long-term, cumulative character of the changes that we are now introducing into the world? Which principles should bound, direct, and constrain this power? Jonas contends that our reflection ought to begin with the heuristics of fear:

In our search after an ethics of responsibility for distant contingencies, it is an anticipated *distortion* of man that helps us to detect that in the normative conception of man which is to be preserved from it. . . . As long as the danger is unknown, we do not know what to preserve and why. Knowledge of this comes, against all logic and method, from the perception of what to *avoid*.⁴⁰

The most apparent threat to humanity would be a literal doomsday scenario: a nuclear war, ecological catastrophe, plague, or some other event that raised the possibility of human extinction.⁴¹ These are the types of scenarios that pervade the apocalyptic imagination, though the contemporary post-apocalyptic genre is defined by near-extinction experiences rather than the genuine article—for there must be someone left to write about. More to the point, such literature contends with the survivors' struggle to maintain their humanity in a collapsing world. Survival is a necessary condition for any ethical conception of the human, and therefore must come first among the preconditions that Jonas calls on us to preserve. However, even this premise is not absolute. Jonas warns that "the policy of survival must beware lest the existence finally saved will have ceased to be human."⁴² Extinction and a dehumanized existence, apocalypse and dystopia, are the Scylla and the Charybdis that humanity must navigate, the ethics of survival "a ridge between two abysses, where means can destroy the end."

If we survey some of the influential dystopian novels of the last two decades, we notice pervasive concerns with the instrumentalization of human life, of the self, and of the natural world, all of which threaten to undermine an ethical conception of the human. Perhaps the most persistent dangers raised in contemporary dystopian novels are those pertaining to the instrumentalization of human beings. This danger may issue from new forms of hierarchy, such as the exploitation of cloned human beings in *Never Let Me Go*, or the reemergence of familiar ones, such as the patriarchal theocracy of *The Handmaid's Tale* or the twenty-first-century slave economy in Ben Winter's *Underground Airlines* (2016). In *Never Let Me Go*, the cloned humans are "donors," their purpose in life to provide organs to the humans from whom their DNA was copied. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women selected for their fertility following a population crisis are raped and forcibly impregnated by male Governors. And in *Underground Airlines*, slavery persists as a cornerstone of the American economy. Compared with the post-apocalyptic novels, the violence of dystopia is systematic and cruelly predictable. To the extent that the personhood of the exploited is recognized, it establishes no limit to the pain and degradation that can be inflicted in the name of creating a secure and comfortable existence for others. In Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, the donors' claim to moral personhood is dismissed not because it is metaphysically or ontologically specious, but because the benefits of their exploitation became too appealing to give up. The idea that

the donors are less than human is not the *reason* for their exploitation—it is an excuse given after the fact. This is explained to the protagonists near the end of the novel:

However uncomfortable people were about your existence, their overwhelming concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer, motor neuron disease, heart disease. So for a long time you were kept in the shadows, and people did their best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren't really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn't matter.⁴³

The donor's ultimate end, to be harvested then switched off and discarded, is an open secret and a banal evil: "It's horror movie stuff, and most of the time people don't want to think about it."⁴⁴ The outrage is not only that such atrocities occur, but that those who benefit from them refuse to acknowledge or accept responsibility for the cruelties administered in their name.

Dystopian writers also imagine societies where individuals become complicit in their own instrumentalization, and the price of participation in the modern world is one's willingness to make oneself a resource: Big Brother meets Big Data. Anticipating much in Zuboff's critique of surveillance capitalism, Dave Eggers's *The Circle* satirizes Silicon Valley's cheery totalitarian drive to optimize through social media and surveillance. The titular company, an amalgam of Facebook and Google, seeks to "close the circle" by constructing a minutely detailed profile of every voting-age citizen of the United States. Users are further incentivized, on pain of ostracization, to surveil themselves with the Circle's proprietary fiber-optic cameras, ensuring a constant flow of information to their digital audience—and, of course, to the Circle itself. Eggers presents a plausible future in which individuals facilitate their own exploitation, and all is justified by a passive-aggressive ideology of mandatory interconnectedness: "Sharing is caring. Privacy is theft. Secrets are lies."⁴⁵ Eggers's concerns resonate with other critics of social media. Zadie Smith argues that platforms like Facebook reduce our interior life down to their parameters, such that we come to resemble the flattened digital personae we share online. What is lost, Smith fears, is the notion of the "private person, a person who is a mystery to the world and—which is more important—to herself."⁴⁶ If the person of the new media age

is the sum total of their likes, views, shares, and mentions, perhaps in the future a person will be little more than a number reflecting their aggregate social utility. This outcome was forecast in “Nosedive” (2016), an episode in the teleplay *Black Mirror*’s pastel nightmare of digital status anxiety. At stake is a future where intrusive technology and hypersocialization reduce a person’s worth to their instrumental value, now objectively quantifiable and updated in real time. Rather than being coerced, we learn to surveil and censor ourselves, and we face an array of social and technological “pushes” to participate in our own commodification.

This instrumentalization of human life keeps pace with, and may be seen as an outgrowth of, the instrumentalization of external nature. Margaret Atwood explores this terrain in her *MaddAddam* novels, each of which presents a nesting doll of calamities: a character’s journey in a post-apocalyptic world, interspersed with flashbacks to the dystopian society that precipitated the near-extinction event. Atwood has described the dystopia as “a technocracy and an anarchy,” referring to the distinction between the Compounds, which house the privileged employees of powerful corporations—mainly bioengineering firms—and the Plebelands, where the rest of humanity is walled off.⁴⁷ In the Plebelands, “things were unpredictable,” while the Compounds curate normalcy and stability.⁴⁸ In the first novel, *Oryx and Crake*, we learn about this two-tiered society from the viewpoint of Jimmy, the son of a highly sought after “genographer.” For Jimmy’s father, life in the Compounds is “the way it used to be . . . before things got so serious,” but for his mother, who experiences intensifying doubts about the cost of her family’s comfort, it is “artificial,” “a theme park.” The Compounds are protected by private security firms that, we learn in the second novel, *The Year of the Flood*, have mostly replaced the police and military forces whose resources proved inadequate to the increasingly unstable world of the Plebelands. The “kings and dukes” of this neofeudal arrangement, the residents of the Compounds also benefit from genetic advances to prevent disease and aging, courtesy of firms like NooSkins, HelthWyzer, and OrganInc Farms that extend bioengineering into every area of human and nonhuman life. Jimmy’s father works on OrganInc Farms’ most controversial and lucrative project: the design of the “ss multiorganifier,” otherwise known as the “pigoon.” These animals, which end up playing a significant role in the third novel, are pigs that have been genetically modified to grow human organ tissue for transplant purposes. A brief but horrifying aside indicates that the type of wholesale exploitation of human beings depicted in *Never Let Me Go* is on the near horizon, blocked

not so much for ethical reasons as by a (temporarily) prohibitive price tag: “It was much cheaper than getting yourself cloned for spare parts—a few wrinkles to be ironed out there, as Jimmy’s Dad used to say—or keeping a for-harvest child or two stashed away in some illegal baby-orchard.”⁴⁹ Eventually, the pigoon project extends to the cultivation of “genuine human neo-cortex tissue,” an experiment that will ultimately allow the animals to attain sentience.⁵⁰ In a society that has already accepted that nonhuman life exists only to be exploited, the line being crossed here is impossible to articulate. While Jimmy’s mother calls it “immoral” and “sacrilegious,” his father can’t believe an “educated person” could make such an objection.⁵¹ Jimmy finds himself in the same position as he begins to object to Crake’s experiments, feeling that “some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed,” but he is unable to explain why.⁵² In any event, Crake is unmoved by Jimmy’s concerns, asserting that he doesn’t believe in nature—“Or not with a capital N.” The instrumentalization of all life, up to and including human life, unites Crake’s Frankenstein-like hubris with the broader patterns of consumption and exploitation that characterize their culture. Looking back on this ruinous trajectory from the post-apocalyptic future, the surviving humans can only explain it as the consequence of an unconscionable blindness: a disregard for nonhuman life that ends with humanity itself being fed into the vast destructive machinery we have built.

Atwood indicates that an ethical conception of the human may have more vulnerabilities than we might initially imagine if we consider only what it means for humans themselves to be treated with dignity. An ethical conception of the human must also fill out the way we relate to nature with orienting principles as well as boundaries and limitations. This warning also complicates the task of a humanist ethics, as the very humanisms that assert the sanctity of the human species have frequently entailed the elevation of the human as master and possessor of nature. According to Martin Heidegger, humanity exalts itself to the “posture of lord of the earth” in an anthropo-solipsism that collapses into nihilism and brings humanity “to the brink of a precipitous fall.”⁵³ As contemporary critics of anthropocentrism point out, many influential ethical conceptions of the human have, in their turn, contributed to humanity’s total domination of nature, and in that way contribute to our precarious predicament today.⁵⁴ This means that in order for humanity to persist, our ethical conception of the human must not only be articulated and preserved but also reimagined in new terms, if it is to continue on any terms.

By confronting us with a dread panorama of domination and dehumanization, the dystopian imaginary prompts political reflection on freedom and humanity in an expansive, existential sense. In doing so it pushes the political imagination beyond the narrow confines of liberal-democratic theory or left projects of political economy. As Habermas noted, the dystopian horizons of modernity make the classical questions of ethics pressing matters of political judgment. But if the dystopian outlook anticipates challenges that can only be met by transformative politics and ethics, we come once more to the question of whether there are any utopian alternatives that we may set against the dystopian potentialities of our present era. Is it true, as Habermas said, that all of the utopian oases have dried up, leaving only a desert of banality in their place?⁵⁵ Since the middle of the twentieth century, the consensus position in mainstream political theory has been a resolutely antiutopian liberalism. The influential political philosopher John Rawls presents a partial exception, calling his project, which set the template for liberal theorizing in the second half of the twentieth century, a “realistic utopia,” splitting the difference between utopianism and its postwar liberal critics.⁵⁶ But as Judith Shklar observes, Rawls’s project presents a utopia in the sense of a norm, not a program for transformative politics or a vision of the good society to be actualized in the future. Hence she accepts as a virtue what some of Rawls’s critics point to as a severe limitation, namely that Rawls’s vision of the just society is “essentially reformist,” has “abandoned transformative politics,” does not “shake up the present enough by forcing us to envision a wholly new world order.”⁵⁷ For Shklar, this is a welcome development; for Rawls’s “resolutely anti-utopian” critics, even the modest liberal theory of justice remains an “unattainable standard” and its application to reality is liable to produce “frustration” at best and “destructive distortions” at worst.⁵⁸

While one major tendency in recent political theory has been the revival of realism, some dissenting voices have pointed to utopianism as a viable and necessary source of orientation toward the present and future.⁵⁹ On such analyses, the key contention is that utopias are not blueprints to be imposed in the pursuit of perfection, but ideals that can more subtly influence perception, judgment, and action. To take Rawls as an example once again, Benjamin McKean defends Rawlsian egalitarianism against the realist charge that it obscures extant and perhaps permanent inequalities, arguing that Rawls would have us orient ourselves toward our fellow citizens *as equals* and thus “dispose its adherents to actions that promote equality.”⁶⁰ A utopian orienta-

tion may thus become a self-fulfilling prophecy: "By orienting ourselves to those institutions and practices where values are partially and imperfectly instantiated in the world, we are better able to act in ways that promote the fuller realization of those values." What realists and idealists disagree on is the extent to which realization is possible, but the contention here is that acting toward a utopian horizon, even one that cannot be definitively reached, will yield an improved society, if not a perfect one, whereas a strictly realist mindset might concede important political battles before they are fought. If this is true for the realization of political goods, it may also be true for the more modest goal of preventing political evil. Michael Walzer has argued, for example, that democratic political systems exhibit endemic tendencies toward hierarchy and authoritarianism that can only be avoided when they are actively resisted by citizens. Though utopianism is not a formal requirement of such resistance, Walzer speculates that such resistance will, in practice, benefit from utopian imagery as sources of motivation and inspiration.⁶¹

