

# The Politics of *The Handmaid's Tale*

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IN CANADA, THEY said, 'Could it happen here?' In England, they said, 'jolly good yarn.' In the United States, they said, 'How long have we got?'" Such were the reactions, according to an interview that Margaret Atwood gave to *The New York Times*, to her futuristic novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. The British response is the calmest, viewing the work, that is, purely as fantasy, like *Alice in Wonderland* or *Lord of the Rings*. Canadians feel, apparently, some modest degree of apprehension. But it is in America, where the tale is set, that reaction has been most intense, most alarmed. By now a canonical text (the self-important term that academics use for books that get taught a lot) in university courses, the source of a film and an opera, a work particularly revered by pessimists, *The Handmaid's Tale* has been widely viewed as a serious commentary on the socio-political conditions of the day. I want to cast a critical eye on the putatively American way of responding to Atwood's tale.

Read "seriously" (in contrast to pure fantasy), the book belongs to the genre called the dystopia, a genre that projects an imaginary society that differs from the author's own, first, by being significantly worse in important respects and, second, by being worse *because* it attempts to reify some utopian ideal. Science fiction works like Pohl and Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants* and John Brunner's *The Sheep Look Up*, while offering decidedly negative images of the future, are not truly dystopian because they lack an anti-utopian animus; Zamyatin's *We* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, by contrast,

serve as paradigms of the genre precisely because their negative futures stem specifically from the implementation of a rational design for reorganizing society, a utopia. Since most, if not all, such designs for a *dirigiste* world belong to the political left—most, of course, are communal, collectivistic—their anti-type, the dystopia, usually is, or at least appears to be, conservative, counseling rather the bearing of those ills we have than flying to others that we know not of. Another tradition of utopias, however, depends on revelation rather than on reason, on some divine injunction or leading from above, in which case they are usually theocracies, regimes ruled by a priestly class whose authority rests in the will and word of God. Giliad—the futuristic society depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale*—is Atwood's dystopic projection of such a theocracy, a right-wing, fundamentalist Christian theocracy.

Aldous Huxley has argued that “whatever its artistic or philosophic qualities, a book about the future can interest us only if its prophecies look as though they might conceivably come true.” That is to say, the conviction or force that such projections convey depends on real-world conditions or, at least, on the perception of these conditions; consequently, as these conditions or perceptions change, so will the vatic force of the fictive projections. Powerful as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* remains in many ways, its potency as a possible and fearful future significantly declined with the decline of the old-fashioned jackboot-and-truncheon totalitarianism. With the collapse of the Evil Empires of Orwell's day, the specter of Ingsoc no longer haunts Europe or the world. As long ago as 1958, in *Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley noted that “recent developments in Russia . . . have robbed Orwell's book of some of its gruesome verisimilitude” and argued, correctly, that “the odds were more in favor of something like *Brave New World* than something like *1984*” looming in our future. We have, in other words, little cause to fear a future that does not seem a plausible extrapolation of current conditions. An America, for example, whose super rich

convert to Christianity, sell all they have to give to the poor, and thus create a crisis in capital accumulation and economic catastrophe is not a scenario that arouses much anxiety.

The question, then, that I want to consider is the plausibility, in light of current conditions, of the future depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale*. We ought, however, first recall that the purpose of a dystopia is not accurate prediction, but effective prophylaxis: the dystopist, that is, wants to offer a self-defeating prophecy. The media frenzy in and around 1984 over *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as prediction almost invariably missed the point that Orwell did not want to describe accurately a totalitarian future, but to forestall one. The less "right" he was, the better job he had done. Similarly, we may safely conclude that Atwood has no desire to prove an oracle; assuming, however, that her purpose is more than merely to entertain ("jolly good yarn"), the minatory force of her tale will depend on the effectiveness of her extrapolation from real and present dangers in today's society. Trueness to the future is thus *not* the crucial criterion of a dystopian vision, but trueness to the present, paradoxically, is.

