

Out of Utopia?

Hans Achterhuis on Welfare and Happiness

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[GER GROOT]

The words 'welfare and happiness' set the tone for the book with which the Dutch philosopher, Hans Achterhuis (1942-), would achieve public recognition in 1980. But those words did not stand alone. The title of the book, which gave rise to intense debate about the way in which the state was expected to improve the lives of its less fortunate subjects in particular, was *The Welfare and Happiness Market* (De markt van welzijn en geluk). 'Clients' should be offered assistance that would make them more able to stand up for their rights. Consciousness-raising and empowerment were supposed to transform them from deprived and dependent beings into assertive individuals who were better able to defend their own interests.

In *The Welfare and Happiness Market* Achterhuis demonstrated that this approach had the opposite effect. The 'clients' just became more dependent on their social workers, who for their part profited from this continuing dependence. Social work created its own ever-growing market, concluded Achterhuis, inspired by the Austrian-born but Mexico-based philosopher and theologian Ivan Illich. Achterhuis' analysis greatly influenced Dutch social work and academic training courses for social workers, a number of which would disappear from the scene in the years of economic crisis that followed.

The Welfare and Happiness Market exemplifies the way in which Achterhuis practises philosophy. Without exception his books engage in intensive discussion of the problems and spirit of the time. In his essays he refers with equal ease to eminent thinkers from the history of philosophy and to recent newspaper commentary or news reports. His sceptical mind is usually one step ahead of the prevailing opinion that he is debating. This makes Achterhuis one of the most remarkable of Dutch philosophers and a prominent personality in public debate.

But he has not always been so sceptical. In 1975, in his widely-read volume *Philosophers of the Third World* (Filosofen van de derde wereld) he still aligned himself enthusiastically with such ideological heroes of the time as Frantz Fanon, Mao Tse Tung and, even then, Ivan Illich. And two years before that, in his book *The Postponed Revolution* (De uitgestelde revolutie) he had pinned his hopes on the Third World to force a global revolution in economic relations and especially in lifestyle, with Mao's China and Castro's Cuba as models.

But a lot of philosophising later there is not much of that left. In 1998 Achter-

huis published his voluminous study *The Legacy of Utopia* (De erfenis van de utopie), from which the text that follows this article is taken. Achterhuis starts this insistent plea against the lure of utopia with a confession: 'The fascination of utopias is not strange to me (...) and in the past failure to adequately recognise the dangers thereof has undoubtedly let me down.' However, he recounts, 'when I was working on the chapter on Mao in "Philosophers of the Third World", I had a nightmare. I dreamed that I personally had landed up in the Chinese Cultural Revolution (...) In retrospect I think I should have paid more attention to this dream. It would have given me more insight into the Cultural Revolution than all the texts I could read about it as an interested outsider'.

In this book, then, utopia operates as something to be feared rather than as something auspicious for the future. Referring to an impressive number of historical and contemporary utopias (from Thomas More to Ayn Rand and from Campanella to Huxley) Achterhuis shows how they are invariably fuelled by a dream of controllability that cannot help but lead to a totalitarian form of society. Utopia turns into dystopia almost by itself, he discovered with a shock when he read *Ecotopia*, the American author Ernest Callenbach's ecological utopia. 'Why would I never want to live in *Ecotopia*?' Achterhuis wondered, after reading the book at one sitting during a journey on an American Greyhound bus. That question became the starting point for his book.

Achterhuis reached his conclusion after a lengthy diversion via books about the ambiguous status of work in the modern world (*Work, a Peculiar Remedy* (Arbeid, een eigenaardig medicijn, 1984)) and the way in which modern economic thinking has begun to focus more and more on the spectre of scarcity (*The Realm of Shortages* (Het rijk van de schaarste, 1988)). Third World thinkers were gradually supplanted by a succession of other authors that Achterhuis discovered: Michel Foucault, René Girard and Hannah Arendt. More and more, too, his work is inspired by Albert Camus, the author he had studied in the 1960s for his doctorate.

In his book on utopia Achterhuis shows extreme reserve regarding any blueprint that claims to be able to establish the ideal society by means of positive measures. He demonstrates how badly that can turn out with reference not only to the implications of the many proposals put forward in the wealth of utopian literature. On a completely different level he also attacked this way of thinking in his pamphlet *The Politics of Good Intentions* (Politiek van goede bedoelingen, 1999), in which he fiercely criticised the Western interventions in Kosovo. Those who allow themselves to be led by humanitarian benevolence alone, without a cool, hard analysis of the political situation, run the risk of causing more casualties than there would otherwise have been, he argued.