Could the negativity of dystopia also provide a resource in this context? Shklar's political thought offers a contrastive case of "dystopic liberalism," and helps us to envision the work that negative ideals might play in political theorizing.⁶² Shklar esteemed the dystopian novel, most notably *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as a literary and philosophical reinvigoration of the utopian tradition, deploying the imaginary society as protest, warning, and an awakening to the nature of cruelty.⁶³ A dystopian sensibility also animates her celebrated "liberalism of fear," an "entirely nonutopian" political theory that posits the task of liberalism as the prevention of abuses of power, namely, "public cruelty" and the fear it generates.⁶⁴ Following Shklar, we could imagine other political sensibilities "of fear," which work backwards from the prevention of political evils to deduce their civic and institutional principles. Shklar herself intimates, for example, what a "republicanism of fear" might look like, following thinkers like Montesquieu, Tocqueville, and Arendt who saw voluntary associations as a necessary constraint on tyranny and despotism insofar as they create "significant units of social power" and in so doing prevent the absolutist concentrations of power out of which political evils are born.⁶⁵ Jacob Levy, notably, has developed a "multiculturalism of fear" that justifies its titular virtue on the grounds that it is the best prophylactic against the evils of inter-ethnic conflict, persecution, and genocide.⁶⁶ One might speculate on a "socialism of fear" that aims to avert the evils of poverty and oligarchic rule, or a "democracy of fear" that posits the franchise

as a necessary tool for the mitigation of gross injustices of authoritarianism or minority rule.⁶⁷ Paralleling the notion of utopia as orientation, we might then think of dystopias as functioning like “anti-ideal” theories, that is, furnishing enlarged images of extant and possible political evils such that citizens take concerted efforts to minimize and prevent them. If a book like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *The Handmaid’s Tale* exaggerates the existence of oligarchical or patriarchal oppression beyond its present or even probable future form, those who take their lessons seriously will be more likely to participate in political action against both real and possible forms of oligarchy and patriarchy.

And yet there may be limits to what fear can accomplish. One arena in which the appropriate balance of hope and fear has been much discussed is the political response to the climate crisis. Influential analysts like the Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh and the British economist Anne Petitfor have diagnosed the climate crisis as a “crisis of the imagination,” alleging that our political imaginary apprehends neither the scope of the crisis nor the scale of the necessary responses.⁶⁸ In response to the former, both fictional and nonfictional works of the last decade have tried to elevate the urgency of the crisis by depicting dystopian futures: a world imperiled not only by heat waves and storms, but also the social and political consequences, including increased inequality, conflict, and authoritarianism.⁶⁹ While some have hailed these depictions as necessary correctives to public complacency, others have criticized them as aesthetically indulgent and politically disempowering, making the possible consequences of the climate crisis more vivid while leaving the possibility of a just and constructive response more remote than ever.⁷⁰ Hence, some political theorists have argued that the climate crisis should prompt a revival of the utopian imagination. Gregory Claeys reads our predicament as one of being stranded between short-term “folly” and long-term goals “so improbably remote as to be meaningless.”⁷¹ In this context, the history of utopian thinking furnishes “maps of possibility” that direct our gaze “beyond the thousand bubbles of everyday consciousness which envelop us, limiting our horizons to what our self-interest and desire for happiness demand, and making superior social arrangements and great future changes appear nearly inconceivable.”⁷² Likewise, Matthias Thaler posits that utopianism can respond to the twofold crises of denial and despair, allowing us to “salvage our sense of reality while at the same time extending our sense of possibility.”⁷³ But both of these theorists also

acknowledge a role for dystopian imaginaries, not to indulge fearmongering or fatalism, but to illustrate the possible consequences of the choices ahead. The question, then, may not be a binary one between imaginaries of fear and hope, but the development of a more nuanced imaginative terrain that gives both fear and hope their due. In this vein, Alison McQueen has gestured toward an ethos of “civic fear” for climate politics, a practice of “fearing well” that “elicits rather than extinguishes our sense of agency and invites rather than forecloses deliberation.”⁷⁴

If the future today does seem to be closed off, then perhaps the question is not whether we need more utopian hope or more dystopian fear, but how, by means of imagination *and* action, we are to “reopen” the future.⁷⁵ Today the left political imagination longs for utopian vistas that it has yet to discover, while many on the right and center bid an unsentimental farewell to this voyage. For my part, I believe that we still have much to gain from engagement with utopian imaginaries, though I also believe that any utopian perspective will have to be transformed by the painful knowledge of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Visions of a better future, and plans for their pursuit, will have to emerge in the real crucible of political life, under rapidly changing conditions, and they will have to resist the tendencies toward finalism and totalism that have marred so many utopian projects. But, as Ursula K. Le Guin has written, “Our final loss of faith in that radiant sandcastle may enable our eyes to adjust to a dimmer light and in it perceive another kind of utopia.”⁷⁶ If we are to meet this call, then we must be intentional in our efforts to cultivate a better society. A politics that seeks only to navigate between lesser evils will probably not succeed even in that modest venture. And so the longing for utopia, far from being a product of nostalgia or misplaced idealism, may well articulate something our political thinking badly needs: a vision of human potential and collective flourishing. Unfortunately, it does not follow from this observation that this is a need that our culture and politics are capable of meeting. It does not follow from the abstract necessity of utopian thinking that any suitable utopian visions will be ready to hand, or that any will find them convincing, or that whatever new utopias we do manage to come up with will have shed the totalitarian hubris so deeply ingrained in the modern project of mastery. In the meantime, we may very well have to make do with our dystopian outlook, steering from calamity to calamity and warding off the great political and ethical evils as we foresee them.

If there is any consolation in this, it is that dystopias are only thinkable because so much of the human condition as we have known it is now liable to change. Anxiety and possibility are inextricably intertwined, and prudent thinking about our prospects will give both their due, as is only appropriate in attempting to confront a future that will necessarily surpass our attempts to imagine it.

Notes

Introduction

1. J. G. Ballard, "Introduction to the French Edition," in *Crash* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 1.
2. J. G. Ballard, "The Concentration City," in *The Complete Stories of J. G. Ballard* (New York: Norton, 2009), 29.
3. Ballard, "Concentration City," 36–37.
4. Ballard, "Concentration City," 38. On "Concentration City" as a "surrealist response to the Holocaust" and a "post-apocalyptic vision of hell," see Jeanette Baxter, *J. G. Ballard's Surrealist Imagination: Spectacular Authorship* (London: Routledge, 2009).
5. Ballard, "Terminal Beach," in *Complete Stories*, 590.
6. J. G. Ballard, *High Rise* (New York: Norton, 1975), 16.
7. Ballard, "Introduction," 1. Ballard further explicates this conceit in a 1962 manifesto for *New Worlds*. See J. G. Ballard, "Which Way to Inner Space?," in *A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews* (New York: Picador, 1996), 195–98.
8. Quoted in Duncan Bell, "J. G. Ballard's Surrealist Liberalism," *Political Theory* 49, no. 6 (2021): 952, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00905917209818>. Bell, however, contests the narrowing of Ballard's work to the dystopian frame, emphasizing competing elements of "idealism . . . personal fulfilment, even transcendence."
9. For a recent example, see Mark O'Connell, "Why We Are Living in J. G. Ballard's World," *New Statesman*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/long-reads/2020/04/why-we-are-living-jg-ballard-s-world>
10. J. G. Ballard, *Kingdom Come* (New York: Liveright, 2006), 213.
11. See J. G. Ballard, "Prophet of Our Present," review of *Aldous Huxley: An English Intellectual* by Nicholas Murray, *The Guardian*, April 13, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/apr/13/biography.aldoushuxley>
12. George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Signet, 1950), 267.
13. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 168.
14. As elaborated below, I use "dystopian imagination" or "imaginary" to refer

to a diffuse and encompassing ensemble of anxieties about the future, and the concepts, images, and narratives that have been used to convey them. I use “dystopian thinking” to refer to specific dystopian thought experiments and the critical perspectives that they advance.

15. For example, Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005); Jill Lepore, “A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction,” *The New Yorker*, May 29, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/05/a-golden-age-for-dystopian-fiction>; Tom Moylan, “The Necessity of Hope in Dystopian Times: A Critical Reflection,” *Utopian Studies* 31, no.1 (2020): 165–67, <https://doi.org/10.5325/utopianstudies.31.1.0164>. Each of these critics allows that at least some dystopian works make constructive contributions to the political imagination, but links the dystopian outlook writ large, and its preponderance over utopian imaginaries, to reactionary, nihilistic, and defeatist politics.

16. Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), Judith Shklar, *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960), Leszek Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

17. Such as Rafaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, eds., *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2003), Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction West and East: Universe of Terror and Trial* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (London: Routledge, 2000), Mark Hillegas, *The Future as Nightmare: H. G. Wells and the Anti-Utopians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), Chad Walsh, *From Utopia to Nightmare* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962). There are of course many other works discussing dystopian writings or writers, but here I am concerned with those that engage dystopia conceptually.

18. Most recent and important among them is Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Other important works are George Kateb’s *Utopia and Its Enemies* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1963), Krishan Kumar’s *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), and Russell Jacoby’s *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

19. The relative neglect of dystopia by political theorists is ironic given that the term was coined by one of our canonical figures, John Stuart Mill. Amid an 1868 parliamentary debate regarding British land policy in Ireland, Mill quipped that if utopian ideas are “too good to be practicable” then the British policies, being “too bad to be practicable,” should be called dystopian. Mill also used the Greek-derived “cacotopia,” a term that few have seen fit to use, with the notable exception

of Anthony Burgess, who appreciated that it “sounds worse than dystopia.” Anthony Burgess, 1985 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978), 52. See the discussion in Claeys, *Dystopia*, 273.

20. Lyman Tower Sargent, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994): 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20719246>. See also Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 1990).

21. These images occur in Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 181–82; Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noer, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xi; Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1964); Jürgen Habermas, “Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision: On Theory and Praxis in Our Scientific Civilization,” in *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon, 1973), 275; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 320–22; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 211, and *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alesandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 1997), 243.

22. See, respectively, Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 16, and Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harvest/HBJ, 1973), 437, 466.

23. See, respectively, Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xi, 169, and Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 123.

24. The antipathy of Cold War liberals to decolonization, and the broader turn of postwar liberalism against the Enlightenment, are major themes of Samuel Moyn’s *Liberalism Against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).

25. Eyal Chowers, *The Modern Self in the Labyrinth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 15.

26. See the introduction to Bernard Yack, *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). Maeve Cooke proposes a similar genealogy of *critical social theory* extending from Rousseau to the Frankfurt School and beyond, characterizing the enterprise as “ethically oriented” critique concerned with the idea that “social arrangements may prevent human beings from realizing their potentials as human beings.” Cooke, *Re-Presenting the Good Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 1–4.

27. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 1951).

28. Stuart Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 67. A similar impulse animates Judith Shklar's celebrated "liberalism of fear." See Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, ed. Stanley Hoffman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 4–20.

29. Chiara Bottici, "The Imaginary," in *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*, vol. 1, ed. Mark Bevir (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010), 685.

