

Erewhon, Everywhere, and Samuel Butler

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical analysis of a book written by Samuel Butler in 1872. The book is titled *Erewhon*, a fictitious society that serves as a satirical representation of British society and its ironies and absurdities. The methodology used is not typical of scientific papers, especially those that are used to develop hard sciences. As Butler compared *Erewhon* to England, the objective of this paper is to compare *Erewhon* to contemporary societies and see if their levels of absurdity have diminished. Due to its subjective, illustrative, and general nature, the reader is entitled to hold a different opinion. That wouldn't, however, mean that the points raised are any less deserving of concern and criticism.

Keywords

Butler, Satire, Society, Modernity, Criticism

1. Introduction

It's fair to assume that when *Erewhon* was first published by Samuel Butler in 1872, only very skeptical—if not outright suspicious—readers could imagine the world as it is now. The unevenness of what is described in the book is substantial enough to justify its name, as *Erewhon* is “nowhere” spelled backward.

When the book was first published, there were discussions about its nature, specifically whether it depicted a dystopian society of terror or a traditional utopian novel. In layman's terms, the difference between dystopia and utopia lies in the likelihood and feasibility of their stories becoming reality. The more likely and feasible something is, the closer it gets to being considered dystopian rather than utopian. No absolute consensus was achieved, and the novel is now considered a political satire, mainly used to ridicule the stupidity, vices, and wrongs of Victorian society through exaggeration.

Erewhon's story takes place in what is now considered New Zealand and starts

with a crusade led by Higgs, a lyrical persona who narrates the whole story. The first part of the plot involves Higgs going on an expedition into the mountains, with the native Chowbok as his guide. Chowbok was reluctant about this expedition and eventually abandoned Higgs, who then embarked on the journey by himself.

After enduring a great deal of difficulties and tribulations, Higgs found what he thought to be the Seven Lost Tribes of Israel, a group that he believed ought to be religiously converted.

With this background plot, Butler criticizes *Erewhon* (the society he had just encountered) by comparing it to England, focusing solely on *Erewhon's* unorthodox moral values concerning phenomena related to physical/mental well-being, criminality, pregnancy and its burdens, the educational system, and the use of machines.

The objectives of this paper have very little to do with reasoning methods, deductive or inductive arguments, and their validity/invalidity, strength/weakness, soundness/unsoundness, cogency, or uncogency. The examples used are not intended to achieve absolute and irrefutable conclusions but to illustrate and perhaps generate guided criticism of some aspects of society that could be of common usefulness.

The objectives are to evaluate and discuss the criticisms of society presented in Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* through comparisons with today's world. For this to happen, this paper aims to draw parallels between issues and absurdities highlighted in *Erewhon's* society and the social, political, and economic aspects present in today's world. Aspects such as the use of machines, health systems, education, judicial affairs, and artificial intelligence are to be used to exemplify and guide the aforementioned criticism.

2. The Use of Machines

Higgs' story in *Erewhon* starts and finishes with machines at its core. He was first imprisoned in *Erewhon* for being found in possession of a watch, i.e., a machine, a species of a genus that had long been abolished and forbidden by the Erewhonians.

The last part of the book is dedicated to reflecting upon the risks of the incautious use of machines, which is why machines had been forbidden in *Erewhon*. Butler's satire is among the first novels to address concepts such as machine consciousness, self-replicating machines, and what could now be defined as artificial intelligence as opposed to biological intelligence.

In the article "Darwin Among the Machines" (1863), sent to the editor of *The Press*, a journal in New Zealand, Butler criticizes and externalizes his concerns about a silent machine rebellion that would replace mankind due to their superiority, just as mankind did to other animals. As the reader can therefore infer, Butler's concerns were not only of a literary nature.

In line with this article, in the chapter "The Book of Machines," Butler externalizes various concerns, some of which are as follows:

Firstly, he expresses clear agitation towards the unprecedented development that machines have demonstrated. Hence, (Butler, 1872: p. 230): “No class of beings has at any time in the past made so rapid a movement forward. Should not that movement be jealously watched, and checked while we can still check it?”

Secondly, in (Butler, 1872: p. 231), the author also raises concerns about the eventual ability of machines to communicate both with each other and with mankind. Alternatively, he worries about their capability to communicate with each other but not with mankind, given the unintelligibility of their language.

