



**According to Richard Gerber, a Key Subject of Dystopian Narratives is ‘the quasi-religious belief in the miraculous power of unlimited [...] progress.’
Analyse Depictions of Progress in Dystopian Narratives.**

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The value and credibility of ‘human progress’ as a framework through which to evaluate the past and look towards the future is called into question in various dystopian narratives of the twentieth century. Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), P. D. James’s *The Children of Men* (1992) and Maggie Gee’s *The Ice People* (1998) all challenge ideas of human progress through dystopic representations of English society in various states of decline and stagnation. This essay will consider the importance of history, technology, nature and leisure as factors that either limit or enable human progress in each text. Human progress is here defined as a belief in the endless improvement of civilisation over time in terms of society, economy, politics and technology. In Richard Gerber’s view, the humanistic conviction that man can independently shape his own destiny, coupled with the evolutionary theory of ‘infinite... growth and flow’, has encouraged the idea of human progress as ‘a historical reality derived from an observation of facts’.¹ The idea of human-progress-as-fact is problematic for the fictional societies facing near extinction in *The Ice People* and *The Children of Men*, as entire world-views and belief systems are called into question. Robert Nisbet has identified a waning interest in the idea of human progress in the twentieth century, which he attributes to a ‘preoccupation with one’s own self and its pleasures’ that differs in scale from anything the West had previously encountered.² The problems created by increasingly self-absorbed and personally dissatisfied societies are explored in these three texts, each which questions whether the direction in which humanity is progressing is desirable or even viable.³ Gerber states that ‘the quasi-religious belief in the miraculous power of unlimited evolutionary progress’ is the ‘basic modern utopian attitude’.⁴ The three dystopias here discussed highlight specific tensions between the belief in human progress and its application to civilization in imagined societies that have different futuristic outlooks to those of our own. In *The Ice People*, for example, Saul tries to make sense of a coming Ice Age that threatens human extinction, by explaining humanity’s progression up to the point of disaster in an apologetic account of human error and poor judgement. Similarly, in *The Children of Men*, Theo attempts to make sense of the shocking finality with which his civilisation will abruptly end through typical Western belief systems, such as history and intellectual rationalism, that enshrine the very ideas of human progress. The civilisations depicted in both texts are subject to large scale natural disasters that threaten and undermine the belief that humanity has, or could ever, triumph over nature. In *Brave New World*, however, this is precisely what *has* happened. Humankind has gained social control through a mastery of science and technology, prompting the World Controllers to believe that they have achieved societal perfection and the end of progress itself. Gerber’s assertion that the belief in human progress is characteristic of modern utopias is reinforced through the following reading of these three texts.

Technology is presented as a powerful tool of civilisation which variously limits or enables human progress in each text. In the technocracy of *Brave New World*, the capacity for societal progression is dictated by a technology that sets the limits of human intelligence, cultural expression and scientific advancement. The World State strives to maintain stability, which it values more than progress, as World Controller Mustapha Mond explains, ‘Every change is a menace to stability... Every discovery in pure science is potentially subversive’.⁵ Change is made impossible through state-enforced scientific and technological methods of social conditioning that inculcate docile complacency in citizens. Furthermore, social and cultural institutions are also designed to encourage submission, appealing to emotional and physical needs in order to numb potentially subversive intellectual thought. Mond explains that, in a choice between mass happiness and the intellectual arts, ‘We’ve sacrificed the high art. We have the feelies and the scent organ instead’.⁶ Mass-produced forms of culture are enjoyable yet ultimately static, unable to progress creatively or intellectually. *Brave New World* thus depicts a

¹ Richard Gerber, *Utopian Fantasy: A Study of English Utopian Fiction since the End of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1955), p. 8.

² Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (London: Heinemann, 1980), p. 4.

³ J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry Into Its Origin and Growth* (London: Macmillan, 1928), p. 2.

⁴ Gerber, *Utopian Fantasy*, p. xii.