30. See Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), and their respective essays in Gillian Robinson and John Rundell, eds., *Rethinking Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1994), and Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

31. See Chiara Bottici, *Imaginal Politics: Images Beyond Imagination and the Imaginary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Chiara Bottici and Benoit Challand, eds., *The Politics of Imagination* (New York: Birbeck Law Press, 2011); Mihaela Czobor-Lupp, *Imagination in Politics: Freedom or Domination?* (London: Lexington Books, 2014); Raymond Guess, *Politics and the Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Alison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Avshalom Schwartz, "Political Phantasies: Aristotle on Imagination and Collective Action," *American Journal of Political Science* 68, no. 3 (2024): 861–73, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12744>

32. Richard Kearney, "Dialogues with Paul Ricoeur," in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 29.

33. Kearney, "Dialogues with Paul Ricoeur," 36–37.

34. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23.

35. See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). Recently, Zoltan Boldizsar Simon and Marek Tamm have developed from Koselleck's work an intriguing program of inquiry into "historical futures." They consider "kinds of transitions from past to future, kinds of anticipatory practices, and kinds of registers as interpretive tools that position such practices on a variety of spectrums between two poles." The utopia/dystopia polarity would be an example of the latter modality. See Zoltan Boldizsar Simon and Marek Tamm, "Historical Futures," *History and Theory* 60, no. 1 (2021): 3–22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.12190>

36. Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 272.

37. In this respect, my inquiry resembles Fred Polak's massive, sweeping examination of the interplay between our visions of the future and our ethical commitments in the present, as well as Robert Heilbroner's concise, but also sweeping, investigation of the same subject. See Fred Polak, *The Image of the Future*, trans.

Elise Boulding (Amsterdam: Elsevier Scientific Publishing, 1973), and Robert Heilbroner, *Visions of the Future: The Distant Past, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

38. McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 54.

39. McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 56.

40. I develop this distinction in more detail in a related discussion of contemporary fiction. See Matthew Cole, “Dystopia, Apocalypse, and Other Things to Look Forward To: Reading for Radical Hope in the Fiction of Fear,” in *Representations of Political Resistance and Emancipation in Science Fiction*, ed. Judith Grant and Sean Parsons (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020).

41. Benjamin Kunkel, “Dystopia and the End of Politics,” *Dissent* 55, no. 4 (2008): 90, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/dystopia-and-the-end-of-politics/>

42. Sargent, “Three Faces of Utopianism,” 8. The relationship between dystopia and Jeremiad is also discussed in Ian Hacking, “The Abolition of Man,” *Behemoth* 2, no. 3 (2009): 6–7.

43. See Heilbroner, *Visions of the Future*, for a concise, if simplified, account. See also Niklas Luhmann, “The Future Cannot Begin: Temporal Structures in Modernity,” *Social Research* 43, no. 1 (1976), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40970217>

44. Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, 38. See also Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 20. Likewise, Reinhart Koselleck argues that classical utopias, including those of More and Plato, were “spatialized”—located in historically contemporaneous yet alien places—but not “temporalized,” whereas modern utopianism articulates the “temporal dimension of utopia as a site of the future.” Reinhart Koselleck, “The Temporalization of Utopia,” in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 8.

45. McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, 58. Eva Horn’s account of “catastrophe without event” suggests something of an intermediary category. See Eva Horn, *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

46. See the discussion in Matthias Thaler, *No Other Planet: Utopian Visions for a Climate-Changed World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 33–43.

47. George Kateb, “The Road to 1984,” *Political Science Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (1966): 577, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2146905>, and Judith Shklar, “What Is the Use of Utopia?,” in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, 181.

48. Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 17–18.

49. Meili Steele, “Literature as Public Reasoning in the Political Struggles over Imagination,” in *The Politics of Imagination*, 187.

50. For an overview of these debates, see Czobor-Lupp, *Imagination in Politics*, 25–39.

51. Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Retreat from Autonomy: Postmodernism as Generalized Malaise,” in *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 39.

52. George Kateb, “The Adequacy of the Canon,” *Political Theory* 30, no. 4 (2002), 495, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3072618>

53. I have previously developed this contention with respect to Orwell in particular. See Matthew Cole, “The Desperate Radicalism of Orwell’s 1984: Power, Socialism, in Dystopian Times,” *Political Research Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2023): 267–78.

54. Isaiah Berlin, *Crooked Timber of Humanity*; Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); J. L. Talmon, “Utopianism and Politics,” in *Utopia: The Potential and Prospect of the Human Condition*, ed. George Kateb (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1971); Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*.

55. See Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, 103–4. Glenn Negley and J. Max Patrick, whose work popularized “dystopia” as opposed to the preceding “anti-utopia” or “negative utopia,” suggested the term could distinguish the generic category of negative fictional societies from those that are intended as criticisms of some or all utopias. This distinction is widely accepted among scholars of utopias. See Glenn Negley and J. Max Patrick, *The Quest for Utopia: An Anthology of Imaginary Societies* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1952), 298, and Sargent, “Three Faces of Utopianism,” 9.

56. Levitas, *Concept of Utopia*, 202.

57. Frederic Jameson, for example, associates dystopia with reactionary politics, calling the antitotalitarian dystopias a “contemporary counterrevolutionary tradition” in “Of Islands and Trenches: Naturalization and the Production of Utopian Discourse,” *Diacritics* 7, no. 2 (1977): 2–21, <https://doi.org/10.2307/465017>. In succeeding works, Jameson acknowledges the distinction between dystopia and anti-utopia, while still expressing skepticism about influential dystopian works such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and dystopian thinking about power more generally, which he sees as impediments to a necessary left utopianism. See Frederic Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 55–56; *Archaeologies of the Future*, 198–202; and *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* (London: Verso, 2016), 54–56. See also Peter Frase, “The Comforts of Dystopia,” *Jacobin*, April 18, 2014, <https://jacobin.com/2014/04/the-comforts-of-dystopia>

58. Moylan, “Necessity of Hope,” 166. The intensity of Moylan’s recent polemic is surprising given that his work in utopian studies has developed the notion of the “critical dystopia,” a lens that draws out the utopian dimensions of dystopian works. However, Moylan reserves this designation for a subset of dystopian works that

depict resistance and the construction of alternatives, with the implication being that most dystopias are not only uncritical but “anti-critical.” Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 180–82, 194–96.

59. John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 19.

60. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), xi.

61. Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 1.

62. Sargent, “Three Faces of Utopianism,” 3. See also the essays in Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, eds., *Utopia Method Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).

63. Sargent, “Three Faces of Utopianism,” 9.

64. Claeys, “News from Somewhere: Enhanced Sociability and the Composite Definition of Utopia and Dystopia,” *History* 98, no. 130 (2013): 162, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24429650>; and Claeys, *Dystopia*, 5.

65. Claeys, “News from Somewhere,” 146. See also Claeys, *Dystopia*, 8.

66. To borrow a phrase from Arthur C. Clarke, whose “second law” of writing about the future holds that “the only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.” Arthur C. Clarke, “Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination,” in *Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible* (New York: Bantam, 1962).

67. Sargent, “Three Faces of Utopianism,” 9.

68. David Brin, “The Self-Preventing Prophecy: or, How a Dose of Nightmare Can Help Tame Tomorrow’s Perils,” in *On Nineteen Eighty-Four: Orwell and Our Future*, ed. Abbott Gleason, Jack Goldsmith, and Martha Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 222.

69. George Kennan, “Totalitarianism and Freedom,” in *Totalitarianism: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, March 1953*, ed. Carl Friedrich (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), 19–20.

70. Karl Jaspers, “The Fight Against Totalitarianism,” in *Philosophy and the World: Selected Essays and Lectures*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Chicago: Regnery, 1963), 74.

71. Arthur Schlesinger, *A Life in the Twentieth Century: Innocent Beginnings, 1917–1950* (Boston: Mariner, 2000), 514.

72. Schlesinger, *Life in the Twentieth Century*, 515.

73. The former concept is, of course, derived from Max Weber. The second term, perhaps less familiar, comes from Harold Lasswell, who used the term to mean, essentially, a hypothesis about the future. The specific developmental construct that Lasswell was concerned with was, in fact, a dystopian one: a militaristic oligarchy that he called “the garrison state.” See Harold Lasswell, “The Garrison State,” *Ameri-*

can *Journal of Sociology* 46, no. 4 (1941): 455–68, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2769918>

74. Koselleck, “Modernity and the Planes of Historicity,” in *Futures Past*, 17; Luhmann, “Future Cannot Begin,” 131.

75. See Sun-ha Hong, “Predictions Without Futures,” *History and Theory* 61, no. 3 (2022): 371–75, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.12269>

76. Jenny Andersson, *The Future of the World: Futurology, Futurists, and the Struggle for the Post-Cold War Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1.

77. Andersson, *Future of the World*, 31.

78. See, for example, Dora Ahmad, *Landscapes of Hope: Anti-Colonial Utopianism in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Bill Ashcroft, *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 2017); and Alex Zamalin, *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). Though less directly engaged with utopianism as such, Adom Getachew illuminates the “utopian core of postcolonial cosmopolitanism” in *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 33.

79. Erich Fromm, afterword to 1984 by George Orwell, 317–18.

Chapter 1

1. Everett C. Wilkie Jr., “Mercier’s *L’An 2440*: Its Publishing History During the Author’s Lifetime,” *Harvard Library Bulletin* 32, no. 1 (1984): 6. See also Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1996), 128.

2. For an account of Zamyatin’s life and *We*’s publication history, see Mirra Ginsburg, introduction to *The Dragon: Fifteen Stories* by Yevgeny Zamyatin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

3. See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 260. See also Polak, *Image of the Future*, and Heilbroner, *Visions of the Future*.

4. Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 276. See also Habermas’ development of this concept in his lecture on modern time-consciousness, the first chapter in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 5–16.

5. The term “project of mastery” is used to characterize Descartes’s philosophical ambitions in Richard Kennington, “Rene Descartes,” in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 434. It enjoys wide currency among critics of modernity, ranging from postmodernism, as in William Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), to neo-Aristotelianism, as in Michael Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

6. See the third chapter in Heilbroner, *Visions of the Future*. This is not to endorse the view, which Robert Nisbet persuasively challenges, that progress of any kind was unthinkable before modernity, but rather the more limited claim that modern agencies of social change generate a distinct perspective on the *type* of progress that can be expected: a continuous and relatively permanent transformation of material and social conditions. See Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1994). See also J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origins and Growth* (London: Macmillan, 1921).

7. See the third chapter in Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*.

8. As in Karl Lowith's influential reading of modern utopianism, as well as Eric Voegelin's somewhat similar cautions against "immanentizing the eschaton." Norman Cohn also belongs to the family of intellectuals who see an apocalyptic dimension to the modern idea of progress and particularly its manifestations in Marxism. See Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949); Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Norman Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970). Hans Blumenberg, whose account of modern progress I draw on in my discussion of futurity, offers some persuasive responses to these arguments. See Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), especially chapters 3 through 6. See also Robert Wallace, "Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Lowith-Blumenberg Debate," *New German Critique* 22 (1981): 63–79, <https://doi.org/10.2307/487864>

9. Jeane-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, *Political Writings*, ed. Steven Lukes and Nadia Urbinati (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 145.

10. Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 3–8.

11. See the third chapter in Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.

12. Hans Jonas, "Seventeenth Century and After: The Meaning of the Scientific and Technological Revolutions," in *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 45–80.

13. Jonas, *Philosophical Essays*, 74. See also William Leiss, *The Domination of Nature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 45–72.

14. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 18–23.

15. Hence scholars of utopianism have argued that modernity transforms "utopia" into "euchronia": the good place into the good time. See Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, 38–42, and the introduction to Manuel and Manuel, *Utopian Thought*. Judith Shklar likewise argues that the projection of utopias as realizable future goals distinguishes modern from classical utopianism, which contains little in the way of "activism" or revolutionary optimism or future-directed hope." See "The Political

Theory of Utopia: From Melancholy to Nostalgia” in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, 166. See also Kosselleck, “Temporalization of Utopia,” 84–99.