In politics, concluded Achterhuis, uncompromising godness can easily become a road to Hell. In his extensive study of violence (*With Maximum Violence* (Met alle geweld, 2008)) he was forced to draw the equally sober conclusion that a culture or society completely free of violence is an illusion that can easily end up as the opposite of what it is trying to achieve. Even so, as he had already written in his short study *Utopia* (Utopie, 2006), which can be read both as a summary and as a critical revision of his big book on the subject, we cannot manage without images of an ideal society – if only to give direction to the actual steps we take in the long piecemeal engineering that is politics.

Remarkably enough, Achterhuis had already identified the positive side of the future dream in *The Legacy of Utopia* – not in the blueprint of a social ideal

but in the promise of future technology. As a professor at the technologically-oriented University of Twente, Achterhuis started to focus on the philosophy of technology in the 1990s. Gradually the distrust of technology inspired in him by the 1970s shifted to a more positive standpoint in which he not only recognises the merits of technical-scientific progress, but also states that culture and society are not subject willy-nilly to its evolution.

This idea is brought out in the following passage from the book, which has been somewhat abridged for this publication. In it Achterhuis opposes the vision of the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who – just like Aldous Huxley in his dystopian novel, *Brave New World* – sees technological development as a danger to humanity. Technology, concludes Achterhuis – with reference to George Orwell – can certainly free humanity from a neediness that for its part might well be called ‘inhuman’. As technical promise, utopia has rights which are better denied it as *social* promise. ■

Happiness and Suffering in Utopia Achieved

By Hans Achterhuis

‘Science does change the world. If part of our humanness is our susceptibility to certain sorts of pain, then the task of curing pain may involve putting an end to humanness.’¹ That is the weighty conclusion that Martha Nussbaum attaches to her own technical utopia, derived from her discussion of Plato’s *Protagoras*. Nussbaum starts by describing humanity when it has just received the gift of reverence and justice from Zeus in the myth recounted by Plato.

People now knew these virtues, to be sure, but they still came into conflict over them. If they got into arguments over numbers, weights or measures, they could resort to their technical knowledge to solve them. Questions to do with living together were not so simple. Passions continued to flare, conflicts between different values – piety versus public-spiritedness, love versus justice – continued to trouble them. Some choices seemed always to result in confusion and pain.

People even invented an art form to express that fact: the tragedy. And the greatest wisdom on the subject was, according to Sophocles, that ‘it is best for a person not to be born’.

Apollo, the god of sunlight, rational order and numbers, felt sorry for humanity. He sent them a messenger, in the person of Socrates, who taught them the *technè*, in which all values could be reduced to pleasure and pain, so that they could then be weighed rationally against each other and maximised. The deity’s gift wrought a wonderful change in the lives of the hitherto so unfortunate creatures. Their whole existence was now governed by an orderly and measurable happiness. Their society, too, took on a new, orderly appearance. Chance, whims and passions were banned. People became ‘parts of a single system; not quantitatively special, but indistinguishable’.² Thus was humanity saved by Socrates’ *technè*.

As Nussbaum describes this salvation in detail, many familiar utopian/dystopian terms recur. Utilitarian calculations of pleasure and pain make moral choices simple, bringing up children along scientific lines is easy. What particularly interests me here is, of course, the theme of utopia achieved. In fact Nussbaum states plainly that this new race could no longer understand the classical tragedies. And even if these new people did read them, the tragedies were about a way of life that was alien to them.



This engraving first appeared in 1609, to illustrate the earlier *Civitas Veri*, or ‘City of Truth’ by Bartolomeo Del Bene: a utopia with towers, walls, castles, walkways, courtyards, orchards, and so on.

‘Here is a character, Haemon, inflamed with what he calls passionate love, killing himself because this one woman, Antigone, whom he loves, has died. This is incomprehensible. Why does he think that she is not precisely replaceable by any other (pleasurable) object in the world?’³

Fortunately people like Haemon and Antigone rarely appear any more in the new world that Socrates has formalised. If this does still happen occasionally, if, for example, someone exhibits unique preferences rather than rational desires and admits to various values that cannot be reduced to each other, he must, alas, be ‘put to death as a plague on the city’. To celebrate this good fortune the annual ‘festival of Socrates’ is substituted for the performance of the now incomprehensible tragedies. ‘The works of art they present are the clear, reasonable prose dialogues that have taken the place of tragic theatre; they celebrate Socrates’ courageous search for the life-saving art.’⁴

Irony drips from these last sentences. However, Nussbaum’s conclusion, with which I started this article, is deadly serious. Anyone who is in any way susceptible to anxiety about utopia achieved will recognise its rhetorical force. Nussbaum suggests that if we go wholeheartedly down the road Socrates indi-

cates in the *Protagoras*, our humanness will go by the board. If we take a technical approach to tackling pain, sorrow and misery, it may well yield the promised happiness – although Nussbaum’s ironic tone makes it clear that she rates it as pseudo-happiness – but we will lose what we consider to be humanness. And for her the most important proof of this is that we will no longer be able to understand the tragedies. Tragic choices between equally compelling values, which is often what is referred to here, do not after all stand up to the all-consuming light of calculating, technical reason.

