“The question of freedom never arises”: The Relationship Between *Brave New World* and *Walden Two* and its Implications for [Anti-] Utopia

In *Brave New World Revisited*, Aldous Huxley’s lesser-known follow-up to his famous dystopia, *Brave New World*, Huxley describes the despots in his fictional society by saying that “[t]hey draw their inspiration, not from the Inquisitor or the SS man, but from the physiologist and his methodically conditioned laboratory animals” (Huxley 75). In making this statement, Huxley suggests that in writing his novel, he was inspired by the work of real-life psychologists. This statement also suggests a possible answer to a question that frequently plagues readers of dystopia: how could a society like this develop? Wouldn’t the citizens detect their oppression and take steps to end it? I posit that the supposed “utopia” created by psychologist B.F. Skinner, *Walden Two*, when considered alongside Huxley’s *Brave New World*, could provide an answer. By comparing the two societies I aim to demonstrate how the similarities between them could suggest that the utopian *Walden Two* could transform into the dystopian *Brave New World*.

Huxley clearly saw the relationship between psychology and dystopia. *In Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley says that “[b]rainwashing, as it is now practiced, is a hybrid technique, depending for its effectiveness partly on the systematic use of violence, partly on skillful psychological manipulation” (Huxley 82). In this statement, Huxley asserts that brainwashing is dependent on psychology in order to manipulate a person’s thoughts and behavior. This relationship suggests that the types of psychological manipulation that Skinner describes in *Walden Two* are closely related to the practice of “brainwashing” and that the purportedly altruistic manipulation in his utopia could easily be abused and slowly transform into despotic brainwashing.

In both novels, the most important aspects of psychological manipulation focus on conditioning the citizens’ emotional states. Huxley discusses the importance of emotional manipulation when he says “[t]he fact that strong negative emotions tend to heighten suggestibility and so facilitate a change of heart has been observed and exploited long before the days of Pavlolv” (Huxley 77). He recognizes that having control over a subject’s emotions is essential for a dictator to maintain control. The only difference between Huxley’s method and Pavlov’s is that instead of creating negative emotions, Huxley’s dictators maintain control by ensuring that the citizens are always at ease. Huxley asserts that “[the dictator] could ensure himself against political unrest by changing the chemistry of his subjects’ brains and so making them content with their servile condition” (Huxley 91). In other words, his dictators keep everyone happy so that they have no reason to rebel.

Frazier, the psychologist in Skinner’s Walden Two, uses a similar method. He asserts that his primary goal in organizing his society is to maintain the happiness of its people. When discussing his behavioral and cultural engineering, he says “[the people] get the satisfaction of pleasant and profitable social relations on a scale almost undreamed of in the world at large” (Skinner 102). He claims that his goals are selfless; that he strives to keep people happy for their own sakes. However, because he is attempting to create an ideal society filled with ideal citizens, we can see that his altruistic goals could become subsumed by efforts to maintain the stability of society as a whole at the expense of the individual.

The reason that emotional control is important in these societies is because emotional manipulation decreases the amount of awareness that the citizens have about their oppression. In both novels, the citizens are given everything they need in order to be happy; thus, they either do not perceive that they are being manipulated and controlled or they do not care. Huxley points this out in *Brave New World Revisited* when he discusses his world’s conditioning techniques, saying, “[the new technique’s] purpose was to manipulate their minds without their being aware of what was being done to them” (Huxley 97). In other words, the conditioning in this society always has two purposes: to train the citizens to be content with whatever their situation in life and to prevent the citizens from being aware of the control being imposed on them.

In an analysis of *Walden Two* and similar real-life utopian communities, Hilke Kuhlmann says that “[t]he planner-manager system is based on the assumption that most people are not interested in the larger political picture as long as their own personal needs are satisfied” (Kuhlmann 14). In *Walden Two*, the larger plans for society are handled by the managers and the ordinary citizens know nothing about these plans. For example, Walden Two has a political manager who tells the citizens who to vote for because “Why should our members take the time…to inform themselves on so complex a matter?” (Skinner 183). In order for this system to function, the ordinary citizens would need to be content with the system and never feel the urge to question it. In this way, the social system in *Walden Two* is similar to that of *Brave New World* in that both require a lack of awareness in their citizens.

