Futures of Negation: Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future* and Utopian Science Fiction

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Review of:
Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. New York: Verso, 2005.

1. It is difficult to gauge the political utility of expressly fictive locations like utopias, given the immediacy and concreteness of a daily, lived political environment. Fredric Jameson sets out to address this quandary in *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. Jameson outlines the contributions utopian fictions have made to the ongoing dilemma of systemic change in a world of capitalist hegemony. Acknowledging the current skepticism in academic discourse about the value of utopian thinking after the Cold War, Jameson ponders the status of utopian fiction and what remains of the link between utopia and socialism. The book sketches the terrain of a "post-globalized Left" that appears to have recovered utopian thought as a "political slogan and a politically energizing perspective" (xii). Jameson goes on to pose the necessary question: What explicitly does utopia seek to negate and what are the contours of imagined alternative worlds? Jameson continually returns to this question, working through a plethora of science fiction (SF) texts in which a utopian impulse or "desire" is perpetually emerging. Science fiction's hospitable futures are commonly rubbished by a world that cannot abide fanciful trajectories. But these visions of global community are not lost. They are simply awaiting excavation from a literary expression committed to thinking the world differently. By addressing the irrepressible wish-fulfillment of new economic and social systems in SF, Jameson counters the cynicism abundant in criticism of utopian literature. *Archaeologies of the Future* is a deft treatise on the resolute political vitality of the utopian form, an argument laced with timely optimism.

2. *Archaeologies of the Future* is divided into two sections: the first section comprises previously unpublished material that theorizes the utopian genre and codifies Jameson's earlier schematics on the subject, and the second collects essays on utopias that Jameson has written throughout his career, ranging from

1973 ("Generic Discontinuities in SF") to recent efforts ("Fear and Loathing in Globalization"), including some of his most provocative essays, pieces that are landmarks in utopian criticism and theory ("Progress versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?"). The book's holistic project traces the historical development of utopia as a literary form, moving from Thomas More's generative 1516 text, *Utopia*, to contemporary novels. However, Jameson devotes most of his analysis to utopian mechanisms in science fiction. He follows Darko Suvin's postulation that utopia is a socioeconomic sub-genre of SF and that, like the larger genre to which it belongs, utopia produces an effect of "cognitive estrangement"--that is, the fictions in which utopian desire appear make strange the familiar power structures of our lives. As readers, we recognize our own world burning within the alien place. Malls, prisons, governments, customs, speech, and even geographies are recognizable yet different by one remove (or more). By disturbing the familiarity and fixity of recognizable power structures, SF texts tease us with radical social models. Science fiction satiates our desire for a transformed tomorrow while reminding us of that future's uncertainty and contingency. However, Jameson dismisses the "vacuous evocation" of utopia "as the image of a perfect society or even the blueprint of a better one" (72). Such a conception of utopia is too simplistic. Instead, he sees utopian desire as global capitalism's imagined neutralization. Jameson believes that "one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet" (xii). Utopia's political relevance, though, comes not from banal pining but from its combative opposition to the "universal belief that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socioeconomic system is conceivable, let alone practically available" (xii). Utopian science fictions threaten the ideological dominance of capitalism by theorizing a world change towards egalitarianism. Or, as Jameson puts it, the utopians "not only offer to conceive of such alternate systems; Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of social totality" (xii). Utopia offers the imaginative counterpunch to the Thatcherite decree that free-market capitalism is our inevitable future.

3. Confronting entrenched capitalism is, according to Jameson, the fundamental process of the desire called utopia. It is a dialectical movement whose political strategy is, strangely, "anti-anti-Utopia." The double negative indicates the imperative to address anti-Utopian ideologies that swirl through capitalism with speculative alternatives. Jameson's most emphatic claim is that utopian literature performs a "critical negativity, that is in their function to demystify their opposite numbers" (211). Utopian SF's political significance (and it is reinforced that SF carries this charge more resoundingly than atavistic and magical Fantasy literature) is not necessarily its prescriptive capacity to imagine the exterminating agent of capitalism or even the exactness of its replacement system. Rather, SF's potency comes from the way it encourages readers to envision alternate social systems. SF asserts an ideological refusal of capitalism "by forcing us to think the break itself" (232). Jameson joins Russell Jacoby (*The End of Utopia* and *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age*) as one of the few voices on the political left still committed to the power of utopian idealization. However, unlike Hardt and Negri's spontaneous utopian

gatherings (*Multitude*, 2004), Jameson's *Archaeologies* is more concerned with the stuff of dreams, the imaginative utterance of solidarity and tolerance, and the nefarious critique that such dreams are politically obsolete.