How well-founded is Nussbaum’s fear that we will lose our humanness if we set about combating certain types of pain which, according to her, are inherent to being a human being? The first question that I would like to ask is: what would have happened if the Athenians and in their wake the whole of subsequent Western culture had listened to Nussbaum instead of Socrates. Nussbaum clearly suggests that that is, in fact, what they did little by little. They set a course in which the technical approach was given a place alongside the symbolic-linguistic. This school of thought made a definite breakthrough with the scientific revolution and the utopian-technical thinking of someone like Bacon. Only from a completely technophobic way of thinking could it be argued that it completely supplanted the symbolic-linguistic approach. Rather, both approaches were put on an equal footing; but this is extremely difficult for representatives of the symbolic-linguistic approach, who throughout history had always had the upper hand, to swallow. They can only perceive one big nightmare scenario in which everything can be expressed in numbers, in other words a technical utopia achieved, in which there is no longer any room for literature like Shakespeare or the classical tragedies.

I have made it clear that this last has turned out better than expected. But that is not what I am interested in now. My question was: what would have happened if the Athenians had listened to Nussbaum? I do not want to elaborate on the thought experiment that could serve as the answer to this. It seems to me to come down to a certain sort of social stagnation. Anyone who automatically rejects fighting against certain types of pain because they just happen to be inherent to the human condition excludes a scientific-technological approach to reality. After all, any step in that direction can lead us to the terrible Brave New World of utopia, in which we have exchanged our humanity for an illusory happiness. Fear of this imposes limits in advance on every technological undertaking.

In *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* Hans Jonas introduces the concept of the ‘heuristics of fear’. Fear of an erosion of our humanness by the possible, unpredictable and irreparable consequences of our technological actions should, according to him, be the guiding principle for all future technological development. Basically this seems to come down to an absolute negative, on his part, to certain technologies whose consequences for mankind, society and the environment can, of course, never be accurately calculated. However, that has been true of all great technological developments ever since the scientific revolution. And

from the very start of that there were warnings that it posed a threat to man's humanness. After all, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* dates from 1817. If any notice had been taken back then of those fearful voices, clamouring loudly in the broad groups of society inspired by Romanticism, science and technology would certainly have been called to a halt. Later on, most of the present-day critics of technology who think like Jonas would undoubtedly have argued that this would have been a bit previous. The question we need to answer, however, is why we should follow this kind of heuristic principle nowadays. There seem to be no more compelling reasons now than there were at the start of the nineteenth century. Then, too, the best available knowledge offered absolutely no guarantee that our humanness would not be threatened by the advances in science and technology.

We can go back much further in our thought experiment with Nussbaum. If her advice had been followed, the technical invention of alphabetical script would probably, indeed almost certainly, not have been developed. After all, in the *Phaedrus* and his *Seventh Letter*, Plato offered some good and, in those days, valid-sounding arguments which showed that writing would lead to the disappearance of some of the fundamental characteristics that constituted man's humanness. In retrospect we can easily argue that these characteristics were part of an oral culture, which was indeed doomed to be lost to the rise of the new technology – Plato was right about that. Nussbaum would be unlikely to claim that man's humanness, or culture as such, has been lost along with it. What goes for writing also applies to other technologies. If in the past, for example, mining or the opening of the human body had been subjected to the heuristics of fear, the Industrial Revolution would never have taken place nor modern medicine have developed. Both activities were surrounded by so many cultural taboos and anxieties that it is a wonder – in retrospect again, of course – that they were ever undertaken at all. It was only possible because of the utopian promises of wealth and prosperity, the curing of sickness and deferment of death, which overcame cultural fear. Nussbaum's anxiety about the possible dystopian side of these promises would have made her a bad counsellor in the past, as I assume she herself would admit. But nowhere does she explain why that should not also be the case today.