One difference between the two societies is that Frazier insists that the system he develops is meant to benefit the individual, in spite of the psychological manipulation that it requires (Kuhlmann 10). This is significant because Huxley feared that in the modern, industrialized society, the individual would be ignored in favor of the species as a whole (Meckier 3). Therefore, in Huxley’s dystopian world, he creates a society in which the interests of the individual are always second to those of society. In other words, Skinner makes a point of emphasizing that his society will not do what Huxley feared, insisting that his world is, in fact, a utopia.

However, is Skinner’s utopia really doing what it claims? When introducing his behavioral engineering techniques, Skinner’s main character, Frazier, says, “’Each of us…is engaged in a pitched battle with the rest of mankind…Each of us has interests which conflict with the interests of everybody else” (Skinner 95). In this quotation, Frazier explains that the idea behind his behavioral manipulation is to induce each individual to behave in the way that most benefits society as a whole. This way, everyone can be happy because everyone will have the same values and goals. On the surface, this seems to be beneficial to the individual because it ensures that no citizen will stand in the way of another’s happiness; yet, this system also denies the citizen the ability to behave in the way that he or she sees fit, instead insisting that he or she behave in the way that benefits society. Thus we can see that Skinner’s system is actually quite close to the society that Huxley feared. It is possible that Skinner put a positive spin on it in order to make it more palatable; this could, in part, explain how a system like this could take hold and eventually become a dystopia.

There are other similarities between the two societies which suggest that the less-threatening *Walden Two* could eventually transform into the totalitarian society of *Brave New World*. Philosopher Pedro Alexis Tabensky points this out when he says that “A society organized in accordance with Skinner’s plan is a society where individuals have no personal control over their lives, like the inhabitants of Huxley’s or Orwell’s totalitarian dystopias” (Tabensky 6). In other words, any society in which the lives of citizens are proscribed and controlled has the potential to transform into a dystopia.

The most significant similarity between the worlds of *Walden Two* and *Brave New World* is their education systems. Huxley’s dictators focus their attempts at conditioning on children because children are more suggestible than adults. He says that “[c]hildren are better hypnopaedic subjects than adults, and the would-be dictator will take full advantage of the fact” (Huxley 113). Therefore, the citizens in *Brave New World* are lifelong subjects of hypnopaedic conditioning, turning them into perfect citizens. Citizens believe that “’everybody’s happy now’…[because] They had heard the words repeated a hundred and fifty times every night for twelve years” (Huxley 75). In other words, hypnopaedic suggestions affect the individual for life, ensuring that they behave properly and remain content.

Similarly, Frazier’s psychological conditioning is only effective if it is implemented from the very beginning; the members of the society who join as adults will never be true members of Walden Two because they did not receive the conditioning that would make them into ideal citizens. For example, Frazier describes one citizen, saying “Mrs. Nash was twelve years old when Walden Two was founded. It was a little late to undo her early training, but I think we were successful” (Skinner 92). In other words, she can still recall her previous life, so she may never be an ideal citizen.

The importance of children does not apply only to those members of the societies who are physically children; it applies to the adults as well. In both societies, the adults are infantilized to some degree. In *Walden Two*, Frazier calls the people his children, suggesting that they are child-like (Kuhlmann 19). They are only given the most basic of tasks, never being asked to engage in complex or abstract thought. They do what they are told to do, never questioning those commands. Similarly, in “A Neglected Huxley ‘Preface’: His Earliest Synopsis of Brave New World,” Jerome Meckier describes *Brave New World* as “one big nursery” (Meckier 10). All of its citizens are psychologically similar to the children in Frazier’s nurseries; however, instead of merely lacking the necessity of complex thought, they lack the ability to move beyond simplistic cognition. This suggests the possibility that the simple life in *Walden Two* could eventually produce a society of infantilized adults.

This is particularly likely when considering the content of “education” in Huxley’s society. The “synthetic myths” of hypnopaedic suggestion only transmit moral knowledge, not intellectual knowledge (Larson 507). The dictators learned early on that only moral knowledge could be gained through hypnopaedia. This is part of how the citizens become so childlike; there is little effort put into improving their intellectual abilities. In the same way, Frazier’s conditioning in Walden Two focuses mainly on moral training. The aim is to train the people to be ideal citizens; intellectual development is expected to follow naturally. Frazier says that “Since our children remain happy, energetic, and curious, we don’t need to teach ‘subjects’ at all” (Skinner 110). In this way, Frazier’s system could result in a society like Huxley’s; with a large amount of moral training and little to no intellectual guidance, Walden Two could easily become a society of complacent and moral, but intellectually stunted, citizens.

