




**Ivana Damjanović**

UNIVERSITY OF BELGRAD, FACULTY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8553-492X>

## **Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism: The Case of Iain M. Banks' *Culture***

**Abstract:** The Culture series created by Scottish author Iain (M.) Banks consists of nine novels, one novella and a couple of short stories situated in the same fictional universe. The eponymous Culture is a space-faring (and space-dwelling) civilization, a conglomeration of several humanoid species and sentient machines, most intellectually powerful beings called *The Minds*. Technological advances made the Culture a post-scarcity society focused on the maximization of personal freedom. The character of its socio-political structure, however, is somewhat unclear. Based on the differences between its internal and external politics, scholars have mostly placed the Culture within the categories of Utopia and Empire. This is, as the present paper argues, a false dilemma since the Culture is simultaneously both and neither of those. The main argument is that the truly adequate label for the political complexities of the Culture civilization was coined only after the untimely death of the author himself – around 2015, when the far (or, some would say, radical) left activists on the Internet coined the phrase Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism. Using both writings of Marx and Engels on the features of communism and Ollman's systematization of these features, I will try to show that this is indeed the case.

**Keywords:** Iain M. Banks, The Culture, Fully Automated Luxury Communism, Artificial Intelligence

I wanted to see the junta generals fill their pants when they realized that the future is – in Earth terms – bright, bright red.

(Iain Banks, *State of the Art*)

### **Introduction**

Iain (M.) Banks (1954–2013) was, undoubtedly, among the leading Scottish writers of his generation. His somewhat peculiar career in the United Kingdom, where he published mainstream fiction as Iain Banks and science fiction as Iain M. Banks,<sup>1</sup> as well as his remarkably interesting character, made him not only a literary star but also an interesting topic for scholars from a variety of disciplines. Having published his first novel, *The Wasp Factory* (1987) at thirty, Banks published steadily for the next thirty years, usually one novel per year. Most of his science fiction works are situated in the same fictional universe and came to be known as The

<sup>1</sup> In the United States, he published mostly his science fiction novels, signed as Iain M. Banks.

Culture series. It consists of nine novels: *Consider Phlebas* (1987); *The Player of Games* (1988); *Use of Weapons* (1990); *Excession* (1996); *Inversions* (1998); *Look to Windward* (2000); *Matter* (2008); *Surface Detail* (2010); *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012), one novella: *State of the Art* (1991), and a couple of short stories: “A Gift from the Culture” and “Descendant,” firstly published in magazines and later as a part of the *State of the Art* collection. These works are set in the universe where an eponymous political entity, the Culture, a loose federation formed by seven or eight humanoid species and mostly governed by Minds, powerful artificial intelligences, is one of the Involved civilizations, technologically advanced enough to be part of galactic meta-civilization, and, as the moniker suggests, involved in politics on a galactic scale.

On the surface, Banks’ Culture novels are situated within the space opera sub-genre. Within the New Space Opera movement in Britain (see more in Caroti 2015; Kincaid 2017; Norman 2021; Sawyer 2009), Banks was determined not only to subvert and revitalize the genre but also to “reclaim it for the Left” (Colebrook and Cox 2013a). So his Culture stories are, simultaneously, epic adventures in space and an “ongoing commentary on the nature of utopia” (Hardesty 2000, 116), deliberately promoting Banks’ left leanings.

In the growing body of scholarship on this part of Banks’ opus, there was a continuous effort to determine the precise socio-political structure of the Culture. The author himself tried to explain it, both in interviews and in an online essay *A Few Notes on the Culture* (1994), in the light of his own political views. These were not secret – in his numerous interviews and public speeches, Banks was very open about his political opinions, both regarding his Scottish homeland and his sympathies for socialism.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he frequently expressed his views on contemporary political issues in letters to the national newspapers, most often *The Guardian* (Norman 2021, 6). And still, there are different interpretations of the political character of the Culture, and among them, two are most prominent: those who see the Culture as a Utopia and those who see it as an Empire. Both sides of this debate seem insufficient and not entirely convincing. Therefore, the main argument of this paper is that the truly adequate label for the political complexities of Culture civilization was coined only after the untimely death of the author himself – around 2015, when the far (or, some could say, radical) left activists on the Internet coined the phrase *Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism*.