16. Condorcet, “The Sketch,” in *Political Writings*, 2. Condorcet has been criticized for overstating the intellectual aspect of progress while downplaying the institutional side, as in Bury’s *The Idea of Progress*. However, Condorcet’s advocacy for the development of institutions of moral and social science was serious and concerted, if flawed. See Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 38–45.

17. Auguste Comte, *Auguste Comte and Positivism: The Essential Writings*, ed. Gertrud Lenzer (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1998), 279.

18. Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 160.

19. Marx, “German Ideology,” 161.

20. Marx, “Toward a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 64.

21. Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 92.

22. Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), 387–88.

23. Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 84.

24. Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 93.

25. Hans Jonas raises this point when describing how modern technology transforms the context of ethical and political judgment. See Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 12–17.

26. Yack, *Longing for Total Revolution*, 8.

27. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 25–26.

28. Thomas Carlyle, “Signs of the Times” in *A Carlyle Reader: Selections from the Writings of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. G. B. Tennyson (Acton, MA: Copley, 2000), 34.

29. Carlyle, *Carlyle Reader*, 37.

30. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, *The Process of Capitalist Production*, ed. Friedrich Engels and trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Chicago: Kerr, 1915), 416.

31. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 663.

32. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, trans. Richard Pevar and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1994), 25.

33. See the overviews of nineteenth-century cultural pessimism in Lowith, *Meaning in History*, 20–32 and 60–66, and Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Henry Holt, 1955), 209–17. I maintain that true fatalism, whether in the

sense of decline (à la Oswald Spengler) or cyclical history (à la Giambattista Vico or in some moments Nietzsche) should be distinguished from the dystopian imagination, which understands the future as contingent. On theories of historical decline, see Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (New York: Free Press, 1997), and on challenges to progress, Matthew Slaboch, *A Road to Nowhere: The Idea of Progress and Its Critics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

34. See Ralph Raico, *The Place of Religion in the Liberal Philosophy of Constant, Tocqueville, and Lord Acton* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 128–30.

35. Berlin, *Crooked Timber of Humanity*, 21.

36. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. 41 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 246–47. See Ian Angus's discussion, "Marx, Engels and . . . Darwin?," in *International Socialist Review* 65, May 2009, <https://isreview.org/issue/65/marx-and-engelsand-darwin/index.html>

37. Daniel Dennett highlights the parallels between Nietzsche and Darwin in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 461–67, while maintaining that Nietzsche did not understand Darwin's ideas and probably never read Darwin firsthand. But see Dirk R. Johnson, *Nietzsche's Anti-Darwinism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), for a sympathetic account of Nietzsche's critique of Darwin.

38. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967), 42.

39. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 133.

40. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 134.

41. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 203.

42. Per Tyler Harper, the Wells of *The Time Machine* offers a "post-Darwinian form of tragedy that directly confronts the existential precarity of the human species." See Tyler Austin Harper, "'The Pitiless Judgment of Time': Human Extinction in the Evolutionary Tragedies of H. G. Wells," *Science Fiction Studies* 48, no. 3 (2021): 423–43, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sfs.2021.0086>

43. H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine*, ed. Nicholas Ruddick (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2001).

44. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, ed. Gregory Claeys (New York: Penguin, 2006), 11.

45. Wells, *Mind at the End of Its Tether* (London: William Heinemann, 1945), 5–6.

46. Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: Routledge, 1948), 139.

47. Weber, "The Nation State and Economic Policy," in *Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

48. Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 181–82. The now-iconic “iron cage” is a product of Talcott Parson’s evocative translation. Weber’s original formulation, *stahlhartes Gehäuse*, translates more literally as “steel-hard casing.”

49. “On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters,” in Yevgeny Zamyatin, *A Soviet Heretic*, trans. and ed. Mirra Ginsburg (London: Quarter Books, 1991), 112.

50. Zamyatin, *Soviet Heretic*, 110.

51. Max Weber, “The Nation State and Economic Policy,” in *Political Writings*, 14–15. The Latin phrase is a reference to Dante: “abandon all hope.”

52. The significance of this concept for Weber’s thinking is elaborated by Wilhelm Hennis in *Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction*, trans. Keith Tribe (London: Allen and Unwin, 1988). Hennis argues that Weber conceptualized his work in terms of the “central question” of the development of humanity and the various personality types that are enabled or constrained by specific “life-orders.”

53. Hennis, *Max Weber*, first and second essays. See also chapter 7 in David Owen, *Maturity and Modernity: Nietzsche, Weber, Foucault and the Ambivalence of Reason* (New York: Routledge, 1994), which builds on Hennis’s analysis.

54. Harvey Goldman, *Max Weber and Thomas Mann: Calling and the Shaping of the Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

55. Weber, *Roscher and Knies*, quoted in Karl Lowith, *Max Weber and Karl Marx*, ed. Tom Bottomore and William Outhwaite (London: Routledge, 1993), 55–56.

56. Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, 1:521, quoted in Hennis, *Max Weber*.

57. Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 119.

58. Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 77–78. This corresponds to what Weber refers to elsewhere as “inner-worldly asceticism.”

59. See the fourth chapter in Alan Sica, *Max Weber and the New Century* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2004), and Habermas’ detailed reconstruction of the theory of occidental rationalism in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1984), 157–85.

60. Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 77–78.

61. Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 181.

62. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 975.

63. Weber, “Parliament and Government in a Reconstructed Germany,” in *Political Writings*, 147–48.

64. “Max Weber on Bureaucratization in 1909,” in J. P. Mayer, ed., *Max Weber and German Politics*, vol. 4, *Max Weber Classis Monographs* (London: Routledge, 1988), 127.

65. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 956.
66. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 972.
67. Weber, “Parliament and Government,” in *Political Writings*, 157–58.
68. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 975.
69. From a review essay published in 1894, quoted in Hennis, *Max Weber*, 95.
70. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1148.
71. Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: Routledge, 1948), 77–128, quote at 95.
72. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1156.
73. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1150; 1156.
74. Weber, “Parliament and Government,” in *Political Writings*, 158.
75. “Max Weber on Bureaucratization in 1909,” in Mayer, *Max Weber and German Politics*, 127–28. The term Weber uses to describe this personality type is the *ordnungsmensch* (person of order), as opposed to the *berufsmensch* (person of vocation).
76. Douglas Mao situates *We* among works examining “a kind of paradox in which the most thoroughly transformative utopia would undo itself precisely by operating perfectly—by predetermining its inhabitants’ life courses so fully as to leave no scope for individually developed life plans or self-realization, no real freedom to be or do.” See Douglas Mao, *The Invention of Nemesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 141.
77. Zamyatin, “H. G. Wells,” in *Soviet Heretic*, 259–90. For thoughtful commentaries on Zamyatin and Wells, see Hillegas, *Future as Nightmare*, 99–109, and Patrick Parrinder, *Shadows of the Future: H. G. Wells, Science Fiction, and Prophecy* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 115–26.
78. Zamyatin, “Contemporary Russian Literature,” in *Soviet Heretic*, 38–50.
79. Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. Mirra Ginsburg (New York: HarperCollins, 1972), 1.
80. Zamyatin, *We*, 2.
81. Zamyatin, *We*, 12.
82. Zamyatin, *We*, 33.
83. Zamyatin, *We*, 24.
84. Zamyatin, *We*, 39.
85. Zamyatin, *We*, 82.
86. Zamyatin, *We*, 127.
87. Zamyatin, *We*, 175.
88. Zamyatin, *We*, 24.
89. Zamyatin, *We*, 146.
90. Zamyatin, *We*, 147.
91. Zamyatin, *We*, 213.
92. Zamyatin, *We*, 214.
93. Zamyatin, *We*, 230.

94. Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber*, 127–28.
95. Zamyatin, *We*, 174–175.
96. Zamyatin, “Literature, Revolution, Entropy,” in *Soviet Heretic*, 109.
97. George Orwell, “Review of *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin,” in *Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters (CEJL)*, vol. 4, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Boston: Nonpareil Books, 1968), 72.

Chapter 2

1. George Orwell, 1984, 27.
2. Orwell, 1984, 28.
3. George Orwell, “Toward European Unity,” in *Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters (CEJL)*, 4:372.
4. Orwell, “As I Please,” in *CEJL*, 4:270.
5. Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (New York: Horizon Press, 1957), 241.
6. As many still do. Michael Robertson, for example, writes that “at the heart of all three books is an attack on utopian thinking itself.” Michael Robertson, *The Last Utopians: Four Late Nineteenth-Century Visionaries and their Legacies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 227.
7. Arthur Schlesinger, *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1949), 2.
8. Shklar, *After Utopia*, vii.
9. Berlin, *Crooked Timber*, 21.
10. Berlin, *Crooked Timber*, 35.
11. See Talmon, “Utopianism and Politics,” 93.
12. Talmon, “Utopianism and Politics,” 98.
13. Talmon, “Utopianism and Politics,” 92.
14. Berlin, *Crooked Timber*, 46.
15. Berlin, *Crooked Timber*, 237.
16. See Jacoby’s discussion of “iconoclastic” as against “blueprint” utopianism in the first chapter of *Picture Imperfect*.
17. Berlin, *Crooked Timber*, 46.
18. Popper, *Open Society and Its Enemies*, 148.
19. Popper, *Open Society and Its Enemies*, 149.
20. Berlin, *Crooked Timber*, 49. In Joshua Cherniss’s rendering, Berlin’s critique of utopianism expresses an essential liberal attitude of moderation in the face of utopian hubris. See especially the fifth chapter in Joshua Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin’s Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), and the sixth chapter in Joshua Cherniss, *Liberalism in Dark Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).
21. Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* (New York: Scribner, 1941), 100. The

critique of political messianism, which overlaps with anti-utopianism, particularly in its conservative varieties, also received important contributions from the likes of Karl Lowith, Norm Cohn, and Eric Voegelin, who saw utopian politics in the light of millenarian eschatology.

22. Also pertinent is Arthur Koestler's essay, among others, in Richard Crossman, ed., *The God That Failed* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949).

23. Shklar, *After Utopia*, 17–18.

24. See, respectively, Bell, *End of Ideology*, 227–74, for the critique of efficiency, and the thirteenth chapter in John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), for the critique of technical perfection, which Passmore associates with dystopians like Zamyatin and Huxley.

25. Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge, 1936). The fourth chapter in Levitas, *Concept of Utopia*, contains an instructive comparison of Bloch and Mannheim.

26. Bloch, *Spirit of Utopia*, 157.

27. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 173.

28. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 236.

29. The first study on utopias to propose that “dystopia” term be used to distinguish works that depicted negative fictional societies from those “anti-utopias” that criticized some or all utopian ideals was Negley and Patrick's *The Quest for Utopia* in 1952. However, dystopia is only of passing concern in their work. Chad Walsh's in-depth study on dystopia, the first of its kind, used this term when it appeared in 1962, but only much later did this become the default term. See Walsh, *From Utopia to Nightmare*.

30. George Woodcock, “Utopias in Negative,” *Sewanee Review* 64, no. 1 (1964): 82.

31. Woodcock, “Utopias in Negative,” 85.

32. Eugen Weber, “The Ant-Utopia of the Twentieth Century,” in *Utopia: The Potential and Prospect of the Human Condition*, ed. George Kateb (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1971), 81.

33. Weber, “Anti-Utopia of the Twentieth Century,” 85.

34. Shklar, “What Is the Use of Utopia,” 181.

35. Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, 103–4.

