

Introduction

The Reality of Imaginary Communities

It seems to me that we are living through a long revolution, which our best descriptions only in part interpret. It is a genuine revolution, transforming men and institutions; continually extended and deepened by the actions of millions, continually and variously opposed by explicit reaction and by the pressure of habitual forms and ideas. Yet it is a difficult revolution to define, and its uneven action is taking place over so long a period that it is almost impossible not to get lost in its exceptionally complicated process.

Raymond Williams, The Long Revolution

Taking up the critical project Raymond Williams announced in the early 1960s of reinterpreting and extending the ideas and values of the past “in terms of a still changing society and my own experience of it,” this book examines some important dimensions of the changing relationship between space and community during the “long revolution” of Western modernity.¹ In addition to contributing to a reconsideration of modernity in terms of its “spatial histories,” this book also does a number of other things: most important, it looks at the origins and subsequent adventures of the singularly modern construct of the nation-state; it investigates some of the difficulties that arise for those in the twentieth century who attempt to imagine new spaces, communities, and histories; it reflects on the potentialities of different kinds of representational and narrative practices, questions made especially important for us today in the light of new electronic literacies and information technologies; and, finally, it explores some alternatives to contemporary methods of studying modern literature and culture.

Drawing together these various agendas is the particularly rich and, as I will show in the following pages, uniquely modern literary genre of the narrative utopia. There has been a surge of interest in the question

of utopia lately, signaled by a number of important new studies, the publication of a major new narrative utopia in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy* (1993–96), and the staging of an international exhibition in Paris and New York in the year 2000.² I believe all this interest points toward a recognition of the deep relationship between utopia and the experience of a modernity now widely understood to be in the midst of a thoroughgoing transformation. While the story that unfolds in the following pages centers on the institutional and formal development of the genre of the utopia, this generic history is understood to be inseparable from a history of modernity in which the works comprising this important genre play such a significant role. Throughout this book then, I argue for the “reality” of the imaginary communities realized within these earlier texts. They are not real in that they portray actual places in the world; rather, they are real, in the sense suggested by Etienne Balibar in the epigraph to this book, in that they have material, pedagogical, and ultimately political effects, shaping the ways people understand and, as a consequence, act in their worlds.³ In short, narrative utopias serve as a way both of telling and of making modern history, and in this lies their continued importance for us today.

As many readers will recognize, the title of this book also recalls that of Benedict Anderson's influential study of the rise of the “imagined communities” of the modern nation-state.⁴ Anderson too describes such communities as “imagined” precisely because while most of their members will never encounter one other, each believes they all share some deep, transhistorical bond. Such a belief has had tremendous consequences for the history of the modern world, a fact made evident almost daily in newspaper headlines. Liah Greenfeld has called this imagined community the “constitutive element of modernity,” and much of the story I tell in the following pages focuses on the formation and the subsequent history of this construct.⁵ I argue that the narrative utopia plays a crucial role in the constitution of the nation-state as an original spatial, social, and cultural form. Beginning with the work that founds the genre, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), there has been a continuous exchange of energies between the imaginary communities of the narrative utopia and the imagined communities of the nation-state, the former providing one of the first spaces for working out the particular shapes and boundaries of the latter. These imaginary communities are “nowhere,” as the etymological root of the term *utopia* bears out, precisely to the degree that they make *somewhere* possible, offering a mechanism by which people will invent anew the communities as well as the places

they inhabit. The utopia's imaginary community is thus not only a way of imagining subjectivity, but also a way of imagining space, thereby helping the nation-state to become both the agent and locus of much of modernity's histories.

If the particular social and cultural institution known as the nation-state has a history, then like any other history, it will be marked by intense moments of upheaval, contradiction, and change. The dawn of the twentieth century witnessed one such moment, in which, beginning in the early decades of this century, the narrative utopia became one of the places where a crisis in this conception of the subject and object of modernity was first registered, a crisis that has taken on a new significance and intensity in our own present. The second half of this book explores the ways some of the most influential narrative utopias of the twentieth century navigate this new social and cultural terrain, as modernity enters into a new phase, marked by a growing consciousness of the place of the nation-state in a global cultural and social space (although, as I argue, the spatial histories of modernity, from their very beginnings, always already take shape on a world stage). The questions these works address are crucial ones: If our social and cultural space is now global, what will be the nature of the communities, the subjects of history, that will operate within it? How do we imagine such a space? And how might we speak its history? A discussion of the formal evolution of the narrative utopia thus also offers a way of bringing into focus some of the monumental changes that occurred earlier in this century in both the practice and representation of space.

