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UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA IN THE AGE OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

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DEBATE
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ABSTRACT

A product of Modernity, utopian and dystopian thought has always hinged upon an assessment as to whether humanity would be able to fulfil the promise of socio-economic, political and techno-scientific progress. In this paper, I argue that the predominantly dystopian outlook of the past century or so marked a move away from former views on human progress. Rather than commenting on humanity's inability to build a better society, current dystopianism betrays the view that the human species as such is an impediment to harmonious life on Earth. I discuss the shift from utopia to dystopia (and back) as a result of regarding humans as a force that does more harm than good, and I consider the possibility of human extinction within the framework of dystopian and utopian visions. The final section of the chapter turns to Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy as a fictional example that plays out the prospect of a world in which humans have all but become extinct.

KEYWORDS

Utopia. Dystopia. Anthropocene.

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Much has been written about the shift from utopia to dystopia in the twentieth century, a trend that seems to have deepened in the first decades of the new millennium.[1] Apart from a brief resurgence in utopian writings in the 1960s and 70s, fuelled by the counter-culture movements and political activism of those decades (MOYLAN, 2000, p. xiv, 68; BOOKER, 1994, p. 17), the past one hundred years or so have witnessed the rise of dystopianism as the predominant zeitgeist. True, this purportedly dystopian attitude hinges upon the definition of the term, a heavily contested territory that has given rise to a copious literature.[2] With its roots in Greco-Roman accounts of the human fall from a Golden to an Iron Age in authors such as Hesiod and Ovid,[3] and in narratives of the expulsion from Paradise, of the Apocalypse and of Hell in the Judeo-Christian tradition, dystopias also draw on imagery associated to historical phenomena such as torture, slavery, the militarization of societies, the ostracism of diseased populations, prisons and death camps (CLAEYS, 2017, p. 3-4; p. 10ss.). With more recent antecedents in disaster writings and discourses on monstrosity (CLAEYS, 2017, p. 58ss.), the dystopian literary genre began as satire of utopian aspirations, and therefore is very much entwined with the flourishing of utopian thought and writings from the seventeenth century onwards.[4] The term "dystopia" itself appears to have been coined in the mid-eighteenth century, but was not widely used until the nineteen hundreds (SARGENT, 2013, p. 10-11).

If both utopia and dystopia can easily be distinguished from their literary cousin, science fiction, for their focus on social and political critique (BOOKER, 1994, p. 19), the difference between the two former concepts is not easy to pinpoint.[5] Are dystopias primarily cautionary and reactive, telling us what not to do, while utopias are forward-looking, showing us the way onward? The separation between the two genres is not so clear-cut. To begin with, utopia shares the same goal as dystopia, namely, that of criticizing the negative features of a certain society by comparing it to another, fictional one. And, as Gregory Claeys points out, someone's utopia might well be someone else's dystopia (CLAEYS, 2017, p. 7). Many canonical utopias of the past have features that most modern readers would clearly identify as dystopian: the strict social control in Thomas More's *Utopia*; the incipient eugenics of Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun*, among countless other examples. This proximity between the two notions has led scholars

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[1] Scholars agree that the twentieth century marked a shift from a predominantly utopian to a dystopian outlook. Keith Booker writes that "much of the history of recent utopian thought can be read as a gradual shift from utopian to dystopian emphases" (BOOKER, 1994, p. 15). For Krishan Kumar, "it is mainly in the twentieth century that dystopia truly comes into its own" (KUMAR, 2013, p. 19). Lyman Tower Sargent argues that "dystopia has been the dominant form of utopianism since around World War I" and goes on to add that "the twentieth century has quite correctly been called the dystopian century, and the twenty-first century does not look much better" (SARGENT, 2013, p. 10).

[2] Several designations have been used to describe a dystopia: anti-utopia, heterotopia, negative utopia, and cacotopia, among others.

[3] Hesiod mentions that humans in his time lived in an Iron Age in his *Works and Days*, while Ovid discusses the same topic in *Metamorphoses*.

[4] Claeys identifies Joseph Hall's *Mundus Alter et Idem* (1605) as the first anti-utopia (CLAEYS, 2017, p. 291). For an in-depth account of the literary history of dystopia, see Claeys (2017, p. 291ss.).