36. Kateb, *Utopia and Its Enemies*, 235.

37. See Mao, *Invention of Nemesis*, 114–27.

38. Quoted in Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1932), 1. The originating essay, “Democracy, Socialism, and Theocracy,” can be read in Nicolas Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, trans. Donald Attwater (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009).

39. Kateb, *Utopia and Its Enemies*, 20.

40. Aldous Huxley, "Science and Civilization," in *Complete Essays*, vol. 3, ed. Robert Baker and James Sexton (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 149–50.
41. Aldous Huxley, "The New Salvationists," in *Complete Essays*, 212.
42. Huxley, "New Salvationists," 213.
43. Aldous Huxley, "The Outlook for American Culture," in *Complete Essays*, 185–86.
44. Aldous Huxley, "On the Charms of History and the Future of the Past," in *Complete Essays*, 137.
45. On Huxley's and Wells's ambiguous attitudes toward eugenics, see Riley Sanders, "Not So Dystopian: A Historical Reading of Eugenics in Science Fiction," *The Forum* 133, no. 1 (2021), <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/forum/vol13/iss1/11>
46. Huxley, "On the Charms of History," 137.
47. Huxley, "Outlook for American Culture," 186.
48. Huxley, "Outlook for American Culture," 187.
49. Huxley, "Outlook for American Culture," 188.
50. Huxley, "Outlook for American Culture," 190.
51. Aldous Huxley, "To the Puritan All Thing Are Impure," in *Complete Essays*, 238.
52. Huxley, "On the Charms of History and the Future of the Past," 133.
53. Huxley, "On the Charms of History and the Future of the Past," 135.
54. Huxley, "To the Puritan All Thing Are Impure," 221.
55. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, 9.
56. Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, 8.
57. Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, 254.
58. Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, 255.
59. Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, 9.
60. Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, 213. The parallels with Dostoevsky's parable of the Grand Inquisitor are discussed by Kumar in *Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, 120–22.
61. Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, 215.
62. Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, 135
63. Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, 6–7.
64. Huxley, "Outlook for American Culture," 192.
65. Huxley's move toward forms of socialism and countercultural association correspond to a broader shift in his sensibilities: his humanism became less elitist and more universalist. This trajectory is convincingly plotted in David Bradshaw, *The Hidden Huxley: Contempt and Compassion for the Masses* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995).
66. Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, 7.
67. Aldous Huxley, *Island* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1962), 259.

68. Huxley, *Island*, 141.
69. Huxley, *Island*, 155–56.
70. Huxley, *Island*, 212.
71. Huxley, *Island*, 178, 30.
72. Huxley, *Island*, 171.
73. Huxley, *Island*, 66.
74. Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, 13.
75. George Orwell, “To S. Moos,” in *George Orwell: A Life in letters*, ed. Peter Davison (New York: Norton, 2010). A younger Orwell did raise analogous concerns, seeking to distinguish his socialism from that motivated by a “hypertrophied sense of order” and objecting to the association of socialism with a “completely mechanised, immensely organized world.” In that context he endorsed *Brave New World* as a corrective to the Wellsian Utopia. See George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937; repr., Orlando: Harcourt, 1958), 189.
76. George Orwell, “Wells, Hitler, and the World State,” in *CEJL*, 2:139–45.
77. George Orwell, “Prophecies of Fascism,” in *CEJL*, 2:30–33.
78. Orwell, “Review of *We*,” in *CEJL*, 4:72–75.
79. James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution: What Is Happening in the World* (Westport, CT: Praeger, [1941] 1972).
80. George Orwell, “Burnham’s View of the Contemporary World Struggle,” in *CEJL*, 4:324.
81. Orwell, “James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution,” in *CEJL*, 4:177.
82. Orwell, “James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution.” 178. Orwell’s rejoinder to Burnham seems not to have registered to his critics on the left, who accuse him of adopting—and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* of expressing—just such a view of power-hunger and domination as immutable characteristics of human nature. In Isaac Deutscher’s influential critique, the true villain of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is “sadistic power-hunger . . . a phantom-like emanation of all that is foul in human nature.” Per Frederic Jameson, Orwell’s encounter with Stalinism became a “pathological and obsessive fixation,” leading him to articulate “a baleful vision of human nature as an insatiable and lucid hunger for power and its exercise.” See Deutscher, *Heretics and Renegades* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), 48–49, and Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 198–200.
83. See Kateb, “Road to 1984,” 574–76.
84. Orwell, “Toward European Unity,” in *CEJL*, 4:371.
85. This statement reflects the contents of two letters written by Orwell just before his death, which were published in July 1949 by the *New York Times* and *Life* magazine. See the document in J. R. Hammond, *A George Orwell Companion—a Guide to the Novels, Documents, and Essays* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1982), 172.
86. George Orwell, “Review of *Russia Under Soviet Rule*,” in *CEJL*, 1:380–81.
87. Orwell, 1984, 205. Orwell debuted the titular concept of “oligarchical col-

lectivism” in a 1940 review of Franz Borkeu’s *The Totalitarian Enemy*. Orwell accepted Borkeu’s postulate that fascism and Communism were “rapidly evolving towards the same system—a form of oligarchical collectivism.” See Orwell, “Review: *The Totalitarian Enemy* by F. Borkeu,” *CEJL*, 2:25.

88. Orwell, 1984, 206
89. Orwell, 1984, 269.
90. Orwell, 1984, 217.
91. Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, 40.
92. Orwell, “The Prevention of Literature,” in *CEJL*, 4:63.
93. Orwell, 1984, 27.
94. Orwell, 1984, 299. “Ingsoc” stands for English Socialism, the official ideology of Oceania’s ruling party.
95. Orwell, 1984, 299–300.
96. Orwell, 1984, 311.
97. Orwell, 1984, 217
98. Orwell, 1984, 262
99. Orwell, 1984, 268
100. Orwell, 1984, 189. Here, Orwell appends his debt to Wells, who placed this future in so many minds. As Sarah Cole notes, the pamphlet itself presents a Well-sian “future-historical interlude,” explaining how the world of 1984 came into being. See Cole, *Inventing Tomorrow: H. G. Wells and the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 51.
101. Orwell, 1984, 73.
102. Orwell, 1984, 188.
103. Orwell, 1984, 204.
104. George Orwell, “The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius,” in *CEJL*, 2:106; and “Arthur Koestler,” in *CEJL*, 3:237.
105. Orwell, 1984, 201.
106. Orwell, 1984, 203.
107. Orwell, 1984, 204.
108. Orwell, 1984, 203.
109. Orwell, 1984, 189.
110. Orwell, 1984, 204–5.
111. Orwell, 1984, 216.
112. Orwell, 1984, 206. It seems clear here that Orwell attacks the Soviet abandonment of utopia, in contrast with the conventional reading found, for example, in Robertson, who describes *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as “an attack on the utopian vision that underlay the Soviet regime.” Robertson, *Last Utopians*, 227.
113. Orwell, 1984, 310; italics in original.
114. Orwell, 1984, 254.
115. Orwell, 1984, 267.
116. Orwell, 1984, 263.

117. Orwell, “James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution,” 178; italics added.
118. Orwell, 1984, 270.
119. George Orwell, “You and the Atom Bomb,” in *CEJL*, 4:9; Orwell, 1984, 203.
120. George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938; repr., Boston: Mariner, 1952), 83–84.
121. George Orwell, “Review of *The Road to Serfdom*,” in *CEJL*, 3:117–18.
122. Orwell, “Toward European Unity,” 371.
123. George Orwell, “Review of *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*,” in *CEJL*, 4:428.
124. Quoted in Hammond, *A George Orwell Companion*, 172.
125. As suggested, perhaps most influentially, by Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and Human Imagination* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), 145–46.
126. Fromm, “Afterword,” to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 326.
127. Fromm, “Afterword,” 316.
128. Fromm, “Afterword,” 318.

Chapter 3

1. For an overview of Fromm’s life and writings, see the first chapter in Kieran Durkin, *The Radical Humanism of Erich Fromm* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

2. Fromm, *Sane Society* (New York: Henry Holt, 1955), 351.

3. Fromm, *Sane Society*, 352.

4. Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 1.

5. Fromm, “Afterword” to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 317–18, and *Sane Society*, 325.

6. See the essays collected in Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). The introductory essay provides a critical account of the uses and abuses of the concept in studying the two regimes.

7. The concept is influentially attacked by Herbert J. Spiro and Benjamin R. Barber in “Counter-Ideological Uses of Totalitarianism in the Cold War,” *Politics and Society* 1, no. 1 (1970): 3–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003232927000100102>. Another discerning—though ultimately more sympathetic—dissection is Walter Lacquer, “Is There Now, or Has There Ever Been, Such a Thing as Totalitarianism?,” *Commentary*, October 1, 1985, 29–35. Jeffrey Brooks contends that totalitarianism and related concepts “circulate in the language planet like moribund satellites that have ceased to receive messages but still reflect light and heat,” but he concedes that they nonetheless “remain meaningful categories for the study of the historical language of politics during the twentieth century.” See Jeffrey Brooks, “Totalitarianism Revisited,” *Review of Politics* 68, no. 2 (2006): 318–28, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dss.2006.0043>

8. Jeffery Isaac, “Critics of Totalitarianism,” in *The Cambridge History of*

Twentieth-Century Political Thought, ed. Terrence Ball and Richard Bellamy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 182; Wilfred McClay, *The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 189.

9. See the discussion in Simon Tormey, *Making Sense of Tyranny: Interpretations of Totalitarianism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995). Tormey raises the idea that totalitarianism is a “dystopia” that cannot really exist when discussing criticisms of the concept as well as in his discussion of Arendt’s concept of total domination.

10. George Kennan, “Totalitarianism and Freedom,” 19–20.

11. Carl Friedrich, *Totalitarianism: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, March 1953* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), 4; Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 461.

12. See Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 13–14; McClay, *Masterless*, 190–91.

13. Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, 14.

14. As discussed in Michael Halberstam, *Totalitarianism and the Modern Conception of Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), David Ciepley, *Liberalism in the Shadow of Totalitarianism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), and Kyong-Min Son, *The Eclipse of the Demos: The Crisis of Democracy Before Neoliberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2020).

15. See, for example, the arguments of the Committee for Cultural Freedom, who published their statement in a 1939 edition of *Partisan Review*. Recounted in Neil Jumonville, *Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 50.

16. See Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, 51. Schlesinger’s *Vital Center* describes the totalitarian man as “tight-lipped, cold-eyed, unfeeling, uncommunicative men, as if badly carved from wood, without humor, without tenderness, without spontaneity, without nerves,” 57. See also Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933–1973* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 256.

17. Friedrich and Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, 16.

18. George Orwell, “Review of *Russia Under Soviet Rule*,” in *Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters* (CEJL), 1:378–81.

19. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Henry Holt, 1941), 140.

20. See Erikson, *Identity Youth and Crisis*.

21. Erik Erikson, “Wholeness and Totality—A Psychiatric Contribution,” in *Totalitarianism*, 162.

22. Erikson, “Wholeness and Totality,” 170.

23. See, respectively, Theodor Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950; repr., London: Verso, 2019), esp. 230–32, and Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* (New York: Norton, 1961).

24. As Lacquer notes, both Arendt and Friedrich and Brzezinski initially insisted on this feature of totalitarianism before modifying their accounts, particularly as the Soviet Union moved away from Stalinism. Lacquer, “Is There Now,” 29–30. See also Benjamin L. Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy, 1920s–1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

25. H. R. Trevor-Roper, “Hitler Reappraised, Ten Years Later,” in New York Times Editorial Staff, eds., *Public Profiles: Adolf Hitler* (New York: New York Times Educational Publishing, 2019), 202. Accounts of Hitler as mass hypnotist are also discussed in David Reddles, *Hitler’s Millennial Reich: Apocalyptic Belief and the Search for Salvation* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 135–42.