4. Jameson complicates the specificity of utopian thought in science fictions by situating these messages firmly in the sociocultural and material histories that produce them. Jameson's explication of the historical conditions that generate individuated wishes for utopia is understandable: the conditions that determine the nature of utopian longing and protest are often the same ones that make society consider utopia an irresponsible fantasy, or as Reinhold Niebuhr declared in 1952, "an adolescent embarrassment." Still, viewing utopia from a material and psychological vantage can't completely overcome the inherent vagueness in the utopian impulse as Jameson describes it. His account of the cultural and political forces in various eras that repress the desire for a better world nevertheless leaves the utopian project orbiting on a general path, far from the praxis that trenchant dissatisfaction with capitalism would seemingly demand. While his point is well taken that the inability to imagine alternative societies would mark the triumph of capitalism, Jameson perhaps overestimates the political practicality of the imaginative process. This is a shortcoming that may leave some Marxists who were expecting more material applicability dissatisfied. That said, Jameson does well to remind us that "our most energetic imaginative leaps into radical alternatives were little more than the projections of our own social moment and historical or subjective situation" (211).

   In calling attention to the cultural conditions that germinated utopian and dystopian narratives, Jameson opens up fascinating comparative avenues between works. For example, he suggests that Orwell's "dispirited reaction to postwar Labour Britain" (202) produced a vastly different critique in *1984* than do the media and mass culture targets ridiculed in Huxley's *Brave New World*, despite the commonplace move to group the two novels together as texts with similar dystopian projects. It is no surprise then that much of *Archaeologies of the Future*'s first section extrapolates evidence of and reactions to the political climates of the 1950s and 1960s (commitment to protest and revolution, suspicion of failed communist movements) from science fiction novels of those eras.

5. Despite the invigorating first theoretical section of *Archaeologies*, the text's bifurcated structure troubles its cohesion, and the format of its second half is scattershot. Consequently, some of the compiled essays read as exercises in utopian analysis rather than contributions to a unified argument. Readers familiar with Jameson's impressive body of utopian scholarship may find little new material (both for the field and for Jameson's own oeuvre). Furthermore, *Archaeologies*' discussion of utopianism as a hermeneutic practice essentially rehashes a reading model that has been popular in Science Fiction studies for quite a while. Though Jameson helpfully reminds us of Ernst Bloch's centrality in developing a method of interpreting a text's utopian content, one can't help but feel that we are treading over territory thoroughly mapped by Carl Freedman and others. That said, it is perhaps Freedman's insight that "it is in the generic nature of science fiction to confront the future" that enables us to recognize the importance of Jameson's work (199). If late capitalism enervates our political

will by insisting on its immortality, then ostensibly fictionalizing a future free of capitalism can free agency from this postmodern deadlock and stave off the intractable position of despair.

6. At his most lyrical, Jameson poignantly reflects on moments in U.S. and European history when revivals of utopian literatures optimistically heralded resistance to inequity. At key points, he includes schematic graphs that concisely delineate the various formulations of utopia SF, contrasting diametric narrative tactics and linking constitutive traditions (4, 37, 131). In the opening chapter, for example, Jameson graphs two descending lines from More's originating text. One line represents programs intent on the realization of a utopian project (such as revolutionary praxis, intentional communities, and the utopian text), while the other includes omnipresent utopian impulses that are less concerned with totality and more directed towards equivocal matters like reform (such as political theory or hermeneutics). In a later graph, Jameson sketches the imbricated field of prophetic texts and moral fables. These graphs clarify Jameson's occasionally expansive comparisons, succinctly showing, for instance, how some satires of systemic corruption share political interests with utopian manifestos. In *Archaeologies*, Jameson's writing is familiarly tricky, yet the graphs and end-of-section summations reward those willing to negotiate the vines of many tangled literary traditions by revealing the structure that networks together five hundred years of branching utopian thought. Though rarely as edifying as Jameson's adroit close readings of trans-historical themes, the graphs remind us of SF's obsession with class striation.