[5] One can distinguish three broad tendencies in utopianism: utopian thought, utopian literature and historically existing utopian movements. Dystopianism consists primarily of dystopian thought and fiction, even though several historical groups that preach an impending apocalypse have adopted dystopian traits. In this chapter, I focus primarily on utopian/dystopian literature and thought and will bracket a discussion of historically existing utopian/dystopian communities.

to define dystopia as utopia's "shadow" (KUMAR, 2013, p. 19) or "alter ego" (DAVIS, 2013, p. 23). Michael Gordin, Helen Tilley and Gyan Prakash note that dystopia is not simply the opposite of utopia, i.e., an imagined society, which is completely unplanned or planned to be deliberately awful. Rather, dystopias are often utopias gone wrong or utopias that work only for a very limited segment of the population (GORDIN; TILLEY; PRAKASH, 2010, p. 1). In other words, utopias function by contrasting the status-quo with a social arrangement that is perceived to be more perfect. Because they are already as good as can be, most utopias are static, the apex of a given civilization.[6] Dystopias, on the other hand, depict a society recognizably worse than another one that is used as a point of reference, and describe a situation that can, and often does, deteriorate even further as the plot unfolds.

A useful distinction is the one between anti-utopia, which aims to criticize utopianism or a particular utopian position and is therefore the true inheritor of the tradition of satire mentioned above, and dystopia, which describes a worse social arrangement than the one we currently live in. Other authors classify the various types of dystopias based upon their relation to Ernst Bloch's famous "principle of hope". For Tom Moylan, for instance, some dystopian writings – anti-utopian dystopias – foreclose any hope for a positive transformation of the present, while others – utopian dystopias – retain a modicum of hope for a better future, in spite of their pessimistic presentation of a negative social alternative (MOYLAN, 2000, p. xiii e 147). Moylan goes on to define the latter as "critical dystopias," open-ended texts that incorporate elements from various other genres and cling to utopianism even in the midst of a dystopian social collapse (MOYLAN, 2000, p. 186ss.).

The underlying thrust of purely negative, hopeless dystopias is profoundly reactionary.[7] For if we are limited to imagining an exacerbation of our current ills and cannot envision the possibility of forging a better polity, we become enclosed within our social reality. These kinds of dystopian scenarios signal that there is no alternative to the status quo, our only option being to prevent the present from getting much worse or, at least, to slow down the inexorable deterioration of our current condition. Critical dystopias, conversely, avoid the hopeless, conservative position of texts that remain at a destructive level, by pointedly criticizing the problems of our age at the same time as they offer at least a glimpse of possible solutions.

Whether anti-utopias, negative utopias or critical dystopias, it is worth pondering upon why the past century appears to have turned its back on utopianism and embraced, instead, various forms of dystopian thought and writings. Whence our seeming dislike for utopia that has led writers to prefer dystopianism as a more faithful reflection of our epoch? The excesses of imperialism and late-stage capitalism (MOYLAN, 2000, p. xi), authoritarianism and despotism, the threat of nuclear annihilation, environmental degradation (CLAEYS, 2017, p. 448ss.), a weakening belief in the future and a conviction that meaningful change is no longer possible (JAMESON, 2020, p. 24) have been identified as some of the key culprits for the current dystopian outlook. To be sure,

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[6] Featherstone (2017, p. 7) came up with the concept of "kinetic utopia," or utopia of movement, to describe capitalist utopias, but saw this kind of utopia in a negative light.

[7] As Claeys (2017, p. 292) points out, many early dystopias were reactionary. Featherstone (2017, p. 3ss.) criticizes the view that utopia is impossible to achieve as an ideological maneuver that prevents people from thinking of alternatives to the status quo.

associating the shift to dystopia to political events and tracing it to feelings of social malaise presupposes a link between fiction and reality that is far from uncontroversial. Yet, utopia and dystopia are pre-eminently political literary genres that hinge upon societal criticism and a desire for social change. It is therefore safe to assume that utopian and dystopian fiction and thought at least refract, if not reflect, the vicissitudes of collective existence and the spirit of the times.