<sup>2</sup> List of selected interviews can be found in the appendices of Colebrook and Cox (2013b).

### **Culture as a Utopia, Culture as an Empire: a False Dilemma?**

There is already a significant body of scholarship dedicated to the definition of the Culture civilization depicted in Banks' novels. Apart from numerous articles and essays published in scholarly journals and edited volumes, several books are now dedicated to Banks. A biography by Cabell (2014) focuses not only on Banks' life but also on his writings. Edited volumes include *The Transgressive Iain Banks: Essays on a Writer Beyond Borders* (Colebrook and Cox 2013b), which takes a wider perspective on his fiction, and *The Science Fiction of Iain M. Banks* (Hubble et al. 2018), focused on his genre works. Finally, there are three relatively recent monographs, all dealing mostly with the Culture series, within, of course, the wider context of Banks' life and work: *The Culture Series of Iain M. Banks: A Critical Introduction* (Caroti 2015), *Modern Masters of Science Fiction: Iain M. Banks* (Kincaid 2017), and *The Culture of "the Culture": Utopian Processes in Iain M. Banks's Space Opera Series* (Norman 2021).<sup>3</sup>

Although most of this research comes from the field of literary theory, and deals with different aspects of Banks' writings and his world – such as posthumanism, gender, etc., there were already significant efforts to catalog and analyze the political structure, or shape, of the Culture civilization. While there are those, such as Heath (2017), who claim that Culture is not “even a ‘polity’ in any traditional sense of the term,” it is obvious that the Culture is a political entity – a community of shared values and of a shared identity, and willing to resort to violence in order to protect both. Exactly what kind of political entity it is, however, remains somewhat unclear, since the Culture “kind of fades out at the edges” (Banks, 1994).

In his discussion on the political nature of the Culture, Norman lists and references a variety of terms used in existing scholarly literature: limitless utopia, ambiguous utopia,<sup>4</sup> critical utopia, techno utopia, liberal utopia, political utopia, anarcho-communist, utopian meta-civilization, spacefaring socialist minarchy, pan-galactic Utopian collective, Galactic Cooperative, astro-political community, totalitarian, interventionist monolith, hedonistic, essentially decadent society, hegemony, imperialist propaganda, fallible dystopia, liberal empire, Galactic Empire, meta-empire (2021, 27–29). A couple of others can be added,

<sup>3</sup> There are also at least two defended doctoral dissertations on Banks: Jude Roberts, *Culture-al Subjectivities: the Constitution of the Self in Iain (M.) Banks's Culture Texts*, University of Nottingham, 2013, and Katarzyna Fetlińska, *Mind, Brain, and Literature: The Fiction of Iain (M.) Banks*, University of Warsaw, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> This term was originally used as the publisher's tagline for Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) and was in later editions adopted as a subtitle.

such as odd utopia (Hardesty 2000), complex heterotopia (Brown 1996), or posthuman and godlike empire (Patra 2020).

These views are, however, not necessarily mutually exclusive. Two interpretations of the Culture can be understood to be in a dialectical relationship (Norman 2021, 27). They are, arguably, two sides of the Culture. Those who focus on the utopian status of the Culture are interested primarily in its “inner workings,” and see a society without want, without violence, without illness, and even without death. This society is also built to maximize personal freedom, and makes all the decisions democratically, through referenda involving anyone concerned<sup>5</sup> (see Banks 1994). And yet: such a society faces a specific problem, as stated already in *Consider Phlebas*:

The only desire the Culture could not satisfy from within itself was one common to both the descendants of its original human stock and the machines they had (at however great a remove) brought into being: the urge not to feel useless. The Culture’s sole justification for the relatively unworried, hedonistic life its population enjoyed was its good works; the secular evangelism of the Contact Section, not simply finding, cataloguing, investigating and analysing other, less advanced civilisations but – where the circumstances appeared to Contact to justify so doing – actually interfering (overtly or covertly) in the historical processes of those other cultures. (Banks 2008a, chap. Appendices: the Idiran-Culture war)

Those covert interventions are carried out by the intelligence/special operations department called Special Circumstances. The role of Special Circumstances, it seems, is seen as controversial:

[...] the contempt so many of our own people feel for Special Circumstances... the contempt we all guess the Minds must feel for us... (Banks 2008a)

I left the Culture because it bored me, but also because the evangelical, interventionist morality of Contact sometimes meant doing just the sort of thing we were supposed to prevent others doing; starting wars, assassinating ... all of it, all the bad things ... I was never involved with Special Circumstances directly, but I knew what went on (Special Circumstances; Dirty Tricks, in other words. The Culture’s tellingly unique euphemism). (A Gift from the Culture, in Banks 2010)

<sup>5</sup> Although, in *Excession* (Banks 2008b), this idea is somewhat undermined.

Looking from the outside, such interventions are not always welcome but are actually resented by targeted civilizations. This is the external aspect of the Culture and the focus of those who see it primarily as an Empire.

Banks, true to himself, seems to confirm both. In the novels, the Culture is frequently called Utopia, sometimes sincerely, sometimes mockingly. In two novels – *Use of Weapons* (Banks 2008e) and *Inversions* (Banks 2008c) – there are fairy tales incorporated into the narrative about the Culture as a magical kingdom. Still, Banks does not hesitate to point out this other side of the Culture, the “cozy proto-imperialist meta-hegemony” (Banks 2008b).

Finally, this juxtaposition of Utopia and Empire seems to be a false dilemma. As Kincaid (2017, chap. 2) points out: “In fact, it becomes clear that for Banks utopia lies in the individual experience of those living in the Culture, but when it comes to interaction with others, particularly with other societies, therein lies anti-utopia. This is the counternarrative of Banks’s books, the ambiguity that drives the stories.” While the Culture could be a Utopia and an Empire at the same time, both terms, however qualified, seem to be insufficient to completely grasp the complexity of this civilization.

### **Excuse: Communism vs. Utopia**

In the very first novel of the series, *Consider Phlebas*, the Culture is explicitly called “communist utopia.” It is, however, written from the perspective of the enemy of the Culture, and probably intended as an insult. While communism was, throughout history, frequently dismissed as “utopian,” the relationship between the two concepts is far more complex. If we move from the concept of communism as an idea (or ideology) and try to investigate what would communist *society* look like, there is relatively little to start from. Karl Marx himself famously refused to write about the specific features of communism and dedicated very few lines of his opus to it, scattered mostly throughout *German Ideology*, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, and *Grundrisse*. His magnum opus, *Das Kapital*, barely mentions the word. This was by design: he wanted to distance himself from the utopian socialists – most famous among them being Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen, and thus refused to “prescribe” what communist society would look like. In his *Preface* to the 1888 English edition of *Communist Manifesto*, Engels elaborates: “when it was written, we could not have called it a Socialist Manifesto. By Socialists, in 1847, were understood, on the one hand, the adherents of the various Utopian systems: Owenites in England, Fourierists in France, both of them already reduced to the position of mere sects, and gradually dying out” (Marx and Engels 1970, p. 13).

On the other hand, the concept of Utopia is hardly a simple one. Ever since the publication of More's famous volume, there is a debate about whether his imagined island is *outopia* (a non-place) or *eutopia* (the good place)<sup>6</sup> or, perhaps, both (see, for example, Vieira 2010). When it comes to the application of the term to the Culture, even a cursory look reveals that there is no consensus on which definition should be used. Stephenson (2013) uses Darko Suvin's definition. Caroti (2015) focuses on Tom Moylan's concept of critical utopia. Norman (2021) evokes the ideas of Ruth Levitas and Fredric Jameson.