26. Anita Pisch, *The Personality Cult of Stalin in Soviet Posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, Inventions, and Fabrications* (Acton: Australian National University Press, 2016), 291–440.

27. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 464.

28. Leo Lowenthal, “Terror’s Atomization of Man,” *Commentary* (January 1946), 6, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/leo-lowenthal/the-crisis-of-the-individual-ii-terrors-atomization-of-man/>; Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 437. A common influence on these two discussions is Bruno Bettelheim’s 1943 book on the concentration camps, which was rooted in his firsthand experience as a survivor of Dachau and Buchenwald, and among the first published survivors’ accounts. See Bruno Bettelheim, “Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations,” in *Surviving and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

29. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 438.

30. Lowenthal, “Terror’s Atomization of Man,” 2.

31. Lowenthal, “Terror’s Atomization of Man,” 3.

32. Lowenthal, “Terror’s Atomization of Man,” 6.

33. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 462.

34. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 466.

35. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 437.

36. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 438.

37. Arendt, “A Rejoinder to Eric Voegelin’s Review of the Origins of Totalitarianism,” *Review of Politics* 15 (1953): 83, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670500007439>

38. Arendt, “Rejoinder to Eric Voegelin,” 83–84.

39. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 374–75.

40. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 375.

41. The debate between Arendt and Riesman is discussed in the second chapter of Peter Baehr, *Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Social Sciences* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

42. David Riesman, “Some Observations on the Limits of Totalitarian Power,” *Antioch Review* 12, no. 2 (1952): 157, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4609554>

43. Riesman, "Limits of Totalitarian Power," 165–66.
44. Riesman, "Limits of Totalitarian Power," 158.
45. Riesman, "Limits of Totalitarian Power," 161.
46. Riesman, "Limits of Totalitarian Power," 168.
47. Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, 238.
48. Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, 333.
49. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noer, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 125; Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 257.
50. Gabriel Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society*; trans. G. S. Fraser (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 2008); Fromm, *Same Society*; C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).
51. Edward Shils, *The Constitution of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 71; Bell, *End of Ideology*, 21.
52. William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (London: Routledge, 1960), 13–14.
53. Bell, *End of Ideology*, 21.
54. Mills, *Sociological Imagination*, 174. On the science-fictional motif of "robotification," see Dustin Abnet, *The American Robot: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020). The tenth chapter discusses many critics of mass society, Mills included.
55. Mills, *Sociological Imagination*, 189.
56. Mills, *Sociological Imagination*, 175.
57. Mills, *Sociological Imagination*, 11.
58. For some, like Raymond Williams, this elitist strain makes the entire concept of mass society unpalatable. Williams holds that "there are in fact no masses, there are only ways of seeing people as masses." See Raymond Williams, "Culture Is Ordinary," in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1989), 3–14.
59. See Joseph Femia, *Against the Masses: Varieties of Anti-Democratic Thought Since the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Christian Borch, *The Politics of Crowds: An Alternative History of Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Stefan Jonsson, *Crowds and Democracy: The Idea and Image of the Masses from Revolution to Fascism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
60. Kornhauser, *Politics of Mass Society*, 19.
61. Burckhardt, quoted in Kornhauser, *Politics of Mass Society*.
62. See Lucien Jaume, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). Regarding Tocqueville's concern with conformity, see Jennie Ikuta, *Contesting Conformity: Democracy and the Paradox of Political Conformity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 32–70.

63. Gustav Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002), x-xi.

64. José Ortega y Gasset, *Revolt of the Masses* (1932; repr., New York: Norton, 1960), 15.

65. Ortega y Gasset, *Revolt of the Masses*, 18.

66. Ortega y Gasset, *Revolt of the Masses*, 73.

67. Emil Lederer, *State of the Masses: The Threat of the Classless Society* (New York: Norton, 1940), 17; Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 23; Kornhauser, *Politics of Mass Society*, 108.

68. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 323–24.

69. Kornhauser, *Politics of Mass Society*, 16.

70. Fromm, *Sane Society*, 148.

71. Fromm, *Sane Society*, 149.

72. Fromm, *Sane Society*, 152.

73. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 105.

74. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 184.

75. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 275.

76. Shils, *Constitution of Society*, 82.

77. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 104.

78. Mills, *Sociological Imagination*, 175.

79. These works also reached a relatively broad audience, with Riesman especially becoming a pop-intellectual celebrity. Alan Wolfe believes this was a “Golden Age of social criticism” wherein “skepticism of American institutions was tightly linked with the accumulation of social knowledge and the use of social science techniques, all written in ways to tap the interest of the informed reader and concerned citizen.” Wolfe, *Marginalized in the Middle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3.

80. As elaborated in Neil McLaughlin, “Critical Theory Meets America: Riesman, Fromm, and the Lonely Crowd,” *American Sociologist* 32, no. 1 (2001): 5–26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27700250>

81. William Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956; repr., Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

82. McClay, *Masterless*, 234.

83. Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, 252–257.

84. Riesman, *Lonely Crowd*, 240.

85. Riesman, *Lonely Crowd*, 8.

86. Riesman, *Lonely Crowd*, 242.

87. Riesman, *Lonely Crowd*, 251.

88. C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 301, 315.

89. Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: Pocket Books, 1957).

90. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94.
91. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvii.
92. Richard Wolin, "Introduction to the Discussion of Need and Culture in Nietzsche," *Constellations* 8, no. 1 (2001): 128. However, when Adorno reviewed *Brave New World*, he was mostly critical, writing that it described Huxley's present alienation but said nothing about the future. See Theodor Adorno, "Aldous Huxley and Utopia," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shirley Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), 95–118.
93. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94.
94. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 115.
95. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 125.
96. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 126.
97. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvii.
98. Lynn Spigel notes that two-thirds of American homes installed televisions between 1948 and 1955. By 1960 the figure had reached 90 percent and the average American was watching five hours of television per day. Lynn Spigel, *Make Room For TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
99. For an insightful retrospective, see G. William Domhoff, "Mills' 'The Power Elite' 50 Years Later," *Contemporary Sociology* 35, no. 6 (2006): 547–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009430610603500602>
100. Mills, *Power Elite*, 309.
101. Richard Bellamy, "The Advent of the Masses," in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought*, 70.
102. Mills, *Power Elite*, 300.
103. Mills, *Power Elite*, 302–3.
104. Mills, *Power Elite*, 304.
105. Mills, *Power Elite*, 310.
106. Mills, *Power Elite*, 316.
107. Mills, *Power Elite*, 317.
108. Mills, *Power Elite*, 308–9.
109. Notable examples include Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in the Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979); Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985); and Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).
110. Among them, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Mao II* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. DeLillo proposes, following Le Bon, that "the future belongs to the crowds." DeLillo, *Mao II* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 16.
111. Fromm, *Revolution of Hope*, 1.

112. Huxley, *Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited*, 7.
113. Friedrich and Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, 24.
114. Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), xii.
115. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 3.
116. Roszak, *Making of a Counter Culture*, 9.
117. Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, trans. Edward Aveling (New York: Scrivener and Sons, 1892), 76–77.
118. For a historical view of the technocracy movement in America, see William Akin, *Technocracy and the American Dream: The Technocrat Movement, 1900–1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977). Technocracy is also discussed under the rubric of “high modernism” in James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
119. For a wide-ranging discussion, see Langdon Winner’s *Autonomous Technology: Technics-Out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977).
120. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage, 1964), 430.
121. Ellul, *Technological Society*, 6.
122. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 9.
123. Roszak, *Making of a Counter Culture*, xiv.
124. This is a major theme within the Frankfurt School of critical theory. In addition to Marcuse’s work, see Max Horkheimer, *The Eclipse of Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 1947).
125. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 123.
126. Roszak, *Making of a Counter Culture*, 7–8.
127. Fromm, *Revolution of Hope*, 38; Ellul, *Technological Society*, 428.
128. Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development* (New York: Harcourt, 1966), 3.
129. Ellul, *Technological Society*, 11.
130. Ellul, *Technological Society*, 429.
131. Ellul, *Technological Society* 332.
132. Ellul, *Technological Society*, 431.
133. Ellul, *Technological Society*, 434.
134. Ellul, *Technological Society*, 432.
135. Ellul, *Technological Society*, 434.
136. Other pioneering works in the philosophy of technology include Ortega y Gasset’s “Meditation on Technique” (1939) and Martin Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology” (1954), though their concerns are more existential

than sociological. For a comparison of their arguments with Mumford's and Ellul's, see the second chapter in Carl Mitcham, *Thinking Through Technology: The Path Between Engineering and Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

137. Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, 1934), 4–6.

138. Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 353.

139. Mumford, *Myth of the Machine*, 13.

140. Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine*, vol. 2, *The Pentagon of Power* (San Diego: Harvest, 1970), 168.

141. Lewis Mumford, *The Condition of Man* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), 9.

142. Mumford, *Myth of the Machine*, 5.

143. Mumford, *Myth of the Machine*, 6, 9.

144. Mumford, *Myth of the Machine*, 14.

145. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 95.

146. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 1.

147. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, xlix.

148. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, xlviii.

149. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, xlvii.

150. Herbert Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 4.

151. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, xli.

152. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 10.

153. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 145.

154. Herbert Marcuse, "Liberation from the Affluent Society," in *The Dialectics of Liberation*, ed. David Cooper (London: Verso, 2015).

155. Herbert Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, preface.

156. Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, 53.

157. Roszak, *Making of a Counter Culture*, 28.

158. Fromm, *Revolution of Hope*, 14.

159. Ellul, *Technological Society*, 40.

160. Fromm, *Revolution of Hope*, 4.

161. Fromm, *Revolution of Hope*, 5. On Fromm's political commitments during the 1960s, which included antiwar and human rights activism and work with both the Democratic Party and the Socialist Party of America, see the fifth chapter in Neil McLaughlin, *Erich Fromm and Global Public Sociology* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021).

162. David Riesman, "The Origins of Totalitarianism, by Hannah Arendt," *Commentary*, April 1951. <https://www.commentary.org/articles/david-riesman/the-origins-of-totalitarianism-by-hannah-arendt/>

163. Friedrich and Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, 13.

164. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 460.

Chapter 4

1. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, vii; Orwell, “You and the Atom Bomb,” in *Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters (CEJL)*, 4:9.

2. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 2. She adds, of science fiction, “to which unfortunately, nobody yet has paid the attention it deserves as a vehicle of mass sentiments and mass desires.” Within a few years, one of the first major studies of science fiction—Kingsley Amis’s *New Maps of Hell*—would appear. See *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960).

3. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 1.

4. “The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man,” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1954), 274. Few works on Arendt have given serious consideration to her reflections on the Space Age, though a fascinating exception is the third chapter in Kelly Oliver’s *Earth and World: Philosophy After the Apollo Missions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

5. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, viii.

6. See John Douglas Macready, *Hannah Arendt and the Fragility of Human Dignity* (London: Lexington Books, 2018).

7. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 322. See Martin Levin, “On *Animal Laborans* and *Homo Politicus* in Hannah Arendt: A Note,” *Political Theory* 7, no. 4 (1979): 521–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009059177900700406>

8. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 31.

9. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, vii.

10. Scholars have used these appellations to emphasize the generative role of the encounter with totalitarianism in Arendt’s thought. Examples include Peter Baehr, introduction to *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin, 2000), xlii–xliii; the first chapter of Tony Judt, *Thinking the Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin 2012), xlii; and the eighth chapter of Rainer Forst, *Justification and Critique: Towards a Critical Theory of Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 165.

11. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 54–55, 199–202.

12. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 5–6.

13. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 2.

14. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 3.

15. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 4–5.

16. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 6.

17. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, vii; Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1970), 85.

18. Arendt states that “politically, the modern world in which we live today was born with the first atomic explosions” and calls this the “background” to her inquiry in *The Human Condition*, 6. See the discussion in Jonathan Schell, “In Search of a Miracle: Hannah Arendt and the Atomic Bomb,” in *Politics in Dark Times: Encoun-*

ter with Hannah Arendt, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 247–58.

19. On the dialogue between the Marxist and Arendtian accounts of alienation, see Jennifer Ring, “On Needing Both Marx and Arendt: Alienation and the Flight from Inwardness,” *Political Theory* 17, no. 3 (1989): 432–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591789017003004>

20. Hannah Pitkin, *Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 8.

21. In an anecdote about the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 in *Human Condition*, 261.

22. Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 7. In a similar vein, Mary Dietz approaches *The Human Condition* as an extension of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and a prelude to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. See Mary Dietz, “Arendt and the Holocaust,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 86–109.

23. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 437.

24. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 7–8.

25. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 437.

26. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 465–66.

27. Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future*, 147.

28. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 4, 320.

29. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 438.

30. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 46.

31. As Hannah Pitkin memorably explains: “In *The Human Condition* society or the social is variously said to ‘absorb,’ ‘embrace,’ ‘devour,’ people or other entities; to ‘emerge,’ ‘rise,’ ‘grow,’ and ‘let loose’ growth; to ‘enter,’ ‘intrude’ upon and ‘conquer’ realms or spheres; to ‘constitute’ and ‘control,’ ‘pervert’ and ‘transform’; to ‘impose’ rules on people, ‘demand’ certain conduct from them; to ‘exclude’ or ‘refuse to admit’ other conduct, or people; to ‘try to cheat’ people and act under a ‘guise.’ It’s like a science-fiction story: an evil monster, a Blob, entirely external to and separate from us, has appeared as if from outer space, intent on taking us over, gobbling up our freedom and our politics.” Pitkin, *Attack of the Blob*, 4.

32. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 40.

33. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 58.

34. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 43.

35. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 41.

36. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 455.

37. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 45.

38. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 43.

39. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 322.

40. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 52–53.
41. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 473.
42. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 58.
43. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 130.
44. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 45.
45. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 46.
46. See Michael McCarthy, *The Political Humanism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).
47. Arendt, “What Is Freedom?,” 147.
48. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 321.
49. For a fascinating account of Arendt’s anxieties about technology and labor, see Matthew Dinan, “The Robot Condition: Karel Capek’s R.U.R. and Hannah Arendt on Labor, Technology, and Innovation,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 46, no. 2 (2017): 108–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2016.1270677>
50. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 132.
51. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 475.
52. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 52.
53. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 151.
54. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 176.
55. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 178.
56. Arendt, *On Violence*, 44.
57. Arendt, *On Violence*, 55.
58. Arendt, *On Violence*, 54.
59. Arendt, *On Violence*, 81.
60. Arendt, *On Violence*, 85.
61. Arendt, *On Violence*, 86.
62. Arendt, “The Concept of History,” in *Between Past and Future*, 59.
63. Arendt, “Conquest of Space,” 270.
64. Arendt cites Gunther Anders’s *The Obsolescence of Man* on the point that nuclear experiments cannot even be called experiments since they are not confined to a controlled laboratory; rather, they make a laboratory “co-extensive with the globe.” See Arendt, *Human Condition*, 150n13. Here, too, there are echoes of Arendt’s account of totalitarianism and its fantasies of omnipotence. Her preceding work had rendered totalitarianism as an experiment, the concentration camp as a laboratory, and the fabrication of humanity as the objective.
65. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, vii.
66. Arendt, “Concept of History,” 60–61.
67. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 143.
68. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 40.
69. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 143.
70. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 144. Arendt’s argument has widely been inter-

preted, including by Habermas, as a retrieval of the Aristotelian distinction between *praxis* (action) and *techne* (production). The stakes of this retrieval are well articulated in Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

71. Arendt, “The Gap Between Past and Future,” in *Between Past and Future*, 14. Jenny Andersson situates Arendt among postwar thinkers who inaugurated a shift from “utopia” to “future.” See Andersson, *Future of the World*, 32.

72. Arendt, “Gap Between Past and Future,” 10.

73. Linda Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 274.

74. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1963), 175.

75. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 178.

76. Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 111.

77. Arendt, “What Is Freedom?,” 167.

78. Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).

79. Jürgen Habermas, “The New Obscurity: The Crisis of the Welfare State and the Exhaustion of Utopian Energies,” trans. Phillip Jacobs, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 11, no. 1 (1986): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/019145378601100201>

80. Foucault, for example, judges Habermas “utopian” in the pejorative sense, insofar as he understands Habermas to posit the possibility of “a state of communication that would allow games of truth to circulate freely, without any constraints or coercive effects.” See Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *The Essential Foucault*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (London: New Press, 1994), 39. For a balanced consideration of the “Foucault-Habermas debate,” see James Tully, “To Think and Act Differently: Foucault’s Four Reciprocal Objections to Habermas’ Theory,” in *Foucault Contra Habermas: Recasting the Debate Between Genealogy and Critical Theory*, ed. Samantha Ashenden and David Owen (London: Sage, 1999).

81. Habermas, “A Philosophico-Political Profile,” in *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, ed. Peter Dews (London: Verso, 1986), 171.

82. Habermas, “Conservative Politics, Work, Socialism, and Utopia Today,” in *Autonomy and Solidarity*, 145.

83. Habermas, “Philosophico-Political Profile,” 168.

84. See Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).

85. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2: *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1987).

86. Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), and *The Lure of Technocracy*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2015).

87. See note 2 in Habermas, “The Scientization of Politics and Public Opinion,” in *Toward a Rational Society*, 125. Habermas revisits the critique of Gehlen in the context of German neoconservatism in the first chapter of Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians’ Debate*, ed. and trans. Sherry Nicholsen (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).

88. Quoted in Matthew Specter, “Legality and Legitimacy: Jürgen Habermas’ Reconstruction of German Political Thought,” PhD diss., Duke University, 2005, 106. Specter has also explored Habermas’ engagement with the technocracy thesis in *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

89. Habermas, “Scientization of Politics,” 75.

90. Habermas, “Technology and Science as Ideology,” in *Toward a Rational Society*, 107.

91. Habermas, “The Classical Doctrine of Politics in Relation to Social Philosophy,” in *Theory and Practice*, 43. See the sixth chapter in Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground*, for an account of the Aristotelian and Arendtian roots of Habermas thinking. For Habermas’ own account of the same, see “Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power,” trans. Thomas McCarthy, *Social Research* 44, no. 1 (1977): 3–24, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970268>

92. Habermas, “Classical Doctrine of Politics,” 60.

93. Habermas, “Life-Forms, Morality, and the Task of the Philosopher,” in *Autonomy and Solidarity*, 206.

94. Habermas, “Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision,” in *Theory and Practice*, 282.

95. Habermas, “Technology and Science as Ideology,” in *Toward a Rational Society*, 117.

96. Habermas, “Dogmatism, Reason, and Decision,” 275.

97. Habermas, “Technology and Science as Ideology,” 106.

98. Habermas, “Technology and Science as Ideology,” 106–7.

99. Habermas, “Technology and Science as Ideology,” 118.

100. Habermas, “Technology and Science as Ideology,” 91–92. See also Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1971), 191–92; *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1979), 116–18.

101. Habermas, “Technology and Science as Ideology,” 92–93. See also *Knowledge and Human Interests*, 192–94; *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, 118–19.

102. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2:184. See Peter Verovsek, “Taking Back Control over Markets: Jürgen Habermas on the Colonization of Politics by Economics,” *Political Studies* 7, no. 2 (2023): 398–417, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217211018621>

103. Admittedly, Habermas has made less of the psychological and spiritual afflictions of modernity than his Frankfurt School predecessors—Fromm, Adorno,

Marcuse—or his successor, Axel Honneth. See, for comparison, Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). This is not to suggest that Habermas' theory cannot accommodate such concerns. On this point, see Timo Jutten, "The Colonization Thesis: Habermas on Reification," *International Journal of Philosophic Studies* 19, no. 5 (2011): 701–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2011.629672>

104. See Habermas, "The New Obscurity," 14–18.

105. See the essays by Taylor and Habermas in *Communicative Action: Essays on Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action*, ed. Axel Honneth and Hans Joas (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

106. Habermas, "Morality and Ethical Life: Does Hegel's Critique of Kant Apply to Discourse Ethics?" in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 200.

107. Habermas, "Morality and Ethical Life," 205.

108. Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, 23.

109. Habermas, "Technology and Science as Ideology," 117–18.

110. Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, 41.

111. Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, 42.

112. Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, vii.

113. Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, 11.

114. Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, 39.

115. Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, 40–41.

116. Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, 15.

117. Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, 26; italics in original.

118. Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, 25.

119. Habermas, "Morality and Ethical Life," 200.

120. Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, 33.

121. Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, 34.

122. Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, vii.

123. Habermas, "Morality and Ethical Life," 209; *Future of Human Nature*, 41.

124. Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, 73.

125. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 297, 135.

126. Foucault's description of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish*, 205. On Foucault as a theorist of "entrapment," see the fifth chapter in Chowers, *Modern Self in the Labyrinth*.

127. Despite the prominence of "technology" and "technique" in Foucault's lexicon, few scholars have connected his thought to the critique of technological society developed by Ellul and other postwar French intellectuals. One exception is Michael Behrent, who sees Foucault as extending the critique of technological society while challenging its normative humanist underpinnings. See Michael Behrent, "Foucault

and Technology,” *History and Technology* 29, no. 1 (2013): 54–104, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07341512.2013.780351>

128. Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–95, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448181>

129. See, for example, the ninth and tenth lectures in Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*; Charles Taylor, “Foucault on Freedom and Truth,” *Political Theory* 12, no. 2 (1984): 152–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591784012002002>; and chapters 5 and 6 in Alan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

130. Eric Paras, *Foucault 2.0: Beyond Power and Knowledge* (New York: Other Press, 2006), 158. Other accounts underlining Foucault’s commitment to individual freedom include Ronald Beiner’s “hyper-liberal” Foucault and David Ingram’s “humanist” Foucault. See, respectively, Ronald Beiner, “Foucault’s Hyper-liberalism,” *Critical Review* 9, no. 3 (1995): 349–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913819508443388>; and David Ingram, “Foucault and Habermas,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 215–61.

131. On Foucault’s intellectual development, see Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), and James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

132. Paras, *Foucault 2.0*, 10.

133. See Kevin Thompson and Perry Zurn, eds., *Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group (1970–1980)*, trans. Perry Zurn and Erik Beranek (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

134. Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Vintage, 1980), 93.

135. Foucault, “Power and Strategies,” in *Power/Knowledge*, 143.

136. Foucault, “Power and Strategies,” 142.

137. “Structuralism and Post-Structuralism,” in *The Essential Foucault*, 87.

138. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978), 139.

139. Foucault, “Two Lectures,” 105.

140. Though Foucault’s overall construal of discipline is more Weberian than Marxist. See John O’Neill, “The Disciplinary Society: From Weber to Foucault,” *British Journal of Sociology* 37, no. 1 (1986): 42–60, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/591050>

141. Foucault, “Two Lectures,” 104.

142. Foucault, “Eye of Power,” in *Power/Knowledge*, 146–48.

143. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 224–25.

144. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 209.

