

**Setting the Agenda: Social Forecasting in the Speculative Fiction of
Rose Macaulay and Sinclair Lewis**

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Introduction

A prima facie reason for thinking that it is not possible to predict future social change is that human history exhibits the sort of randomness that defies our predictive skills. Factors which, considered independently, appear well understood may amplify or modify one another in unforeseeable ways. Outcomes which seem almost unavoidable may unfold in incalculable ways or simply never materialise. Apparently unimportant developments may have major and unexpected consequences. Given such pervasive contingency, one can understand the assumption across much of the humanities and social sciences that social prediction in anything but the weakest sense is impossible. This may also explain why, even though speculative fiction is the branch of literature most closely associated with the future, scholars of speculative fiction almost universally assume that it cannot tell us anything informative about the future as such and must instead be read as a commentary on the present. The latter view, subject to various inflections and qualifications, has been held by such prominent commentators in the field as Ursula Le Guin, Fredric Jameson, Carl Freedman, and Peter Fitting.¹

In this article, we challenge the prevailing consensus by showing how speculative fiction might yet be seen as providing a degree of genuine insight into the future without requiring us to give up the assumption that events are deeply contingent and that this necessarily rules out prediction in anything like its conventional sense. As we shall see, speculative fiction need not be read in narrowly predictive terms to help us imagine, anticipate, and prepare for possible futures. More specifically, speculative fiction can achieve an imaginative form of what the American sociologist Daniel Bell terms “social forecasting”. We will demonstrate this by considering two novels that are noteworthy because of how they seem to anticipate major social developments that occurred long after their publication: *What Not* by Rose Macaulay (1918) and *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis (1935).

¹ See Ursula Le Guin, “Introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*” in *Dreams Must Explain Themselves: The Selected Non-Fiction Works of Ursula K. Le Guin* (London: Gollancz, 2018), 46–49; Fredric Jameson, “Progress versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?” in *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005), 288; Peter Fitting, “Utopia, Dystopia, and Science Fiction” in Gregory Claeys, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 144.

Daniel Bell on Social Forecasting

In an innovative series of studies across the 1960s and 70s, Bell introduced and deployed a style of social analysis which he termed “social forecasting”. As influential as some of Bell’s work has been within the social sciences, the implications of social forecasting for the study of the future are arguably yet to be fully appreciated even today, with scholars of speculative fiction neglecting him completely. In his 1978 book *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Bell provides perhaps the clearest and most succinct statement of what social forecasting involves. There Bell distinguishes

between *prediction* and *forecasting*. Prediction is the stipulation of “point events,” i.e., that something will occur at such time and place. Forecasting is the identification of structural contexts out of which problems arise, or the trends which may be realized. A set of events – which is what one seeks to predict – is often the conjunction of structural trends with particular contingencies. Since such contingencies are not forecastable (they cannot be subject to rules, or formalized in an algorithm), one can invoke “intelligence” (inside information), shrewd guesses, or wisdom, but not any social science methodology in making predictions. In short, one can deal with conditions, but not precipitating factors; with structures, not contingencies.²

As Bell makes clear in this passage, one should understand forecasting as analytically separable from prediction. Bell fully concedes that contingencies are not forecastable. He defines prediction as the stipulation that a given event will occur at a specific time and place. For Bell, the human world, unlike many objects of natural-scientific study, cannot be predicted in this sense; “wisdom” or insider information are the only resources available here, neither of which can sustain a full-blown social-scientific methodology. Forecasting, by contrast, identifies “*structural contexts* out of which problems arise” (emphasis added). This approach has an intuitive appeal and seems immediately more promising than “point event” social prediction. By “structural contexts”, Bell means the broad social, institutional, and infrastructural frames *within which* future events will take place. These frames are partly ideational and partly material: they encompass both the general intellectual parameters of future thought and the physical forms in which these are embodied and expressed. Unlike prediction, the forecasting of changes in structural contexts provides a more-or-less *plausible* anticipation of the future given a set of initial conditions, rather than a law-like certainty on the model of A necessitating B. As Bell’s work on forecasting makes clear, plausibility is not a consolation prize in this regard; it is the form that anticipation takes within the human domain. Rather than attempting to foresee a discrete happening like a terrorist attack, forecasting deals with the general conditions that enable or constrain such happenings.

Bell’s suggestive 1987 article “The World and the United States in 2013” provides an effective illustration of social forecasting in practice.³ The article describes itself as “an effort to identify significant *structural* changes in world society and the United States so as to provide a framework for

² Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 205.

³ Daniel Bell, “The World and the United States in 2013”, *Daedalus*, Vol. 116, No. 3 (1987), 1–31.

analysis. It is *not* an effort to predict the future.”⁴ By “structural” in this instance, Bell means “social arrangements rooted in demographic, technological, and economic institutions”.⁵ This is the level at which the changes projected in the article take place. Bell then poses the question of whether we can predict the future, to which his answer is: “If we mean by that the exact configuration of world society, or even of the United States in 2013, not likely.”⁶ To take just one major example of a failure to anticipate sweeping social change on a global scale, as Bell notes, few predicted the demise of the European colonial systems or the decolonisation process that followed.⁷ Nevertheless, there may be a way to anticipate the future that is not ruled out by such counterexamples. “Within a limited frame”, Bell claims, “one may be able to identify *basic structural frameworks* that are emerging, that form the matrix of people’s lives.”⁸ The word “emerging” in this passage is crucial and suggests how Bell is able to recover a form of forecasting from the contingency of history.

