

Book Review

Human Nature in Utopia: Zamyatin's We by Brett Cooke. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002.

Reviewed by Gary Cox

Human Nature in Utopia argues a startling hypothesis about utopian systems. Building a society on a completely rational model is not just a political mistake but a scientific and philosophical one. A rational society is just not what we are evolved for, so the critique of hyperrationalist societies in *Brave New World* (Huxley), *1984* (Orwell), and Evgenii Zamyatin's *We* can be understood anew from the viewpoint of evolutionary science. Zamyatin's anti-utopia (dystopia) was one of the earliest ones written, but it remains one of the least known. It may also be the only one written in a society that was actually being rebuilt on utopian lines, although Zamyatin managed to emigrate before the Soviet Union's most nightmarish potentials were realized. All of this makes an evolutionary reading of *We* a hot topic not only to evolutionary scientists, literary scholars, political scientists, and historians, but to policymakers as well. Brett Cooke takes us through it meticulously and perceptively, with a "sidelong glance" at other dystopian literature that is just about encyclopedic.

Cooke's book will still be rough going for most of us. Readers who come to it from evolutionary psychology will be challenged by material from the Soviet 20s, from other anti-utopian literature, and from *We* itself, which they are unlikely to have read. Advice: get a copy and read it alongside Cooke's book; it's a neglected gem (outside Russian Studies circles) and will reward your efforts. Literary scholars and Slavists will find Cooke a challenge as they will be reading classic literature in an unfamiliar context, alongside E. O. Wilson, Tooby and Cosmides, and their ilk, -- an excellent challenge for scholars accustomed to post-modernist drivel.

Although the book's basic thesis, that utopia's mistake is denying human nature, is argued perceptively in the introduction, it is easy to lose track of it in the pages that follow, as the idea is disconcertingly broad. Most of Cooke's book asks whether sociobiological themes are present in *We* to the extent we would expect,

and whether Zamyatin comments implicitly on evolutionary issues. The answers are “yes” and “yes,” but the details sometimes seem quotidian. In particular, the chapter on food sharing, unfortunately the second, is quite mechanical in spots. (Yes, people in dystopian novels are depicted eating together and, yes, food sharing is characteristic of sapient hominids.) Non-mathematicians (such as your humble servant) who want to understand the math of *We* (Zamyatin was a professional engineer) will appreciate chapter four, where the Euclidian/Newtonian math of the “United State” is contrasted with the Lobachevskian/Einsteinian math of its subversive opponents. Chapter five, “Child’s Play,” comments interestingly on the role of neoteny (persistence of juvenile features in adulthood) in evolution, and also discusses Zamyatin’s important article “On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters.” This piece is well-known to Russianists but should be better known among evolutionary psychologists. It posits an ideal of “perpetual revolution” and shows Zamyatin a fine theorist of cultural evolution, although the idea is put forward in a Marxist, not a Darwinian, context. The chapter on the United State’s *Lex sexualis* will garner the most interest, owing to the magnitude of sexual issues in evolutionary psychology, not to mention the magnitude of sexual interests in most humans. A final chapter on self-expression shows that one can discuss ontology and epistemology of fictional texts without buying a lot of post-modernist claptrap.

If some of us have our way, there will be more studies like Cooke’s. Unfortunately, there is an overwhelming bias in the publishing world, and in academic circles, against literary scholarship that contradicts the shibboleths of post-modernism (a.k.a. post-structuralism, deconstruction, literary theory). Northwestern University Press should be applauded for starting to breach this wall, along with University of Missouri Press, which brought out Joseph Carroll’s *Evolution and Literary Theory* a few years back [1995]. The utopians’ mistake of hyperrationalism is also one of the errors of the post-modernists, who hold that irrational prejudices may be overcome by multiculturalist homilies. (Never mind that, undaunted by the hobgoblin of consistency, they also argue the incommunicability of knowledge.) David Miall’s panel on “Literature, Cognition & the Brain” at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association has become a subversive fixture in the deconstructionists’ holy-of-holies. The website by the same name (Miall’s with Alan Richardson <<http://www2.bc.edu/~richarad/lcb/>>) is a good place to start researching this topic, as is Francis Steen’s “Cog Web: Cognitive Cultural Studies” <<http://cogweb.ucla.edu/>>. There are also “Bio-aesthetics” panels at the annual conference of the Human Behavior and Evolution Society, though these panels are less likely to be noticed by practicing deconstructionists. My own study of the evolved basis of behavior in the work of rabid anti-Darwinist Fyodor Dostoevsky (“Russia’s Feminine Soul Revisited: A Neo-Darwinian Look at Dostoyevskian Group Psychology,” *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, vol. 35 [2002]) may become a book. It is time for similar studies of

_____ (your favorite author's name here). Shakespeare? Homer, not to mention other world folklores? Chaucer? Dante? Thomas Hardy? Flannery O'Connor? The field is still fairly wide open. The exchange of fantasy narratives is a basic human proclivity, so there is fertile ground for study.

Assignments: 1.) Read Brett Cooke's book on Zamyatin (Remedial reading for this assignment is Zamyatin's *We* itself). Due: ASAP. 2.) Answer this question: How are themes important to evolving humans reflected in your favorite fictional literature? Due: When received. 3.) Write your own book. Due: The very near future.

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