The Trouble with Nowhere
Martin Jay

THE END OF UTOPIA: POLITICS AND CULTURE IN AN AGE OF APATHY
by Russell Jacoby.
Basic Books, 256 pp., £17.95, 20 April 1999, 0 465 02000 3

UTOPIA: RUSSIAN MODERNIST TEXTS 1905-40
edited by Catriona Kelly.
Penguin, 378 pp., £9.99, 23 September 1999, 0 14 118081 1

THE FABER BOOK OF UTOPIAS
edited by John Carey.
Faber, 560 pp., £20, 4 October 1999, 0 571 19785 X

THE NAZI WAR ON CANCER
by Robert Proctor.
Princeton, 390 pp., £18.95, 26 May 1999, 0 691 00156 0

Rousseau, Mercier, Saint-Simon, Cabet, Owen, Fourier, Morris, Bellamy, Wells, Skinner — and some unexpected alternatives — Dickens (oddly represented by a diatribe against the idea of the Noble Savage); Tennyson, Kipling, Conrad, Lawrence, Yeats — Carey presents a wonderfully rich array of obscure writers from many cultures and different eras, virtually all with vivid imaginations of the best of all possible worlds (or in a few cases, their dystopian opposites).

What they share, he puckishly points out, is the desire 'to a greater or lesser extent, to eliminate real people'. The means to do so, of course, differ widely, ranging from rule by phrenologists in John Trotter's Terrors in Phrenologate, published in 1829, to the ingestion of the magic potion Vril — partial namesake of the later real-world drink Bovril — in Bulwer Lytton's The Coming Race (1871). Some measures are more draconian than others, including More's genocidal fantasy of destroying the bellicose Venetians whom he regards as 'filthy scum' — Carey tentatively identifies them as the Swiss — that must be wiped off the face of the earth. Some are lonelier than others, perhaps the most bizarre being the talking trees in Nits Klim's Journey to the World Under Ground (1741) by Ludwig Holberg, who punishes any talk of theology or metaphysics with banishment or surgical bleeding. Others are more grim than attractive, for example the suppression of sex in favour of virgin births (Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland, published in 1915) or the suppression of freedom by behavioral conditioning (B. F. Skinner's Walden Two, published in

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Opposing them are fantasies of absolute abundance and unconstrained desire, most famously realised in the phalansteries that Fourier sought in vain to inspire. Although it is impossible to discern a single pattern in the riot of utopian imaginings contained in these collections, it is striking to see how many seek perfection through some form of generic manipulation or public hygiene. The Republic is adamantly on the denial of medical treatment to the sickly and intemperate, lest they breed unhealthy babies; Tacitus greatly admired the Germanic tribal ban on intermarriage as a way to prevent contamination. Many utopians have sought redress along similar lines for the flaws of our creaturely existence.

In view of this background, it comes as a less of a shock than it might have been to find a passage from Mein Kampf included in Carey's anthology and described as 'the culmination of the great utopian tradition that starts with Plato'. Hitler, after all, would have had no trouble endorsing Wells's chilling prophecy that the men of the New Republic will not be squeamish, either, in facing or inflicting death, because they will have a fuller sense of the possibilities of life than we possess. They will have an ideal that will make killing worth the while; like Abraham, they will have the faith to kill, and they will have no superstitions about death.

Although Jacoby dismissively resists the inclusion of Nazism in utopian thought, saying that this would involve 'stretching utopia till it is meaningless', there can be no doubt that even if Matthew Arnold would have found it appalling, it deserves a place in the tradition, alongside every other anti-pluralist, anti-relativist, monolinguistic politics of redemption. Plato's Republic was, after all, the most widely read work on political theory in the Third Reich.

There is, however, one final ironic twist to that conjunction, which is brought out by Robert Proctor's remarkable study of The Nazi War on Cancer. Proctor, the author of an earlier account of the Nazi racial hygiene crimes, now provides an astonishing—and entirely unapologetic—history of the reverse side of the coin. Without in any way minimising or relativising the evils of medical euthanasia or genocide, Proctor shows that the Nazi obsession with nurturing a 'healthy' Aryan people led to serious scientific work in public health that can only be called progressive in its implications. Nazism, he points out, was 'a vast hygienic experiment designed to bring about an exclusionary sanitary utopia'. Its paranoid, genocidal abolition of the 'contaminated' bodies that 'polluted' the gene pool was matched by a much more constructive 'cleansing' of its own fantastical ethos. It sought, in other words, to exercise not only metaphorical cancers from the body politic, but the literal ones that actually endangered the health of the German Volk.

The result was an energetic, state-directed research initiative to understand the dangers of environmental hazards like asbestos, to reduce alcoholism and to promote healthy nutritional practices. Once health dangers were realised, the regime launched a concerted campaign—couched in the vocabulary of 'public enlightenment' that seems so anathema to the romantic myth-making at the heart of the movement—to change bad habits. Above all, it meant a preventive war on tobacco, meaning the German people from an addiction with links to disease that were first established by scientists like Fritz Linzelt, who flourished during the Nazi era. The vigorous onslaught against smoking that ensued, including banning advertisements and raising cigarette taxes, exploited the curious fact that Hitler, Franco and Mussolini all abstained, while Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin were rarely seen without a cigar, cigarette or pipe between their lips.

Although Proctor is careful to point out the splits and disagreements within the Nazi medical establishment and shows that a thin line separated quackery from serious science, the overwhelming effect of his research is to make us aware that a number of utopian impulses were inextricable from the dystopian ones which are so vivid in our memories. Proctor knows that some will read his argument as evidence that anti-smoking campaigns are somehow inherently Nazi in nature, and in fact, he registers the irony that their effect in postwar Germany was diminished precisely by this linkage. A similar distaste for all things associated with the Nazi regime also slowed down the recognition that there were carcinogens in asbestos dust.

No simple formula can capture the tangled implications of the utopian project. It is no more an innocent exercise in imaginatively resistant to the status quo than it is a surefire recipe for totalitarian domination. It is tempting to say that utopias beguile us for as long as no attempt is made to realise them, yet the unexpected lesson of Proctor's book is that some positive effects may follow, even when the real-world experiment has turned deeply sour. In this sense, Jacoby's jeremiad about the end of utopia, for all its over-simplification of the issues, is not without merit.

On balance, however, a re-reading of the complexities of Nazism does not really add weight to Jacoby's lament. Perhaps the main problem, as Hannah Arendt pointed out long ago in The Human Condition, is that utopianism is grounded in the kind of political thinking that relies on the model of man in the singular as homo faber, who can fabricate his world, rather than men in the plural as political actors who can only contest it from a partial point of view. It is not surprising to find Jacoby be-moaning the current fashion for pluralism as a sign of the degeneration of the utopian imagination.

Pluralism returns as radicalism ebbs. Nor is this wholly objectionable. Not every age spawns bold ideas about society. In its various forms, perhaps pluralism is the best our era has to offer. Yet the retreat is presented as an astounding advance. A familiar if not banal idea, pluralism, is dubbed cutting edge. Painted with 'culture' or 'chrestométhia multiculturism', it becomes a mythology of our time.

From the vantage point of redemption, pluralism does indeed seem like thin gruel. But for those who are happy to see the messiah tarry a little bit longer, it will be a source of some relief. It may be true, as Wilde insisted in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', that 'a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always lacking.' But what needs to be remembered is that such a map must include plenty of imperfect 'somewheres'—those unredeemed acres in Middlesex that afford a refuge from the 'nowheres' whose news is, alas, not always so good.