The changes social forecasting is concerned with do not belong exclusively to the future; rather, they are more-or-less plausible developments of elements already present in the observer’s own situation, albeit in a nascent and weakly understood state. The article proceeds to forecast a series of structural changes in both American and world society, including what Bell terms the “Third Technological Revolution”. “By 2013”, he anticipates, “the third technological revolution – the joining of computers and telecommunications (image television, voice telephone, data information computers, text facsimile) into a single yet differentiated system, that of the ‘wired nation’ and even the ‘world society’ – will have matured.”⁹ On this basis, Bell goes on to consider how the architecture of electronic networks could radically transform work, leisure, communication, and the economy. Bell deems the last of these changes especially important, characterising it in terms of a shift from markets as “places” to markets as “networks”, that is, decentred flows of information made possible by rapid new forms of communication.¹⁰ Once again, it is worth emphasising the structural nature of the changes Bell describes. Bell does not, in the style of a classic “hard” science fiction writer like Isaac Asimov, predict specific inventions or speculate about the utility of any given technology. Rather, his analysis is of the general contours of a society in which the *form* of the electronic network has come to occupy a central role in communication. As Bell makes clear, the precise nature of such a society and its specific features and institutions are outside the remit of the forecast; it would not therefore be correct to say that Bell is here predicting the World Wide Web or the smartphone, for instance. This is why, rather than a detailed map or blueprint of the future, Bell states that forecasting aims to provide a “framework for analysis”. Based on developments in science, technology, industry, and the economy during the twentieth century,

⁴ Ibid., 1.

⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁰ Ibid., 12.

Bell suggests that it is not unreasonable to expect a social transformation broadly in line with his sketch of the Third Technological Revolution. While there is nothing guaranteed or predetermined about such change, it is clear that – allowing for the intrusion of any number of unforeseeable contingencies – this forecast provides a valuable basis for imagining and preparing for a not-unlikely future. The fact that this strand of Bell’s article today reads like a strikingly prescient anticipation of the course of subsequent structural changes lends further support to the viability of social forecasting as a method.

In other works, including his 1973 book *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, Bell refers to the structural contexts that “form the matrix of people’s lives” as “social frameworks”.¹¹ These are the frameworks that structure how people live, work, and relate to one another. Changes in social frameworks set what Bell terms the “agenda of questions” that societies confront: fundamental questions relating to, for example, social roles, new modes of life, and society’s attempts to “manage” its own fate through the political system.¹² As we will now argue, at least some forms of speculative fiction imaginatively forecast just such changes in social frameworks and the “agenda of questions” associated with them.

Social Forecasting in Rose Macaulay’s *What Not*

The first of our two examples of texts that illustrate the social forecasting potential of speculative fiction is the novel *What Not* by the critically neglected British writer Rose Macaulay.¹³ Written during the final months of World War One and originally published in 1918, it was reissued in abridged and amended form in 1919 after being withdrawn from circulation the previous year due to a passage its publisher deemed potentially libellous. As an apparent result of this interrupted release, plus the difficulty of classifying and hence marketing the novel, the reading public disregarded *What Not* and the book plunged into obscurity. Republished in unexpurgated form for the first time since 1918 by the independent British publisher Handheld Press in 2019, *What Not* is only now beginning to receive critical attention from scholars in utopian and science fiction studies. While it represents only a partial selection from a suggestive and somewhat elusive text, the following discussion shall focus on just two of the novel’s themes – the mass media and eugenics. Before turning to these topics, however, it is worth making a few points about the novel’s genre and its relationship to twentieth century speculative fiction.

¹¹ Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9–13.

¹³ James Purdon notes that, “Although her writing has not stimulated as much critical discussion as one might expect on the basis of her long and distinguished career – rather less, for instance, than her near coeval Virginia Woolf; less even than younger contemporaries like Elizabeth Bowen or Graham Greene – there are signs of reviving interest” in contemporary literary studies. The present article is a contribution to this revival. Purdon, “Rose Macaulay and Propaganda”, *Modernist Cultures*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2021): 450.