The rejection of utopianism is often attributed to an intrinsic problem of utopia, which, according to a variety of thinkers, tends to lead to oppression.[8] British philosopher John Gray, for instance, argues that utopias work as normative models used to justify violent acts perpetrated by religious or political groups and concludes that they necessarily lead to totalitarian political regimes.[9] The move away from utopia would be, according to this perspective, a response to the totalitarian horrors of the past century that posited a perfect, utopian society – the classless society of communism or the cohesive national community of Nazism, for example – as an end to be achieved no matter the human and environmental costs. But, as I argued in the Introduction to my co-edited book *Existential Utopia*, utopianism does not necessarily equate to a transcendent, trans-historical ideal to be relentlessly pursued, sacrificing who – and whatever in the present to the altar of a higher value. Rather, utopias can operate intra-historically, forming pockets of resistance and/or opening paths away from what exists into a more just polity. This is the sense of *existential* utopia, that is to say, an intra-temporal thought of new possibilities within everyday reality (MARDER; VIEIRA, 2012, p. xii).

Assuming that not all utopias necessarily drive us to totalitarianism, the purported contemporary dismissal of utopianism is also often blamed on the collapse of so-called grand narratives, most saliently the belief in human progress and secular perfectibility.[10] The confidence in the power of reason and science to usher humans into an era of peace and prosperity has certainly declined since its heyday in the Enlightenment. But more than a distrust in the human ability to build a better society to come, the shift from utopia to dystopia seems to point to an uncertainty about what a good society is. The apparent failure of our utopian imagination betokens a failure in defining what a *eutopian* social arrangement would actually be. The difference between past and present-day authors, then, is that the latter can only identify what bad polities look like. To put it differently, late-modern thinkers are quick to diagnose the ills of our time but seem incapable to determine possible forms of cure.

What could be the reasons for this inability to imagine positive social scenarios? An easy scapegoat is the relativism often associated to the postmodern turn that marked the last decades of the past century. If there are no objective truths, so the familiar indictment of postmodernity goes, how are we to know right from wrong, good from bad, and so on? A more intellectually rigorous assessment of postmodern thought, however, would recognize that the situated knowledge it advocates is not equivalent to the anything-goes caricature of the movement painted by its detractors. Still, I would

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[8] Thinkers including Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, Leszek Kolakowski, Michael Oakeshott and Friedrich Hayek believe that utopia leads to totalitarianism (DAVIS, 2013, p. 23).

[9] Gray makes this case in his ominously titled book *Black Mass. Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*.

[10] As Kumar (2013, p. 19) points out, the main targets of dystopia have been the grand narratives of modernity: "reason and revolution, science and socialism, the idea of progress and the faith in the future".

argue that our move away from utopianism is not entirely divorced from a postmodern frame of mind. I see the steady decline of utopia in the past century as going hand in hand with a questioning of humanity's place on the planet. It is not so much that we fail to conjure up a good society but, rather, that we are unsure as to whether human society, as such, is a good thing. In the rest of this paper, I will discuss the shift from utopia to dystopia (and back) as a result of regarding humans on earth as a force that does more harm than good. In the next section, I consider the possibility of human extinction within the framework of dystopian and utopian visions. The final section of the essay turns to Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy as a fictional example that plays out the prospect of a world in which humans have all but become extinct.

EXIT HOMO SAPIENS

Utopia, at least in its current form, came into existence at the dawn of modernity with More's eponymous book from 1516, and utopianism, together with dystopia, have been entangled with valuations of what it means to be modern ever since. Many early dystopias were diatribes against the ideals of the Enlightenment or the French Revolution (CLAEYS, 2017, p. 292ss.) and this anti-modern streak of dystopianism continued well into the twentieth century, leading authors such as Moylan to consider that dystopia often "expresses a simple refusal of modern society" (MOYLAN, 2000, p. xii). Several features of modernity, in particular its reliance on science, technology and mechanization, have been the subject of dystopian narratives, as exemplified by E. M. Forster's well-known short story "The Machine Stops" (1909). Claeys identifies the fear of an uncontrollable crowd – a phenomenon exacerbated by the increasing concentration of the population in large cities in the modern period – as an ancestor of dystopias (CLAEYS, 2017, p. 19ss.), an anxiety that later coalesces in discourses about overpopulation and, starting in the 1960s, in dystopian novels about the topic (CLAEYS, 2017, p. 461, 468).

