Review

Reviewed Work(s): Imaginary Communities: Utopia, The Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity by Phillip E. Wegner

Review by: Peter Ruppert

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Nevertheless, the basic conflict of "disciplinary rigor versus cultural accommodation" (125) has continued to separate Amish and Mennonites from 1693 to the present. Hence, the Mennonites have also posted an impressive record of portraying the Amish as misguided formalists. Weaver-Zercher documents some intriguing yet sad instances in which Mennonite zeal to set the record straight has gone too far, and portrayals of the more fallible side of Amish life have required painful retraction. Readers interested in the panorama of Anabaptist persuasions and their relationship to each other will find this chapter especially compelling.

The final chapter treats reaction to the 1985 film *Witness*. Interestingly, but not so very surprisingly, it was the outside community that debated the merits of this movie, rather than the Amish themselves. Some found it a sympathetic presentation of the Amish, others a shameful travesty. Some heralded it as the death knell of Amish privacy and rural life, others found it a mere blip on the screen of Amish portrayals.

The author devotes considerable space to the role played by John Hostetler in his opposition to the film. I cannot judge how fairly Weaver-Zercher presents Hostetler's involvement in the controversy surrounding *Witness*, but certainly agree with the basic premise that scholars are not necessarily any less prone than others toward allowing their own perspectives to inform conclusions drawn about communities and their members.

In his closing remarks, Weaver-Zercher concedes that the seemingly paradoxical "popular narrative tropes—the Amish as saving remnant and the Amish as fallen saints" (185) continue to appear. As with any well-known group, however, the reality of the Amish is more interestingly varied than the fiction portrayed by outsiders who construct a reality based on what they feel the group should be all about. No better proof of this last point could be put forward than *The Amish in the American Imagination.*

The work is profusely illustrated, and contains outstanding notes, bibliography, and index. It belongs in every serious collection about the Amish.

Philip E. Webber
Central College—Pella, Iowa

Phillip E. Wegner. *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, The Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity.*

Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California Press, 2002. xxvi + 297 pp. $22.50.

AT A TIME when utopian thinking and imagination are often diagnosed as extremely weak, if not yet in a coma, Phillip Wegner's ambitious and far-reaching study of utopian narrative provides an invigorating tonic. This provocative and lively book argues that literary utopias have played a crucial role in the history and formation of the modern nation-state, provides a historical and theoretical overview of the work of past utopias, and offers alternative approaches to studying the genre with exemplary and inspired readings of its most influential texts. Much of Wegner's effort here seems to be to evoke the kind of "passionate and engaged public discussion" that he claims "electrified" readers in the past with the utopian shock of the new. Discerning a current "surge of interest in the question of utopia" (xv–xvi), Wegner sets out to recapture this sense of excitement by drawing our attention to what he considers unique and most relevant about the genre: its potentially activating and transforming social impact, both in terms of how it shapes the way we understand the world we live in, and how we consequently act in it.

At the heart of the book is the contention that utopian narratives constitute a special kind of representational and conceptualizing activity. Not quite literature (which deals with concrete lived experience), nor social theory (which systematizes and organizes totalities), the narrative utopia is "an in-between form that mediates and binds together these other representational acts" (xviii). Appealing to the Louis Marin/ Fredric Jameson fundamental premise that utopias are organized around a blind spot that limits their vision of radical change (in Thomas More's case the inability to imagine capitalism and the market), Wegner argues that utopian texts are *figurations* or *cognitive mappings* of cultural space that provide a "pre-theoretical" and epistemologically limited view of history in the making, a view that can only subsequently be fully mapped by literature and theory. For Wegner, it is precisely in this inability to represent systematic alternatives that utopian narratives achieve their most dramatic impact. Abandoning the commonplace assumption that literary utopias portray perfect societies, Wegner asks us to think of them as "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" (xix). Seen this way, utopian texts are basically incomplete, engaging in a kind of praxis or performance that resembles the rehearsal situation in the theater—an open-ended situation that enables us to play with alternatives, to try out variations and permutations, before opening night when all the possibilities congeal into one determinate form (or history).