Lastly, also in (Butler, 1872: p. 231), the author mentions that “Some people may say that man’s moral influence will suffice to rule them; but I cannot think it will ever be safe to repose much trust in the moral sense of any machine.” *Permissa maxima venia*, in line with (Sandel, 2007), human beings have been in constant conflict with each other, among other reasons, due to their inability to reach a consensus about morality. Hence, the eternal clash between the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, the libertarianism of Robert Nozick and John Locke’s conception of property, and the deontological morality of Immanuel Kant and his categorical imperative. If this premise is accepted, that is, if this human difficulty in reasoning about morality is accepted, what kind of moral influence could man expect to exert?

Aside from moral digressions, there are other personal aspects severely influenced by unintelligible technologies, such as the impact of using artificial intelligence by human resources departments to determine the suitability of applicants, and the use of artificial intelligence to determine financial institutions’ score attributions when conferring loan limits and interests, to name a few.

To conclude this topic, it would appear that the fears expressed in “The Book of the Machines” are not hypothetical anymore, with many of its uncertainties predicting present times.

3. Health System

Butler frontally criticizes the Erewhonians’ health system. In Chapter VII, Higgs has his first encounter with what would later be confirmed as unpleasantness towards those who were ill. After having his physical and mental well-being scrutinized by the magistrates, Higgs decides to exaggerate his symptoms to gain some extra attention from those around him. It is only after being severely reprimanded that he finally understands the Erewhonians’ complete intolerance to illness—a literal criminalization of sickness.

Erewhon was published in 1872. In 1864, England passed The Contagious Diseases Acts, which were then modified in 1866 and 1869. These acts were mainly intended to curb venereal diseases, i.e., those that are sexually transmissible. Moreover, since prostitutes were also involved, but there were no legal definitions or prohibitions of prostitution, women could be arbitrarily arrested and forcibly examined. If women were found to be infected, they would be sent to

lock hospitals.

Ironically, cities with high concentrations of soldiers were considered lenient. This leniency was justified by a necessary concession. As soldiers were often single, these cities had an enlarged tolerance.

4. Colleges of Unreason

The Colleges of Unreason focus on the study of a subject that could be described as “hypothetics”. In (Butler, 1872: p. 208) Higgs reasons that

They argue thus - that to teach a boy merely the nature of the things which exist in the world around him, and about which he will have to be conversant during his whole life, would be giving him but a narrow and shallow conception of the universe, which it is urged might contain all manner of things which are not now to be found therein. To open his eyes to these possibilities, and so to prepare him for all sorts of emergencies, is the object of this system of hypothetics.

The Colleges of Unreason had two main subjects, hence their professors of Inconsistency and Evasion. Subsequently, in (Butler, 1872: p. 212), Erewhonians defend that,

(...) everyone is a genius, more or less. No one is so physically sound that no part of him will be even a little unsound, and no one is so diseased but that some part of him will be healthy – so no man is mentally and morally sound, but that he will be in part both mad and wicked; and no man is so mad and wicked but he will be sensible and honorable in part. In like manner there is no genius who is not also a fool, and no fool who is not also a genius.

The up-to-datedness of Butler’s satire resonates. In (Bauman, 2000), the author sustains the idea that society has been, throughout the generations, losing its metanarratives; their conceptions capable of creating meaning and justifying the world as a whole. *Id est*, given the absence of these metanarratives, the world has given place to personal narratives; that is to say, there are almost as many personal narratives as there are people to subjectively create them. Some extreme examples could be the belief in the relativity of scientific facts; the belief that vaccines are a product of pharmaceutical conspiracies; that man has never been to the moon and that this has never been more than propaganda; that the Earth is flat, etc.

Regarding doubts about conspiracies, in (Butler, 1872: p. 218) there is a unique criticism.

(...) I found that the course of study was divided into two branches – the practical and the commercial – no student being permitted to continue his studies in the actual practice of the art he had taken up, unless he made equal progress in its commercial history.

Thus those who were studying painting were examined at frequent intervals in the prices which all the leading pictures of the last fifty or a hundred years had realized, and in the fluctuations in their values when (as often happened) they had been sold and resold three or four times. [...] It is as important for him to learn how to adapt his wares to the market (...).

A skeptical reader could challenge this by arguing that these are exceptions of little to no academic value. The counterpoint would be that, minority opinions or not, these statements have been gaining publicity and adherents. The mere condition to counter these beliefs depends on the assertiveness, vagueness, and relateness with which the statements are made. In that context, [Butler \(1872: pp. 219-220\)](#) says the following about the Erewhonians' educational system:

As there is hardly any subject on which this suspicion cannot arise, I found it difficult to get definite opinions from any of them, except on such subjects as the weather, eating and drinking, holiday excursions, or games of skill. [...] The art of sitting gracefully on a fence has never, I should think, been brought to greater perfection than at the Erewhonian Colleges of Unreason.