⁵ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Granada, 1932), p. 180.

⁶ Huxley, *Brave New World*, p. 177.

society that symbolises the end of progress in its inability to advance technologically, emotionally or intellectually, and in its lack of desire to do so. Patrick Parrinder has argued that one 'feature of the modern utopia is that it represents political society as an end in itself, not as a means towards some spiritual or other- worldly goal'.⁷ In *Brave New World*, there is no goal in which society strives towards beyond materiality and stability of economic production. Even science, as Mond explains, 'is just a cookery book, with an orthodox theory of cooking that nobody's allowed to question'.⁸ This tension between creativity and technology highlights Huxley's anxieties concerning the impact of modernity and mass-commodification on individual and creative freedoms, and the implications of this for society's progression.⁹ The end of progress in *Brave New World* is purposefully achieved through a prioritisation of stability over change, which is enforced through technology. In *The Children of Men*, progress is also limited, however not through the power of technology but largely by its defects. Technology fails to solve the problem of global infertility, directly hindering human progress and survival. Theo explains that 'Western science and Western medicine haven't prepared us for the magnitude and humiliation of this ultimate failure', noting that humanity's incapability in discovering the cause of infertility is more troubling than the impending end of the species itself.¹⁰ The literal impotence of the human species is mirrored by the metaphorical impotence of Western technology, its sudden and complete irrelevance when confronted by the force of nature's will. Alternatively, in *The Ice People*, the human species ultimately fails to maintain positive control of technology. The impending ecological disaster is explained in terms of the globalisation and the commodification of travel. Saul recalls how his generation 'travelled everywhere ... on cheap, safe airlines that competed for our business'.¹¹ Humankind's self-serving exploitation of technology and subsequent ignorance towards how this causes environmental damage is highlighted as the main reason for temperature change and decreased fertility. Humankind is proud of its advanced technology. As Saul explains, 'we were besotted with our own cleverness'.¹² The novel identifies a misuse of technology most noticeably through its representation of the Doves: small, domestic robots that perform household chores and provide companionship for an increasingly segregated society. The Doves exist on organic matter, reproduce themselves and therefore evolve. Saul only entertains the possibility that the Doves could be dangerous briefly, and the suggestion that the Doves are evolving independently from their human creators actually provokes his admiration. Whilst Saul is genuinely repulsed when he learns that a child had been attacked by a Dove, it's face 'a disc of bloody mess, a featureless horror in a tangle of tubes', the news does not prompt him to dispose of his own Dove, to which he is sentimentally attached.¹³ As Saul casually muses, 'no robot had ever harmed me'.¹⁴ Saul's sense of disconnect is underlined by his ignorance of blatant warning signs in favor of continued false companionship with his Dove.¹⁵ The global commercial popularity of the Doves highlights the selfish way in which humans abuse technology. Just as the dangers of the Doves are ignored, so are the warning signs of climate change. *The Ice People*, like *The Children of Men* and *Brave New World*, questions a human tendency to place its faith in technology as a purely rational and scientific means of human progression, without considering the wider social, cultural and ecological implications.

Leisure time is an integral cultural component of the three fictional dystopic societies, functioning to remedy or distract from individual feelings of loss of purpose and stagnation. Robert Nisbet has identified the twentieth century as an 'Age of Leisure' in which interest in progress is 'hardly to be expected in a civilisation where more and more groups are ravaged by boredom'.¹⁶ His argument neatly dovetails with Gerber's view that 'If time were conceived to be an empty and meaningless abstraction, this would mean a loss of significance for the individual'.¹⁷ Increased boredom in the twentieth century is detrimental to the idea of progress, as more people conceive of their time and purpose to be ultimately meaningless. Such sentiments are reflected in the general apathy with which citizens view climate change in *The Ice People*. Saul recalls how the first Doves caused 'a honeymoon of many months' in Europe and 'replaced the refreezing of the icecaps as the chief topic of

⁷ Patrick Parrinder, *Utopian Literature and Science: From the Scientific Revolution to Brave New World and Beyond* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 5.