Atwood's Giliad exists in the near future, not just within the lifetime of her protagonist Offred (or June) but within the span of her childbearing years. Less than a decade, seemingly, separates the Giliadian future from the (more or less) present, the world we know. Is so cataclysmic a social revolution occurring so abruptly plausible? Atwood has adduced the example of Iran under the ayatollahs as an instance of a society's performing such an abrupt *volte-face*; and, indeed, the speed with which Iran retook the veil lends credence to her fictive scenario. Twentieth-century history offers other apt analogues. Could the boyars of Russia, in the summer of 1914, have imagined the epic transformation that the guns of August would inaugurate? Could a normal citizen of Weimar Germany in, say, 1929 have even begun to conceive what his nation would be like a decade later? "It is," Orwell wrote in 1940, "as though in the space of

ten years we had slid back into the Stone Age. Human types supposedly extinct for centuries . . . have suddenly reappeared, not as inmates of lunatic asylums, but as masters of the world." Indeed, could any of us, only a few years ago, have predicted the collapse of the Soviet empire—so swiftly, so totally, so bloodlessly—and the momentous social transformations that followed in its wake? A sort of historical Doppler Effect seems to have developed where rapid and radical change appears to be the most dependable constant of our time. The once seemingly irreversible trend toward ever greater internationalism has foundered on the rocks of renewed nationalism, and even nationalism itself confronts the disintegrating forces of ethnic and religious tribalism. Not only are the Balkans being rebalkanized, so is much of the rest of the world. What Atwood projects, then, is the sort of cataclysmic upheaval that the rest of the world has experienced happening here and happening as the result of the same sort of disintegrating religious tribalism. The former United States is, in this scenario, a patchwork of warring satrapies, of which Giliad is but one, the area once known as New England.

Given, then, that historical analogues render Atwood's scenario not altogether implausible, the more crucial question (echoing the title of Sinclair Lewis's 1935 novel on a similar theme) becomes: Can it happen *here*? Atwood stated that she did not include anything in *The Handmaid's Tale* "that had not already happened or was not underway somewhere": perhaps so—somewhere—in Iran or Romania or East Timor, but in the United States? Even in this, one of the darkest and most retrograde periods of our nation's history? Is there, that is, any legitimate plausibility to her future and, therefore, any real force in her warning? When Atwood wrote the tale in 1985, the religious right was riding high, the result largely of tent revivalism's having discovered cable television. Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority—both now defunct—were receiving a lot of media attention; Jimmy

and Tammy Faye Bakker had blubbered their way to a bizarre sort of celebrity; and the pre-masturbating-a-hooker-in-a-motel-room-revelation Jimmy Swaggert offered a nightly spectacle of evangelical rapture equaled in authenticity only by his peers in the World Wrestling Federation. All their grotesquerie appeared to many observers as the goofy-face of a serious sociological phenomenon, the coalescence of evangelical Christians—the lumpen-born-again—into a sizable and significant voting bloc. On this premise, Pat Robertson in 1988 mounted a campaign for President—that went nowhere. Nevertheless, the Religious Right seems to have established a permanent caucus in the Republican Party, where it pretty much writes party platform every four years and enjoys a veto over presidential candidates. It claims—and is claimed—to have defeated the Equal Rights Amendment, has spearheaded jihads against legalized abortion, gay rights, and the mainstream media and, in general, served as God's PAC on earth. The fervor and tenor of the Religious Right can well be gauged by Pat Robertson's characterization of feminism as "a socialistic, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians."