In line with the previous discussion, it is worth reflecting upon society's difficulties in interpreting and reasoning about freedom of speech and paradoxes such as the paradoxes of democracy, tolerance, and freedom, as eloquently examined by Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* ([Popper, 1945](#)).

The subjective criticism here is that Erewhonian Colleges of Unreason are not entirely just a product of Butler's satire. One could argue that the emergence of the difficulties just mentioned is the flipside of reason's relativity.

5. Judicial Affairs

Some of the current criticisms of judicial systems are about their subjectiveness, formalism, inefficiency, classism, etc. In this regard, [Butler \(1872: p. 108\)](#) provides some rather grotesque examples. A man's wife had just died, and it was important for the defense's thesis to prove that he didn't love her; that he was neither sick nor mentally unwell. How could he be suffering if he had not even cried?

The prosecution's witnesses were categorical, and the plaintiff was found guilty. The jury recommended the prisoner to mercy since he had just insured his wife's life for a considerable sum.

The sentence was equally odd ([Butler, 1872: p. 109](#)),

But for the recommendation of the jury I should give you six months' hard labour. I will, however, commute your sentence to one of three months, with the option of a fine of twenty-five percent of the money you have received from the insurance.

Surprisingly enough, the prisoner thanked the judge.

The second case involved a young man pleading youth and inexperience as his

defense, to which the judge replied that he should not talk nonsense and that this was no excuse.

Lastly, a man was accused of pulmonary consumption, an offense (illness) that according to Erewhonian laws was punished with death until recent times.

Higgs insists that the formalities of the procedure were observed, much as they were in England. The jurors were sworn in, the accused had the opportunity to declare himself guilty or not guilty, to which he pleaded not guilty, and the trial was overall impartial.

A valuable comparison to this matter is found in Camus' (1989) *The Stranger*, in which the main character, much like in *Erewhon*, is also a lyrical persona who not only describes the physical aspects of the story but also makes mental notes and personal comments about the perceptions and feelings he was experiencing. In Camus' book, Meursault, probably due to the author's identification with a philosophical theory called absurdism, would be better categorized as someone who expressed his feelings by clarifying that he had no feelings to express. If anything, perhaps apathy.

In one rare moment when Meursault expressed something resembling an unequivocal feeling, he was disappointed with the judicial system and its obsession with formalism and indifference to the participants in the process. In Camus (1989: p. 84), Meursault describes the situation as follows.

My lawyer arrived, in his gown, surrounded by lots of colleagues. He walked over to the reporters and shook some hands. They joked and laughed and looked completely at ease, until the moment when the bell in the court rang. Everyone went back to his place. My lawyer walked over to me, shook my hand, and advised me to respond briefly to the questions that would be put to me, not to volunteer anything, and to leave the rest to him.

Some pages after it (Camus & Ward, 1989: p. 98), Meursault complains that,

In a way, they seemed to be arguing the case as if it had nothing to do with me. Everything was happening without my participation. My fate was being decided without anyone so much as asking my opinion.

The criticism here is less about whether the defendant had the opportunity to voice his own perspective, reasons, and even excuses, and more about whether procedural laws exist merely to ensure the validity of the trial or if they are a true juridical tool imagined to ensure the observance of some of the most fundamental rights that exist, such as the right of defense. This defense should not only be formal but should reflect the defendant's needs and personality.

Back to Butler's book, the defense adopted the strategy of denying the illness and alleging that it was nothing but an attempt to defraud an insurance company. The prosecution, however, had better fortune. In Butler's words (Butler, 1872: p. 111), the accused was "to the point of death [...]. His coughing was incessant during the whole trial, and it was all that the two jailors in charge of him could do to keep him on his legs until it was over."

Pursuant to this, Higgs evaluates the judge as having fairly analyzed all the defense's points. As soon as the jury pronounced the prisoner guilty, there was an attempt at applause, which was immediately repressed.

This seems to indicate a pleasure in seeing others condemned, or in Foucault's words in *Discipline and Punish*, the spectacle of punishment. The times of torturing, dismembering, amputating—all having “the body as the major target of penal repression”—have disappeared (Foucault, 1995: p. 8).