This is particularly likely considering the one caveat that Huxley offers concerning the effectiveness of mental conditioning: “Environmental factors certainly play their part in making one person more responsive to suggestion than another” (Huxley 114). In Walden Two, it is not only the mental condition of each person that is controlled; it is also the environment. Theoretically, because the children born in Walden Two would all be raised in the same place, even in the same nursery, there would be no environmental differences to complicate their response to conditioning. For example, the nursery is described as “controlled temperature, noiseless sleep” (Skinner 89). In other words, all of the children live in identical environments. In addition, Huxley states that temperament is a major factor in how people respond to conditioning (Huxley 116). This is also a non-factor in Walden Two because the mental conditioning ensures that each citizen will have the same, ideal, temperament. For example, children are required to do exercises to master frustration. Kuhlmann discusses these exercises, saying that “[t]he person to emerge from that kind of education is to be self-controlled, strong, well-poised, and basically happy with his or her accomplishments” (Kuhlmann 12). This is similar to conditioning in *Brave New World* that conditions all citizens to respond in the same way to stimuli (Mencutekin 62). In other words, it is not a big leap from *Walden Two* to *Brave New World*.

Another similarity between the two worlds is their views on sexuality. One of the most shocking aspects of society in *Brave New World* is its extremely permissive views on sex; children are encouraged to engage in sexual experimentation from an early age and adults are expected to be sexually promiscuous. As one of the inane hypnopaedic phrases states, “everybody belongs to everybody else,” and monogamy is the most extreme social taboo. In Walden Two, teenagers marry early, because “[e]arly marriages are intended to save teenagers the frustrations of unfulfilled sexual desires” (Kuhlmann 11). In both worlds, the leaders recognize that sexual frustration is a major cause for unhappiness: something that they work hard to prevent. Therefore, both sets of leaders take steps to prevent such feelings of frustration, keeping citizens content. The only difference is that Walden Two still encourages marriage. However, it is not difficult to imagine the leaders seeing that even looser sexual rules would lead to even happier citizens. In other words, the sexual attitudes in *Walden Two* are the beginning of a path that leads to *Brave New World*.

Another similarity between the two societies is their governments. In *Brave New World Revisited* Huxley states that “[a]ny law or social arrangement which makes it possible for officials to be led into temptation is bad” (Huxley 107). In other words, in his society, even the leaders who implement the control and conditioning should behave according to the rules and conditioning of the society. Similarly, Kulmann tells us that “Frazier explains that scientists are best suited for the task of designing society because their aims are supposedly never selfish” (Kuhlmann 13). Skinner believes that scientists should be in control of society because they will always do what is best for society and never abuse their power. This is similar to the theory in *Brave New World* in that measures are taken to prevent any group of individuals from having more power than the ordinary citizens. Thus, no one is impervious to the control of society.

In addition, both societies operate according to the principle that the best political situation is one that runs itself; there should be as little interference from above as possible (Firchow 116). In both novels, the government conditions people so that they will behave according to the standards of society without being forced. Their conditioning and social expectations ensure that they will never disturb the status quo; because of this, government officials have no need to interfere. This goes back to the issue of awareness; the reason that these societies, *Brave New World* in particular, are successful is because the people are unaware that they are being controlled. This is why lack of interference from above is essential.

The societies are also similar in that technology is an important aspect of both. In *Brave New World*, the society is more or less based around its technology. People are conditioned to be the ideal consumers, and this consumerism keeps the economy thriving and keeps the people occupied and content. In addition, “[t]hroughout [*Walden Two*] the reader is presented with ingenuous little inventions aimed at making daily life more pleasant” (Kuhlmann 4). Part of keeping the citizens happy is giving them technologies that will limit the amount of work that they need to perform. In this way, an abundance of technology is vital to these societies because it increases the happiness and complacency of the citizens.