For those who espouse a utopian faith in modernization, the problem of contemporary society lies in an incomplete modernity, whose promise of rational socio-political organization and techno-scientific progress has not yet been completely fulfilled. Anti-modern thinkers, conversely, regard these very same developments as potentially leading to disaster. From the perspective of anti-modern thought, dystopias are not mere cautionary tales that highlight the excesses of modernity. Rather, modernity itself is dystopian and utopia would, in this view, amount to a retreat to a pre-modern, bucolic, pastoral or Georgian way of life. Fredric Jameson sees a direct link between anti-modern ideology, embraced by writers and philosophers as varied as José Ortega y Gasset, T. S. Eliot or Martin Heidegger, and the fear of a dystopian, overpopulated world. For Jameson, "[i]t is only in postmodernity and globalization, with the world population explosion, the desertion of the countryside, the growth of the megacity, global warming and ecological catastrophe," that the ills of our society were blamed upon "the scandal of multiplicity and of what is generally referred to as overpopulation, or in other words, the definitive appearance of the Other in multiple forms and as sheer quantity or number" (JAMESON, 2010, p. 36). For anti-modern intellectuals, the various socio-political and economic problems we face can be traced back to "all those unknown others who constitute 'society' beyond one's immediate circle of acquaintances," a feeling that is then "concentrated in the fear of multiplicity and overpopulation" (JAMESON, 2010, p. 36). Jameson sees in the images of soulless clones or of living-dead, brainless zombies

an expression of the anti-modern, dystopian horror of the masses, which conservative thinkers regard as responsible for the decline of our civilization (JAMESON, 2010, p. 36).

Utopian and dystopian takes on modernity and overpopulation are heavily indebted to eschatologically inflected modes of thinking that place an emphasis on the end of times as a Millenarian kingdom of peace and prosperity, a land of milk and honey for everyone, or on an apocalyptic vision of widespread death and destruction, either of which would be night. Frank Kermode has rightly sounded a note of caution about the pitfalls of eschatology and of assuming that our polity stands in an extraordinary relation to the time to come. For Kermode, every age judges the crises of its society to be deeper or more significant than the ones of previous eras (KERMODE, 2000, p. 93ss.). Those who reflect upon the future tend to think that they live in the end of an era, at a critical juncture and on the brink of period-defining events that often entail the annihilation of the entire human race. Both utopian and dystopian thought would therefore belong in a long line of reflections about crisis that would either herald a dramatic change for the better or result in a doomsday scenario.

What Kermode fails to mention as an issue that distinguishes more recent utopian or dystopian eschatological predictions from previous ones is that, in the past, eschatology involved the intervention of a divine entity that brought about the end of a fallen society. It is only in the twentieth century that humanity acquires the ability to affect change upon the entire human race through nuclear technology, genetic manipulation and a dramatic modification of the biosphere. This is the meaning of secularism: humankind has now taken over the role of divinity as creator and destroyer of life. It is no coincidence that dystopianism has accompanied the ability to bring about a radical transformation of life on Earth. For, if previous generations could count on divine wisdom to make the right decision about the eschaton, humanity, from the start of the nuclear age onwards, had to reckon with the fact that decisions about the fate of the planet and all its inhabitants are in the hands of flawed beings, whose actions are, more often than not, grounded on self-interest.

Modernity, then, is inextricably linked to an exponential growth of human population, a development that cannot be attributed to the intercession of a transcendent entity but, rather, to a scientific approach to reality. Thomas Malthus infamously predicted that an incessant population growth would soon lead to widespread famine in his 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population*, a situation that the so-called "Green Revolution," enabled by industrial agriculture relying heavily on fertilizers, pesticides and machinery powered by fossil fuels, managed to avert (BERGTHALLER; CARRETERO GONZÁLEZ, 2018, p. 5). For utopians, the escape from the worst anxieties surrounding overpopulation reinforces their belief in the promise of modernity; dystopian thinkers consider that it will only be a matter of time before such fears become reality.

What has up until recent years united both utopian and dystopian thought is a view of human disappearance from the face of the Earth as an eminently negative development. From the Biblical episode of the flood that wiped out most of humanity, through concerns about exceeding the Earth's carrying capacity, to images of deadly viruses spreading to the entire globe that have lately become all too real, the extinction of our species has been interpreted as *the* negative outcome of social crisis, which both utopian optimists and anti-modern dystopians wish to avoid. It is therefore unsurprising that threats to the survival of humankind became the centre of many dystopian narratives from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Slavoj Žižek identifies the four main "riders of the apocalypse" as the ecological crisis, the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the

capitalist system and the explosive growth of social divisions, while Jameson adds the uncontrollable traffic in armament as yet another menace to human existence (ZIZEK, 2010, p. 10; JAMESON, 2010, p. 22).

