

REVIEW ARTICLE

PRESERVING THE POSSIBILITY OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

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Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future. The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London, Verso, 2005. ISBN 1-84467-033-3

The utopian is a theme found throughout Jameson's prodigious oeuvre. One of the things Jameson does in his early text, *Marxism and Form* (1974), is track the role of the utopian in Western Marxism. This text reveals that the negativity of critical theory is always closely aligned with the utopian. Later, in *The Political Unconscious* (1984), Jameson famously asserted that even the libidinal force of Fascism and anti-Semitism has its deep roots in the utopian impulse. *Postmodernism* (1991) then revealed the totalizing and inescapable force of a reifying consumer capitalism whose only chink was an irrepressible, but fragile, utopian impulse. In *The Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson provides an extended and comprehensive analysis of the utopian, his master concept.¹ Prior to this, his most systematic account of the utopian was to be found in his long essay titled "Utopia, Modernity, and Death".² While that essay clarifies the concept of the utopian, it does so within the limited historical context of Modernism; the present book is far broader in scope.

In all of the above works, the utopian is more than a quirky peripheral literary genre, or even a political program; it is rather a fundamental impulse of human existence, as fundamental as desire itself. This is, of course, a transcendental claim, but *Archaeologies of the Future* is also concerned with the history of the concept of the utopian. The

1. All references to this text will be given in brackets within the body of the review.

2. See Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994. There is also an early essay on utopia, and Thomas More specifically, titled "Of Islands and Trenches," (1977) which is not included in *The Archaeologies of the Future*. See Fredric Jameson *The Ideologies of Theory*, Vol. 2, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989.

transcendental and the historical are two paths that a discussion of the utopian can take; according to Jameson's dialectical method, these paths are not logically incompatible. In terms of cultural criticism, this means that Jameson looks at both those texts that are consciously utopian, and those more unconscious libidinal manifestations that can be allegorically recovered from everyday life, and also from seemingly degraded, or minor, cultural phenomena. Some critics have accused Jameson of being too historicist, of reducing everything to the status of an effect of an ineluctable historical necessity.³ Against this view, it should be noted that Jameson explicitly asserts here that the ontological structure of the not-yet is a transhistorical foundation that escapes the relativism of historicism (170-173). This foundation is not, however, a fully present, representationally graspable concept or truth. Rather, it remains negative, or demystificatory. I'll return to this negativity later in the discussion.

Before I examine the conceptual content of the text, a brief word on how the text is structured. The text has two parts; the first part, titled "The Desire Called Utopia", is an extended meditation on the nature of the utopian and its history; this review will focus on this part.⁴ The second part is made up of a selection of occasional essays, all of which have been published before, related to the topic of the utopian. The text as a whole develops its discussion by drawing on a wide range of historical examples from the utopian genre and also from Science Fiction. Some of the better known figures discussed include Thomas More, Rousseau, Fourier, Morris, Thoreau, Stanislaw Lem, Ursula Le Guin and Philip K. Dick.⁵ A diverse list to be sure, but that is partially the point: the utopian is a broad category. In linking Science Fiction and Utopia, Jameson is following Darko Suvin, who asserts that the utopian is itself a sub-genre of Science Fiction.⁶ Both forms imagine alternative worlds, and both attempt to imagine technological and organizational innovations that transform human life. As a final word on structural matters, it is worth noting that the book's dust jacket says that *Archaeologies of the Future* is "the latest volume, after *Postmodernism* and *A Singular Modernity*, of Jameson's projected six-volume series on the Poetics of Social Forms." This makes it sound as if there are three volumes to come. Somewhat confusingly, Jameson himself says that the present volume is the concluding volume of the aforesaid series.⁷ Whatever the case, the architectonic outlines of this massive project are not, as yet, evident, but we can at least infer that, for Jameson, the utopian is an essential element of humanity's social being.

What is it, Jameson asks, that defines the utopian as a genre, wary as he is of too formulaic an answer (35). Jameson first approaches this question through an analysis of Thomas More's inaugural utopian text. Plato is clearly also a contender for the title of the first utopian, but Jameson only briefly mentions him before excluding him. Plato is judged to be not truly utopian, perhaps because of his dependence on anamnesis (rec-

3. Terry Eagleton, "Making a Break", *London Review of Books* (9 March, 2006), pp 25-26.

4. An early version of this first part appeared in *New Left Review* under the title, "The Politics of Utopia", *New Left Review*, 25 (Jan-Feb 2004), pp. 35-54.

5. Jameson claims that it is only a selective list; this seems too modest. See *Archaeologies of the Future*, xiv.

6. *Archaeologies of the Future*, xiv.

7. *Archaeologies of the Future*, pg. 15, footnote 8.

ollection), or perhaps because he is pre-modern and therefore unable to grasp history, which is, of course, integrally related to the utopian. Having mentioned history, it is necessary to briefly note the historical conditions that are the ground of possibility for the utopian genre before we can fully elaborate on its formal or structural characteristics. Jameson's claim is that the utopian genre arose during the transition to modernity. Although his explanation of this process is somewhat difficult to follow, it seems that the growing importance of money, commerce and the forced clearing of the land of peasants, revealed the constructed nature of society, a revelation that gave rise to the possibility of imagining an alternative society. The space opened up for such imaginings is, in one sense, what Jameson means by the "utopian enclave" (this is the title of chapter two). To elaborate, the rising significance of money (not yet functioning fully as capital) meant that an element of the social whole stood out as being in conflict with the whole. The whole could then be grasped for the first time through this differentiation of one of its parts. This account of history, versions of which can be found throughout Jameson's work, rests on an account of modernity as social differentiation, or reification (14-15). This is, if you like, the historical event that Jameson's theory rests upon; it is the totalizing, or necessary, structure of our history. He later gives a more straightforward account of the contingent historical reasons that shaped More's particular utopia: these include the rediscovery of the classical world, the emergence of Protestantism, the discovery of the new world and the influence of monasticism.