7. Class division and economic dominance cast large categorical shadows over *Archaeologies*, looming so large that at times Jameson's text seems redundant. Jameson unfortunately devotes far fewer pages to sexual and racial utopianism. While his attention to the urban sexual politics of Samuel Delany's *Trouble in Triton* considers emancipation via posthuman prostheses, the episode is one of a few brief digressions on utopian engines that are not explicitly anti-capitalist. Not only does this mode of thinking place inordinate pressure on economics to resolve social identity disputes, it also excludes many important SF utopian texts from Jameson's discussion. Specifically, though William Burroughs's sexual utopias (*Cities of the Red Night*, *Naked Lunch*) have been copiously addressed by critics, contemporary utopian studies must still come to terms with other alternative orders, like Burroughs's, that are not forged in economic materialism. Misha's *Red Spider, White Web*, and nearly all of Kathy Acker's catalogue braid artistic trade and non-normative sexuality to form new, just modes of community. A chapter dedicated to recent SF texts that probe scientific and intellectual property politics concomitantly, such as China Mieville's New Crobuzon novels, would neatly fill the lacuna of non-economic utopias or dystopias in *Archaeologies*. Jameson's study would be significantly richer if it responded in more depth to growing feminist criticism on cyberculture, posthumanism, and recombinant sexuality (for example, work by N. Katherine Hayles and Lisa Yaszek). SF's voluminous articulations of sexual alterity, bodily augmentation, and alternative social models of gender inclusivity scream for critical placement alongside studies of communitarian or socialist revolution. In the end, Jameson's theory that utopian SF enacts "negation of a negation" is somewhat troublesome no matter how important and accurate we take that

project to be. Does a Hegelian model of negation, and anti-anti-capitalism, neutralize an unjust system, or does it erect a better one? If the former is true, is the neutralization of global capitalism with local resistance the best we can hope for? How "utopian" is a series of toggling ideological reversals? The paradox of utopian thought in a global age, however, seems to exactly validate Jameson's project. Not only is utopian desire the inextinguishable negative of capitalist totality, utopianism is the opposition necessary to imagine capitalism's mortality into being.

8. While Jameson's allegiance to Hegelian negation can be wearying, abstractions of hyper-aggressive postmodern capitalism, particularly those that modify Marcuse and Adorno, are illuminating. Additionally, the analyses spin out from the work of utopian theorists of *Science Fiction Studies* fame, Darko Suvin and Tom Moylan, though there is less dialogue with critics in the field than with continental philosophers. Jameson acknowledges Moylan's classification of the "critical dystopia" as utopia's negative cousin, and offers a useful distinction between the often collapsed categories "dystopia" and "anti-utopia." He spends very little time on this divergence, and the heft of the dystopia discussion is left for totalitarian structures in Orwell's fiction. Jameson has heralded cyberpunk as the quintessential cultural expression of postmodernism, but he bypasses the opportunity to reexamine the dystopian genre as the apex of viral corporatization, electing instead to press its depiction of labor. Jameson levels a critique against the utopian science fictions of the 1960s that imagined radical new social structures but stopped short of imagining the progressive applications of cybernetics. He posits that the utopian impulses in cyberpunk fiction and those texts written during the rise of the internet seem "less to have been the production of new visions of social organization and of social relations than the rendering anachronistic and insipid of the older industrial notions of non-alienated labor as such" (153). The consequences of such limited utopianism are far-reaching in the globalized world. Jameson rightly argues that business capitalists have outstripped literary utopianists in envisioning new infrastructural models and social relations to economic production. He concedes that post-Fordism is perhaps an antiquated and imprecise categorization of the current stage of capitalism, relying instead on economic theorists' ironic coinage "Walmartification" as indicative of the economic climate. Jameson's diagnosis of this globalized, Walmart stage, and his dissatisfaction with it, dovetail into his argument that the literary utopia must be recognized as an antidote ("a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right"). Conceivably, utopian texts act as counterweights to the neo-liberal celebration of globalization. Jameson urges us to develop an anxiety about losing the future. If we cease envisioning utopian tomorrows, revising them, discarding them, and rewriting them (hence, the poetic title of the book), then we acquiesce to static exploitation. Utopia gives us hope; it is "a rattling of the bars and an intense spiritual concentration and preparation for another stage which has not yet arrived" (233).

9. Jameson's call to reinvigorate a progressive political imagination is captured in his concluding remarks on Robinson's *Mars* trilogy. Jameson argues that the fictive end to patriarchy and property on Mars "is an achievement that must constantly be renewed . . . [since] utopia as a form is not the representation of

radical alternatives; it is rather simply the imperative to imagine them" (416). Jameson dodges the trap of assigning utopian narratives the task of designing a new society that can be installed in perfect replication. Though the imaginative ability to shake capitalism's hold on our present and future is still rather tenuous by the conclusion of *Archaeologies*, Jameson convincingly situates utopianism as a politics of hope and difference to offset the ideological claim that capitalism lacks natural enemies. A utopian aesthetic is a viable first step (even if it is only that) towards realizing a system of equality. By continuing to imagine alternate worlds, the utopian desire, at once atomized and collective, exacts the ennobling ideology of negation and shakes the conformist myth of capitalism's permanence in our own lives.

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Talk Back

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