Utopians are confident that human annihilation will be obviated by a deepening and expansion of modernity's project to all human beings. Anti-modern thinkers, while viewing overpopulation as a dystopian scenario, also shy away from pushing for the disappearance of humanity as such. For them, the extinction of humans would be a dystopia, caused precisely by the imbalances of modern life and by uncontrollable masses of people. Moylan discusses the difference between anti-utopians, who still believe in humankind's ability to survive the worst distortions of progress, and ex-utopians, who have abandoned all hope in the human potential to survive (MOYLAN, 2000, p. 124). Human extinction is a bleak prospect that can still possibly be avoided for the first, and that is inevitable for the second group of thinkers.

In the past few decades, there has been a subtle shift in the lines separating utopian and dystopian views on modernization and human population. For if dystopias express, from the inception of the genre, a renunciation of modernity, that rejection has of late transformed into a repudiation of humans as the agents who brought about modern life and its attendant evils. Such an assessment of humankind goes hand in hand with contemporary reflections on the Anthropocene, a geological era marked by human beings' lasting impact on the planet.[11] As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008) argues, the distinction between human and natural history, as well as humanist accounts of modernity and globalization, collapses when we regard humans as a geological force. The unprecedented rate of anthropogenic changes to the Earth, including the contamination of the oceans, soils and atmosphere by industrial by-products and waste, the mass extinction of other species and global warming have led some thinkers to consider that the disappearance of *Homo sapiens* might be a positive development, if not for humans, then for the Earth and all other living beings. From being regarded as an unintended, dystopian outcome of modernity-gone-wrong, human extinction has come to acquire utopian undertones.

Works like Alan Weisman's book *The World Without Us* (2007), together with films including *The Future is Wild* (2002), *Aftermath: Population Zero* (2008) and *Life after People* (2008, 2010), invite us to imagine our planet without humans as an idyllic place where non-human beings thrive once again. If the recent Extinction Rebellion protests against climate change and human-induced ecological collapse precisely in order to prevent the human extinction that gives the movement its name, these other visions of the world without us regard extinction as a good thing. As Mark Jendrysik notes, this represents a mutation in eschatological, millenarian thought, in that such scenarios promise salvation to nature, not humanity; or better yet, they promise the salvation of nature *through* the absence of humans (JENDRYSIK, 2011, p. 35). While Weisman's book and the above-mentioned films skirt the thorny issue of how the Earth got rid of humanity in the first place, activist groups such as the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement call for people to abstain from reproduction to facilitate *Homo sapiens*' gradual demise and

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[11] The recent history of the term goes back to atmospheric chemist and Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen, who co-wrote an article with Eugene Stoermer in 2000 arguing that, due to our extensive impact on the planet, the current geological period should be called the "Anthropocene:" the age of humans.

prevent environmental degradation, while the even more radical anti-human Church of Euthanasia advises its followers to "Save the Planet, Kill Yourself".

Vincent Geoghegan summarily defines advocates of human extinction as "self-loathers," who "expend utopian energy anticipating the extinction of a humanity that is deemed to be a parasite on nature" and contrasts this stance with a self-critical perspective that would recognize human failings, all the while working toward the betterment of humankind (GEOGHEGAN, 2013, p. 46). Jendrysik agrees that thoughts of human extinction amount to a surrender to despair, since they imply giving up hope of ever attaining utopia (JENDRYSIK, 2011, p. 35). But, as Geoghegan himself acknowledges, there is a utopia of "humanity crushed" (GEOGHEGAN, 2013, p. 46). If humans are a blight on the planet, responsible for widespread destruction of their environment wherever they take root, then their extinction would amount to the only true utopia. It would entail a return to Arcadia or a Garden of Eden devoid of humans, a kind of renewed Genesis enabled by the sacrifice of the human species. "Without man," writes Jendrysik, "the peaceable kingdom is established at last" and "[t]he end of history has finally arrived" (JENDRYSIK, 2011, p. 48). Human society is deemed beyond repair and the only way of achieving utopian aspirations is to do away with *Homo sapiens* altogether.