In addition to offering new ways to read the histories of modernity, my study of narrative utopias also aims to alter our understanding of how we use diverse narrative forms to make sense of—indeed, to make—our world. Such a reconsideration becomes especially important as we attempt in the new millennium both to imagine innovative forms of political activity and to come to grips with the immense possibilities made available by emergent information technologies. At the heart of this book lies my contention that the narrative utopia is a specific kind of representational act, and also a particular way of conceptualizing the world. I use the term *re-presentation* here in the sense given by the German word, *Darstellung*, with its double implication of representation *and* presentation, encompassing both practices of reproduction and those of a much more active performance of the world. The specificity of the narrative utopia's representational and cognitive practices is too often overlooked in many other discussions of the form that tend to see

it either as a lesser kind of literature or a branch of social theory, and thus relegate it, on the one hand, to the specialized domains of the literary critic or, on the other, to those of the intellectual historian or political scientist.⁶

Neither characterization adequately grasps the nature of the work performed by the utopia. The representational practices of literature give expression to the unique and concrete lived experiences of collective or, in the case of most modern texts, individual ways of being in the world—that is, of particular phenomenological inhabitations of its spaces. The representational practices of theory, on the other hand—or what Louis Althusser calls “science”—attempt to perceive in a coherent and systematic fashion the abstract principles organizing the totalities in which these experiences take place. And never, apparently, do these two meet. However, the narrative utopia, along with the larger class of representational practices of which it is a part, occupies a middle ground between the phenomenological concreteness of the literary aesthetic and the abstract systematicity of the theoretical, working instead to develop a conception or, to use a term whose significance will emerge later in my discussion of the groundbreaking work of Louis Marin, a *figuration* of a space whose lived experience and theoretical perception only later become possible. Thus, in a very real way, first mapping the terrain that will be inhabited by literary art and theory, the narrative utopia serves as an in-between form that mediates and binds together these other representational acts.

It is precisely this sense of the utopian text as engaging in a particular kind of praxis, a specific representational activity, that I mean to emphasize through my use throughout this book of the phrase *narrative utopia*. This too flies in the face of much of the received wisdom about these works. Utopias are too often read as static descriptions of a place, real or ideal, with “description” being implicitly understood to be the “other” to the temporal, or process, orientation of narrative. However, I argue that in forms like the narrative utopia, description itself serves as what in other contexts we think of as action or plot, so that social and cultural space and communal identity slowly emerge before our eyes by way of a process Roland Barthes calls “semiosis.” With this term, Barthes means to distinguish a whole class of texts—providing what might seem at first glance an improbable link between the writings of the Marquis de Sade, Charles Fourier, and Ignatius Loyola—that, unlike the mimetic imperative driving literature and theory, dislocate the problem of reference. Far more significant for these kinds of texts is what

Barthes describes as the “performance of discourse,” the very activity of making the world through language.⁷ Thus, the classical Enlightenment figure of the map, with its presupposition of a singular “God’s-eye view” upon a fixed and stable space, is an inappropriate one for the narrative utopia. Narrative utopias are more akin to traveler’s itineraries, or an architectural sketch, tracing an exploratory trajectory, a narrative line that, as it unfolds, quite literally engenders something new in the world.⁸

This implies a dramatic temporal reorientation as well; for if both literary and theoretical representations approach the narrative present in terms of the past, attempting to grasp it as some form of a completed whole, semiotic itineraries or performances like those of the narrative utopia conceive of the present in terms of the future, as something that is incomplete and continuously coming into being. That is, the present, its concerns, desires, and contradictions, rather than being the end of the representational practices of the narrative utopia (as in those of literature or theory), serves as the very raw material from which the narrative performance will generate something original. These productive performances are what made these works so electrifying for their contemporary audiences, confronting them with all the shock of the new. In this book, I want to recapture some of this energy and excitement and thereby help us, too, to begin again to think of the possibilities of the new.