What Not is subtitled “A Prophetic Comedy” – a phrase we shall consider more fully below. This seems appropriate given the satirical mode in which Macaulay writes. Set at a non-specific historical juncture, *What Not* describes a presumably near-future version of Britain in which a relatively authoritarian, though non-totalitarian, government has come to power. Through a combination of control of the mass media, propaganda, social engineering, and eugenics, the government aims to create a more intelligent population on the pretext of avoiding a repetition of past wars, particularly World War One. The guiding idea of the government’s programme is that, if human intelligence were raised to a high enough level, all social conflict could in principle be eliminated, thereby making unlimited human progress possible for the first time. While qualified at points by political realism and English pragmatism, the ideal pursued in this future society is thus highly utopian, at least in one sense of that term. A clear forerunner of Macaulay’s novel in this regard is Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, which is likewise a work of satire that scathingly critiques and humorously deflates utopian projects for human improvement. Throughout history, satire’s numerous purposes have included criticising the powerful in the name of the powerless, denouncing social injustice, ridiculing hypocrisy and self-importance, and highlighting the gap between the ideal and the real. In *Gulliver’s Travels* and *What Not*, this last purpose arguably takes precedence: in both cases, the satire’s primary aim is to warn of the perils of rationalistic dreams of human improvement and the misery that results from them. This situates both novels within what one might term the modern anti-utopian tradition, that is, fiction which serves to criticise or highlight the dangers of grand utopian ambitions, schemes, or social policies.¹⁴ Combined with what an early reviewer of the novel called its “bright” tone, as well as the sarcasm and wit with which many of its situations and characters are portrayed, it is tempting to classify *What Not* as a larger-than-life satire alongside such classics of the genre as *Candide* and *Animal Farm*, and to regard it principally as a comic fable of generic human failings.¹⁵

However, one can instead read Macaulay’s novel in a way that places greater emphasis on its engagement with the social and political issues that concerned the author and her contemporaries. The literary scholar Sarah Lonsdale takes a step in this direction when she observes that, despite its lightness and comedy, “*What Not* deals with some very serious, big, and dark ideas prompted by the hypothesis that if a society will submit to conscription and rationing for the public good during wartime, it will submit to further authoritarian and anti-democratic policies if it is persuaded so to do, during the peace.”¹⁶ Macaulay’s biographer, Sarah LeFanu, notes that Macaulay’s wartime novels all engaged with “the issues surrounding [the] war well in advance of the works that have since become the canonical

¹⁴ Sarah LeFanu sees Macaulay as adopting a pro-eugenics stance in *What Not*, arguing that the novel ‘suggests, in a way that links the pre-war enthusiasm for eugenics with a contemporary anti-war sentiment, that if only the general level of intelligence in the population could be raised, then there need never be another war.’ In the reading put forward here, by contrast, this is precisely the view which the novel ought to be read as *criticising*. LeFanu, *Rose Macaulay* (London: Virago, 2003), 137.

¹⁵ Sarah Lonsdale, “Introduction” to Rose Macaulay, *What Not* [1918] (Bath: Handheld Press, 2019), ix.

¹⁶ Lonsdale, “Introduction”, ix.

prose works of the period.”¹⁷ During the war, the British public had seen unprecedented government measures and restrictions imposed, including conscription, rationing, imprisonment of conscientious objectors, requisition of houses and industrial materials, and severe curbs on press freedom under the Defence of the Realm Act 1914. As Lonsdale notes, Macaulay’s view was that, during this time, the country “had submitted to a necessary wartime authoritarianism.”¹⁸ Lonsdale is surely right to highlight the authoritarian dimension of Macaulay’s fictional regime, which is referred to at several points throughout the novel as “the British autocracy” (37), and to connect this with Britain’s wartime experience. Nevertheless, as we shall now see, it is in its concern with other themes that *What Not* is arguably most innovative and thought-provoking.

As Lonsdale observes, Macaulay and George Orwell were both prolific journalists with a strong sense of the growing influence of the media in the twentieth century.¹⁹ It is noteworthy, however, that Macaulay’s *What Not* – which LeFanu characterises as a “semi-satirical novel about social control”²⁰ – appeared over thirty years before Orwell’s own vision of an authoritarian future Britain in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in which government propaganda is central to controlling public opinion.²¹ As James Purdon has argued, Macaulay was “among the first British novelists to take propaganda seriously as a subject for fiction, and wrote insightfully about its methods and its social implications.”²² Two factors help to explain why Macaulay could appreciate the importance of the control of information in contemporary society. The first factor is Macaulay’s employment as a civil servant at a time when the wartime shortage of men meant a high demand of women civil servants. She worked in the War Office in 1917 and the Ministry of Information in 1918, giving her insight into the state’s strategic manipulation of information as part of the war effort. The second factor is Macaulay’s journalistic career, which allowed Macaulay to experience first-hand, as a participant-observer of sorts, the processes by which the mass media could control and direct public opinion. Both these occupational experiences clearly inform *What Not* and its speculation about how the future role of the media could lead to changes in what Bell terms social frameworks.

This speculation takes place within the novel at the level of both content and, crucially, literary form. At the level of content, the novel depicts a society saturated by newspapers: characters in the London Underground are divided into social types based on the newspapers they are shown reading in the novel’s opening pages; the narrative’s principal characters are shown constantly consulting newspapers to take the temperature of national feeling and to gauge where events are likely to be headed next; the political contestation of the government’s eugenics programme is conducted to a significant extent in the form of warring newspaper editorials and opinion pieces; the mass opposition movement

¹⁷ LeFanu, *Rose Macaulay*, 3–4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xvi.