Utopia has made a comeback with a twist through the dream of a world without humans that is eerily peaceful and harmonious, reminiscent of utopian visions of Paradise. What does this conception of a human-free Eden mean for the tradition of utopian writings inaugurated at the outset of modernity? In the last section of this chapter, I discuss Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy in light of the utopian/dystopian imagination of a world with (almost) no humans.

USTOPIAN EXTINCTION: MARGARET ATWOOD'S MADDADDAM TRILOGY

Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy, which includes the novels *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013), fictionalizes the emergence of new hominoid beings called the Crakers. They get their name from the game Extinctathon which their creator, a brilliant scientist called Glenn, used to play with his best friend Jimmy when they were adolescents. The game was about guessing the name of a species that had become extinct in the past fifty years and players had to choose an extinct animal as their codename. Glenn picked Crake, after the Australian red-necked Crake, and thus the beings he genetically engineered were dubbed "Crakers." Ironically, though, and in spite of the origin of their name, the Crakers, far from being on the brink of annihilation, flourish in their post-Apocalyptic world. Humans are the ones who are extinct in the novels, by virtue of a virus that Crake releases embedded in the BlyssPluss sexual enhancement pill, which also promises protection against STDs and the prolongation of youth. After driving countless species to extinction, it is humans who endure an Extinctathon – a marathon of extinction, a ton of human extinctions, a hecatomb – that leaves *Homo sapiens* reduced to a few scattered survivors.

At first glance, the eradication of almost all human beings, literally reduced to pulp, appears to be the ultimate dystopia. As Crake himself points out, "all it takes is the elimination of one generation" for the entire infrastructure of late modern society to come crumbling down (ATWOOD, 2004, p. 261). Even if human know-how were somehow to

be preserved, the few people who remained alive would not have the tools or be able to produce the energy to maintain the machinery that keeps the modern world going. And this collapse of life as we know is exactly what happens shortly after the virus hits. As Jimmy, one of the few survivors, reflects: "Strange to think of the endless labour, the digging, the hammering, the carving, the lifting, the drilling, day by day, year by year, century by century, and now the endless crumbling that must be going on everywhere. Sandcastles in the wind" (ATWOOD, 2004, p. 50). Humans and the complex political structures and technology they created to mould reality to their needs rapidly vanish with the extermination of humanity.

And yet the novels do not depict the world without humans as an altogether bad place. To be sure, as Paul Harland mentions, the few human survivors mourn the loss of their loved ones and of the way of life before the onset of the plague (HARLAND, 2016, p. 583ss). However, the overwhelming sense conveyed by the trilogy is that humankind had it coming. As the roommates of Jimmy's girlfriend put it: "Human society […] was a sort of monster, its main by-products being corpses and rubble. It never learned, it made the same cretinous mistakes over and over, trading short-term gain for long-term pain" (ATWOOD, 2004, p. 285). They go on to compare humanity to an enormous, life-destroying animal: "It [human society] was like a giant slug eating its way relentlessly through all the other bioforms on the planet, grinding up life on Earth and shitting it out the backside in the form of pieces of manufactured and soon-to-be obsolete plastic junk" (ATWOOD, 2004, p. 285). Adam One, the leader of the radical environmentalist group God's Gardeners, also decries human behaviour once he realizes the deadly virus is spreading: "It is not this Earth that is to be demolished: it is the Human Species. Perhaps God will create another, more compassionate race to take our place" (ATWOOD, 2010, p. 508).

In the aftermath of the "Waterless Flood," the Biblically-inspired name the Gardeners gave to the plague, a small number of humans is left to co-exist together with the Crakers. Toby, a former member of God's Gardeners who is in charge of telling the hominoids stories through which they try to make sense of their origin and of the world around them, designates the years before the plague as chaos. The three MaddAddam novels move back and forth in time, describing the period before the annihilation of most humans as a world of out of kilter, dominated by rampant capitalism. The employees of large corporations lived in fortified compounds insulated from the majority of the population, who inhabited the lawless *pleeblands*. Climate change had caused massive droughts and large areas of the planet – Texas and the Mediterranean basin, for instance – had turned into deserts. Countless plants and animals had gone extinct, while unbridled genetic manipulation had given rise to bizarre crossbreeds, including *rakunks*, *liobams* and *pigoons*, the latter designed with implanted human stem cells, in order to grow human organs for transplant. As Toby explains to the Crakers, "[t]he people in the chaos cannot learn. They cannot understand what they are doing to the sea and the sky and the animals. They cannot understand that they are killing them, and that they will end by killing themselves" (ATWOOD, 2013, p. 353). Humans were engaged in relentless, widespread destruction of the Earth and their demise is presented as an almost inevitable outcome of their actions and as a blessing for all other living beings.