Both this “in-betweenness” and the orientation toward the future account for the cultural pedagogical force of utopian texts. The particular narrative utopias I discuss at length in this book—most centrally, More’s *Utopia*, Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, Alexander Bogdanov’s *Red Star*, Jack London’s *The Iron Heel*, Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—were, along with numerous other representatives of the genre that I touch on more briefly (including, among others, Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, William Morris’s *News From Nowhere*, Arthur Dudley Vinton’s *Looking Further Backward*, Ignatius Donnelly’s *Caesar’s Column*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*, H. G. Wells’s *A Modern Utopia*, and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*), deeply influential in their particular times and places, contributing to, and often directly shaping, debates over a wide range of social and cultural concerns. Indeed, one of the most exciting aspects of studying these works in their contexts is witnessing the passionate and engaged public discussions they often provoked. However, in addition to these immediate effects, many of which I elaborate in the coming chapters, the very narra-

tive practices made available by utopian texts helped transform how their readers understood and acted in the world in far more profound ways as well. By inserting something heretofore unknown in the world—an original conception, figure, or what one of More’s contemporaries called a “speaking picture”—the narrative utopia generates the cognitive space around which new kinds of lived experiences and theoretical perceptions form. Thus, understanding the past work of narrative utopias has real consequences for how we live and perceive modernity in the new millennium.

Each of the chapters of this book is organized in such a way as to form a kind of “in-between” representation as well, being at once theoretical—mobilizing and exploring the points of contact between a wide range of different discourses—and historical, focusing on how various narrative utopias engage with the concerns of their time and place while participating in the ongoing, long revolution of modernity. Thus, this study in its very form calls into question some of the conventions of current intellectual work, and attempts to clear a space for a new kind of relational-spatial study of cultural texts. I explicitly address these issues in Chapter 1, where I begin by reconsidering what is still too often perceived as the discredited work of genre criticism. I argue first that problems arise when we assume that genre study involves only the creation of textual taxonomies. In order to circumvent these problems, I elaborate an alternative approach to genre that reads it as a fundamental aspect of the self-interpreting “being-in-the-world,” or Heideggerean *Dasein*, of any text. Such a self-reflexive awareness becomes evident both in the ways each text in the genre engages with its predecessors and in its particular remaking of the generic institution in response to its particular historical context. Thus, in a manner reminiscent of Heidegger’s phenomenological analysis, my approach to genre sets aside the impossible goal of describing definitively the set of necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in the genre—which would be nothing less than a quest after ontological *essences*—and instead explores how such a critical self-awareness defines the genre’s *existence*. Like all such institutional beings, genres exist in time, and thus genre provides a means of reviving a kind of historical thinking, stressing the relationship between cultural texts located in different times and places, unavailable in many contemporary critical reading strategies, including those of the New Historicism and a good deal of cultural studies. Through this discussion, I hope to contribute to the project of constructing a richer, multidimensional approach to any cultural text.

The next section of Chapter 1 examines in more detail the particular nature of the representational practices of the narrative utopia. Central to my discussion at this point is the work of the French social philosopher and theorist of space, Henri Lefebvre. Only recently becoming more widely known to an English-reading audience, Lefebvre's innovative studies of the spatiality of contemporary life have been central to many of the most influential recent discussions of modernity and post-modernism. I show how Lefebvre's crowning achievement, *The Production of Space*, and the dialectical tripartite model of space that it develops provide a powerful tool for rethinking the practices of the narrative utopia. However, as I emphasize throughout this book, the spatial mapping of modernity takes place alongside an equally important critical assault on already existing practices and spaces. I thus conclude this chapter by examining some of the theoretical work—including that of the most significant twentieth-century student of utopia, Ernst Bloch—that highlights this dimension of the form. What emerges is a dialectical understanding of the relationship between the temporal and spatial dimensions of the narrative utopia, a dialectic that, I maintain, is at the heart of the experience of modernity as well.⁹

Having established some of the theoretical stakes involved in this project, I begin Chapter 2 with an exploration of the “origins” of this generic institution. Although its roots extend much further back into older traditions of “utopian” thought and representation, the modern narrative utopia has a distinct moment of birth in the 1516 work by the English Christian humanist Thomas More, which at once introduces a new word, literary institution, and conceptual problematic into the European cultural imagination.¹⁰ However, I show that it is not More's original act, but rather a process of “re-authorings” of his narrative undertaken by its subsequent readers—readers among whom I number More himself—that set into place the institutional being-in-the-world of this genre. What these various readers recognized in More's performance was a new tool that enabled them at once to bring into view and participate in the making of a nascent modernity.