The phenomenon, then, that Atwood extrapolates into Giliad—an intolerant, totalitarianoid fundamentalism, intent on culture war—obviously exists here and now; but is it really a serious enough phenomenon to send the sort of *frisson* down the spine that a dystopia should? I think not. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* frightened because there was a Stalin in the Kremlin and a Beria at Lubyanka: consequently, as real-world totalitarianism receded, so did the dread produced by the fictive intensification of it in Oceania. Because technology more than politics informs Zamyatin's *We* and Huxley's *Brave New World* and Vonnegut's *Player Piano*—or, more precisely, a politics generated by advanced technology—and because the potential for a techno-tyranny remains quite plausible, these

dystopias retain much of their minatory power. Compared to the cataclysmic totalitarian threats of yore (Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Mao) or the continuing techno-totalitarian threat, a neo-theocracy on the banks of the Charles inspires little fear as a plausible future. While admiring the imagination and artistry of *The Handmaid's Tale*, I find it wants to frighten us too much about too little.

When I suggested something along these lines to a class studying the book, I was surprised by the intensity of some students' objections to what I had said. With abortion clinics being bombed and gays being bashed, with *Roe v. Wade* hanging by a thread and Clarence Thomas recently ensconced on the Supreme Court—my example is of that vintage—with the forces of reaction infiltrating school boards and Intelligent Design being taught as science, my reservations were taken by the politically correctest among them to be ostrich-like at best and, at worst, objectively fascist, as old-line Marxists used to say. It was helpfully suggested that blindness like mine was exactly what had allowed Hitler to come to power. What, I protested, about all my Bush jokes? My small but very sincere contribution to People for the American Way? My support for the Dixie Chicks? Did these count for nothing in establishing my lefty-prof *bona fides*? Nothing. If I was too obtuse to see that Giliad lurked just around the corner, then I probably also believed that Oswald shot Kennedy and “just say no” really worked. Clearly, I thought, my class was stoned—Oliver Stoned. But when later, untutored by this experience, I presented the same argument at an academic conference liberally sprinkled with feminists, the reaction was even more virulent—as I had no gradebook to brandish against the assault. Only an imperceptive and/or evil running dog of the status quo would have any but words of praise and thanks for Ms. Atwood's timely warning.

These experiences confirmed one of my suspicions: the dystopia serves for a certain kind of reader much the same function that the Gothic romance served for the eighteenth

century or that slasher movies serve for the pubescenti today: to scare them silly. As one nineteenth-century poet sang in praise of Gothic terrors, "there is a joy in fear." The joy in fear that explains the appeal of horror stories probably also explains the appeal of the dystopia, an ideological horror story. My students, I realized, and my fellow conference goers of a certain persuasion *wanted to be scared*—scared by the specter of a shadowy cabal of rightwing zealots spreading its secret tentacles everywhere, just as earlier they had wanted to be scared by Freddie Kruger or Pinhead. *The Nightmare on Elm Street* and the nightmare in Room 101 have much the same psycho-aesthetic appeal: "there is a joy in fear." Thus, in minimizing the dangers that *The Handmaid's Tale* maximizes, I was literally acting as a killjoy, throwing warm water on them, so to speak. It was a critical approach not greatly welcome in class or at conference.

But I was not done. Atwood's tale, I went on to suggest, had other weaknesses in verisimilitude. One of these struck me when, early in the novel, in a casual bit of dialogue, there is mention that the armed forces of Giliad have just smoked the Baptists out of one of their strongholds in the Blue Hills. If the sect that rules Giliad—never specified—is at war with the Baptists, with whom indeed could it be allied? Of whom indeed could it be composed? Not only are the Baptists the largest Protestant denomination in America, but they are surely the most theologically fundamentalist and politically reactionary of any of the mainline Christian sects. One can hardly imagine a faction of the Religious Right far enough to the right of the Baptists to be at war with them, and yet large and powerful enough to organize a coup to bring down the U.S. government. When, in addition, we discover that in the ongoing "sect wars" Catholicism has been declared illegal in the Republic of Giliad and its priests, when caught, are hanged, the implausibility of Atwood's theocratic future becomes even more obvious. Were the Religious Right to pose any real political threat, it would arise from a convergence of all the