Atwood is known for her engagement in environmentalist causes[12] and has spoken out against the toll our consumer-driven society and rapid population growth is exerting on the planet.[13] She writes that "[t]he rules of biology are as inexorable as those of physics: run out of food and water and you die. No animal can exhaust its resource base and hope to survive. Human civilizations are subject to the same law" (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 322). It is telling that she does not regard the MaddAddam novels as works of science fiction, since they contain nothing that would be impossible in the present, at least in theory.[14] She prefers to use the term "speculative fiction," given that the texts invent "nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent" (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 322). Rather, the narratives expand upon a conjecture, a "what if" question: "What if we continue down the road we're already on? How slippery is the slope? What are our saving graces? Who's got the will to stop us?" (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 323). Atwood regards her books as thought experiments. She does not see human extinction as particularly catastrophic, but merely as one of the possible outcomes of our way of life, one of the possible answers to the question of *Homo sapiens*' future. As she remarks, Crake is, from a certain perspective "the most altruistic person around" (Atwood, cited in BOUSON, 2016, p. 348), since he is courageous enough to act in order to stop humanity's complete destruction of the biosphere.[15]

The (almost) post-human world after the plague is therefore not a sombre wasteland but a place where an accelerated rewilding process is happening, as fauna and flora, including the genetically modified species, quickly reconquer what were once bustling cities. The few humans left seem destined to perish and the survival of *Homo sapiens* lies in interbreeding with the Crakers. Toward the end of *MaddAddam*, several Craker-Human children are born who will carry at least part of the human genetic heritage forward. The Crakers themselves are presented as an alternative to humankind's destructiveness. Problematic as their origin certainly is – they were designed by a scientist and are therefore living proof of human hubris and desire to bend the rules of nature –, they are painted in idyllic colours. Simple-minded, peace-loving, egalitarian and friendly, they lack the racism, sexism, hierarchical social organization and drive to exploit the environment that are the hallmark of humanity. They are vegetarian and able to digest raw plant material, which means that they have an almost endless source of nourishment at their disposal; are physically adapted to a significantly warmer climate

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[12] Deborah Bowen summarizes some of Atwood's contributions to the environmentalist cause: "In 1995 she gave up her house in France after President Jacques Chirac resumed nuclear testing. In 2000 she donated a significant portion of her Booker Prize money to environmental groups; since 2006, Atwood and her partner Graeme Gibson, an avid birder, have been joint honorary presidents of the Rare Bird Club within BirdLife International; in the last ten years she has used her book tours to promote environmental activism, ensuring that travel on these tours is carbon-neutral, and particularly promoting shade-grown coffee, to protect the migratory songbirds of the forest canopy" (BOWEN, 2017, p. 700).

[13] As Atwood puts it: "We must slow our growth rate as a species or face a series of unimaginable environmental and human catastrophes" (cited in BOUSON, 2016, p. 342).

[14] Atwood offers the following definition of science fiction: "I define Science Fiction as fiction in which things happen that are not possible today — that depend, for instance, on advanced space travel, time travel, the discovery of green monsters on other planets or galaxies, or which contain various technologies we have not yet developed" (ATWOOD, 2005, p. 85).

[15] Jimmy also reflects upon Crake's motivations for releasing the virus: "Had he been a lunatic or an intellectually honourable man who'd thought things through to their logical conclusion? And was there any difference?" (ATWOOD, 2004, p. 343).

(their skin smells of citrus, so as to repel insects, and is UV resistant); and their female come in heat once every three years, at which time they amicably mate with four males until they get pregnant, thus rendering jealousy obsolete. It is unclear which traits will live on in the Craker-Human infants, but the new interbred community is likely to avoid some of the worst features of humankind.