⁸ Huxley, *Brave New World*, p. 181.

⁹ Nathan Waddell, 'Signs of the T: Aldous Huxley, High Art, and American Technocracy' in *'Brave New World': Contexts and Legacies*, ed. by Jonathan Greenberg and Nathan Waddell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 41-42.

¹⁰ P. D. James, *The Children of Men* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 5.

¹¹ Maggie Gee, *The Ice People* (London: Telegram, 1998), p. 23.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Nisbet, *Idea of Progress*, p. 349.

¹⁷ Gerber, *Utopian Fantasy*, p. 12.

conversation'.¹⁸ The Doves function as a form of distraction from more disturbing global issues. Saul finds technology 'entirely absorbing', a way of escaping from the realities of human decline.¹⁹ In *The Children of Men*, leisure time also offers distraction from the reality of humankind's impending extinction. Theo explains how, for an increasingly aged society, recreational sports help citizens to 'retain the illusion, if not of youth, of vigorous middle age', preserving hope for a dying population.²⁰ However, state provided recreation is also a tool of social control. The dictatorial Warden of England, Xan Lyppiatt, has made Golf the national game, opened national pornography shops to re-stimulate sexual desire, and provided a range of luxury recreational activities for all citizens, such as weekly hour-long massages 'available to all on the NHS'.²¹ State-provided recreation serves to convince a dying species that they have everything they need in a world where they have nothing to achieve. The Council of England's guarantee of 'freedom from fear, freedom from want, freedom from boredom' underlines how distraction and a false sense of purpose have become national priorities.²² Increased leisure gives the illusion of freedom, luxury and choice, as Theo muses, 'Xan has always known the wisdom of giving people a choice in matters where choice was unimportant'.²³ M. Keith Booker argues that 'bourgeois society can perpetuate its power through far more subtle means' than fear, highlighting how The Council of England maintains control through the illusion of increased luxury as proof of society's freedom from boredom.²⁴ It is in this way that the society depicted in *The Children of Men* most closely resembles that of *Brave New World*, in which recreational activities are important parts of the popular culture. Sexual promiscuity, for example, is a social and cultural norm, functioning to counteract the threat of monogamy. Mustapha Mond explains, 'chastity means passion... and instability. And instability means the end of civilisation. You can't have a lasting civilisation without plenty of pleasant vices'.²⁵ Promiscuous sex and other 'pleasant vices' maintain an illusion of certain freedoms whilst also acting to repress potentially subversive thoughts and feelings. The widespread use of a state-administered drug, Soma, follows a similar function. As a literal sedative, Soma promises users 'a holiday from reality whenever you like', and, with no mental or physical side effects, will leave you 'without so much as a headache or a mythology'.²⁶ Citizens use Soma daily to remedy anxiety, stress or other ill-feelings. Huxley has retrospectively described Soma as 'an insurance against personal maladjustment, social unrest and the spread of subversive ideas'.²⁷ In a society where 'the development and production of goods [is] designed to promote a hedonistic pursuit of pleasure that will prevent the build-up of potentially subversive political energies', State-encouraged recreational sex, drug use and sporting activities are an admission of mass dissatisfaction.²⁸ In both *The Children of Men* and *Brave New World*, leisure is a method of maintaining order and stability. Mass entertainment is a symbol of sedation that contributes to societal stagnation. Robert Nisbet's conviction that the twentieth century is an 'Age of Leisure' speaks to the contemporary moment in which these novels were written, underlining real anxieties about societal boredom and the implications of this for human progression.