fundamentalist elements, not from internecine "sect wars" among them. One has to imagine Jerry Falwell in bed with Cardinal O'Connor—metaphorically speaking, of course—scratching each other's backs, not stabbing them. But since Falwell's Southern Baptists and O'Connor's Irish Catholics are criminalized in Giliad, its theocracy is composed of some nameless, nebulous sect sprung up from no known historical roots in the real-world body politic. Truth is, I suspect, that Atwood knew little about the specific varieties and vagaries of American fundamentalism and maybe cared less; she projects instead a suprahistorical entity whose origins exist more in demonology than in sociology. The Republic of Giliad, for instance, consists of Northeastern States, probably the most liberal in the nation, rather than being located in the South or the Sun Belt, where the Religious Right is the strongest. Depicting Cambridge, Massachusetts, under the thumb of theocratic thugs has a certain delicious perversity to it—rather like Huxley's converting the Athenaeum into the Aphroditium in *Brave New World*—but no demographic plausibility. Chattanooga or Searcy, Arkansas, much more likely theocropolises, lack the cachet of Cambridge (where Atwood once lived) and the shock value of having Harvard's Kennedy School of Government serve as the site of the inquisitional executions known as Salvagings.

Furthermore, the practice that provides the central metaphor of the novel—the handmaid's indentured service as surrogate womb—has, of course, no sanction in Christian theology, fundamentalist or otherwise. The exigencies of Atwood's future, however, brought about by extreme environmental pollution and a consequent drastic decrease in fertility, necessitate and justify a practice like handmaidenry, condemnable as it might be by today's fundamentalist canons. Her argument, not wholly implausible, runs like this: the general patriarchal attitudes of fundamentalism, with its stress on the subservience and subordination of women, would, under dire circumstances, develop sufficient



“scriptural” justification for such breeding tactics. (The Catholic Church at one time called down the wrath of God on users of the effete Byzantine implement, the fork; Boston’s Puritans opposed the installation of street lights as an incentive to wickedness: eternal verities can mutate, or as Groucho Marx once said: “I have my principles, but if you don’t like these I have others.”) The mutation from the real-world fundamentalism that we know to the fictive fundamentalism of Giliad posits a process in which certain already evident traits are exaggerated into new yet familiar configurations.

However, the Old Testament episode which, apparently, suggested handmaid surrogacy to Atwood (and from which she draws one of the novel’s epigraphs) is not at all an instance of patriarchal dominance or exploitation. For feminist critics, the patriarchy—a vaguely conceived and indiscriminately adduced concept—serves the same purpose that Original Sin serves for Christians or that Capitalism served for Marxists, when there were still Marxists: as the source of and explanation for all evil. Atwood preaches to the feminist choir, then, when she makes patriarchy responsible for handmaidenry. In Genesis, however, the practice is a female ploy, the strategy of a barren wife to keep her husband away from the other woman—who also happens to be his wife, and fertile. This bizarre *menage a cinq*—there are *two* handmaids involved—generates the Twelve Tribes of Israel and fully justified J. R. Ackerley’s observation to a friend: “I am half way through Genesis and quite appalled by the disgraceful behavior of all the characters involved, including God.” But in this instance, the particularly disgraceful behavior of coupling through a third party is Rachel’s, not Jacob’s—nor, presumably, God’s. Atwood fails here to give discredit where discredit is due.

The final weakness that I see in *The Handmaid’s Tale* concerns not so much its take on fundamentalism, but its failure to engage the dynamics of ideological revolution of

