

Capitalism and the “Environmental Dystopia”

Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, New York: Doubleday, 2003.

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For radical science activists like me, the capitalist commodification of the dance of life is always advancing ominously; there is always evidence of nastier and nastier technoscience dominations.

–Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium*

The literary genre of utopia, or “the good place,” has a long history of radical political connotation, beginning with its origins in the writing of Thomas More (1478-1535). Since the 19th century, when the ill effects of industrialization began to be felt on a mass scale, creative writers have used the genre of utopian fiction to make political arguments about the interconnection between the economy and the natural environment. Think of William Morris’s groundbreaking ecosocialism in *News from Nowhere* (1890), the publicly owned green spaces of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1897), or the localized organic agriculture of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915). More recently, in the work of science fiction writers like Ernest Callenbach, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Ursula K. LeGuin, the environmental utopia or “ecotopia” has emerged as a literary subgenre in its own right, often with an explicitly socialist flavor. Callenbach’s aptly named *Ecoptia* (1975), for example, depicts a stable-state economy with collective ownership of farms and businesses in addition to a pristine natural environment. But if socialism has often provided the political platform for a vision of ecological utopia, it is equally likely that utopia’s counterpart, the *dystopia*, or “bad place,” would envisage capitalism as the ultimate cause for the degradation of the environment.

Enter Margaret Atwood’s dark new novel, *Oryx and Crake*. Though few mainstream reviews will point this out, the novel is a clear representation of capitalist eco-dystopia if ever there was one. The narrative opens on a bleak, post-apocalyptic wasteland inhabited only by a narrator named Snowman (presumably the last living human), a gentle race of genetically altered humanoids called “the Crakers,” and an abundance of strange mutant animals. As Snowman relates his attempts to survive and look after the Crakers, he intermittently lapses into flashbacks of his childhood as “Jimmy,” during a pre-apocalyptic period sometime in the 21st century. The novel thus unravels like a mystery, as the past catches up with the present and the reader slowly learns how civilization as-we-know-it came to its end. We learn of Jimmy’s love for a mysterious young girl named Oryx and of his friendship with a boy he calls Crake, who turns out to be a powerful and disturbed scientific genius interested in extinction and genetic mutation.

Just as any dystopia represents a critique of its contemporary situation (such as Orwell’s critique of totalitarianism in *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*) the political force of *Oryx and Crake* lies in the way Snowman’s flashbacks, to a time just prior to apocalypse, look oddly familiar. Atwood in fact depicts a society replete with the environmental and economic ills of our own era. One of the first things a reader might notice about this society is an intensely class-based spatial stratification. Jimmy and Crake live in a “compound,” a gated suburban community of middle-class citizens who rarely ever leave; we are told that, “compound people didn’t go to the cities unless they had to...they called the cities the *pleeblands*” [p. 27]. The effect of this spatial organization, as in *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, is to segregate the upper classes from the poor. Jimmy’s father compares this situation to feudalism, in which “kings and dukes had lived in castles” [p. 28]. Although the compounds have the high walls

and guard towers of castles, the compound is not a feudalist organization at all, but rather, an intensely capitalist one. Jimmy's father works for a research corporation called OrganInc. Farms, which owns the compound and controls all the people in it. OrganInc. and other corporation compounds in the novel are live-in factories for white collar knowledge workers who engage in scientific experimentation for profit.

The novel thus depicts not only socio-economic stratification but also the scientific manipulation of nature. The compound workers engage in genetic engineering projects, such as the production of a "pigoon," a large pig-like animal with organs that can be harvested for use in human bodies, or a headless, legless chicken which yields more edible meat per animal. These examples—not far removed from our own "OncoMouse" or "Frankenfoods"—show an attempt to cut down on nature's lag-time and speed up the processes of production to make nature conform to the economy. The greed behind the compound's scientific research is made clear when Jimmy's rebellious, idealistic mother launches an attack on his father's exploitative practices: "You've thought up yet another way to rip off a bunch of desperate people...you hype your wares and take all their money and then they run out of cash, and it's no more treatments for them [p. 57]. The reader eventually learns that pharmaceutical companies have been inventing new diseases to keep pace with the cures they invent, in order to keep people sick for profit [p. 210].

As the novel develops, Atwood makes explicit the connection between the commodification of scientific knowledge and the destruction of the natural and human environment. While in the privatized and sterilized space of the compound—entombed in a shopping mall atmosphere of caffeine, pornography and video games—the inhabitants are completely separated from nature. But outside the Earth is literally coming undone:

As time went on...the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the drought in the midcontinental plains regions went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes [p. 24].

The beach house owned by Jimmy's grandparents is "washed away with the rest of the beaches and quite a few of the eastern coastal cities" [p. 63]. On the east coast, the month of June is referred to as the "rainy-season," and there is a reference to "Harvard being drowned" [p. 173]. Chaotic weather, food shortages, and large-scale environmental shift provide an ominous backdrop to the story of Jimmy's childhood.

But if Atwood's vision is bleak and pessimistic, she also provides brief glimpses of resistance to the commodification of nature, such as the "coffee wars" that Jimmy and Crake watch on the television: when the Happicuppa corporation invents a genetically modified coffee bean that can be harvested in mass quantities by machines, small growers are forced off the land, and a global resistance movement erupts. Anti-Happicuppa groups stage protests and blockade compounds while farmers riot and burn crops. When Jimmy remarks that "There hadn't been anything like it since the first decade of the century," [p. 179] he is surely alluding to our own recent anti-globalization protests and indigenous environmental justice movements such as those surrounding water rights in Cochabamba or basmati rice in India. The fact that Atwood's fictional example of political protest involves agricultural workers reinforces the interplay of nature and economy in the text.

On one level, *Oryx and Crake*, through its negative portrayals of genetic engineering and pollution, is simply a criticism of science and technology. However, the powerful subtext to this "Frankenstein's monster" story is the private ownership and profit motive of the compounds where the research is conducted. Read in light of green socialism, Atwood's novel is a grim and startlingly

realistic depiction of the way capital colonizes not only the total environment of the globe, but also the microscopic internal spaces of body and mind. Because the very personal story of Jimmy's childhood is continually interrupted by scenes of climate shift and social unrest, the narrative moves dialectically between the personal and the political, between the local and the global, creating what Fredric Jameson might call a "cognitive map" of the social totality—an attempt to chart the various interconnections of a globalized economy and a disrupted ecosystem as they impact a single human body. *Oryx and Crake's* dystopian universe provides both a warning and a criticism of current trends in our society. The critical force of the dystopian genre is the fact that its desolate descriptions are quite possible, if not inevitable, given existing trends, and that a large-scale structural shift must be made in order to prevent such a vision from materializing. For anyone interested in the interconnections between science and political economy, Atwood's novel is both an entertaining romp and a fascinating polemic.