

Dystopia: a natural history Gregory Claeys

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Abstrak

Dystopia: a natural history is the first monograph devoted to the concept of dystopia. Taking the term to encompass both a literary tradition of satirical works, mostly on totalitarianism, as well as real despotisms and societies in a state of disastrous collapse, this book redefines the central concepts and the chronology of the genre and offers a paradigm-shifting understanding of the subject. Part I assesses the theory and prehistory of dystopia. Utopia and dystopia are portrayed not as opposites, but as extremes on a spectrum of sociability, defined by a heightened form of group identity. The prehistory of the process whereby enemies are demonized is explored from early conceptions of monstrosity through Christian conceptions of the devil and witchcraft, and the persecution of heresy. Part II surveys the major dystopian moments in twentieth-century despotisms, focusing in particular upon Nazi Germany, Stalinism, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and Cambodia under Pol Pot. The concentration here is upon the political religion hypothesis as a key explanation for the chief excesses of communism in particular. Part III examines literary dystopias. It commences well before the usual starting point in the secondary literature, in anti-Jacobin writings of the 1790s. Two chapters address the main twentieth-century texts usually studied as representative of the genre, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The remainder of the section examines the evolution of the genre in the second half of the twentieth century to the present.