Preemptive Regime Change in Iain M. Banks' *The Player of Games*

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It's a familiar story: an isolated island culture, something which we could call a utopia or even a paradise without too much hyperbole, meets and is overwhelmed by the diseases, technologies, economic and religious ideologies, and sheer numbers of the West. Herman Melville was an eyewitness to the last days of one such utopia in his first book, *Typee*, and the death throes of another in his second, *Omoo*. In the mid-19th century, he was one of the few speaking out against Christian missions and other "help" being forced on aboriginal cultures in the Pacific and elsewhere. The books, part adventure novel, part travel guide, part anthropological essay, are perhaps best seen as an extended challenge to the unquestioned perception of Euro-American cultural superiority, making the case that aboriginal cultures would be far better off if left alone. When cultures of such disparate power meet, the stronger one is inevitably toxic to the weaker (Melville 519).

Scottish author Iain M. Banks offers a reverse image of this in several of his science-fiction novels. His utopia, simply named "the Culture," is a

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post-scarcity spacefaring socialist minarchy with virtually limitless power and a drive to explore, contact, and assist less-developed societies. Banks’ second Culture novel, *The Player of Games*, concerns the Culture’s contact with the aggressive, expansionistic, and highly repressive Empire of Azad. Like real-world Pacific utopias being crushed by well-meaning but imperialistic Western juggernauts, this empire is crushed by a well-meaning utopia. The question we are left with, which Banks never clearly answers, is whether the Azadians end up better off for their encounter with the Culture.

While the Culture is clearly supposed to be the "good guys" in this and other novels, Banks focuses on the Culture’s interactions with other civilizations, venturing into moral gray areas. Even in *The Player of Games*, where the other society is depicted as being a dystopia, Banks forces readers to confront the question of whether the Culture is right to intervene, or whether it should leave less-developed societies to follow their own path. Banks asks, can a utopia be a utopia only internally, or must it have a utopian foreign policy as well? And what should a utopian foreign policy be?

To explore these questions, we need to understand the utopia and dystopia involved in the story. Banks describes the Culture as a place where "nothing and nobody [...] is exploited" ("A Few Notes"). By "nothing," he is including the intelligent machines of the Culture: the drones—robots who are roughly as intelligent as humans—and the Minds, unimaginably brilliant artificial intelligences that are the brains of the Culture’s gigantic ships and orbital habitats. Although the humans created the first intelligent machines, after thousands of years the current drones and Minds are
the descendants of untold generations of machines, each designing improved models, so that now the humans are equal partners with the machines, which have the same rights as any human citizen. By this we can see that the Culture has gone beyond eliminating racism to ridding itself of speciesism and even bio-chauvinism.

It is possible to avoid such exploitation because the Culture has developed into a "post-scarcity" society—that is, the technological level is high enough that there is virtually no limit on fulfilling the wants and needs of any citizen. Every home and ship contains machines that can assemble from base materials anything people want to eat or drink, wear or use (Player 183). Energy is effectively limitless ("A Few Notes"), as is living space, since each of the uncounted artificial worlds called Orbitals has many times the surface area of a planet. Medical care is very nearly perfect, and people are as immortal as they want to be, though most grow tired of life after a few centuries and elect to self-euthanize ("A Few Notes"). In addition to being able to interbreed with closely-related species, humans have been modified to be able to die at will and to be born with a set of glands which can produce mind-altering drugs of all sorts, with no chance of addiction. Furthermore, they can change gender at will, though the process takes a few months. These all make exploitation all the more difficult: sexism becomes impossible, while a fall from utopia would result in the population retreating into a (free) drug-induced state of bliss, and at the worst they could just commit suicide—the ultimate in non-cooperation. The machines, naturally, have no gender, and can alter consciousness or self-terminate even more easily than a human.

The genetic modifications do not stop there. Banks has implied several
times (in "A Few Notes," Gevers, and Jeffries) that he is not sure whether we naturally-evolved humans are really capable of developing a utopia without some genetic self-tinkering. In an interview he says, "they [the Culture] alter their genetic inheritance to make themselves sane and not genocidal, as we often seem to be" (Jeffries). So his utopia is not one that is inevitable, something that will just happen when our technology reaches the point at which we pass from our current economy of scarcity into an economy of abundance. But he insists that it is not some fantastic Land of Cockaigne, with singing food happily flying down people's throats ("Cockaigne" 74). While many today believe that utopia is not only impossible but "extraordinarily dangerous" and doomed to "pretty well always end in a huge river of human blood" (Gray 4), Banks calls this attitude "defeatism" (Gevers). He insists that there is nothing wrong about self-directed evolution; in his first Culture novel, he writes, "And if we tamper with our inheritance, so what? What is more ours to tamper with? What makes nature more right than us?" (Consider Phlebas 335-6). While Lyman Tower Sargent, referring to other utopias, has called such an "attempt to create a new people through eugenics ... the ultimate in the expression of a distrust of people as they are now constituted" (93), Banks' argument above and elsewhere puts it in a more positive light, especially considering that such transhumanist self-modification holds the potential (but of course not the certainty) of avoiding the dark excesses of eugenics.