²⁰ LeFanu, *Rose Macaulay*, 138.

²¹ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* [1949] (London: Penguin, 2000).

²² Purdon, “Rose Macaulay and Propaganda”: 449.

which ultimately topples the government is initially given voice through columns in several liberal and radical newspapers; and the dividing line between what the public thinks and what the media wants it to think is shown to be, at times, vanishingly small. Government propaganda, meanwhile, enters the text as much via Macaulay's use of literary form as through overt statement. To suggest the insidious and pervasive nature of the so-called Ministry of Brains' control of the population's outlook, the main narrative is periodically broken up by excerpts from government billboards, posters, flyers, and broadcasts. The use of this technique foreshadows similar devices which were to appear soon afterwards in the work of modernist writers such as T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce. Although the propaganda passages in Macaulay's novel are less visually striking and more integrated into the surrounding text than, for example, the newspaper headlines which dart across the page in the newspaper office episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*, they are nevertheless an innovative and effective means for conveying the ubiquity of the control the Ministry has come to exercise over citizens's minds.²³ This element of the novel does not appear to have received attention at the time of its publication, but Bell's work on social forecasting helps us to see it in a new light. In Bell's terms, Macaulay is forecasting some of the likely affordances and dangers of a society in which the media plays the sort of massively expanded role only seen in reality some decades later. Rather than making specific predictions, she extrapolates from existing trends in war-time Britain to imagine how these might coalesce into a new set of background conditions for social life, in the process making new styles of communication and new forms of manipulation possible.

In addition to the parallel she draws between Macaulay and Orwell, Lonsdale notes several "uncanny resemblances" between *What Not* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, including the latter's influential portrayal of an advanced eugenics programme.²⁴ Again, though, it is worth emphasising that Macaulay's novel appeared almost fifteen years before Huxley's, thereby anticipating some of the ideas for which *Brave New World* has become best known. In the case of *What Not*, the direction of influence runs from Macaulay to Huxley (and Orwell), not the other way. One likely trigger for Macaulay's speculative treatment of eugenics is the debate in early twentieth-century Europe about how science might be mobilised in new ways to improve the health of populations. As the historian Mark Mazower has shown, eugenics was practised during the interwar period in various forms in several European nations, principally Britain, Russia, and Germany.²⁵ Eugenicists "believed that it was indeed possible to produce 'better' human beings through the right kind of social policies" and sought to rid humanity of what were taken to be its main deficiencies.²⁶ In Germany, eugenics discourse gave rise to the consequential notion of "racial hygiene".²⁷ In Britain, the anthropologist, eugenics pioneer, and social Darwinist Francis Galton's writings of the 1880s and 90s laid the groundwork for subsequent

²³ James Joyce, *Ulysses* [1922] (London: Penguin, 2000).

²⁴ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* [1932] (London: Vintage, 2007).

²⁵ Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin, 1998), 77–105.

²⁶ Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 91.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

work in the field. Other developments in Britain likely to have influenced the writing of *What Not* include the founding of the Eugenics Education Society in 1907, which promoted eugenics research and public understanding of the new science, and the passing of the Mental Deficiency Act in 1913, which prohibited intercourse with women deemed “deficient”.²⁸ The programme described in Macaulay’s novel reflects these historical realities while extrapolating from them toward a hypothetical new kind of society, in which selective breeding has become a central organising principle. In this society, all citizens are ranked and graded by an assigned intelligence score, while a system of taxation and severe financial penalties discourages the less intelligent from reproducing and prohibits citizens from engaging in romantic relationships with anyone more than one intelligence grade above or below them. This maintains a social caste system and form of population control which foreshadows that of Huxley’s dystopia. One horrific initial consequence of this system is the mass abandonment of “superfluous” infants – those who have resulted from “improper” pairings or been born to “deficient” parents – in ditches, fields, and other deserted locations, yet the novel implies this is merely an ad-hoc measure until a more rigorous application of eugenic techniques comes into force, whereupon no such births will presumably occur. Read in terms of social forecasting, this aspect of the novel may be seen not only as a comment on the eugenics discourse of its day, but as a foreshadowing of twentieth-century biopolitics of the kind Michel Foucault analysed in the late 1970s.²⁹ Once again, the deeper significance of the text lies not in any attempt to foresee future contingencies, but in modelling how changes already underway by the early 1900s might imply a deeper alteration in structural contexts over the longer term.

Interestingly, the main motivation for the popular revolt against the Ministry of Brains towards the end of the novel is the regressive new taxation, which hits the poor far more than the rich, leading to widespread discontent. Although several characters voice objections to the eugenics programme and its ethical implications, most notably those characters who see the programme as contrary to Christian teachings, the implication of the narrative’s final act is that what the population ultimately objects to is not the practice of eugenics as such but rather the unfairness of the tax regime which accompanies it. In this way, Macaulay leaves open the possibility that the British people might yet prove amenable to the use of eugenics in future, assuming that it could be administered in a more agreeable manner. The downfall of the Ministry of Brains is therefore a more ambiguous note on which to conclude the novel than it might otherwise appear. The fact that eugenics has not been adopted as public policy in Britain during the century since the publication of *What Not* should not be taken as a simple “refutation” of this aspect of Macaulay’s forecast. A forecast as Bell conceives it is an informed anticipation of one possible matrix of structural conditions within which people might one day live; it is thus more like a space of possibilities than a specification of what will occur and when. Given the alarming resurgence of eugenicist discourse in twenty-first-century science and culture, it would seem premature to conclude

²⁸ Lonsdale, “Introduction”, vii–xiii.

