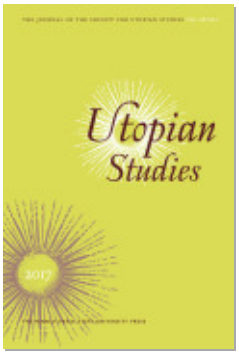
Utopies et catastrophe, Revers et renaissances de l'utopie (XVIe–XXIe siècles) [Utopias and Catastrophe. Reversals and Revivals (16th-21st centuries)] ed. by Jean-Paul Engélibert and Raphaëlle Guidée (review)



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Jean-Paul Engélibert and Raphaëlle Guidée, eds. *Utopies et catastrophe, Revers et renaissances de l'utopie (XVI^e–XXI^e siècles)* [*Utopias and Catastrophe. Reversals and Revivals (16th-21st centuries)*].

Rennes: Collection La Licorne, Presse Universitaires de Rennes, 2015. 262 pp. Paperback, $21.00, ISBN 978-2-7535-4009-5

Reviewed by Lise Leibacher-Ouvrard, University of Arizona

This first-rate collection of essays in French stems from several international colloquia organized by a joint research program on utopia and catastrophe at the universities of Bordeaux-Montaigne and Poitiers between 2011 and 2013. Globally, as the title of Jean-Paul Engélibert and Raphaelle Guidée's excellent introduction ("Actualité de l'utopie," 7–21) makes immediately clear, the volume questions and refutes the depreciation of utopia expressed (and analyzed) frequently in the last decades: the contemporary propensity to point, if not to the death of utopia, to the flourishing of dystopias since the nineteenth century and the view that utopias themselves are the root cause of most twentieth-century crises and catastrophes.

The first section is dedicated to the ambivalence of utopia from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. Five essays have no difficulty proving that a skeptical if not outright dystopian dimension was already embedded or implied within utopia from an early period on. Jean-Michel Racault ("Utopie et utopisme, catastrophe et catastrophisme dans les littératures des XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles," 25–42) paves the way in providing a valuable theoretical framework and a set of definitions of, among others, the broad meaning of the relatively new term *catastrophe*. He then proposes to distinguish between utopias that promote a positive type of catastrophism—a disruption deemed necessary to accomplish either a divine plan or the course of history (e.g., in Campanella, Montesquieu, or Deschamps)—and utopias that depict a negative type—where the ideal society is deemed incompatible with humanity or becomes unbearable itself (as in Foigny's 1676 *Terre australe connue*, among others). Izabella Zatorska's contribution ("Utopiser en catastrophe. Utopie et colonisation, XVI^e–XVIII^e siècles," 43–52) provides an equally useful reminder that most early modern ideal societies are founded on violence. Colonization

is best exemplified in the unabashed massacres perpetrated by Fontenelle's Ajaoian *philosophes*, but, as is also argued here, Foigny's hermaphrodites are no strangers to extermination. By this point one cannot fail to notice that Foigny's *La Terre australe* provides much food for thought in this opening part of the volume. Indeed his imaginary journey is central to Catherine Gobert's thought-provoking essay ("Une utopie catastrophique," 53–71). As she argues, in spite of seemingly prelapsarian characteristics, the Fall from Eden structures the hermaphrodites' conception of half-men, their condemnation of sensuality, and their suicide. A mostly ironic and dystopian reading of *La Terre australe* is also part of Nicolas Correard's finely crafted comparative analysis of Foigny's text with Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Holberg's *Iter Subterraneum* (1742); as Correard points out ("Idéal de la raison, catastrophe de la raison: Utopisme et scepticisme chez Foigny, Swift et Holberg," 73–93), the three writers portray Reason as the very source of the catastrophes that it seeks to remedy, and their denunciation of its excesses should be recognized as one of the skeptical tenets of the early modern anti-utopian tradition. Didier Coste then shows ("De l'ambiguïté allochtonique: Casanova et Aurobindo," 95–108) how catastrophe frames not only the beginning but the end of Casanova's *Icosameron* (1788), the monumental depiction of a prelapsarian subterranean world whose accidental discovery and progressive colonization by Europeans are finally brought to an emblematic, explosive conclusion. One regret here: the parallel with Sri Aurobindo's epic poem *Savitri* (1950–51) is tantalizing but all too brief. On the positive side, the very focus on Casanova makes for a fitting transition to the second part of the volume.