So internally, the Culture is a paradise with no need for hunger or work, money or laws other than a bare minimum to keep anyone from violating anyone else's right to do as they will, with instant communication so that everyone can discuss or vote on anything, and godlike Minds that
can find great fun in making a centrally planned economy actually work ("A Few Notes"). It is, as Banks admits, "pretty boring to read about" (Gevers), so the stories mostly focus on the Culture's interactions with other civilizations, and with the Culture's misfits, those who are not satisfied by a worry-free life of pleasant leisure. These people are often drawn to join Contact, the Culture's exploration, diplomacy and, in extreme situations, defense arm. And the biggest misfits seem to be drawn to a small division within Contact known as Special Circumstances (hereafter referred to as SC), responsible for spying on and otherwise interfering with other civilizations. In fact, SC employs many non-Culture mercenaries, echoing Thomas More's *Utopia* and its extensive use of the bloodthirsty Zapoletes (More 120-1). This is where we see those moral gray areas, as Contact and Special Circumstances not only seem to treat other cultures in a patronizing way, but even keep information from the ordinary citizens of the Culture itself, for their own good (*Player of Games* 79).

Still, these violations of the Culture's mores seem quite tame when we look at the Empire of Azad, which dominates its area of space and is predicated on exploitation and constant, aggressive expansion. It is a capitalist society in which everything "is based on ownership" (*Player of Games* 114)—everything, including the people, is organized into a hierarchy of dominance and submission that is very shocking to the characters from the Culture, but which is all too familiar to Banks' readers, for Azad is merely a slightly exaggerated melange of many modern nations in our real world. It combines America's fanatic belief in capitalism with Nazi Germany's race-based fascism and the paranoid militarism of Saddam Hussein-era Iraq. Everything is commodified, capitalism taken to an
extreme—but not really much more extreme than what most of us are familiar with. The dominant gender of the Azadian species (an intermediate third gender) treats both males and females as property, and has engaged in a centuries-long eugenics program to reduce their intelligence (136-9, 204). The dominant, pale-skinned race has wiped out the others; the "few hundred dark-skinned babies ... still born each year" are "supposed to be strangled and their bodies presented to the Eugenics Council for a bounty," and the penalty for not doing so is death (205). Conquered aliens are shown being tortured and humiliated on the news, intercut with "interviews with the tearful families of slain troopers" (186). The economy is structured to keep the middle class in a state of quiet desperation, dreaming of wealth while being terrified of poverty, and poverty is seen as the deserved fate of failures (122). Encrypted broadcasts limited only to high-level bureaucrats show pornographic, sadomasochistic acts that are illegal for the masses to witness—the most highly restricted channels show live acts of rape, torture, and murder of political dissidents for the pleasure of the highest-ranking members of government (208-9).

According to Special Circumstances, "As a rule, such archaic forms of authority wither long before the relevant species drags itself off the home planet" (74), but in this case the Empire has something that has kept them locked into this hierarchical form for centuries longer than usual. It is a game, a game so complex, so fascinating, so challenging that they have named themselves after it and defined themselves through it. *Azad*, like most board games, is one of combat, territorial expansion, and conquering. It has become the pillar of Azadian culture, being "used as an exam for both entry into and promotion within the empire's religious, educational, civil
administrational, judicial and military establishments" (76). In fact, the winner of the equivalent of the World Cup becomes Emperor.

This may make the game sound like the basis of a reasonable meritocracy, and perhaps it would be if it were fair, but the game is rigged. Only those from wealthy families can afford to grow up playing constantly, and only the dominant gender is allowed to win any but the lowest-level games; they gang up on any females or males who dare to challenge them (136-9). Non-Azadians are not allowed to play the sacred game at all. The game creates other problems, as well. It acts as a sop tossed to the public, blinding them to the unfairness of their society by claiming that anyone can become a big "success" if they only try hard enough—by extension making them blame themselves if they do not succeed. It also warps and limits the Azadian worldview to one of conquer-or-be-conquered: "Azad itself simply produced an insatiable desire for more victories, more power, more territory, more dominance..." (200).