There is, however, one important similarity between concepts of communism and utopia: they both represent "the end of history."<sup>7</sup> In the perfect society, there is no further need for change – they are, by definition, in stasis. Banks himself seems to admit as much regarding Culture – in the third Culture novel, *Use of Weapons*, a non-Culture character informs a woman from Culture: "your stasis is your society" (Banks 2008e, chap. 2). Numerous times throughout the novels, he insists that in the Culture things change very slowly<sup>8</sup> – even when it comes to "everyday" technologies. This is fortunate for researchers of the Culture universe, because otherwise, the sheer time span would make any meaningful and all-encompassing analysis too challenging, if not impossible. Namely, the Culture novels were written and published over almost four decades, and the series timeline starts in the 14th century and ends approximately a millennium, or millennium and a half, later.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, neither communism nor utopia are particularly interesting settings for stories to take place in. Banks resolves this problem in an interesting way. He focuses on the relations of the Culture with other civilizations and, consequently on the Contact and Special Circumstances. While both the Contact and especially Special Circumstances employ non-Culture mercenaries, there are Culture citizens who opt to work for these departments,

6 This particular double meaning of Utopia could also pertain to the Culture, given that the first sentence of Banks' essay reads "Firstly, and most importantly: the Culture doesn't really exist" (Banks 1994).

7 For a useful analysis of Hegel's, Kojeve's, Marx's and Fukuyama's notions of the end of history, see, for example, Grier (1990).

8 Kincaid (2017), puzzlingly, thinks that the Culture "avoids the problems usually associated with utopias by being dynamic, ever changing." This claim, however, does not seem to be supported by the source material.

9 While Norman dates the end of internal chronology in the 2300s, Kincaid (2017) places the end of the Culture saga "sometime towards the end of the twenty-eighth century." More on the timeline of Culture novels can be found in Norman (2021); a detailed timeline of Banks' life and work, compiled by David Haddock, is available in Hubble et al. (2018, xiii–xx).

given that life in the utopian Culture can be, as Cox (2013) puts it, “rather boring,” at least for some. The description of Contact and Special Circumstances agents, strangely, brings Banks very close to Fukuyama’s *End of History*. His somewhat cynical paragraph seems eerily close to the way the Culture deals with its overly adventurous and possibly problematic malcontents: “The fact that a large historical world co-exists with the post-historical one means that the former will hold attractions for certain individuals precisely because it continues to be a realm of struggle, war, injustice, and poverty [...] It is probably healthy for liberal democracies that the Third World exists to absorb the energies and ambitions of such people; whether it is good for the Third World is a different matter” (Fukuyama 1992, 318).

### **Culture as Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism**

The phrase Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism seems to have appeared sometimes in 2015. It is based on the philosophy of Fully Automated Luxury Communism (FALC), presented for the first time in a video by Aaron Bastani (2014), who later elaborated on it in a book (Bastani 2020). It focuses on the crises of the modern era, as well as technologies that could help overcome them. Bastani (2020, 50) very deliberately uses the term communism, despite its possible negative connotations for some, “for the benefit of precision; the intention being to denote a society in which work is eliminated, scarcity replaced by abundance and where labour and leisure blend into one another.” This program presupposes the arrival of a post-scarcity economy, based on currently existing technologies and trends, and claims that “[c]ommunism is luxurious – or it isn’t communism” (Bastani 2020, 56). Building primarily on Marx’s writings, Bastani underlines that technological progress is not enough to bring about the end of poverty if it is not supported by adequate politics. While he does not mention Banks’ Culture novels, almost every single technology he describes as necessary to bring FALC about is already anticipated by Banks – artificial intelligence, asteroid mining, synthesized meat, etc.