One of the most effective theoretical descriptions we have of this particular representational activity is to be found in Louis Marin's important work, *Utopiques: Jeux d'espace*. I also focus in this chapter on Marin's elaboration of the operation he calls “utopian figuration,” a way of mapping, through the narrative elaboration of the “speaking picture” of the utopian text, some of the most significant dimensions of an emerging modernity. However, for all the suggestiveness of Marin's

analysis, the conception of modernity deployed in his text is marked by a crucial blind spot; thus the latter part of this chapter explores another possible way of reading the project of *Utopia*. Marin implicitly accepts the assumption that the history of modernity is one with a telos, gradually moving toward the realization of a single, universal, sociocultural space and subjectivity, wherein all forms of contradiction and conflict have been abolished. Such a vision is shared by theorists of the modern on both the political left and right, from the most enthusiastic socialist visionaries to the most despairing theorists of iron-cage disciplinarity (and continues today, for example, in many invocations of the implicitly teleological concept of “globalization”). In contrast to this view, I argue that modernity is in fact constituted by a fundamental contradiction between universalism and particularism, between the production of homogenous empty space—capital, the money form, labor, and the juridico-political subject—and the formation of new kinds of local identities and spaces distinguished by what Slavoj Žižek calls “organizations of enjoyment,” the “real, non-discursive kernel” materialized through a particular set of social and cultural practices and understood as under constant menace by the Other.¹¹ The brilliance of More’s originary text lies in its mapping of the relationship between these twin dimensions of an emergent modernity, of the constant movement between universalization and particularization, or the de- and re-territorializations of social desire. Thus, in addition to the abstracting and universalizing tendencies so effectively articulated by Marin, we see suddenly exploding forth in More’s work a radically new and deeply spatialized kind of political, social, and cultural formation: that of the modern nation-state.

The success of More’s work in founding this new genre also helped to establish the nation-state as the increasingly naturalized expression of both the space and the subjectivity of modern history. In Chapter 3, I begin to explore the fortunes of this representational practice during the course of the last century. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, the link between the imaginary community of the utopia and the imagined community of the nation-state had become so firmly established that later expressions of the form now also serve to recontain the anxiety-producing clash of publics that occurs within the spatial and cultural boundaries of the national community. This is exactly what unfolds in Bellamy’s phenomenally successful *Looking Backward* (1888). Writing in a moment when the earlier definition of the United States “Republic” was being challenged by the new class, racial, and ethnic “publics” that

were then coming to inhabit it, and attempting to walk a line between conservative desires for a retreat to the past and radical calls for the violent overthrow of the present, Bellamy uses the institution of the narrative utopia as a way of imagining a new kind of American national community. While presenting an important early figuration of the contours of emerging practices and institutions, such as those of middle-class consumerism and professionalism, Bellamy also develops a profound reflection on the relationship between collective identity, national space, and *memory*. His text presents a program for overcoming the fractured and conflicting “organizations of enjoyment” of the late-nineteenth-century United States by way of a willed forgetting of those memories and histories that bind individuals and communities to what he views as the dead weight of the past.

While Bellamy’s text offers us one last look backward at the older project of the narrative utopia, the two texts that I investigate in Chapter 4, Bogdanov’s *Red Star* and London’s *The Iron Heel* (both 1908), present a fundamental and far-reaching reconsideration of the practices of this generic institution. Both texts were written as deeply political interventions, and I argue that they succeed precisely to the degree that they also challenge the established practices of the genre. Indeed, I maintain that all of the great twentieth-century works that participate in the generic institution of the narrative utopia are involved in the project of remaking the form so that it will be adequate to a changing experience of modernity. Responding to the political crisis initiated by the defeat of the 1905 Russian Revolution, and negotiating the concerns of their particular social and cultural situations (for London, especially the growing fissure in the American labor movement between the IWW and AFL), Bogdanov’s and London’s works also mark a growing awareness of the ways that the processes of modernity have effectively sutured global space into a single totality. And yet, neither text can offer an adequate representation, or cognitive mapping, of the kind of collective subjectivity, a universalized organization of enjoyment, that might coincide with such a space. Thus, both works refocus the project of the narrative utopia on the figuration of the kinds of collective subjects that will mediate the passage between these two spatial orders of modern history. In effect, these two works sever the old link between the imaginary community of the narrative utopia and the imagined community of the nation-state. In Bogdanov’s text, what takes the place of the nation as the subject of modern history is the idealization of the Proletariat that

he elaborates in a monumental philosophical system, the “Tectology,” while in London’s work, there occurs a much more concrete figuration of the mobile, imagined collective subjects found in places as diverse as the bureaucracies of the corporations and the “state capitalist” socialist parties.