Special Circumstances, seeing the Empire of Azad as a source of great misery for its own people and its neighbors, decides that humanitarian intervention is necessary. But they know that "coming in 'all guns blazing' ... is almost never the right approach" (296). The Culture, vastly more advanced than the Empire, would instantly win any war, but the subsequent occupation would be

a huge drain on our resources as well as morale; in the end, such an adventure would certainly be seen as a mistake, no matter the popular enthusiasm for it at the time. The people of the empire would lose by uniting against us instead of the corrupt regime which controls them, so putting back the clock a century or two, and the
Culture would lose by emulating those we despise; invaders, occupiers, hegemonists. (79)

It is almost a shock to read that today and realize it was written not only before the current Iraq crisis, but even before the first Gulf War over Kuwait.

What SC must do is give the Azadian masses a reason to rise up and destroy the regime themselves, so that Contact can come in and help them rebuild as humanitarian saviors rather than occupiers. SC must give them what Terry Eagleton calls a

... moment when it becomes tolerably clear that there is nothing any longer in the system for them; that the perils and discomforts of disaffection outweigh the meagre gratification of conformism; that sheer apathy is no longer materially possible; that even an obscure, untested political alternative would be better than what they are landed with; and that anger at the unjust way in which they are being treated is more powerful than fatalism and fear. (37)

Create that moment, and the people will rise up. But how to do so? Of course, they must destroy the game of Azad. Discredit the game, and the corrupt Empire falls apart. The regime is de-legitimized, since authority figures hold their positions only by right of being the best players. And with the sop, the safety valve, the almost-true illusion of social advancement taken away, the message of liberty and equality spread by SC-supported agents will no longer fall on deaf ears.

And so they turn Jernau Gurgeh, the Culture's celebrated player of games, a mildly arrogant savant, master of hundreds of games. In a moment of weakness, he sets himself up to be blackmailed into joining SC
as an ambassador to Azad. SC plays on the Azadian regime’s overconfidence and fear of the Culture to trick them into inviting Gurgeh to play, while playing on Gurgeh’s arrogance and fear of embarrassment to get him to play his best. He believes he is merely a cultural ambassador, here to show the Empire that those of the Culture are good sports, gracious winners and humble losers. Gurgeh is never allowed to realize until the end that his real mission, by winning again and again, is to discredit the one slender pillar that holds up the decaying edifice of the Empire. And despite the Azadian advantage of growing up with their game, Gurgeh’s broad experience makes him familiar with virtually all possible rules that could work in any game; his flexibility beats their rigidity every time (296). As he realizes in the final game against the Emperor himself, he is the Culture, and the Emperor is the Empire (271). They are both shaped by their societies, and the Culture is more robust, more stable, and more flexible.

In the end, Gurgeh is turned into an assassin—a memetic assassin, a murderer of an idea. By winning the game he, an alien, kills its mimetic, ideological value, and this indirectly kills the Emperor, whose entire self-definition is destroyed along with the game he had devoted his whole life toward mastering. Insane, the Emperor orders his troops to kill all witnesses to the final game, including most of the high-ranking members of the regime, and attempts to kill Gurgeh as well, but accidentally kills himself instead (288-91).

Thus, this is not only an act of humanitarian intervention that results in the destruction of the Empire’s most important cultural value; it is an act of regime change. And so finally we return to the question posed earlier: What should a utopian foreign policy be?
First we should consider whether the Culture should intervene at all. Apparently, there is no United Nations of the Galaxy, so there is no equivalent of the Declaration of Friendly Relations, which "affirms that 'every State has an inalienable right to choose its political, economic, social and cultural systems, without interference in any form by another State'" (Chesterman 107). Simon Chesterman argues that the oppressive nature of a regime makes no difference, that the current American notion that "an undemocratic regime loses the protection of international law by effectively voiding its sovereignty .... is not so much a logical conclusion as an auto-da-fe" (90-1). And according to Michael Weinstein, the American experience in Iraq has called into question the wisdom of regime change for some time to come. However, Paul Christopher makes the case that unilateral humanitarian intervention on a national level, like vigilantism on an individual level, is permitted when there is no higher authority which reserves for itself the right and duty of maintaining international law (197-8). But finally, the Empire is violating the sovereignty of all its neighbors, attacking them, occupying them, and committing mass murder and even genocide against them, and none of them is strong enough to stand up against the aggressor. Something must be done, and the Culture has the power to do so.