This also relates to work in the two societies. In *Brave New World*, everyone enjoys the work that they do because they are made, both through genetics and conditioning, to do it (Mencutekin 61). In *Walden Two*, people enjoy their work because they are permitted to do whatever work they choose and because their hours are extremely limited. In both societies, leaders understand that it is important for people to work in order to keep society thriving and to ensure that the people’s lives have a purpose. However, both have discovered methods for making work as pleasant as possible, therefore ensuring that the necessity of work will not negatively impact the contentedness of the citizens.

In summary, there is one major connection between the systems of *Brave New World* and *Walden Two*: in both, there is a sever limitation of freedom. Huxley presents a lack of freedom in his novel because he believes that “[f[reedom is…a great good, tolerance a great virtue and regimentation a great misfortune” (Huxley 120). Similarly, in Skinner’s world “[t]he problem…is that Walden Two is modeled on the idea that there are only…surface freedoms, as opposed to deep freedom of the will” (Tabensky 3). In other words, both worlds are dystopian in that both take away freedom from the individuals in order to maintain stability for the society.

The reason that this insistence on stability is problematic is that the “perfect” lives these worlds offer limit the potential of the citizens. In discussing *Brave New World*, Firchow states that “[c]haracter, after all, is shaped by suffering, and the new world state has abolished suffering in favor of a continuous, soma-stupefied, infantile ‘happiness’”(Firchow). In other words, the people are happy, but they are never fully developed as human beings. Firchow goes on to tell us that this is the reason why readers relate to John the Savage: although his passions lead to his death, his suffering makes him the most human character in the novel. Similarly, the goal in *Walden Two* is to create a world in which there is extreme contentedness, and where citizens are trained to deal with frustrations without experiencing extreme emotions. Would this conditioning eventually lead to a *Brave New World*?

The question that remains is: Why does *Brave New World* succeed, while *Walden Two* fails? One reason could be that in *Brave New World*, “desirable behavior was insured by a double process of genetic manipulation and postnatal conditioning” (Huxley 128). Therefore, genetics and behavioral conditioning work together to guarantee that the citizens maintain correct behavior. Walden Two, on the other hand, lacks genetic manipulation, depending entirely on behavioral engineering to maintain order. The dependence on a single method of control could be a reason why Walden Two does not succeed.

Another difference between the societies is that in Walden Two, Skinner believes that his system is truly altruistic, and that it cannot be abused by the leaders. Therefore, he provides no defense against misuse (Kuhlmann 18). In describing the managers, he says that “His power is scarcely worthy of the name. What he has, instead, is a job to be done” (Skinner 218-219). In *Brave New World*, leaders such as Mustapha Mond accept that their manipulation is about power; therefore, they take steps to prevent their leaders from abusing the system. Therefore, being in denial about his true motives could be a detriment to Frazier’s system.

In real-life utopias based on *Walden Two*, the biggest pitfall was the communal child-rearing system. Skinner underestimated the emotional attachment that parents had to their children (Kuhlmann 102). Therefore, the system struggled because at first, because there were no children who had been present from birth (Kuhlmann 103). Parents who came to the utopias were still attached to their children, and having to give them up made them want to leave quite quickly. *Brave New World* does not have this problem because of its assembly-line reproduction. Children no longer have parents, so there are no familial ties to stand in the way of communal child-rearing. In fact, when the word “mother” is uttered, “the smut that was really science fell with a crash into the boys’ eye-avoiding silence” (Huxley 24). In other words, the idea of natural childbirth/rearing is obscene, making communal childrearing the norm. Therefore, Skinner’s system was bound to have setbacks in this regard as long as natural childbirth was a necessity.

Because of the similarities between the two societies, it is conceivable that the “utopian” *Walden Two* could eventually transform into the dystopian *Brave New World*. As Kuhlmann states, “[i]n *Walden Two*, Skinner was still very much concerned with presenting his views in a way that would be acceptable to an American audience” (Kuhlmann 22-23). Therefore, his ideas couldn’t be quite as extreme as Huxley’s. However, a gradual extension of these ideas over the years could have resulted in a slow transformation from utopia to dystopia. In addition, the society in *Walden Two* was still in the early years of its existence; eventually, they could have eliminated the flaws that made it inferior to *Brave New World*. With experience and new advancements in technology, Walden Two could have become the model of efficiency that we see in Huxley’s society.