

Thinker's progress

Richard Davenport-Hines

Paradise Dreamed: How Utopian Thinkers Have Changed the Modern World.

By Pamela Neville-Sington and David Sington. Bloomsbury: 1993. Pp. 322. £18.99.

"PROGRESS", said Oscar Wilde, "is the realization of utopias": an opinion with which the authors of this cultural history of utopian thinking generally agree. They cover their subject with the soothing syrup of twentieth-century liberalism, and conclude that "many of the most positive political developments of the past half-millennium have also drawn nourishment from the utopian tradition: the rise of science, of female emancipation, of democracy itself". This conclusion is made possible by their own optimistic spirit and by a certain selectiveness in their material; it is not the result of ideological dishonesty.

Paradise Dreamed is most satisfying when dealing with quasi-scientific topics. The book begins with a sketchy introduction to Plato and the Golden Age of ancient Greece and a rather unexciting summary of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516); but it becomes more interesting when discussing the utopian speculations of Francis Bacon. This great English jurist, who regarded philosophy as having no practical use, propounded a new role for science in society in his *New Atlantis* (1627). Systematic experiment and scientific innovation would achieve "the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible", Bacon hoped. To this end he proposed the foundation of a research laboratory to be named the College of Six Days' Works which was to include cave-houses for experiments in refrigeration, astronomical towers, desalination plants, ecological mini-environments, furnaces, acoustic chambers, engine-houses of all sorts and much else including "houses of deceits of the senses". Readers who are unfamiliar with Bacon's vision of a science-based utopia will welcome the Singtons' introduction to his ideas.

Lewis Mumford's view, that cities were the earliest utopias, is taken up by the Singtons, who give a plain and unpretentious presentation of European architectural ideas since the renaissance as expressions of utopian thought. Their section on urban engineering concludes with an account of the career of Le Corbusier which is so muted in its judgements that it will satisfy neither his opponents, who complain that he exemplified the most inhumane and totalitarian elements of twentieth-century architecture, nor his surviving protagonists. *Paradise*

Dreamed had its origins in a BBC radio series: unfortunately the need for 'broadcasting balance' has left a somewhat lifeless version of the authors' opinions.

Another section examines the impact of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* (1888), described as the best-selling novel in the nineteenth-century United States after Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Bellamy's fantasy about the benefits of mechanization prefigured the glories of a consumer's paradise, launching a literary tradition in support of technological progress that was halted only by Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). Both books, as analysed by the Singtons, contain ideas about applied science that are thought-provoking if anecdotal. The difficulty of sustaining a long analysis of serious ideas in a radio programme is discernible even in this discussion of Bellamy and Huxley.

There are serious issues underlying the chatty approach. "I deny that freedom exists at all", declared the behavioural psychologist B. F. Skinner, whose novel *Walden Two* (1948) is analysed by the Singtons. "I must deny it — or my program would be absurd." Skinner was one of the few modern utopians to recognize explicitly that freedom and organization are incompatible, and that effective planning has to be oppressive. Other malign features of utopian thought are identified by the Singtons. "We must build on a clear site", said Le Corbusier, expressing the utopians' instinct to reject history and erase the past. Each utopian scheme is the projection of a long imagination, and seeks to impose the values of one individual on a community. Non-conformity can become a criminal transgression, and there is a tendency to seek equality by enforcing uniformity. Although Marx abhorred utopianism as reactionary, communism is rightly treated by the Singtons as a potential paradise perverted by evil.

"What has always made the state a hell on earth has been precisely that man tried to make it his heaven", wrote F. Hoelderlin. Schemes of human perfection prove in the end only human imperfectibility. One does not have to be a Christian believer to regret the Singtons' concentration on Western secular thinkers; it means that although their book is essentially a reading of Western literary texts on ethical themes, they do not mention several great ethical writers who put their ideas into a Christian framework without evangelical attitudinizing. Foremost among these in the twentieth century is W. H. Auden. Unlike the melioristic, materialistic Singtons, Auden, after long thought about both arcadian and utopian visions, concluded that "our world rapidly worsens". His great poem *Vespers* (1954) is one of the sharpest ever critiques of the utopian mentality. At first it seems frivolous in its teasing of the *dirigistes*, technocrats and

zealots of utopian reform; but he offers an alternative vision, and ends by adjuring that "without a cement of blood (it must be human, it must be innocent) no secular wall will safely stand".

Although the Singtons are sympathetic to communitarian experiments such as the Shakers in the United States, and see attractions even in Californian hippydom of the 1960s, their optimism is not convincing. "The attempt to externalize the kingdom of heaven in a temporal shape must end in disaster", wrote Auden's contemporary Hugh Kingsmill. "It cannot be created by charters or constitutions not established by arms. Those who seek for it alone will reach it together, and those who seek it in company will perish by themselves." □

Richard Davenport-Hines is at 51 Elsham Road, London W14 8HD, UK.

Bugbear

Arno A. Penzias

Digital Woes: Why We Should Not Depend on Software. By Lauren Ruth Wiener. Addison-Wesley: 1993. Pp. 245. \$22.95, £19.95.

ANYONE who still regards computers and the software that controls them as beyond blemish will find readable antidotes in this volume's case histories. A veritable 'Murphy's Law' (if anything can go wrong, it will) for software, the presentation will reward readers who seek cause to worry about the programs that 'chug' away on their behalf. Although computer scientists will find themselves hard put to accept many of the sweeping statements that pepper the text (such as "the software just can't keep up [with hardware advances]" and "testing software thoroughly is simple — and impossible"), the worst one can say about the author is that she is unnecessarily pessimistic about prospects for quality improvements. So fine, let's try and prove her wrong.

The book begins with 13 accounts of technology-related mishaps, and ends with 7 criteria for selecting a software system. In between, readers receive a lively — if rather downbeat — view of the software industry as might emerge from an after-work gripe session. Except for Bill Gates ("a CEO [chief executive officer] who can program"), industry executives rarely do the right thing, unless tricked by resourceful subordinates. True to the subtitle, the presentation attempts to persuade readers not to rely on software. But quantitative data that might test this thesis are given no place in this anecdotal format.

How has the growing use of software