The original notion of FALC was later expanded on the Internet into Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism. While not necessarily associated with any particular movement or organization, there seems to be growing support for the left among the young (see Jones 2021). Being the “Internet natives,” this generation naturally uses memes as their “speculative image board of the new political imaginary” (C\_Y\_S 2019, 322). The particular Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism meme sprung as an embracement of the FALC concept as well as an attempt to reconcile two strands of the contemporary online left ideology – traditional Marxism and identity politics (see Hobson and Modi 2019, 344).

According to *Know Your Meme* (2017), a crowdsourced website dedicated to recording and cataloging internet memes, the phrase “envisions an idealistic society where gender norms have been abolished to such an extent that there is little to no difference between gay and straight, and due to automation, luxury is available to all people.” The entry specifically mentions Banks’ Culture universe as an example of the philosophy. Today, on Facebook alone there are ten public and private groups with the phrase in their title, with memberships up to over 300, as well as two pages with about fifteen thousand followers each. This phrase, I argue, is the most accurate label for the socio-political structure of the Culture.

The key feature of the Culture is the existence of Minds, extremely advanced artificial intelligences, alongside other sentient machines and humans. This, among other technological advances, has led to complete automation:

Briefly, nothing and nobody in the Culture is exploited. It is essentially an automated civilisation in its manufacturing processes, with human labour restricted to something indistinguishable from play, or a hobby. No machine is exploited, either; the idea here being that any job can be automated in such a way as to ensure that it can be done by a machine well below the level of potential consciousness... (Banks, 1994)

The consequence of this is a post-scarcity society, utilizing the infinite resources of the galaxy. It enables every citizen of the Culture to have literally whatever they want. Therefore, life in the Culture is quite luxurious.

One of the technologies available to citizens of the Culture is genetic modification, allowing, among other things, to switch genders at will, or choose to stop somewhere in between. Usually, most citizens use this opportunity, and bisexuality is the norm – it is, for example, considered strange that Jernau Gurgeh, the protagonist of *The Player of Games*, refuses to switch from his birth gender and is strictly heterosexual. This logically leads to complete gender equality:

A society in which it is so easy to change sex will rapidly find out if it is treating one gender better than the other; within the population, over time, there will gradually be greater and greater numbers of the sex it is more rewarding to be, and so pressure for change – within society rather than the individuals – will presumably therefore build up until some form of sexual equality and hence numerical parity is established. (Banks 1994)



Culture is predominantly a space-faring society. It moved almost completely from living on planets to full-time living in space. There are three key types of habitats mentioned in the Culture stories. First among them are General System Vehicles, huge sentient starships:

General Systems Vehicles were like encapsulated worlds. They were more than just very big spaceships; they were habitats, universities, factories, museums, dockyards, libraries, even mobile exhibition centres. They represented the Culture – they were the Culture. Almost anything that could be done anywhere in the Culture could be done on a GSV. They could make anything the Culture was capable of making, contained all the knowledge the Culture had ever accumulated. (Banks 2008a, chap. 7)

The rest of the population lives on Rocks, “hollowed-out asteroids and planetoids” fitted with drives, or on Orbitals, described as segments of the Dyson sphere orbiting the stars. Precisely its space-faring character, Banks explains, determines Culture’s political organization, which he summarily describes as “socialism within, anarchism without” (Banks 1994).

Finally, is the Culture a communist society? Technologically enabled post-scarcity, it can be argued, is a precondition of communism even in Marx’s original vision. The true, unqualified communism<sup>10</sup> begins when “[t]he wealth which capitalism left and which the first stage of communism multiplied many times over starts communism on its way with a super abundance of all material goods. Wide-scale planning has been enormously successful. Technology has developed to a plane where practically anything is possible” (Ollman 1977, 21).

While there is no systematic description of the communist society provided by Marx and Engels, Ollman (1977, 21–22) helpfully summarizes features of communism as originally envisioned into six major points:

1. The division of labor has ended and people are both capable and willing to perform different kinds of work.
2. Activity with and for others, in all spheres of life, has become the primary motivation and goal.