²⁹ See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave, 2010).

that Macaulay's forecast of a society in which applied eugenics forms one of the "structural contexts" for people's lives has proven to be merely empty speculation.

While taking "wartime authoritarianism" as its starting point, then, the novel is less concerned with the threat of authoritarianism, which remains relatively embryonic, than it is with specific technologies of social, mental, and biopolitical control. Relevant here are two brief texts appended to the main body of the work: an "Apology" written in 1918 and a "Note" added to the 1919 reissue of the novel. In the "Apology", Macaulay deems *What Not* to be "a shot in the dark, a bow drawn at a venture," but one which is nonetheless "the best one can do in the unfortunate [post-war] circumstances, which make against all kinds of truth, even that inferior kind which is called accuracy" (4). She continues, self-deprecatingly, that it is "rather of the nature of suggestion than of prophecy, and many will think it a poor suggestion at that" (4). "It will be observed," she writes further on, "that the general state of the world and of society in this so near and yet so unknown future has been but lightly touched upon. It is unexplored territory, too difficult for the present writer, and must be left to the forecastings of the better informed" (5). In the "Note" from 1919, however, Macaulay asserts that her novel was in fact "intended prophetically" and concludes by suggesting that "as the date of the happenings described in *What Not* is unspecified, it may still be regarded as a prophecy, not yet disproved" (6). While these authorial comments on the novel's speculative element point in several directions and may not be fully consistent with one another, two points of relevance to our present purposes do emerge clearly. The first is that Macaulay distinguishes between accuracy, which she calls an "inferior" kind of truth, and prophecy, which is implied to be a loftier and more demanding kind of truth. In 1918, Macaulay is not prepared to dignify her work with the latter term, preferring to settle for the most modest "suggestion". By the following year, she is apparently confident enough to refer unequivocally to *What Not* as a work of prophecy. In the earlier text, Macaulay concludes by deferring to what she calls "the forecastings of the better informed." In the later text, she implicitly casts herself in the role of the informed forecaster by retrospectively promoting her novel from mere suggestion to authentic prophecy. While the brevity and ambiguity of both texts makes it difficult to arrive at a precise definition of "prophecy" in Macaulay's sense, the contrast with the "inferior" truth of accuracy is certainly suggestive. It is possible, though not demonstrable, that Macaulay has in mind here something approximating Bell's distinction between prediction and forecasting. This is not to suggest that Macaulay either had or needed a fully articulated theory of social forecasting; her novel stands or falls independently of any such theorising. Despite their slipperiness, Macaulay's deployment of the terms "accuracy", "suggestion", "forecasting", and "prophecy" in the two texts does suggest she was working out a precursor to Bell's forecasting vocabulary, albeit in a more informal register. Given that "accuracy", the kind of anticipation that Macaulay distances herself from, more naturally lends itself to the prediction of specific events, it is reasonable to align the term "prophecy" with the anticipation of broader and perhaps more diffuse forms of social change.

The import of the “Apology” and the “Note” would then be that, on the view of its author, *What Not* is best read not as an attempt to foresee future events in a narrow sense – something that Macaulay holds to be especially difficult in the turbulent and confused aftermath of the war in any case – but as offering a more open-textured, exploratory vision of one possible set of future developments. In practice, this way of viewing the novel helps to bring Macaulay’s resourceful exercise in social forecasting sharply into focus. It is possible, of course, to read *What Not* as a commentary on the moment to which the author herself belonged: as we have seen, various autobiographical, social, and political threads connect the novel to Macaulay’s own life and times. However, one could alternatively understand the novel’s speculative treatment of the mass media, propaganda, and eugenics as a form of social forecasting in Bell’s sense. Rather than *predictions* about the fate of real-world newspapers and media outlets named in the novel, specific future uses of government propaganda, or the likelihood of selective breeding and intelligence testing becoming the norm in Britain in the coming century, Macaulay’s novel may be read as an attempt to *forecast* how longer-term structural, institutional, and technological change could make possible new forms of social control and even entirely new kinds of society. In Bell’s terms, *What Not* works toward outlining the new “agenda of questions” opened up by the prospect of the rapid expansion of the mass media, the increasing sophistication and reach of propaganda, and the growing interest and investment in biopolitical technologies in Europe. It is in this sense that Macaulay has written a novel which is, in her own terms, not so much accurate as prophetic.