The capacity to reproduce is the most important and obvious indicator of humankind's ability to progress. In the technocracy of *Brave New World*, natural methods of reproduction have been eradicated by the state. The entire population is scientifically manufactured and produced in fertilising rooms, inside 'racks and racks of numbered test-tubes'.²⁹ Huxley highlights how, with the rise of mass-production and revolutionary forms of technology in the inter-war period, the gap between nature and technology was closing. In 1932 Huxley wrote that 'today Nature, though still an enemy, is an enemy almost completely conquered'.³⁰ This sentiment is communicated in his depiction of the World State's frightening mastery of nature through genetic manipulation. In its effort to increase stability and efficiency, the state has harnessed the power of nature through technology. The Director of Hatcheries, Henry Foster, lauds society's triumph over nature as a move from 'the realm of mere slavish imitation of nature into the much more interesting world of human invention'.³¹ Huxley's frightening warning about

¹⁸ Gee, *The Ice People*, p. 95.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁰ James, *The Children of Men*, p. 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁴ M. Keith Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 48.

²⁵ Huxley, *Brave New World*, p. 190.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

²⁷ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited* (London: Harper Collins, 1959), p. 104.

²⁸ Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse*, p. 47.

²⁹ Huxley, *Brave New World*, p. 16.

³⁰ Aldous Huxley, 'Science and Civilisation', in *The Hidden Huxley: Contempt and Compassion for the masses, 1920- 1936*, ed. by David Bradshaw (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 106.

³¹ Huxley, *Brave New World*, p. 22.

the technological triumph over nature is that 'our present troubles are not, then, due to Nature: they are entirely artificial, genuinely home-made'.³² Huxley sees the manipulation of nature via technology as truly dangerous, a sentiment that is echoed in *The Ice People*, which blames human abuse of technology as a cause of climate change. There is a sense in each of the texts that humanity is teetering on the brink of losing control of the technology that it once mastered. This is certainly the case in *The Children of Men*, where Western science and technology is unable to confront the disaster of global infertility. Susan Squire has argued that in an infertile world like that depicted in P. D. James's novel, people look for answers 'not in medicine or science but in the countercultural and religious worlds'.³³ Protagonist Theo searches for answers beyond the realms of western rationalism, turning towards questions of religion and the divine. Sarah Dillon has called *The Children of Men* both a 'reproductively futural novel' and a 'Christian novel', underlining the strong links between themes of fertility and religion that run through the narrative.³⁴ Dillon likens the final scene, in which Theo baptises the first baby to be born in twenty-five years, to the nativity, reading this positively as 'a tale of mankind's redemption'.³⁵ However, Theo's act of baptism is not necessarily an image of hope or redemption for humankind. By baptising the new baby, Theo submits himself to a religious framework that, like western rationalism and intellectualism, has ultimately failed to provide him with any comfort in the face of humankind's very imminent demise. Theo only finds relief in the miracle of new life, an unexplained phenomenon that reinforces the ambiguous power of nature and the indiscriminant way in which it gives and takes. By submitting to Christianity, Theo relinquishes his rational search for answers and acknowledges the supremacy of natural forces over human effort. This final sentiment that depicts humankind as the subject of natural or divine forces is not a message of redemption, but one of humanity's utter helplessness in the face of nature's unexplainable wrath. This same sense of human inferiority to nature is underlined in *The Ice People*, in which there are strong indications that humanity will be superseded by the technology it has created. Here society tries to counter issues of mass infertility by adopting domestic, robotic Doves as stand-ins for real children. Tensions between nature and technology are explored through the truly frightening qualities of adaption and evolution possessed by the Doves, that are neglected and unregulated by the human population. In a moment of realisation, Saul encounters a pack of mutated Doves, more advanced and evolved than he could have possibly imagined, 'moving silkily out of the shadows... quivering, almost silent'.³⁶ This he witnesses with initial feelings of wonder and awe until 'the first one shot out a long tentacle... the flesh of his cheek was sliced like a chicken-sliced then sucked'.³⁷ At this turning point Saul fully understands the implications of allowing technology to self-evolve in an uncontrolled environment, returning us to Huxley's belief that the real threat to humanity is not natural but in fact artificial. If the ability to reproduce is the most important indicator of human progress, decreased fertility and the manipulation of reproductive methods in these texts highlights a very human anxiety concerning the perpetuation of the species, and the tension that this creates between nature and technology.