The MaddAddam novels, often read as dystopias, are therefore only dystopic from the narrow perspective of humanity. From the point of view of the Crakers, or of the biosphere at large, the world after the "Waterless Flood" is significantly better than before. Atwood herself has noted that she does not believe in pure utopias or dystopias: "within each utopia, a concealed dystopia; within each dystopia, a hidden utopia" (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 82). She uses the world "ustopia" to describe the inevitable fusion of the two genres. "*Ustopia*," she writes, "is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia – the imagined perfect society and its opposite – because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other" (ATWOOD, 2011, p. 82). The novels in the trilogy are ustopias because their utopian or dystopian outlook depends on whose perspective we adopt: that of the billions who perished in the Waterless Flood, of the human survivors, of the Crakers, of non-human beings, and so on. However, the narratives are also ***us*topias** in that they invite readers to reflect about us, humans, as a species. Does *Homo sapiens* deserve to live, or would the world really be better off without us? And is this a matter of choice, or has our fate already been sealed by the unintended, cumulative effect of our actions? Atwood leaves these questions open in her texts but makes it clear that the future of our planet hangs in the balance.

Offshoots of modernity, both utopia and dystopia are based on a conception of human beings as rational individuals in charge of their lives and able to choose, as a group, how best to live them. By offering models of significantly better or worse social arrangements, the two genres presuppose that humans can decide how to organize themselves to either emulate superior polities or avoid the mistakes of bad ones.[16] Even the possibility of human annihilation through nuclear technology still involved a choice. To be sure, no one could elect not to have a nuclear disaster such as Chernobyl, but people were able to determine not to start a nuclear war. This element of volition that is crucial to utopianism and dystopianism is all but absent from an understanding of humanity as a species. Humankind has certainly not decided to overpopulate the Earth beyond its carrying capacity or give rise to global warming. By delivering themselves to unbridled expansion and modification of the planet to meet the needs of their growing numbers, humans irrationally undermined the conditions for their own survival. Can such a predicament devoid of volition still allow for utopian and dystopian thought?

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[16] The modern conception of humans as rational individuals is questioned from early on. Immanuel Kant, for instance, considered that humans worked toward the betterment of society almost in spite of themselves. By believing to act in their own self-interest, they were, in fact, promoting the cause of humanity and progress towards perpetual peace. This was also, *mutatis mutandis*, the idea behind Adam Smith's notion of the invisible hand, through which individual and often selfish decisions contributed to the well-oiled functioning of the market. Both of these ideas, however, presupposed the existence of God, who guaranteed that the sum total of human actions led history (or the market) in the right direction. With the erosion of faith in a divine entity, history came to be perceived as the result of scattered decisions with no obvious greater purpose and determined by the limited understanding of the individuals who made them.

Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy prompts readers to assess humankind as a species. For scientist Crake, *Homo sapiens* is not worth saving and the future of humanity lies in the Crakers. "As a species we're doomed by hope, then," asks Jimmy in one of the novels. Crake replies, in a continuation of the dialogue: "'You could call it hope. That, or desperation.' / 'But we're doomed without hope, as well,' said Jimmy. / 'Only as individuals,' said Crake cheerfully. / 'Well, it sucks.' / 'Jimmy, grow up'" (ATWOOD, 2004, p. 139). In a reiteration of the arguments adduced by utopia's detractors, Crake came to the conclusion that hope – the driving force of utopia and dystopia, in different ways – is the root cause of human destructiveness. Utopia realized, the Crakers are devoid of hope, in the same way as they experience no fear. The world of Crakers and Craker-Humans enabled by Crake's release of the "Waterless Flood" plague is therefore a better version of human society. True, it came into being after one last act of human volition – the will of a mad scientist –but the novels suggest that humanity was doomed one way of the other. Crake's actions only sped up a process already well underway, creating a utopia/dystopia of life without human life.

What is, then, the role of utopian and dystopian thought in the Anthropocene? For one, considering human beings not as rational individuals, fully able to determine all aspects of their lives, but as a species that is not insulated from its surroundings means an emphasis on the *topos* of utopia. A world without humans would be considered utopian exactly because humanity's systematic destruction of its environment, of the *topos* that is the planet we inhabit, would come to an end. Our ability to imagine the globe without *Homo sapiens* as utopian can also be seen as a coming of age of humans, who finally get over the narcissistic belief that they are god(s)'s gift to the Earth, and realize that they turned out to be more of a curse. But a post-human world such as the one created by Crake is just one possible scenario, a "what if" among others. What if we give hope a chance after all? Can there still be a utopia that would include us humans in the mix? And what would be the role of such a utopian desideratum in the age of the Anthropocene?

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