Social Forecasting in Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here*

Our second example of a text that illustrates the social forecasting potential of speculative fiction is Sinclair Lewis’s 1935 novel *It Can’t Happen Here*. The novel depicts the rise of Buzz Windrip, a fearmongering, nativist demagogue who promises to restore greatness and prosperity to America, successfully runs for President of the United States, and establishes an increasingly authoritarian regime once in power. The novel’s protagonist Doremus Jessup is a liberal newspaper editor who at first is slow to respond to Windrip’s ascent but ends up as part of the resistance movement against the new regime. Like *What Not*, *It Can’t Happen Here* is a work of satire, though perhaps leaning more towards the “satirical-realistic”.³⁰ Lewis wrote *It Can’t Happen Here* in the context of rising fascism in Europe, reflecting anxieties that it could similarly take root in American society.³¹ At the same time, Lewis drew inspiration from contemporary figures in US politics like the populist Senator Huey Long and sought to illustrate that, if fascism were to emerge in the US, it would take on distinctly American

³⁰ See Ian Afflerbach, “Sinclair Lewis and the Liberals Who Never Learn: Reading Politics in *It Can’t Happen Here*”, *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (2019): 524–25; Frederick Betz and Jorg Thuncke, “Sinclair Lewis’s Cautionary Tale *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935) Against the Socio-Political Background in Germany and the USA in the 1930s”, *Orhis Lirruruni*, Vol. 52 (1997): 35–36.

³¹ James McBride, “Trump and Trumpism: The Wall, Semantic Desubstantiation, and Authoritarian Discourse”, *International Journal of Humanities, Art, and Social Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 5 (2021): 2.

characteristics.³² As Jessup puts it in the novel, “If there ever is a Fascist dictatorship here, American humor and pioneer independence are so marked that it will be absolutely different from anything in Europe” (284).

In recent years, *It Can't Happen Here* has enjoyed newfound attention due to striking similarities between Windrip's candidacy and presidency in the novel and those of Donald Trump in the real world.³³ According to Sally Perry, the Executive Director of the Sinclair Lewis Society, in 2017 (the first year of Trump's presidency) sales of *It Can't Happen Here* were up by approximately 1500% from the previous year.³⁴ Both Windrip and Trump adopt a highly theatrical approach to politics, with large, emotionally-charged rallies where they rail against the “lies” of the press and promise strong executive action to bypass, in Windrip's words, “a lot of dumb shyster-lawyer congressmen taking months to shoot off their mouths in debate” (30). Both present themselves as champions of those who resentfully feel forgotten by the political establishment, pledging to make these sections of the population dignified and prosperous again. Both appeal to racist, xenophobic, and masculinist sentiments. Throughout *It Can't Happen Here* are snippets from Windrip's promotional book *Zero Hour: Over the Top*, which – like *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (1987) – is part memoir, part programme, and part exhibitionist boasting. Similarly, one can draw parallels between Windrip's secretary Lee Sarason, a former newspaper editor who serves as Windrip's press agent, adviser, and ghostwriter, and Stephen K. Bannon, the former executive chairman of the alt-right website Breitbart News who was Trump's top counsellor and chief strategist for the first seven months of the Trump Administration.³⁵

Commentators also note significant differences between the novel's depicted events and those of the Trump era that seem to work against the novel's newfound reputation as “prophetic”.³⁶ In Ellen Strenski's words, “As prediction, the fascist America of *It Can't Happen Here* is alarming but limited and, when compared to today, easily falsified.”³⁷ Unlike Windrip's regime, the Trump Administration

³² See Warren S. Goldstein, “Trump, the Religious Right, and the Spectre of Fascism”, *Critical Research on Religion*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2021): 3; Daniel Burston, “‘It Can't Happen Here’: Trump, Authoritarianism, and American Politics”, *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 15 (2017): 2; Matt Seaton, “An American Populist in the White House”, *Soundings*, Vol. 65 (2017): 14; Stephen L. Tanner, “Sinclair Lewis and Fascism”, *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1990): 61.

³³ See Alexander Laban Hinton, *It Can Happen Here: White Power and the Rising Threat of Genocide in the US* (New York: New York University Press, 2021). Sarah Churchill, “The Return of American Fascism: How a Legacy of Violent Nationalism Haunts the Republic in the Age of Trump”, *New Statesman*, 2 September 2020; Beverly Gage, “Reading the Classic Novel That Predicted Trump”, *The New York Times*, 17 January 2017; Malcom Harris, “It Really Can Happen Here: The Novel that Foreshadowed Donald Trump's Authoritarian Appeal”, *Salon*, 29 September 2015.

³⁴ Quoted in Ellen Strenski, “It Can't Happen Here, or Has It? Sinclair Lewis's Fascist America”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 29 (2017): 433.

³⁵ Strenski, “It Can't Happen Here, or Has It?”, 425–436.

³⁶ See Sean McGlynn, “The Normalisation of the Far Right”, *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (2020): 488; Afflerbach, “Sinclair Lewis and the Liberals Who Never Learn”, 538; Eric A. Posner, “Can It Happen Here?: Donald Trump and the Paradox of Populist Government”, Public Law and Legal Theory Working Paper No. 605, University of Chicago 2017, 7; Andrew Corey Yerkes, “‘A Biology of Dictatorships’: Liberalism and Modern Realism in Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*”, *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2010): 299.