The Idea of human progress positions history as evidence of civilisation's linear and continuous advancement. Although history indicates that humankind has progressed up to the present moment, further progression is ultimately unknowable. Bury asserts that 'time is the very condition of the possibility of Progress', suggesting that if the time at the disposal of humanity was to reach its limit, 'the idea would be valueless'.³⁸ It is therefore the speculative assumption of future human progress that allows the idea to exist in the present moment. In *Brave New World*, the World State has eradicated the concept of history so as to repress potentially subversive projections of the future. In a world without past and future, citizens live in a perpetual state of present that disables them from abstract analysis of their own timeline and sense of linear progression. Booker suggests that the 'impoverishment of the present' in *Brave New World* asks the question of whether the present can actually be 'enriched through learning from the past'.³⁹ Mustapha Mond's pronouncement, using the words of Henry Ford, that 'history is bunk', certainly seems to suggest that the past is irrelevant to understanding the society of the present.⁴⁰ However, Huxley's inclusion of Henry Ford's denouncement of history is a challenge to Ford's

³² Huxley, 'Science and Civilisation', p. 106.

³³ Susan Squire, 'From Omega to Mr. Adam: The importance of Literature for Feminist Science Studies', *Science, Technology & Human Values* 24:1 (1999), 132-158 (p. 151).

³⁴ Sarah Dillon, 'Literary Equivocation: Reproductive Futurism and *The Ice People*' in *Maggie Gee: Critical Essays*, ed. by Sarah Dillon and Caroline Edwards (Canterbury: Glyphi, 2015), p. 106.

³⁵ Dillon, 'Literary Equivocation', p. 106.

³⁶ Gee, *The Ice People*, p. 243.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

³⁸ Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, p. 5.

³⁹ Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse*, p. 63.

⁴⁰ Huxley, *Brave New World*, p. 38.

belief that 'the arts and intellectual endeavor were unnecessary and wasteful' in the business world that he promoted and dominated.⁴¹ The eradication of art, culture and intellectual endeavor in favor of new, efficient things is the price of stability in the World State. Yet, as Nathan Waddell has highlighted, 'from its title onwards *Brave New World* heralds the moral relevance of old things... a possible counter to the technocratic undertakings that have so drastically transformed humankind'.⁴² Huxley places a greater value on history, then, than his World Controller, reinforcing the suggestion that understanding the past is integral to present creativity and future change. *The Children of Men* and *The Ice People* imagine the implications for the importance of history in societies where continued human progress is no longer possible. Both Theo and Saul struggle to reconcile their barren futures with the false promises made by rich and progressive pasts. For Theo, the loss of future generativity challenges the significance of the past and the great human culture that will not be enjoyed by future civilisations. Theo considers how 'The world's greatest libraries will in forty years' time at most be darkened and sealed', questioning the relevance of 'storing our books and manuscripts, the great paintings'.⁴³ As a historian of the Victorian era- a time when the belief in British progress and prosperity was at its height- Theo struggles to convince himself of the sudden absence of human progression, finding the historical and academic frameworks upon which he has relied suddenly useless. Theo rebels against the end of progress by refusing to accept the irrelevance of human culture and history. He imagines 'those mythical creatures landing in St Peters Square and entering the great Basilica', reliving the magnificence of European architecture through the eyes of an imaginary alien race in order to maintain the illusion of cultural significance.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Theo begins to keep a diary, documenting his experience of what he believes to be the last days, with the intention of setting it on fire when he reaches old age. He explains how he has 'no intention of leaving the diary as a record... I am not as self-deceiving as that', yet the very act of writing a diary is hopeful, an indicator of a belief that he still holds some importance as 'Theodore Faron, Doctor of Philosophy, fellow of Merton College'.^{45,46} A comparison can be drawn here with *The Ice People's* Saul, who is intent on writing down his story before the wild boys of the new ice age kill him. Sarah Dillon highlights Saul's futile hope that his story will be a 'defense against his own death', as the act of writing only works to isolate him further from the wild boys and reduce the time left before they kill him.⁴⁷ Saul values documenting his past over living an increasingly bleak future, a topic he will not discuss with the wild boys. He explains how 'they want me to tell them about the future. I tell them I'd better stick to the past. Human beings have always foretold the future. Self-deluders'.⁴⁸ For Saul, it is only once the hope of progress has completely expired that he can see the fallacy inherent in the idea itself. As Bury stated, 'it cannot be proved that the unknown destination towards which man is advancing is desirable', however, blind faith in the idea of progress suited both Saul and Theo up until the point that it was categorically disproven.⁴⁹ Bury asserts that belief in the idea of progress is an act of faith, it can be proved neither true nor false, and thus 'belongs to the same order of ideas as Providence or personal immortality'.⁵⁰ Whilst both characters attempt to accept the coming end of humanity, their desire to add personal stories to the extensive volumes of human history- even if only momentarily- suggests that they cannot completely shake their almost religious belief in the idea of human progress.