This points as well toward another concern that I explore in this chapter: the role of the intellectual within these imaginary and imagined communities. While I suggest that the narrative utopia has been centrally concerned with the place of intellectual labor from More’s founding text onwards, this issue takes on an even greater urgency as the form itself undergoes the dramatic reconstructions we witness in the twentieth century. In an important way, these two utopias illustrate the central tension in the vision of the role of the intellectual that will be much fought over in the coming decades: a withdrawal from action that arises from the determinist idealism hinted at in Bogdanov’s work and the determining vanguardism of an intellectual bureaucratic elite promoted in London’s text.

The reevaluation of the older project of the narrative utopia continues with Zamyatin’s *We* (1920). If the older expressions of the genre present a singular narrative of the spatial history of modernity, one bounded within the confines of the nation-state, Zamyatin’s text offers a vision of multiple competing “possible worlds” or historical trajectories for modernity. Equally significant, as a consequence of the events in Zamyatin’s own time and place in the years following the Soviet revolution, he comes to regard the nation-state as not only an insufficient space for the potentialities of modernity, but as an actual detriment to its realization: in *We*, the borders of the nation-state now mark a possible horizon of modern history itself. As a way of navigating around this blockage, Zamyatin develops a brilliantly original, permutational schema of possible expressions of the narrative utopia form and, indeed, marks the place of two of the most influential expressions of the genre that appear in the years following the Second World War: the “anti-utopia,” and the “open-ended” utopia that proliferates in the early 1970s. A powerful example of the latter is to be seen in Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974), and in the second part of Chapter 5, I explore the significant and little remarked upon convergences between her influential work and Zamyatin’s earlier text. I do not want to underestimate the significance of Zamyatin’s and later Le Guin’s rigorous maintenance of this “horizon” of possibility, especially in light of the perceived political closures of each

of their historical situations. Indeed, I show that something quite similar is accomplished on the philosophical front in the contemporary work of Bloch. However, the failure of these texts to offer any concrete figuration of a new spatiality is not without its own cost, something similarly stressed by Antonio Gramsci, whose insights I invoke in the closing pages of this chapter.

Exactly the nature of this price is evident by the time we arrive at one of the single most influential narratives, utopian or otherwise, of the twentieth century: Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). This narrative marks another crucial turning point in the history of this generic institution, negating the modernist play of "possible worlds" we see in Zamyatin's and later Le Guin's texts and offering in its place what I call, drawing upon the work of Karl Mannheim, a new form of the "conservative utopia." Orwell's celebrated text, like another key work of this moment, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, perceives the mass media and industrial forms of global cultural production as a threat to the various autonomous organizations of enjoyment—rational, aesthetic, subjective, domestic, and *national*—that had been so central to the histories of modernity. Their destruction, Orwell concludes, will bring the project of modernity to a close. Moreover, in Orwell's view, it is the rise of what Walter Ong later describes as "secondary orality"—in the form of the new global informational technologies—that now undermines the more than four-century-long hegemony of print literacy, as well as the forms of the imagined community that arose alongside and, indeed, through it.¹² Thus, diverging from the institutional tradition of the narrative utopia, Orwell's work imagines a short-circuiting of the forward momentum of modernity. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* attempts to delink the values of modernity from the very ongoing process of modernization which gave rise to these values in the first place, and promotes instead a nostalgic return both to the older form of the imagined community found in the English nation and the kind of "literate" intellectual critique formed within it. Thus, while providing a double assault on the new mass-media culture and the kinds of "engaged" intellectuals we see, for example, in London's work—a double critique that will play a crucial role in the political intellectual struggles of the Cold War world—his text offers a figurative glimpse of what will become one of the dominant forces of our post-Cold War present: the explosive emergence of nostalgic and antimodern nationalisms. And in mapping the antinomies of a homogenous global mass-

media and commodity culture and the violent particularisms of the new nationalisms, Orwell's text effectively blocks out the horizon of our own present experience of modernity.

As I hope will become evident, I conceive of my book itself as another kind of experiment in utopian figuration, or of cognitive mapping: an attempt to create at once a historical and theoretical overview of the work of past narrative utopias, and to produce my own "speaking picture" of a history still in formation, and hence "not yet" available for a final summation. And as with the various narrative utopias I discuss throughout this book, I imagine this project as an invitation to see the histories of modernity in a new way, so that we might also begin to imagine anew the space of our present and future. As this book will show, such imaginings are indeed real, and they will shape, as much as the imaginary communities of the past, the paths we embark upon in our attempts to make our futures.