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THE LAST UTOPIANS: FOUR LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY VISIONARIES AND THEIR LEGACY (2018) BY MICHAEL ROBERTSON

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Robertson, Michael. *The Last Utopians: Four Late Nineteenth Century Visionaries and their Legacy*. Princeton University Press, 2018, 336 pp.

"In the nearly-500 years since its publication, Thomas More's *Utopia* has influenced everything from the thinking of Gandhi to the tech giants of Silicon Valley" (BBC October 6, 2016). This is how articles and books on utopias, journalistic or academic, start these days, especially in light of the 500th birthday of More's 1516 *Utopia*, which was coming, was there, or had just passed. Another variation: "In 2016 we celebrated the five-hundredth anniversary of Thomas More's *Utopia* [marking] the birth of a neologism and a literary genre" (Cziganyik 2017, 1).

One would almost feel relief that these beginnings substitute the eternal dissections of utopia's etymology, had they not become the second step of such works. And it is fascinating that the discipline of Utopian Studies that supposedly thinks about alternatives contains so few of them. Lack of alternatives also marks motivations ('utopia is still relevant') and materials used: lucky readers get a parade of hyper-canonised authors including More and Plato, Marx/Engels and their contemporaries (St. Simon, Fourier, Owen), critical theorists (Bloch, Manheim, Marcuse, but seldom Adorno), cultural theorists (Williams, Jameson), and contemporary 'utopian scholars' (Levitas, Sargent, Sargisson, Moylan). On the side of literature, lucky readers may get More, Bellamy and Morris, Orwell, Huxley, and Zamyatin, Atwood, Piercy, and Le Guin, Gilman and (Rokeya Sakhawat) Hossain; and maybe, just maybe, Ngugi or Okri. Unlucky readers get persistent misconceptions of Utopia as perfection, as totalitarianism, or neoliberal ballyhoo. Indeed, it is hard not to feel the "boredom" with the discipline that some readers feel with the utopian text, and if Utopia has been declared dead or socially irrelevant, the state of its scholarship may as well be read as its eulogy (Jameson 39–40).

On this stage, Michael Robertson publishes his *The Last Utopians*. *Last Utopians* (2018) is well-written and contains interesting facts – Edward Carpenter "may" have been Walt Whitman's lover and preferred "homogenic" over "homosexual" because the latter had both Greek and Latin roots (140, 162). Yet it hardly escapes Utopian Studies' numbing grip – a discipline that Robertson astonishingly characterises for its "vibrancy" and as "burgeoning" (13, 305) – as the formulaic "Introduction" and "Chapter One" show well. The former introduces *Last Utopian's* focus on

“utopian literature and social thought in the United States and Great Britain from the mid-1880s until 1915,” and “Edward Bellamy, William Morris, Edward Carpenter, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman” as the main “subjects” (6). It justifies that for “progressive” politics their Utopian thought is still “relevant to our current political moment” (6–7) and explains More’s supposed pun – “*ou-topos*, no place, but also [...] *eu-topos*, good place” (6). The latter rehearses the argument that, at the end of the nineteenth century, “poverty” led people to believe that a revolution was imminent, providing fertile ground for utopianism (18–20). It then glosses over a familiar history of Utopian writing (More, Bacon, Mercier, Owen, Fourier). The only surprise is Robertson’s methodological commitment to “biography and literary analysis” in the post-death-of-the-author era (14).

The four single-author chapters that follow roughly have a three-stage structure: First, a biography supposedly explaining why these authors wrote utopian works. Second, a superficial discussion of the authors’ earlier works as backdrop for, third, a discussion of hyper-canonised utopian works – Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888), Morris’ *News from Nowhere* (1890), Carpenter’s *Towards Democracy* (1905), and Gilman’s *Herland* (1915). Bellamy’s belief in solidarity and the necessity of a work/leisure balance is emphasised and his involvement with politics is elaborated. Morris is argued to have been “journeying towards utopia his entire life” because he had “devoured the romances of Walter Scott” in his childhood and later joined the socialist party (79). He, too, valued different perceptions of work. Carpenter thought that “homosexuals are less sensual and more spiritual [...] and have been responsible for the origins and furtherance of art, science, and religion,” and thus for utopianism (159). Gilman rejected patriarchy in favor of work and sympathised with the eugenics movement.

There is no doubt that Robertson is a talented writer. And even if the almost pre-‘new critics’ valuation of biography is questionable, his mastery of that genre makes *Last Utopians* pleasantly readable. Yet selecting some of the most canonised utopian periods/authors and prioritising brief discussions over thorough “literary analysis” (it is unclear what that term means for Robertson), the book has little novelty to offer. *Last Utopians* may even be a step back. Attempts to “provincialize” Utopian Studies (cf. Ashcroft 2007; Dutton 2010) may as well not have occurred, and we may ask in this context why the hyper-canonisation of Gilman’s work, and the well-documented white superiority beliefs in it, must be reproduced by incorporating it in studies such as *Last Utopians*. Robertson also ignores recent attempts to think outside of the discipline and offer analyses of the structural and systematic ways in which oppression operates and can be overcome (cf. Kunkel 2014; Srnicek and Williams 2015).

The most aggravating aspect of *Last Utopians* is the seeming opposition to “class warfare,” “revolutionary violence of class warfare,” “workers revolution,” “educating workers about class struggle,” and “violent labor struggles” (69, 75, 83, 153, 217). This is drearily framed as an opposition to Marx (yet another commonplace theme) that recurs throughout *Last Utopians* with the violence of a pop song refrain and is initially ascribed to the four authors. But in the last chapter Robertson makes that opposition his: Moving beyond his chosen period, he employs more stock texts (Orwell, Huxley, Zamyatin, Le Guin, Atwood, Piercy) to rehearse that World War One meant a shift from

utopia to anti-utopia/dystopia. Robertson then places himself in his narrative to “investigate” contemporary “everyday utopias” (242). He literally finds and visits them in a “rural commune,” a “private school,” Rudolf Steiner’s legacy (whose uncomfortable connection to antisemitism he ignores), and “a nearby farmers’ market,” among others. These, he maintains, are peaceful and “more modest” utopianisms, characterised by a “wariness of totalizing visions,” and are “crucial” for creating a “better future.” Without them, he says, “we’re reduced to resigned acceptance of a morally intolerable status quo” (267-71).

What Robertson seemingly fails to understand is that class struggle takes place in a global world-system and involves a dialectical antagonism between the exploiters and the exploited within that system – meriting a “totalizing” response. First, violent class warfare is not just workers rising up but also capitalists oppressing workers – Structural Adjustment in Africa, Troika in Europe, regime changes in the Americas, debt imperialism in Asia, the global unequal distribution of value, health, education, environmental catastrophe, not to mention flat out war. Violent class struggle is ongoing and is not a moral problem as Robertson suggests but an existential one. Second, the liberal individualist belief in isolated instances as loci for social change ignores the structural totality of capitalist modernity in which they exist. If the globality of ongoing violent class warfare does not convince Robertson of the reality of that social totality and the “totalizing vision” it necessitates, the environmental emergency under which humanity lives as a whole, but which it suffers unequally, should leave no question. Far from “progressive,” as Robertson sees it, the politics of moderate or small-scale change that *Last Utopians* advocates is, at best, insufficient. *Last Utopians*, in short, is old wine in new bottles.

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BIONOTE

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