This reorientation allows Wegner to shift his focus to the "cultural pedagogical force of utopian texts" (xix). Drawing on the theoretical work of Henri Lefebvre, Darko Suvin, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Gilles Deleuze, Karl Mannheim, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Slavoj Zizek, as well as numerous other theorists and critics, Wegner provides close readings of Thomas 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* (as well as brief discussions of William Morris's *News from Nowhere,* Arthur Dudley Vinton's *Looking Further Backward,* Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's Column,* H.G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia,* Charlotte Perkin Gilman's *Herland,* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*).

Skillfully combining theoretical issues with historical analysis, Wegner unravels the dialectical workings of these texts, mapping their changing configuration of spaces and forces, and connecting them to the ongoing concerns of the genre. Taking up the much-maligned task of genre criticism, Wegner sets aside the goal of describing the necessary conditions for membership and explores instead how the critical self-awareness of a text reverberates with other texts in the genre and with its historical context. "Like all such institutional beings," he writes, "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" (xx).

To illustrate the potential benefits of understanding narrative utopias as figurations, and also to give a sense of Wegner's achievement here, I would like to briefly consider the pivotal chapter on Zamyatin's *We* and Le Guin's *The Dispossessed.* (Part of this chapter appeared in *Utopian Studies* 4, no. 2 [1993] and won that year's Battisti Award.) Wegner begins by observing that, unlike the classical utopias that confine us to a singular space, these modernist texts generate a narrative in which several "possible worlds of utopian fiction" coexist and interact. Moreover, both texts turn this apparent failure to represent a single utopian alternative into an aesthetic and even a political victory (153). In *We,* for example, Wegner sees these possible worlds

reflected in the changes the protagonist undergoes, each articulating a variation of himself and the social possibilities he embodies. These possibilities are made apparent in the familiar conceptual antimonies in *We*—happiness vs. freedom, city vs. country, the collective vs. the individual—which usually lead to Manichean readings in which one side of the dialectic is privileged over the other. But for Wegner, "the brilliance of Zamyatin's work lies in the incorporation of thesis and antithesis within itself" (163). Using the semiotic rectangle developed by A.J. Greimas, Wegner proceeds to map the thematic coordinates of the narrative and finds that it actually gives us four possible worlds: the dystopia of the One State, the anarchic primitive utopia of the Mephi, the anti-utopia of Entropy, and the utopian horizon of "infinite revolution." Instead of the linear, confident structure of the classical utopia then, *We* leaves us with an "open space," a more genuine "no-place" of "infinite revolution" and radical action. Utopia itself, Wegner points out, escapes representation altogether. Though it is indicated, it is not seen. This is because utopia can only be perceived, Wegner writes, in "shadow images—registered, as it were, on the extreme periphery of our conceptual retina" (170).

Mapping the multiple spaces of *We* clearly yields a richer and more resonant reading of the text, allowing us to see not only the "possible worlds" it offers, but also the historical possibilities that existed in the world of its composition (i.e., the Soviet revolution). Wegner concludes that Zamyatin's rewriting of the genre succeeded in radicalizing it aesthetically (180), but at the cost of sacrificing a crucial feature of the classical utopia: its twofold function of critical estrangement of the present *and* the elaboration of an imaginative alternative. By sundering the utopian dialectic, the modernist utopias of Zamyatin and Le Guin maintain the critical capacity to teach us to think historically, but they defer the task of envisioning an alternate history: they maintain hope, but tell us nothing about what to hope for. One answer to the question of whether we should unreservedly welcome this development may be found in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* which blocks out the utopian horizon altogether.

Wegner's book succeeds in providing us with a kind of cognitive map of the genre itself—a map that diagnoses the limits of utopia as figuration along with its capacity to arouse the desire for change. Still, as all good books, this one leaves us with a number of questions. For one thing, if utopian narratives tell us more about their limits than about preferable alternatives, what special purpose do they then serve? And if the "no-place" can only be glimpsed "on the edge of our conceptual retina," what does it actually bring into view? And, perhaps more importantly, if utopia is not represented in the text, then how, or by what agency, is it produced? If we cannot imagine a better world, how can we ever hope to attain it? And finally, of what use is utopian desire if it leaves us only with endless variations on persistent forms of inequities and exploitation without at least some indication, some image of hope, that might lead to the transformation of the intolerable existing state of things?

Peter Ruppert
Florida State University