<sup>10</sup> As opposed to “dictatorship of the proletariat” as the first, transitional phase. Discussing this phase in detail is beyond the scope of this paper but it is been widely researched in both East and West throughout the 20th century. For a quick overview see Ollman (1977), who provides insight into its key features, as well as Draper (1962), who discusses what the phrase originally meant for Marx and Engels.

3. Individual ownership and private property are completely abolished.
4. Conscious effort to bend nature and all of its resources to human will, through knowledge and control over nature.
5. Human activities are not organized by external forces anymore – there is no apparatus of coercion, no restrictive rules nor punishment, and the state “withers away.”
6. The divisions based on nation, religion, race, occupation, class, family, and place of living ceases to exist.

The first point is the most obvious – in the Culture, there is no more mandatory labor (this is something even Marx did not consider possible). Education is a life-long endeavor, and prolonged life spans give people the opportunity to engage in as many different activities as they like and become proficient in them. In the *Use of Weapons*, this is demonstrated through at least two separate conversations the protagonist has as the newcomer to Culture. One of them illustrates the point perfectly:

“Usually,” the man said. “I work on alien – no offense – alien religions; Directional Emphasis In Religious Observance; that’s my speciality... like when temples or graves or prayers always have to face in a certain direction; that sort of thing? Well, I catalog, evaluate, compare; I come up with theories and argue with colleagues, here and elsewhere. But... the job’s never finished; always new examples, and even the old ones get reevaluated, and new people come along with new ideas about what you thought was settled... but” – he slapped the table – “when you clean a table you clean a table. You feel you’ve done something. It’s an achievement.” (Banks 2008e, chap. IV)

So, in this sense, in the Culture everyone is able “to do one thing today, another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic” (Marx and Engels 1968, 53).

Second point is the only one that does not really apply to the Culture – it is an extremely individualistic society. This is in line with Kincaid’s (2017, chap. 5) observation that “in Banks’s political writing, it is always the individual that matters, more than the party, more than the community, more than the family.”

Regarding the third point, there is no private property or ownership in the Culture. As Ollman correctly observes, “[p]rivate property has always been based, in a fundamental sense, on the existence of material scarcity” (Ollman 1977, 27). When *everything* can be made without effort and in an infinite number of copies, the very notion of ownership loses every appeal. In *The State of*

*the Art*, where the Culture Contact Unit visits Earth at the height of the Cold War in 1977, some of its crew become enamored with the planet and its customs, including the notion of payment and ownership:

Li insisted on being paid so the ship fashioned him a flawless cut diamond the size of his fist. It was his, the ship told him. A gift; he could own it. (Li lost interest in it after that though, and tended to leave it lying around the social spaces; I stubbed a toe on it at least twice. In the end he got the ship to leave the stone in orbit around Neptune on our way out of the system; a joke.) (Banks 2010)

Furthermore, there is an uncanny resonance between Marx's proposition that "[f]rom the stand-point of a higher economic form of society, private ownership of the globe by single individuals will appear quite as absurd as private ownership of one man by another" (*Capital III*, cited in Ollman 1977, 27) and the discussion Jernau Gurgeh has with one of the Azad high officials:

"But what if I do want something unreasonable?"

"What?"

"My own planet?" Hamin wheezed with laughter.

"How can you own a planet?" Gurgeh shook his head.

"But supposing I wanted one?"

"I suppose if you found an unoccupied one you could land without anybody becoming annoyed... perhaps that would work. But how would you stop other people landing there too?"

"Could I not buy a fleet of warships?"

"All our ships are sentient. You could certainly try telling a ship what to do... but I don't think you'd get very far."

"Your ships think they're sentient!" Hamin chuckled.

"A common delusion shared by some of our human citizens."  
(Banks 2008d, chap. 2)

Combined with the first point - moving "completely beyond material scarcity as well as mandatory labour," (Norman 2021, 9), this transcendence of the need for private ownership amounts to another famous feature of communism: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!" (Marx 2009, 11).