³⁷ Strenski, “It Can't Happen Here, or Has It?”, 427–428.

did not have congressional representatives executed. Whilst many noted the echoes of historical concentration camps in the immigration detention centres where children were held after forcible separation from their families, this is quite different from the mass rounding-up of political opponents that Lewis envisaged. Windrip was an established career politician with an inner circle of conventional public figures, whereas Trump was a political outsider. For all that Bannon resembled Sarason, the former's employment at the White House ended less than a year into Trump's presidency. Although there are thought-provoking parallels between Windrip's paramilitary "Minute Men" and Trump's armed, far-right supporters – a point to which we shall return below – Trump never seriously attempted to form the latter into an organised, semi-militarised force in the mould of the Italian Blackshirts or the Nazi Brownshirts. This suggests that a major problem with treating *It Can't Happen Here* as prediction is that Lewis's vision was heavily inspired by then-contemporary European models of fascism.

As with *What Not*, we can partly answer this line of criticism and better understand *It Can't Happen Here*'s anticipatory qualities by approaching the novel in terms of social forecasting rather than prediction or one-to-one correspondence. For example, there is the socioeconomic context that creates the "Forgotten Men", a major component of Windrip's political base to whom he appeals with promises to break through the economic stagnation and to provide them with security.³⁸ Whilst any discussion of "left-behinds" in the context of Trumpism should be approached with caution because it is often based on a narrow and racialised understanding of being "left behind",³⁹ there is an obvious parallel with how Trump was able to win support in key areas of the US by claiming he could address the grievances of the "squeezed middle" and of sections of the working class.⁴⁰ One "Forgotten Man" is Jessup's handyman Oscar "Shad" Ledue, who becomes a "crusader" for Windrip, praising him as "the first statesman in years that thinks of what guys like us need" (88-80). Ledue is a recurring character, which suggests that the novel is inviting the reader to try to make sense of him and his motives.⁴¹ *It Can't Happen Here* provides its "anatomy" of the Forgotten Men by imaginatively depicting the possible results of ongoing structural changes observable as a persisting trend in American society (in this case, structural changes relating to employment, working life, and financial stability). The structures in question order the lives of that society's inhabitants. As such, in Bell's terms, *It Can't Happen Here* depicts a change in social frameworks.

Windrip's nativism points to another important structural context, namely American racial politics and its relationship to American nationalism and Christian conservatism. Windrip blames his supporters' ills on stigmatised "others", especially "people who are *racially* different from us" (69), framing them as job competitors, thereby stripping away any "sense of common humanity" and

³⁸ Ibid., 430.

³⁹ Gurminder K. Bhambra, "Brexit, Trump, and 'Methodological Whiteness': On the Misrecognition of Race and Class", *British Journal of Sociology*, S1 (2017): S214–S232.

⁴⁰ Christopher Phelps, "The Novel of American Authoritarianism", *Science & Society*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (2020): 113; Yerkes, "A Biology of Dictatorships", 295–296.

⁴¹ Strenski, "It Can't Happen Here, or Has It?", 431–432

facilitating public approval of his increasingly repressive methods of social control.⁴² Accordingly, Windrip pledges to protect jobs for white male workers by enacting policies that discriminate against blacks, immigrants, women, and Jews, and by adopting an economically protectionist stance on matters of trade and manufacturing (10–11, 63). His nationalist rhetoric frequently affirms Christianity and private property, and denounces socialism and communism (61, 63–64, 118). All this helps us situate Trumpism in the context of persisting trends in American society that facilitate nativist politics.⁴³ For reasons of space and focus, here we cannot resolve the long-running debate over whether or not Trump’s form of authoritarianism was properly-speaking fascist.⁴⁴ That said, even if they are not identical, Trumpism and fascism have significant overlaps in their rhetorical strategies, bodily practices, and modes of attunement.⁴⁵ Whilst perhaps complicated by the recent rise of far-right groups in US that (at least publicly) adopt “multi-ethnic” or “multi-racial” forms of national chauvinism, the legacy of slavery has long been central to far-right politics in the US, including in the 1930s and in the early 21st century.⁴⁶ Moreover, Eric Ward’s remark that antisemitism forms the “theoretical core”⁴⁷ of present-day white nationalism gives additional significance to Christopher Phelps’s observation that “*It Can’t Happen Here* is the first American novel to underscore anti-Semitism and anticommunism as powerful elements in modern authoritarianism”.⁴⁸ Whilst the dissimilarities between, on the one hand, Windrip’s more classically fascist movement and regime and, on the other hand, Trumpism falsify *It Can’t Happen Here* as prediction, they do not negate the novel’s value as a social forecast. By highlighting the factors that enable both Windrip and Trump to come to power, *It Can’t Happen Here* identifies important structural and ideological continuities in American society between Lewis’s time and our own.