The seven chapters in that section are dedicated to the age of revolutions: utopias in history. In the first one ("La dystopie française d'Émile Souvestre à Léon Daudet. Petite traversée générique," 111–23), Valérie Stiénon's insightful survey of eight novels illustrates the dystopian turn that took place in French futuristic fiction between 1846 and 1930. Her analysis of well-known and lesser-known novels (by Souvestre, Verne, Robida, de Chousy, Rosny Aîné, Maurice Renard, José Moselli, and Léon Daudet) shows how their "art of catastrophe" differs from that of classical utopias in its actual intent to act upon reality. The essays that follow are convincing proof that such a negative yet ultimately engaged vision is not limited to France, to the nineteenth century, or to fiction. As Stanislas Gauthier argues ("Une utopie contre l'utopisme: *Nous autres* [1921] d'Eugène Zamiatine," 125–36), *We* is undoubtedly indebted to the catastrophic, police state context of its publication, but it is also indicative of a

utopian form of resistance. As Anna Saignes shows ("À propos du *Slynx* [2000] de Tatiana Tolstoï," 137–50), in functioning at a multiplicity of conflicting satirical levels (equally critical of pre-Soviet, communist, and postcommunist Russia, as well as suggestive of Hiroshima), Tolstoy's complex postnuclear fiction manages to preclude ideological closure. According to Elaine Després ("La dystopie des gros cerveaux: Catastrophes et évolution dans *Galápagos* [1985] de Kurt Vonnegut," 151–67), the apocalyptic novel *Galápagos* is not only a radically antihumanist, hopelessly pessimistic pamphlet against the innumerable catastrophes caused by the oversized human brain; it is also a hopeful expression of anger and a belief in evolution. Sylvia Amorim ("Mia Couto et José Saramago: Quelques pistes pour un renouveau de l'utopie," 169–84) then shows how, through parody in particular, several works of the two Lusophone novelists Couto and Saramago not only reflect the current crisis of utopianism but propose alternative models. Delphine Gachet ("Repenser l'utopie citadine: *Les Villes invisibles* [1972] de Calvino," 185–201) argues that even though Calvino's well-documented fascination for Fourier is at play in *Invisible Cities*, the novel must also be read as a move away from Fourier and an innovative exploration of different, more fragmented forms of urban utopia. Finally, as evidenced in Marie Martin's inspiring essay ("Paysages après la catastrophe et utopie plastique dans le cinéma expérimental contemporain," 203–14), both Xavier Christiaens's *The White She-Camel* (2006) and Jacques Perconte's *After the Fire* (2010) demonstrate how even ecological disasters (respectively, the shrinkage of the Aral Sea and a forest fire in south Corsica) can ultimately be transformed into an aesthetic experience that conveys not only a critique of catastrophe but a sense of survival and renewal.

A third, last and shorter section is appropriately devoted to "hypotheses." Acting in response (in part) to Hans Jonas's 1979 warning against utopian irresponsibility, Patrick Savidan's arresting essay "Adorno et les promesses de l'utopie négative" (217–37) investigates Adorno's work as a rejection of resignation, while Jean-Paul Engélibert's "Après la catastrophe, l'utopie" (239–53), energetically fueled by Slavoj Žižek's *Living in the End Times* (2010), provides a provocative, forward-looking, and open-ended conclusion. Admittedly some Anglophone scholars of utopianism may get distracted by the seeming conflation, in some essays, between the French term *contre-utopie* and utopian satire, dystopia, or anti-utopia. Arguably too, the model of "critical" utopias/dystopias that was developed by Tom Moylan (*Demand the Impossible*, 1986) could have been applied profitably to some of the primary texts involved. Let

me stress, however, that in rejecting the temptation of defeatism and disenchantment in our own age of extremes, this volume participates in a welcome spirit of resistance and in the utopian impulse that its own chapters illuminate. As such and in many ways, it is a must-read for scholars in the field of utopian studies and beyond.

Karen M. Johnson-Weiner. *New York Amish: Life in the Plain Communities of the Empire State.*

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010. 224 pp. Cloth, $24.95,
ISBN 978-0-8014-4518-7

Reviewed by Richard M. Marshall, University of Indianapolis

Quilts with "a black-and-white checked" pattern "for the NASCAR market" are stitched together by an Amish woman whose family uses an outdoor privy because church rules stipulate "no indoor plumbing"; an Amish man delivers cans of his milk to an Amish-owned neighborhood collection tank cooled by electricity because state laws require the refrigeration of milk. These are just a few of the images Karen Johnson-Weiner presents of the New York State Amish and their continuing effort to maintain a life disconnected from the surrounding society upon which they are, to varying degrees, economically dependent. The Amish's struggle to preserve separate-from-the world communities and the diversity among the various Amish subgroups are themes Johnson-Weiner examines along with her primary focus: the impetuses for Amish families' migration to New York.

The quilt-making woman and milk-delivering man above, despite their acquiescence to the buying public and to state laws, belong to "the ultra-conservative Swartzentruber Amish" (54). Johnson-Weiner explains the origin of this and other Amish groups in her first chapter, "Who Are the Amish?" which also outlines the European origins of the Amish, in particular focusing on the various schisms of the Anabaptists, who themselves had broken from the Catholic Church in the 1520s in Zurich: "By the end of the