The fourth point, complete mastery of the surroundings and nature, also neatly applies to the Culture. The very living in space habitats both presupposes and embodies this complete mastery of the natural forces as well as conditions of human life. Technological advancements leading to the endless supply of energy and matter further underline this point.

The fifth feature of communism, the absence of organized coercion, restrictions, and the state, is perhaps the one most pronounced in the Culture. Banks believes that technological progress and the move to space-dwelling will necessarily lead to the dissolution of hierarchies. Theoretically, every individual has unbound freedom to do as they choose, although in practice it is not always that simple, as the following passages illustrate:

“Just remember.” She watched the slowly scrolling screen.  
“We have our orders.”  
“Agreed-on courses of action, Sma. We don’t have orders, remember?”  
Sma nodded. “We have our agreed-on courses of action.”  
(Banks, 2008e, chap. 4)

*The Fate Amenable To Change* had carried out all the standard initial measurements and observations of the entity, but had been very forcefully advised indeed not to do any more; no direct contact was to be attempted, not even by probes, smaller craft or drones. In theory it could disobey; it was its own ship, it could make up its own mind... but in practice it had to heed the advice of those who knew if not more than it, better than it. Collective responsibility. Also known as sharing the blame. (Banks 2008b, chap. 8)

The Culture has no laws as such: “there are, of course, agreed-on forms of behaviour; manners, as mentioned above, but nothing that we would recognise as a legal framework” (Banks 1994). The punishment for breaching these norms is usually some form of social ostracism. The most extreme form of penalty is “drone-slapping,” applicable in the rare cases of murder – the offender is assigned a drone to follow him around for the rest of his life and make sure that he never repeats his crime (Banks 2008d, 1994). This kind of punishment is highly efficient: “[n]ot only does this reduce recidivism to zero, the prospect of being supervised by a drone for the rest of one’s life also serves as a powerful deterrent to crime” (Heath 2017).

Also, the Culture is *not* a state in any meaningful sense. It has none of the features commonly associated with this type of political organization: no fixed territory, no formal government, no apparatus of coercion. Nor does it have any of the functions of the state, aside from one: “[t]his work of administration, more properly of coordination, is the only function in communism which is analogous to the duties of a modern state” (Ollman 1977, 33). And in the Culture, this function is performed by artificial intelligences.

The very nature of the Culture civilization also provides for the abolition of the divisions based on gender, race, class, and locality. Genetic modifications, it is already explained, effectively lead to gender equality. The same applies to race – if everyone can choose how they want to look, up to and including significant deviations from humanoid form – the very notion of race loses its meaning. The Culture’s habitats are a balanced combination of urban and rural areas, and one can easily travel between them using quick and reliable means of transport (Banks 1994), thus abolishing the opposition between the village and city way of life – one can have the best of both. This division between the rural and urban was, by the way, something that deeply bothered Marx himself (see Ollman 1977).

There are, of course, other, more specific features of the Culture that make it explicitly communist. Two perhaps most prominent, also stemming from the abundance and technological change, are the abolition of money and the planned economy. “Money implies poverty” is the Culture saying quoted in two of the stories in *The State of the Art* (“The State of the Art” and “A Gift from the Culture”). It “withered away,” along with the private ownership, the state, and the religion. The planned economy, which Banks holds in high regard, was also at one stage the key principle in the Culture, but “it has moved even beyond that” (Banks 1994). This is an interesting and now especially relevant point since there are voices who argue that a planned economy is superior to unchecked market forces and already present in capitalist societies of today (Bastani 2020), and also those who believe that technological developments in the field of information processing, up to and including AI, will make such a system not only feasible but also extremely efficient (see Parson 2020).<sup>11</sup>

Last but not least – Banks himself said that the Culture is communist, in his own irreverent way: “The Culture is hippy commies with hyper-weapons and a deep distrust of both Marketolatry and Greedism” (Roberts 2017).