In line with this, Hornqvist (2021: p. 6) defends a similar perspective, stating that “punishment has provided audiences with pleasures in different historical contexts.” The author also mentions both Plato's conceptions of pleasures shaped according to the body's needs and Freud's views of pleasure as a complex reasoning involving the dichotomous concepts of wishing, wanting, desiring, and enjoyment and satisfaction.

In the end, a burning issue that societies face today is people's dissatisfaction and dissociation from the law and the defense of ideals prone to punitivism, criminalization, and the general resurgence of the law as a theoretically effective solution. Ergo, observing punishment would allegedly represent the delayed fulfillment of society's desire for justice.

In closing, it is the foundations that the judge uses (Butler, 1872: p. 111) that are the most alarming.

It pains me much to see one who is yet so young, and whose prospects in life were otherwise so excellent, brought to this distressing condition by a constitution which I can only regard as radically vicious; but yours is no case for compassion: this is not your first offence: you have led a career of crime, and have only profited by the leniency shown you upon past occasions, to offend yet more seriously against the laws and institutions of your country.

Ultimately, the fragment just transcribed could be used with little to no effort to fundament many cases of recidivism, a problem so complex that the use of AI seems to be inevitable. After the text edit has been completed, the paper is ready for the template. Duplicate the template file by using the Save As command, and use the naming convention prescribed by your journal for the name of your paper. In this newly created file, highlight all of the contents and import your prepared text file. You are now ready to style your paper.

Recidivism

Mass incarceration is a global ongoing issue. According to Clear & Reisig (2021: p. 2), one out of five of the world's prison population is incarcerated in the United States. As mentioned on the website World Prison Brief and in its fourteenth edition of the Prison Population List report (2024), countries such as Brazil, India, Russia, and even China have no reason to be less concerned about it.

Furthermore, the authors highlight that structural problems such as poverty and structural inequality are at the core of the situation. Few academics would

challenge that some difficulties are environmental, i.e., exogenous factors. Nevertheless, there are other aspects of equal relevance, such as endogenous characteristics and adjudicators' fallibility.

Regardless of the justifications and ultimate causes of crime commitment, judicial systems have been investing substantially to analyze and categorize people according to their propensity for committing crimes. In order to eliminate human bias and adjudicators' fallibility, algorithms of human behavioral prediction are being used.

The recidivism mentioned by the judge in *Erewhon* gave rise to a sentence whose foundations could easily be used by judges employing behavioral prediction algorithms such as COMPAS.

To this respect, in (Dressel & Farid, 2018: p.1) while criticizing (Angwin et al., 2016), said that,

Algorithms for predicting recidivism are commonly used to assess a criminal defendant's likelihood of committing a crime. These predictions are used in pretrial, parole, and sentencing decisions. Proponents of these systems argue that big data and advanced machine learning make these analyses more accurate and less biased than humans. We show, however, that the widely used commercial risk assessment software COMPAS is no more accurate or fair than predictions made by people with little or no criminal justice expertise.

In this order of events, the mass incarceration problem is allegedly connected to social, political, and economic inequalities. Regardless of the correctness of this premise, behavioral predictive algorithms are being developed and used as a sufficient aid to overcome subjectiveness when adjudicators must rule. In the end, the Erewhonian Book of Machines and its portrayal of trials represents a difficulty that is now shared. That is to say, the use of technology represents an additional problem in judicial affairs.

6. Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, this paper has no ambitions to provide conclusions beyond any reasonable doubt. The main idea was to analyze if Butler's satirical social analysis bears similarities to society as it now is, approximately 150 years after its publication.

The topics analyzed include the use of machines, health systems, colleges of unreason, judicial affairs, and the use of artificial intelligence, with China prominently advancing in the latter.

In all the aforementioned topics, there is general criticism. It is worth noting that the criticism used to illustrate the thesis that today's world isn't less satirical than *Erewhon* may be subjective in its relevance and frequency, but it's rather unlikely that someone would challenge its social existence.

In conclusion, *Erewhon* stands for "nowhere," and one could argue that nowhere is now, arguably, everywhere. That is to say, some, if not many, of the as-

pects that were sufficient to generate criticism and even understood as enough for a fictitious society to be described as satirical are sadly present in today's society. As this paper had the sole ambition to generate criticism at a literary level, further and valuable contributions to the field could, from this initial analysis, be made through the use of statistics and empirical analysis, should the idea be more empirical and less critical.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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