any stripe. Put baldly, with the exception of the Aunts, who rank low in the revolutionary hierarchy, no one in Giliad seems to be a true believer in its revolution: it is a fanatical regime without the fanatics. True, the Aunts are the sort of gimlet-eyed, hard-hearted martinets familiar in and necessary to radical movements everywhere; but they are mere functionaries, and besides we never see what lies behind their public selves, what lurks beneath the wimple. But if the upper echelons are indicative, private selves in Giliad are quite different from the public ones. Consider Serena Joy, the wife of Offred's Commander, a wickedly sly cross between Phyllis Schlafly and Tammy Faye Bakker: she barely and ill conceals her disdain for the theocratic regulations of Giliad, violating them in ways small—like smoking black market cigarettes—and great—like scheming to get Offred impregnated by a chauffeur. The Commander, too, violates all manner of Giliadean proscriptions in conducting his forbidden liaison with his handmaid, obviously relishing all his "sins." Although central characters in the tale, these two might be considered atypical exceptions, anomalies, but Offred learns from the doctor that handmaids are frequently impregnated illicitly—he offers Offred his services to that end—and from her trip to Jezebels with her Commander, she discovers that most of Giliad's big brass frequent these clandestine brothels. "Everyone's human, after all," the Commander explains. "You can't cheat Nature." A wonderfully tolerant point of view, probably even true, but hardly the credo that would make or sustain a revolution of the saints.

Atwood wants, apparently, to expose the hypocrisy behind the neo-puritanism of Giliad, to expose the fraudulent pretensions of a regime of Jimmy Swagger-like phonies. But do phonies—time servers, hypocrites, humbugs—make revolutions, radical ideological revolutions? For this one needs the flashing eye, the floating hair—Savarola, not Machiavelli, Robespierre, not Tartuffe, Ayatolla

Khomeini, not Elmer Gantry, Orwell's O'Brien, not Atwood's Commander Fred. True, every violent revolution moves from a charismatic to a bureaucratic stage, where rule-following functionaries take over from fire-eating fanatics; but it seems too soon for Giliad to have ossified in this manner. Perhaps even more important, Atwood's narrative never conveys the sense of Giliad's ever having had a charismatic stage. Only the Aunts seem fanatic enough to make a revolution—and they are only girls. The rest lack all conviction.

A usual and significant feature of the dystopia is its *agon*, in which the rebellious protagonist confronts the apologist for the evil regime: D-503 and the Benefactor in *We*, John Savage and Mustapha Mond in *Brave New World*, Winston Smith and O'Brien in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Montag and Capt. Beatty in *Fahrenheit 451*, and so on. From their confrontations emerge not only the critical ideological issues at stake in each novel but the nature of the utopian-totalitarian personality itself, ruthless in its righteousness, power-mad in its piety (I have dealt extensively with this character type in a recent essay in *Humanitas*, "The Utopian as Sadist.") But no such *agon* occurs in *The Handmaid's Tale* and, given Atwood's cast of characters, perhaps none could. The Republic of Giliad is fanatically, even ascetically cruel in its ideology, but its rulers are flabby, passionless, without conviction. Elmer Gantry is no substitute for the Grand Inquisitor.

A primary difficulty—perhaps *the* primary difficulty—for anyone writing a cautionary tale about the destruction of American democracy by a radical coup, right or left, is, as I previously suggested, its implausibility. Not merely that, like Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* where Charles Lindbergh defeats Franklin Roosevelt in the 1940 election, it didn't happen that way, but the utter improbability of its ever happening that way. When Sinclair Lewis set out in 1935 to show in *It Can't Happen Here* that it *can* happen here, that, as he claimed, when fascism comes to America it will come wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross, the

result was a clunky ideological potboiler that superimposes the German experience on America, complete with domestic versions of the Night of the Long Knives, Kristallnacht, concentration camps, etc., with sizeable doses of Huey Long-ish demagoguery substituted for Der Fuhrer's. If Lewis's (admirable) purpose was to warn against the then-rising tide of fascism, this book, its manifold artistic failings aside, must have ill-served that purpose, for its scenario is patently, even laughably improbable, so much so that at times one comes to doubt his seriousness. By contrast, those scenes near the end of *Babbitt*, where Vergil Gunch and The Good Citizens' League coerce Babbitt back into the booboisie from which he has strayed, have the sinister feel of an authentic American fascism in the making, a Big Brother is Watching You aura *avant-Orwell*. But *It Can't Happen Here* owes more to hysteria than to history, entirely untrue to the American experience, as it has been or is ever likely to be.