### **Conclusion**

The writing of Iain (M.) Banks is deeply political, even though he consistently rejected to be labeled as a “political writer with the capital P” (Kincaid 2017, chap. 2). They reflect his political views, which are situated firmly at the far left of the political spectrum. It can be argued that this is most visible, and meticulously executed in his Culture universe, “his finest creation” (Tom Chivers, cited in Caroti 2015, chap. 1). According to Banks himself, “[t]he Culture

<sup>11</sup> It is also worth noting that USSR tried to use early cybernetic and information technologies exactly for planning purposes (see, for example, Peters 2016).

stories are me at my most didactic, though it's largely hidden under all the funny names, action and general bluster" (Roberts 2017).

Speaking about the socio-political background of the Culture novels, Norman (2021, chap. 9) underlines the switch from welfare capitalism and Keynesianism to neoliberalism that took place in Britain during the 1970s: "it was exactly this kind of communitarian, social democratic politics that was being eroded around him which Banks channeled into his vision of a utopian society, providing a truly radical alternative to the real-world status quo." Although Brown (1996, 72), saw the Culture as "essentially a post-modern, nineteen-eighties utopia," even the earliest Culture novels read as extremely modern even today, and resonate with both technology and concerns of our own age – from "terminals" similar to our mobile phones, to vat-grown meat, environmental awareness and growing distrust of capitalism in its latest neoliberal iteration.

Given the explicitly leftist, and, as the discussion hopefully shows, perhaps just a little less explicitly communist features of the Culture as depicted by Banks, it is somewhat baffling that the novels have attracted the attention of some of the richest and most prominent 21st-century capitalists – such as Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg. Elon Musk has declared himself on Twitter as a "utopian anarchist of the kind best described by Iain Banks," while Mark Zuckerberg chose the second Culture novel, *The Player of Games*, for his book club (see more in Norman 2021, 1–2). This illustrates how much the Culture resonates with contemporary ideological landscapes, even if it is sometimes misunderstood. On the other end of the political spectrum, it is embraced, through the notion of Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism, by the growing, and possibly global,<sup>12</sup> online leftist community, using modern technologies to express their concerns and visions of the future.

Banks' vision of an advanced civilization is a part of an ongoing tradition of science fiction (although the term should be applied broadly) writers, either British or with strong ties to Britain, who are using their literature, and lending their voice, to promote the ideas of social justice. George Orwell and H. G. Wells may have been the most prominent among them in the last century. However, as Douzinas and Žižek (2010, ix) remind us, "communism must be thought today by taking its distance from statism and economism and becoming informed by the political experiences of the twenty-first century." This seems to be taken seriously by authors as diverse as China Mieville, Richard Morgan, Cory Doctorow, and Jo Walton, who are providing, through their utopias, dystopias, and their in-between societies, both sharp critiques

<sup>12</sup> Although, for now, it seems to be mostly British (see Hobson and Modi 2019).

of the late capitalism and imaginaries of better futures. Finally, if the arguments presented here are sufficient to conclude that the civilization imagined by Iain Banks is indeed Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism, where does that leave us? The Culture is not a utopia, inasmuch as communism per se is not a utopia.

It is, however, *utopian* in the sense of inspiration, a pointer (perhaps vague, but a pointer nevertheless) towards possible futures. Is it then also pointing towards the imperial ambitions of such a future? The Culture would certainly not be the first society that celebrates freedom within, but acts imperialistically towards others – from Pericles' Athens to the modern "export of democracy" we have seen many such examples. After all, if one firmly believes in the superiority of their social arrangement, it would be a crime not to make it a gift to others. What makes the Culture special is that its aims are not necessarily human, thus related to human nature. It does act as an Empire and tries to make other cultures in its own image, but can we be sure what motivates the Minds? So, in our pursuit of the Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism, we should perhaps be aware of its possible, as of yet unknowable, dark sides.

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