Peter Swirski, *American Utopia and Social Engineering in Literature, Social Thought, and Political History (Routledge Transnational Perspectives on American Literature)*.

Alice Lee

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9863
ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher
European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

This text was automatically generated on 2 May 2019.

Creative Commons License
Peter Swirski, *American Utopia and Social Engineering in Literature, Social Thought, and Political History* (*Routledge Transnational Perspectives on American Literature*).

Alice Lee

REFERENCES


1 With Greece undergoing one of the most dramatic periods of social engineering in postwar history, the European Union trying to engineer a supranational federation, and China social-engineering not only the sociopolitical but the family life of one and a half billion people, the subject of social engineering should be on everyone’s mind. Not that you would notice. Certainly not in the United States which has just completed one of its most dramatic decades of social engineering on the national scale. Under George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, under Henry Paulson and Ben Bernanke, under the Patriot Act and orange-level terrorist alerts, America was conditioned to develop from a kinder and gentler nation to a scared and at the same time scary nation.

2 In the introduction to *American Utopia and Social Engineering*, Peter Swirski diagnoses the results of the American social experiment: “The United States today is afflicted with political alienation, militarized violence, institutionalized poverty, and social agony” (3). Worst of all, continues Swirski in his utterly absorbing, not to say epic in design and execution, book of literary, historical, social, and political diagnosis, America is afflicted with a chronic and acute memory-deficit syndrome. “America insists on ignoring the
context of its present dilemmas. It insists on forgetting what preceded the headlines of today and on denying continuity with history. It insists, in short, on its exceptionalism” (3).

3 Human societies are established to accommodate and regulate the needs of the people and as such they require constant cultivating of this human environment. Focusing on the six decades from 1948 (the publication of Skinner’s Walden) to 2008 (the end of the Bush II administration), Swirski’s *American Utopia and Social Engineering* revisits the theory and the history of attempts to cultivate the American society, to make it better. Chapter One is devoted to the most scandalous scientific utopia in the modern era, Skinner’s behaviourist design for an ideal community which became the blueprint for a number of real communities that tried to make the project work. In the end all failed, as Swirski documents, for the same reason: Skinner’s advice to social engineers fails to account for adaptive mechanisms that evolution implanted in all social animals, including human beings. Chapter Two deals with the questions of sanity, madness, conformism, and personal responsibility in the context of Ken Kesey’s fascinating bestseller (and Milos Forman’s unforgettable film) *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. The chapter concludes with an eye-opening analysis of different types of voting systems, all better than the one the American Electoral College has just used to reappoint Barack Obama. A comparison with Swiss direct democracy highlights how much American would-be democracy has yet to learn from the Old World. Chapter Three which deals with Bernard Malamud’s haunting novel *God’s Grace* is a sustained meditation on evolution and on the forces inside all of us: the selfish instinct to take care of “number one” and the altruistic instinct that allows us to co-exist in extremely complex societies, and which sometimes even drives us to acts of self-sacrifice, of which orthodox Social Darwinists, such as Herbert Spencer, have nothing to say. This is probably my favourite chapter in that it concludes with an entertaining application of the Darwinist thinking to oral literature, and more specifically to proverbs which testify to the presence of both the “me first” and the “we first” (as Swirski calls them), the pro-individual and the pro-social instincts in all of us. The focus of Chapter Four is Walker Percy’s existential bestseller *The Thanatos Syndrome* and the technology of mind control: direct and indirect, but either way soon to be in the hands of social engineers on planet Earth. How soon? Swirski rounds up pages and pages of dense and invaluable research that is currently being pursued in university laboratories and in military installations around the United States. Finally, Chapter Five is about emotions, politics, and George W. Bush’s campaign to social-engineer America into a country that looks like the “alternative America” from the pages of Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*.

4 Unfortunately, the limits of a book review do not allow a more extensive engagement with the colossal amount of original ideas that leap out at the reader from almost every page of Swirski’s book. But perhaps my invitation to read the book itself is enough since the only review of *American Utopia and Social Engineering* that could do it justice would have to be as long as the book itself.
AUTHOR

ALICE LEE
Hong-Kong University