As the last historical part of my thought experiment I will take Huxley and his time. From his preface to *Brave New World* it is clear that he would not have liked it if science and technology had stagnated in the period in which he situates the Savage. Unlike the character in his novel, Huxley opts for the normality of his own time. He obviously appreciates its technological achievements, but they have gone far enough. Science and technology must once more be subjected to cultural restrictions, otherwise we will hurtle towards the dehumanisation of the Brave New World. But anyone in the 1930s who looked a little further than this scion of the English elite could hardly have subscribed to this opinion. As a counter to Huxley's rather rosy view of society as it was then I would

point to *The Road to Wigan Pier*, by that other great dystopian whose instinct for injustice and social misery was much sharper. In this authoritative report on the living conditions of English miners Orwell described the underside of exactly that society of which Huxley, from his privileged position, was so enamoured. 'For it is brought home to you, at least while you are watching, that it is only because miners sweat their guts out that superior persons can remain superior'.⁵ In contrast to the apolitical Huxley, Orwell, who was very much a political animal, understood darned well that changing this inhuman situation was a matter of social justice. At the same time he also knew that scientific and technical progress could contribute to alleviating this very real abject misery, which was at least as bad as the fictitious circumstances of the Savage that Huxley described. Despite his relatively comfortable position as an intellectual, Orwell never entirely shared the dystopian-tinted technophobia of many of his contemporaries. His dystopian anxieties concerned the dangers of a social utopia, dangers to which Huxley remained blind. Undoubtedly this can be partly explained by the fact that the latter remained entangled in the rhetoric of utopia, whilst Orwell, recognising and seeing through its temptations, made a radical break with it.

Undoubtedly this last point deserves further development. At present, with this comparison between Huxley and Orwell I just wanted to stress that the 1930s and '40s again offer hardly any reasons why at that time technology ought once again to be subjected to traditional cultural limits, however much Huxley and a broad group of cultural and technological critics may, for what they considered good reasons, have advocated it. So, it seems to me that the good reasons that have been lacking for some twenty-five centuries already barely exist today either. The structure of the argument for fearing utopia/dystopia achieved has not changed, but the gloomy predictions have never come true.

I do not want to escape from the dilemma with which Huxley, with utopian logic, confronts the reader by opting for some sort of comfortable normality, but by disputing the compelling nature of this logic. In the above I have done that chiefly by showing that the dystopians' fear of utopia achieved can hardly be called well-founded. But the opposite is also true. I would like to put a large question mark beside utopian expectations as well. The promises of future attainable happiness have not been borne out, any more than the fear of dehumanisation. Certainly many, many of the objectives of the technical utopias have been realised, but nowhere have they brought the peaceful and glorious happiness that was supposed to be associated with them.

The radio did not bring us happiness, but neither has it plunged us into ruin as cultural pessimists initially feared. It has undoubtedly enlarged our cultural perspectives, but it would be a gross exaggeration to claim that it has fundamentally changed the human condition with its constant alternation of suffering and happiness. The same applies to television, too, despite the dystopian pronouncements so closely associated with it. However fundamentally it may have

influenced our lifestyle, this technological invention has neither made us happy nor permanently dehumanised us. The same is true of all technological developments of which utopian/dystopian discourse expected, in turn, absolute salvation or total dehumanisation. One by one they have been integrated into modern human existence and new stories, of suffering and grief as well as of pleasure and joy, have been woven around them. So would we want to rid ourselves of radio and television because they have not fulfilled our utopian expectations? That hardly seems to be the case. At least as important as the pursuit of happiness and the struggle against suffering, which are behind scientific and technological developments, is, it seems to me, the desire to understand and control the world. Radio and television are among the wonders that have made this possible. Even if they have not brought lasting happiness, as long as they have not caused the feared dehumanisation prophesied by the Utopia Achieved Syndrome, there seems no reason whatsoever to react with this constant sense of unease.

Is it not this desire to control that is, ultimately, at the core of all this? As well as controlling and manipulating reality, is it not also important to have an attitude of passivity and acceptance? Is it not this which has been completely supplanted by the trend towards control by technical means? And is not this the greatest danger against which the Savage struggles? Is this not the ultimate temptation of the technologically-tinted utopia that we must constantly resist? I do not wish to completely deny the legitimacy of this sort of question, but I do think that the desire for control, just like the pursuit of happiness, is never-ending. Each new technological artefact that it produces raises new – or better, perhaps, age-old – problems for the human condition that can just lead to rebellion against our lot as to acceptance of it. Every form of control produces side effects which cannot be controlled in advance. At present, the fear of dehumanisation through total control seems to be as unfounded as the fear of soulless happiness.

From *The Legacy of Utopia* (De erfenis van de utopie. Amsterdam: Ambo, 1998).
Translated by Lindsay Edwards

NOTES

1. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 120
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*. In: *Orwell's England*. London: Penguin, 2001, p. 79