

### *American Utopia: Literature, Society, and the Human Use of Human Beings*, by Peter Swirski



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Peter Swirski's *American Utopia: Literature, Society, and the Human Use of Human Beings* is a whirlwind journey through the many aspects of "utopia." Along with literature, Swirski brings in history, psychology, sociology, and economics to ground America's long-lived utopian fantasy. Early in the book, Swirski introduces the authors on whom he focuses, his proclaimed four horses of the utopian apocalypse, as the authors "take on the mantle of social reformers by diagnosing the pitfalls of social reform" (39). Those authors are Thomas Disch, Bernard Malamud, Kurt Vonnegut, and Margaret Atwood.



The book is divided into five parts with each part consisting of three chapters. *Part One: Utopia, Eutopia and Youtopia* covers the history of the concept of "utopia" from Thomas More's 16<sup>th</sup> century book to modern real world examples of utopian attempts, examines the history of utopia in America with a special focus on the 1960's, and lays out the book's thesis statement and the author's methodology going forward. Swirski sees utopia as a diagnostic tool for society and not a prognostic tool as others in the past have treated it. In other words, utopia is a question for how society might function when various types of social engineering are applied, and not the answer to those experiments. His methodology is to ask questions regarding human nature vs. nurture, whether humans can be bioengineered to be better, and how Big Data might work with utopia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The remaining four parts of the book are each focused on one author. Each of the four authors serve as a different critique of utopia, starting with Disch's social engineer who becomes Malamud's social engineer stymied by biology. Vonnegut reverse-engineers humans, and Atwood bioengineers an entirely new species and abandons humans altogether. Within each of these sections, the first chapter is devoted to a biographical sketch of the author and a focused reading of a key work using utopia as a lens. The second chapter positions the work within its own literary context, highlighting influences and shared tropes. Finally, the third chapter of each section moves

into the present by looking at current (or at least recent) American socio-political trends with the author's work serving as a framework.

*Part Two: Dischtopia* looks at Thomas Disch's work *334* (1972). Swirski uses Disch's utopia to highlight utopia's often used trope of social engineering via education. Then he takes an interesting turn in the third part of the section when he ties social engineering to Big Data. It's an unexpected examination of how the age of Big Data is successfully social engineering Americans on a large scale in a way that education has been unable to. Swirski argues that Big Data will eventually remove choice, or the need for choice, because an algorithm will decide everything, a type of utopian hedonism. Swirski sees the loss of decision-making agency as both utopian (the algorithm is never wrong because the data is the data) and hedonism (people are no longer tasked with making decisions for themselves) that could lead to a reduction in critical thinking and critical activity by privileging passive consumption. From here Swirski discusses what he sees as the fallacy of Universal Basic Income versus a Utopian Basic Income. A Universal Basic Income allows room for social engineering due to existing wage gaps, something akin to the Chinese Social Credit System. A Utopian Basic Income would be based on a more equitable redistribution of wealth throughout all social classes that would remove wage gaps. Finally, Swirski talks about how the US is the current example of the undemocratic democracy of Athens and that the US democracy is based on income inequality which adversely affects the happiness of the population. The discussion here is adventurous and highly enlightening.

*Part Three: Pantopia* introduces the reader to Bernard Malamud's *God's Grace* (1982). Here Malamud's utopia examines the tribalism that is inherent when one pits social engineering against biology. To connect this to current America, Swirski discusses cultural memory and proverbs. Swirski's interest in proverbs lies in their lasting power and how that longevity runs counter to our Snapchat world. Swirski posits that religion might be a by-product of adaptive biology in the brain. He further points out that the United States has a high level of religious participation and that a high level of religious engagement might be one of the causes of the extensive social problems plaguing the country because the human brain seeks to find agency, even supernatural agency, to explain away phenomena. Of the author discussions, this one might be the weakest. While the connections to proverbs and the novel are solid, it's less clear how *God's Grace* completely relates to American utopia.

*Part Four: Uchronia* focuses on Kurt Vonnegut's *Galapagos* (1985) while also touching on *Timequake* (1997) and *Cat's Cradle* (1963). It's not always clear which novel Swirski is discussing, which could be very confusing for someone who isn't well-versed in Vonnegut. Vonnegut's utopia is about reverse engineering evolution in order to inspect the quality of the human brain. Swirski takes this opportunity to explore the tension between the individual and society at large. In order to facilitate the discussion, game theory is posited as the opposite of decision theory as a means of understanding the irrational versus rational when it comes to decision making. To further elucidate his discussion, Swirski introduces the game Prisoner's Dilemma to highlight strategic give and take. Players in the Prisoner's Dilemma can work against one another or attempt to

cooperate depending on the scenario. In terms of utopia, it becomes clear that cooperation is the best way to establish a utopia, but in America we undervalue niceness and tend to wield capitalism like a boot to the throat. While this does not make cooperation impossible, it makes it difficult. It is the way the country has evolved.

*Part Five: Biotopia* concentrates on Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003). Whereas Vonnegut reverse engineers evolution, Atwood's utopia results in bioengineering an entirely new species. Not surprisingly, Swirski connects this to current technologies such as CRISPR, genetically modified food, clones, genetically modified animals, and humans pushing evolution. Part of Swirski's point in this chapter is that we are unaware of the potential side-effects we may sow as we play with genetics, especially considering the history of eugenics. Humans are the agency for change and human nature will dictate the success or lack of success that a utopia might reach.

Overall, *American Utopia: Literature, Society, and the Human Use of Human Beings* is a fast-paced, highly informative read. The connections Swirski makes between the literary texts, utopia, and current American society are fascinating and varied. One minor quibble is that some of the section titles within the chapters can be confusing. Many of them are tongue-in-cheek literary references that aren't explained in the context of the chapter or section. This book should appeal to those interested in the specific authors as well as those who are interested in utopia and utopia's place in American culture.

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