145. This analysis is presaged by Foucault's 1967 discussion of "heterotopia," Foucault's term for "other spaces" in which social norms are suspended. Foucault looks at these sites as neither utopias nor dystopias, but as a "reservoir of imagination" and experimentation with social forms and ways of life. See Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowicz, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27. See also Peter Johnson, "Unravelling Foucault's 'Different Spaces,'" *History of the Human Sciences* 19, no. 4 (2006): 75–90, and, on the connection to Bentham's panopticon, Mark Kelly, *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault* (London: Routledge, 2009).

146. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 205.

147. Huxley, *Themes and Variations* (New York: Harper, 1950), 207.

148. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201.

149. Orwell, 1984, 3.

150. David Lyon, *Electronic Eye: The Rise of Surveillance Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 202–4.

151. Foucault, "Subject and Power," 781.

152. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 199.

153. On anti-totalitarianism as a context for postwar French thought, see Jan Plamper, "Foucault's Gulag," *Kritika* 2, no. 2 (2003): 255–80, <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2002.0027>, and Michael Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004).

154. Foucault, "Questions on Geography," in *Power/Knowledge*, 68.

155. As Christofferson notes, *The Gulag Archipelago* was not important as a "revelation"—it did not tell its French readers much about the gulag or Soviet rule that they did not already know—but it was nonetheless a potent "metaphor . . . the one word that could represent and legitimize the emerging radical repudiation of communism and revolutionary politics." Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left*, 90.

156. Quoted in Alessandro Fontana and Mauro Bertani, "Situating the Lectures," in Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 275.

157. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 239.

158. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 242–43.

159. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 245.

160. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 253. For a fuller analysis of Arendtian and Foucauldian biopolitics, see Claire Blencowe, "Foucault's and Arendt's 'Insider View' of Biopolitics," *History of the Human Sciences* 23, no. 5 (2010): 113–30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695110375762>

161. Foucault, *History of Sexuality: I*, 44.

162. Foucault, *History of Sexuality: I*, 145.

163. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 260.

164. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 261.

165. Quoted in Fontana and Bertani, "Situating the Lectures," Foucault, *Society*

- Must Be Defended*, 276. For Foucault's full remarks, albeit in a different translation, see Giovanni Mascaretti and Michel Foucault, "The Analytic Philosophy of Politics," *Foucault Studies* 24 (2018): 188–200, <https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.v0i24.5532>
166. Foucault, "Subject and Power," 779.
167. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France (1978–1979)*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2004), 130.
168. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 321.
169. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 319.
170. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 319–20.
171. Michel Foucault, "Useless to Revolt?," in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, vol. 3, *Power*, ed. James Faubion (New York: New Press, 1994), 453.
172. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 260. On Foucault's account of neoliberalism, see chapter 2 in Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neo-Liberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), and the essays in Daniel Zamora and Michael C. Behrent, eds., *Foucault and Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015).
173. Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick Hutton (Burlington: University of Vermont Press, 1982), 19.
174. Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, 18.
175. Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1994), 261.
176. Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," 152.
177. Rux Martin, "Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault, October 25th, 1982," in *Technologies of the Self*, 15.
178. Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," in *The Essential Foucault*, 50–54. On the normative stakes of Foucauldian critique, see Richard J. Bernstein, "Foucault, Critique: As a Philosophic Ethos," in *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).
179. Martin, "Truth, Power, Self," in *Technologies of the Self*, 10.
180. See "Fugitive Democracy," in Sheldon Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays*, ed. Nicholas Xenos (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 100–113.
181. Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 5. In a similar vein, Arendt characterizes the modern age in terms of "its new preoccupation with the future of the man-made world on earth." See Arendt, *On Revolution*, 230.

Conclusion

1. Inspired by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* (New York: Knopf, 2015); Kim Stanley Robinson,

New York 2140 (New York: Orbit, 2017) and *The Ministry for the Future* (New York: Orbit, 2020); and a dash of Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (New York: Random House, 1992).

2. This is my clumsy amalgam of M. T. Anderson's *Feed* (Somerville, MA: Candlewick, 2002); Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (New York: Random House, 2011), and some ideas explored in Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus* (London: Seeker, 2017).

3. A variation on scenarios found in Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (New York: Vintage International, 2005), and other post-apocalyptic stories.

4. On oligarchy, see Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (2014): 564–81, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592714001595>, and Jeffrey Winters, "Oligarchy and Democracy," *The American Interest* 7, no. 2 (2011), <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2011/09/28/oligarchy-and-democracy/>. On neoliberal technocracy, see Habermas, *Lure of Technocracy*; Brown, *Undoing the Demos*; and Matthew Cole, "What's Wrong with Technocracy?," *Boston Review*, August 22, 2022, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/whats-wrong-with-technocracy/>. On ethnonationalist authoritarianism, see Michael Feola, *The Rage of Replacement: Far Right Politics and Demographic Fear* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2024).

5. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, "This Is How Democracies Die," *The Guardian*, January 21, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2018/jan/21/this-is-how-democracies-die>; Shane Goldmacher and Ben Shreckinger, "Trump Pulls Off Biggest Upset in U.S. History," *Politico*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/11/election-results-2016-clinton-trump-231070>. On Trump's appeal to racial resentments, see Marc Hooghe and Ruth Dassoneville, "Explaining the Trump Vote: The Effect of Racist Resentment and Anti-Immigrant Sentiments," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 51, no. 3 (2018): 528–34, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096518000367>

6. Brian Wheeler, "The Trump Era's Top-Selling Dystopian Novels," *BBC*, January 29, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-38764041>; Alexandra Alter, "Boom Times for the New Dystopians," *New York Times*, March 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/30/books/boom-times-for-the-new-dystopians.html>

7. Sam Harnett, "Trump Election Spurs Sales of Books About White Working Class and Totalitarianism," *KQED*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.kqed.org/news/11275396/trump-election-spurs-sales-of-books-about-white-working-class-and-totalitarianism>

8. Alex Hern, "Forget Nineteen Eighty-Four: These Five Dystopias Better Reflect Trump's US," *The Guardian*, January 26, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/26/1984-dystopias-reflect-trumps-us-orwell>;

Charles McGrath, “Which Dystopian Novel Got It Right: Orwell’s ‘1984’ or Huxley’s ‘Brave New World?’,” *New York Times*, February 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/13/books/review/which-dystopian-novel-got-it-right-orwells-1984-or-huxleys-brave-new-world.html>

9. Christian Holub, “Thanks to President Trump, Dystopian Novels Are Popular Again,” *Entertainment Weekly*, August 22, 2017, <https://ew.com/books/2017/08/22/trump-era-dystopia-novel-sales/>

10. Nina Burleigh, “The Bannon Canon: Books Favored by the Trump Administration,” *Newsweek*, March 23, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/bannon-canon-books-trump-adviser-572835>

11. Quoted in Elian Peltier and Nicholas Kulish, “A Racist Book’s Malign and Lingering Influence,” *New York Times*, November 22, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/22/books/stephen-miller-camp-saints.html>

12. Michael Hayden, “Miller Pushed Racist ‘Camp of the Saints’ Beloved by Far Right,” Southern Poverty Law Center, November 12, 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/11/12/miller-pushed-racist-camp-saints-beloved-far-right>

13. See Kunkel, “Dystopia and the End of Politics”; Lepore, “Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction.”

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23. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 474.

24. Peter Pomerantsev, *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019), and *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014).

25. Masha Gessen, *Surviving Autocracy* (New York: Riverhead, 2020), especially the twelfth chapter.

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34. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019), 20.

35. Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 21.

36. Axel Honneth, following György Lukács, posits that reification distorts “a more genuine or better form of human praxis.” See Honneth, *Reification*, 26.

37. For an overview, see Anne Phillips, *The Politics of the Human* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
38. Jonas, *Imperative of Responsibility*, 26.
39. Jonas, *Imperative of Responsibility*, 30.
40. Jonas, *Imperative of Responsibility*, 26–27.
41. The ethics of dehumanization is the key concern of dystopian thinkers, but readers curious about the ethics of extinction should consult Émile P. Torres, *Human Extinction: A History of the Science and Ethics of Annihilation* (London: Routledge, 2024).
42. Jonas, *Imperative of Responsibility*, 81.
43. Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (New York: Vintage International, 2005), 263.
44. Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, 279.
45. Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 303.
46. Zadie Smith, “Generation Why?,” in *Feel Free: Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 60–61.
47. Atwood, *In Other Worlds*, 91.
48. Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 27.
49. Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 23.
50. Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 56.
51. Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 57.
52. Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 206.
53. Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (London: HarperCollins, 1977), 27.
54. For example, see Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989) and *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003), or Harari, *Homo Deus*.
55. Habermas, “New Obscurity,” 2.
56. John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 11.
57. Shklar, “What Is the Use of Utopia?,” in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, 187–89.
58. William Galston, “Realism in Political Theory,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 4 (2010): 395, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885110374001>
59. Michael Walzer, “Should We Reclaim Political Utopianism?,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 12, no. 1 (2012): 24–30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885112463646>; Benjamin McKean, “What Makes a Utopia Inconvenient? On the Advantages and Disadvantages of a Utopian Orientation to Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 4 (2016): 876–88, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055416000460>; Mathias Thaler, “Hope Abjuring Hope: On the Place of Utopia in Realist

Political Theory,” *Political Theory* 46, no. 5 (2018): 671–97, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591717740324>; David Estlund, *Utopophobia: On the Limits (if Any) of Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

60. McKean, “What Makes a Utopia Inconvenient?,” 887.

61. Walzer, “Should We Reclaim Political Utopianism?,” 27–28.

62. See Seyla Benhabib, “Judith Shklar’s Dystopic Liberalism,” *Social Research* 61, no. 2 (1994): 477–88, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40971041>. Though Katrina Forrester cautions that it is possible to overstate the extent of Shklar’s dystopianism and ignore the importance of hope in her conception of political theory. See Katrina Forrester, “Hope and Memory in the Thought of Judith Shklar,” *Modern Intellectual History* 8, no. 3 (2011): 591–620, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244311000369>

63. See Shklar, “What Is the Use of Utopia?,” 181, and “Nineteen Eighty-Four: Should Political Theory Care?,” in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, 347.

64. Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, 11.

65. Shklar, “Liberalism of Fear,” 12.

66. Jacob Levy, *The Multiculturalism of Fear* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

67. Samuel Bagg argues, for example, that the best justification for elections and universal suffrage is not that they express the will or wisdom of the people, but that they prevent “dangerous forms of elite capture.” Samuel Bagg, “The Power of the Multitude: Answering Epistemic Challenges to Democracy,” *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 4 (2018): 891–904, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000527>

68. Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 9; Anne Petitfor, *The Case for the Green New Deal* (London: Verso, 2019), 162.

69. For examples, see Oreskes and Conway, *Collapse of Western Civilization*, and David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming* (New York: Crown, 2020).

70. For an overview of this debate, see Matthew Cole, “At the Heart of Human Politics: Agency and Responsibility in the Contemporary Climate Novel,” *Environmental Politics* 31, no. 1 (2022): 134–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2021.1902699>

71. Gregory Claeys, *Utopianism for a Dying Planet: Life After Consumerism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 6.

72. Claeys, *Utopianism for a Dying Planet*, 9.

73. Thaler, *No Other Planet*, 2.

74. Alison McQueen, “The Wages of Fear? Toward Fearing Well About Climate Change,” in *Philosophy and Climate Change*, ed. Mark Budolfson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 157.

75. See Jerome Baschet, "Reopening the Future: Emerging Worlds and Novel Historical Futures," *History and Theory* 61, no. 2 (2022): 183–208, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.12263>, and, for a related argument, Jonathan White, *In the Long Run: The Future as a Political Idea* (London: Profile Books, 2024).

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