This point about continuities in American society brings us to persisting cultural trends that *It Can’t Happen Here* explores in relation to Windrip’s rise to power. Although Windrip’s political base includes both middle-class and working-class Americans, those who thrive as his Minute Men tend to come from a more “respectable” background. Many Minute Men officers are recent college graduates or drawn from “the gymnasiums and the classes in Business Administration of the Y.M.C.A.” (152). These semi-professionalised Minute Men, who mostly come across to Jessup as “mighty nice, clean-cut young fellows” (100), take “pride in being called an ‘inspector’” and enthusiastically undertake “the actual management of the poor” (156). As Matthew Carey Salyer observes, this means that the Minute

⁴² Ibid., 430.

⁴³ See Rob Kroes, “Signs of Fascism Rising: A European Americanist Looks at Recent Political Trends in the U.S. and Europe”, *Society*, Vol. 54 (2017): 222–223; McBride, “Trump and Trumpism”, 3; Churchill, “The Return of American Fascism”.

⁴⁴ For two arguments in favour of differentiating fascism from the more mainstream, populist “radical right”, see: David Renton, *The New Authoritarians: Convergence on the Right* (London: Pluto Press, 2019); Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge, UK, and Medford, AM: Polity, 2019).

⁴⁵ William E. Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism: The Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy Under Trumpism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

⁴⁶ Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York: Random House, 2018).

⁴⁷ Eric K. Ward, “Skin in the Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism”, *The Public Eye*, 29 June 2017.

⁴⁸ Phelps, “The Novel of American Authoritarianism”, 249.

Men have similar middle-class aspirations to those of Jessup.⁴⁹ Lewis famously explored the vacuous, narrow-minded, and self-satisfied mentality of the American middle classes in two previous novels, *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922). The latter gave rise to the term “Babbitry” for this set of values, attitudes, and behaviours. As Salyer goes on to say, “In a sense, [the Minute Men are] just pursuing familiar *Main Street* ‘boosterism’ and ‘Babbitry’ at a more accelerated rate, and on a more aspirational scale”.⁵⁰ Significantly, the Trumpist ‘insurrectionists’ who participated in the attack on the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 also tended to come from a more professional or petty bourgeois background: estate agents, florists, car wash owners, and so forth. In other words, they were the social carriers of precisely the kind of Babbitry that Lewis identified in his cultural-critical fiction, including *It Can’t Happen Here*. They were part of the “large proportion of people who feel poor no matter how much they have, and envy their neighbors who know how to wear cheap clothes showily” (112). In short, *It Can’t Happen Here* was able to “foresee” and provide insights into key aspects of Trumpism because it provided an imaginative frame for exploring the issues that American society might plausibly confront due to structural changes arising from then-emerging trends in American culture.

Conclusion

We have seen how Macaulay’s *What Not* and Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* demonstrate speculative fiction’s potential to engage in social forecasting in Bell’s sense. In the case of *What Not*, the novel not only anticipates other works of speculative fiction, such as *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but forecasts elements of the agenda of questions raised by, on the one hand, the mass media and propaganda of the following decades – well in advance of theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their work of the 1940s⁵¹ – and, on the other hand, modern biopolitics of the sort Foucault discussed in the 1970s. In the case of *It Can’t Happen Here*, the novel anticipates important dimensions of Trumpism by highlighting and extrapolating from persisting socioeconomic, political, and cultural trends in American society that order people’s lives in a way that structurally enables nativist movements. These examples suggest the scope for reconsidering speculative fiction more generally in terms of social forecasting. Before we can do so, however, we must reject the largely unquestioned scholarly assumption that treating speculative fiction as telling us something about the real future must involve an illegitimate or implausible form of prediction. As *What Not* and *It Can’t Happen Here* show, speculative fiction can imaginatively forecast changes in the structural contexts in which we live and thereby make a meaningful contribution to critical reflection on what lies ahead.

⁴⁹ Matthew Carey Salyer, “‘Minute Men’ at the Capitol? Reading Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* in 2021”, *Forbes*, 18 January 2021.

⁵⁰ Salyer, “‘Minute Men’ at the Capitol?”.

⁵¹ See, for example, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94–136.

To conclude, at least two avenues for further exploration suggest themselves. The first would be a re-evaluation of past speculative fiction, including both canonical and noncanonical works. How might familiar texts appear when reinterpreted in terms of their contribution to the enterprise of social forecasting and in light of the course of subsequent events? A second possibility would be to read present-day speculative fiction in relation to our own unknown future. What might such literature (and film) be able to tell us about how plausible changes in social frameworks and their associated agenda of questions could make available new social, political, and cultural possibilities, as well as posing new dilemmas, challenges, and problems? In both cases, it is worth considering, firstly, what insights and effects these texts generate that Bell's more soberly sociological forecasts do not and, secondly, how these texts' properties as forms of speculative fiction help generate such insights and effects. Bell once remarked that attempting to identify structural changes for the purposes of social forecasting "is like holding a small candle in a hurricane to see if there are any paths ahead and how to go forth. But if one cannot light and hold even a small candle, then there is only darkness before us."⁵² By taking seriously how entries in the genre achieve an imaginative form of social forecasting, speculative fiction gives us one more candle to hold as we work our way through the hurricane.

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⁵² Bell, "The World and the United States in 2013", 31.

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