Sometimes Contact does decide to leave well enough alone. In this way it echoes Thomas More's Utopia, which does not attempt to change the cultures of its neighbors—indeed, it works hard and even fights wars to support the status quo of nations with economic and governmental systems different from its own. Robert Shepherd argues that this is because "The only utopian revolution attempted in Utopia was the original, successful
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one carried out by Utopus[, the founding monarch]. The inhabitants of Abraxas whom he conquered and transformed were 'rude and rustic'” (851), and thus perhaps a utopian revolution is only possible or desirable with the most primitive, undeveloped societies. Indeed, the Culture does not intervene in every problematic society it encounters, either. In the novella "The State of the Art," Contact discovers and observes Earth in the year 1977. (It turns out the humans of the Culture are not us.) The story features an extended argument over whether the Culture should intervene to save us from ourselves on the threshold of World War III, and Contact decides merely to continue observation.

Banks also makes the case that, aside from the right to intervene, the Culture has little choice to do so in some cases because of its nature:

... the average Culture person—human or machine—knows that they are lucky to be where they are when they are. Part of their education, both initially and continually, comprises the understanding that beings less fortunate—though no less intellectually or morally worthy—than themselves have suffered and, elsewhere, are still suffering. For the Culture to continue without terminal decadence, the point needs to be made, regularly, that its easy hedonism is not some ground-state of nature, but something desirable, assiduously worked for in the past, not necessarily easily attained, and requiring appreciation and maintenance both in the present and the future. ("A Few Notes")

So, does it make sense, on practical and ethical bases, to intervene in this case? For this we can usefully turn to 17th-century Dutch philosopher Hugo Grotius and his criteria for jus ad bellum, the basis for much of our
international law concerning the justification of war, because SC’s intervention is committed with the intention of effecting a regime change, and can thus be seen as an act of war.

First, *jus ad bellum* requires a just cause, which, "In addition to defense of self or property, other just causes arise when a ruler, even a ruler in another state, 'inflicts upon his subjects such treatment as no one is warranted in inflicting’" (Christopher 82). This is clearly fulfilled by the Empire's treatment of its own people and those it conquers.

Second, "the good toward which the war aims [must be] proportional to the evil that the war will cause" (Christopher 83). This is difficult to determine until after the fallen former empire stabilizes into something new, but SC risks only Gurgeh and kills almost no one itself, and we may assume that assistance from the Culture will shorten and ameliorate the death toll of the revolution as much as possible. The Minds of the Culture, after all, do not go in with only a plan for battle and none for the aftermath.

This leads into "the next *jus ad bellum* condition [which] requires that there be a *reasonable chance of success*" (Christopher 85). A drone from SC claims that the Minds had it all figured out, that the outcome was nearly inevitable (*Player of Games* 296). We can assume they devoted equal effort to preparing for the ensuing revolution and the rebuilding, though Banks leaves this unsaid.

"The fourth condition demands that nations *publicly declare* their wars" (Christopher 85). In this case, the Culture does not fulfill the condition, but the memetic nature of the attack makes it difficult to see how they could have publicly declared it beforehand. But one of the reasons
Grotius offers for a public declaration is to insure his fifth condition, "that only a *legitimate authority* may declare war" (Christopher 86). This too is a problem, because the Culture has no leaders. Special Circumstances is the closest they have to a legitimate authority, though.

"Finally, Grotius specifies that war must always be a *last resort*" (Christopher 87). Considering the effects the Empire was having on its people and neighbors, and the imperatives of the Culture, this condition seems to have been fulfilled. As stated before, something had to be done, and the Culture devised the most elegant and least destructive way of carrying it out. As Pascal Boniface argues, "Regime change must be a last resort, undertaken after all other possibilities of prevention and diplomatic procedures have failed to resolve the problem. Military action to change regimes must be implemented with a minimum of force and have a reasonable chance of attaining its goals" (102).

Unlike many fictional utopias, Banks' Culture does not feed us easy answers. The Culture, in its ongoing struggle to survive as a utopia among other civilizations, is forced into morally difficult positions. It cannot exist in isolation; in fact, as Banks points out, in order to avoid stagnation, it must contact other civilizations and, where necessary, interfere with them—something which violates its own internal moral precepts of individual freedom from interference. But this is a case of choosing the lesser of two evils. The Culture does not rush in with bombs and occupying forces, with half-baked plans to attempt to impose its own culture on others. Instead, the Culture observes, waits, and devises a thorough plan to take down an oppressive regime with minimal loss of life, and at the same time discredit the cultural basis of its negative hierarchical structure, so that the regime
does not simply reappear with a new face, "the new boss, same as the old boss." Azad, both game and empire, are gone. Now the people of Azad have a chance to create a post-imperial society—with, of course, some friendly guidance.

**Works Cited**


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