My claim, here, is that *The Handmaid's Tale*—if read as something more than “a jolly good yarn”—shares the same fate: absolute historical improbability. “How long have we got?” Nonsense. In some eyes—I can see them now: flinty, lizard-like, unforgiving; I have known them, known them all—this judgment will seem like an exercise in American exceptionalism, the belief that we are different and better than other nations; and to some degree it is. But now, to make my point, I must wax explicitly—and partisanly—political. I think we are living in one of the darkest periods in our nation's history, with serious threats posed to our rights and liberties. George Bush was arguably the worst U.S. President ever (I vote affirmative), a grotesque mockery of what a democratic leader ought to be. Never have so many fasciod personality types, led by Dick Cheney, occupied such high positions in government as in this administration. Corporate corrosion of the political process grows apace, and Congress seems enfeebled, the limp branch. Some of the more extreme bloggers even argue that the question is not

when fascist regime change will occur, but just when after 9/11 it did.

But. . . .

As I write news comes of U. S. District Judge Victor Marrero ruling that sections of the Bush-beloved Patriot Act “offends fundamental Constitutional principles,” that the government’s ability to demand records and use administrative subpoenas without warrants and judicial review is a violation of free speech and individual rights. Earlier the Supreme Court held that the military commissions set up by the Bush administration to try detainees at Guantanamo Bay lack “the power to proceed because its structures and procedures violate both the Uniform Code of Military Justice and the four Geneva Conventions” signed in 1949. Even Congress shows signs of stirring from its somnambulance. Numerous books expressing more or less the same opinion of Bush and company that I just expressed abound: the presses that publish them have not been smashed, the stores that sell them have not been trashed. Even some members of his administration, disillusioned, have resigned and written highly critical accounts of what goes on there, but none has yet had an ice pick driven through his skull. None of the multiplying number of retired generals who question the conduct of the insane venture in Iraq has been sent to reeducation camps in darkest Arkansas, nor even, so far as I know, forfeited his pension. No secret army—Blackwater, say—has, in the name of national security, disbanded Congress, “preventively detained” its leaders, and “disappeared” the more recalcitrant ones, as happens in both *It Can’t Happen Here* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*: the putsch is not native to America. The judiciary still make independent judgments, wise or foolish as the case may be, but not obedient to *obiter dicta* from the oval office. Elections will be held come November when the electorate, if it chooses, can end the long national nightmare that the Bush Administration has been. And if not . . . well, democracies, including ours, make a lot of mistakes. But true democracies

retain the structure and mechanics for self-correction: the errors we make in one decade—like incarcerating Japanese-Americans in World War II—can be admitted and rectified in another. In short—to belabor the obvious no longer—American democracy is sound and stable, often disappointing in its collective decisions and clumsy in effecting its best intentions, but utterly, unequivocally unlikely—barring some unprecedented cataclysm—to transform into a fascist dictatorship along the lines of those in *It Can't Happen Here* or *The Handmaid's Tale* or, perhaps the most lurid of all, Jack London's prototypical *The Iron Heel*. (And if someday I'm being waterboarded by Blackwater functionaries in the basement of a federal building somewhere, I'm sure to be acutely embarrassed by these words.)

Jonathan Swift was much amused by the report of an Irish Bishop who, upon finishing *Gulliver's Travels*, declared that he believed hardly a word of it. In taking the approach to *The Handmaid's Tale* that I have, I fear running the risk of sounding like the Irish bishop, mistaking fantasy for reality. If one reads the book only as “a jolly good yarn,” then my strictures are, of course, irrelevant. But if one reads it seriously, as a dystopia warning against a theocratic fascism as the shape of things to come, then the miscalculations that I have adduced call its effectiveness into question. To those who *want* to be afraid, to be very afraid, my apologies for offering words of reassurance: some books do give me nightmares, but *The Handmaid's Tale* is not one.

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