Robert Gerber's position, that the belief in human progress is the basic modern utopian attitude, suggests that the utopian aim is to conceptualise the ways in which humans may or may not progress. For the laws of progress to be deductible, Karl Popper argues that 'we must try to imagine the conditions under which progress would be arrested'.⁵¹ The three texts in question each imagine various situations in which the progress of civilisation has been in some way slowed or halted. In *The Ice People* and *The Children of Men*, human error is blamed both for causing natural disaster and also for being unable to find a solution to it. In *Brave New World*, human mastery of science and technology is the source of social stability, albeit at the cost of creative, intellectual and social freedom. It is the irrational human element that Popper believes to be the most unreliable factor in determining the possibility of future

⁴¹ Scott Peller, 'Laboring for a Brave New World: Our Ford and the Epsilons' in *Huxley's "Brave New World": Essays*, ed. by David Garrett Izzo and Kim Kirkpatrick (London: McFarland, 2008), p. 64.

⁴² Waddell, 'Signs of the T', pp. 43-44.

⁴³ James, *The Children of Men*, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 3-4.

⁴⁶ Terry Bacon and Govinda Dickman, "'Who's the Daddy?': The aesthetics and politics of representation in Alfonso Cuarón's adaptation of P. D. James's *Children of Men*", in *Adaptation in Contemporary Culture*, ed. by Rachel Carroll (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 150.

⁴⁷ Dillon, 'Literary Equivocation', p. 120.

⁴⁸ Gee, *The Ice People*, p. 14-15.

⁴⁹ Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, p. 2.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

⁵¹ Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 1957), p. 142.

human progress. He argues that attempts to control the human element ‘would mean the end of progress’, echoing the stable but unprogressive society of *Brave New World*.⁵² For Popper, then, as for J. B. Bury, human progress is not deductible in any real sense as it depends on too many human variables.⁵³ The utopia thus functions to suggest ways in which humanity could possibly progress, and the dystopia to explore the ways in which this progress could be limited. As dystopian novels that are distinct to the twentieth century, the three texts present the power play between technology and nature as a key area of tension, upholding mass infertility and environmental damage as ways in which human progress could be hindered. Furthermore, the texts explore isolation, apathy and boredom as social conditions of modernity, underlining how the willingness of the masses to relinquish political, technological and social control is a threat to human progress. Finally, the texts question the adequacy of the idea of progress as a way of understanding human purpose and worth by challenging whether the positioning of humankind’s destiny within a linear, evolutionary framework is a truly useful way of conceiving of a future that is ultimately unknowable.

⁵² Ibid., p. 147.

⁵³ Ibid.

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