What More's text reveals is the ambiguity of the utopian form. Is it a satire on the present, or a serious projection of future possibilities? Jameson's point is that it can be both at once. Satire seems to imply an ideal that grounds its critique even if it never explicitly explains this ground. More's text neatly makes this point because it is divided into two parts that correspond to a satire on his contemporary society, and an ideal, or solution, to the problems raised by the satire. But is the ideal itself just a joke? Is it, as conservative revisionists would have us believe, worse than More's actual contemporary society? One thing is for certain, the scathing nature of More's view of his own society cannot be doubted when he writes of sheep devouring men.⁸ But are the utopian proposals idiosyncratic, slightly wacky, personal ideas of More's, or do they have a claim to a broader social significance? The utopian flight of fancy seems to discredit any critical purpose, and yet without such a flight there is no utopian text. This is the paradox that all utopias face: if it is to retain its critical edge, then it risks being too similar to the present, but if it goes to the other extreme and is too different from the present, then it risks losing all critical relevance. The problem of the relation between critique and ideal is explained by the relation between books one and two of More's text. Book one shows that piecemeal solutions to particular problems are doomed to failure due to their relation to the larger framework of society: for example, a new penal code does nothing to address the causes of criminal behavior in the first place (38-9). To solve these particular problems requires the representation of a total world; furthermore, it follows that this world must be separate from the given or empirical world; it must be its own closed sys-

8. Thomas More, *Utopia*, Trans: R.M. Adams, W.W Norton & Company, New York, 1975, pg. 14.

tem. Just as the utopia in question is structured by its physical separation from the rest of the world through the physical construction of a fifteen mile wide channel, so too the utopian imagination itself is an act of secession from empirical reality.

Jameson further notes that the totalizing form of utopia usually rest on the claim that there is one element, a “root of all evil”, that must be extirpated in order for total social transformation to be possible (39-41). In More’s case, utopia rests on the abolition of private property.⁹ While utopian texts generally revolve around the four main themes of property, work/play, sex/family and nature, the measure of a utopia’s radicality ultimately rests on its view on property.¹⁰ But for Jameson, all utopianism, even that of the market itself, must ultimately rest on anti-capitalist foundations. In this respect, Jameson rejects all attempts to separate the utopian and socialism, even though socialism, as a political project, lacks the radical refusal of the given reality that is found in the utopian (196).

Jameson characterizes the utopian as a mode of thinking structured by various oppositions. Thus the opposition outlined above between critique and invention, satire and ideal, can also be seen in terms of the opposition between science and ideology. Science here is equivalent to critical understanding, while ideology refers to those “solutions” which really tell us more about the limits of the social imagination in the present than they tell us about future possibilities. In other words, the overt purpose of the utopian text, to imagine difference, really conceals its true function, which is to delimit the present. The value of the utopian for Jameson is that it enables us, against the text’s own overt intentions, to gauge these limits, thereby opening up the possibility of an awareness of that which can be neither thought, nor imagined, except as an empty possibility, namely the novum.¹¹ Shifting to one more opposition discussed by Jameson, we can say that it is not a utopia’s content, but rather its form that is significant. This is because the form leads us to the irreconcilable contradictions of the text’s representational content (and, by extension, its ideological situation), and therefore to the insight that only a total social transformation can transcend these contradictions. As Jameson notes, in Hegelian mode, this is the content of the utopian form itself.

The reader may wonder how precisely we get from the utopian text to its irreconcilable contradictions. This is mainly where the hard work of Jamesonian textual analysis lies. Using Greimas’s structuralist framework of the semiotic rectangle (a methodological tool found throughout Jameson’s work)¹², he shows how the four elements of the ideological content of More’s utopia can be seen to be in relations of opposition and con-

9. As Jameson notes, this is a very old idea that goes back at least as far as Plato. See *Archaeologies of the Future*, pg. 229.

10. Perry Anderson structures his discussion of Jameson on the utopian around these four themes. See Perry Anderson, “The River of Time”, *New Left Review*, 26(Mar-April, 2004).

11. Jameson defines the novum as, “the utterly and unexpectedly new, the new which astonishes by its absolute and intrinsic unpredictability.” Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1971, pg. 126.

12. See *Archaeologies of the Future*, pg. 29, note 17.

tradition with each other.¹³ The key point is that the text is a failed amalgam of these elements. This failure is necessary for the form itself, and it is this failure that points to the limits of representation and the empty place of the not-yet. The utopian text is therefore a simultaneous revealing and concealing of contradictions (see chapter 3). Such irreconcilable contradictions are to be found not just in single texts, but also between texts. In chapter 10 Jameson examines the intertextual debates between various texts over the true content of utopia. To give just one example: will utopia mean work for all and an end to unemployment, or will it mean the end of work altogether? How are we to overcome such divergent opinions? Perhaps every utopia has its moment of truth: this is the false solution of relativism. Perhaps we need to pick and choose elements from various utopias. Clearly this leads to an unsatisfactory eclecticism. No, Jameson insists that the truth of the utopian, the “moment of truth” as he calls it, is resolutely negative, meaning that it is a non-substantive movement of demystification (175). In other words, the solution must be a formalism that goes beyond any particular content by pointing towards the not-yet as that which lies beyond the contradictions we are bound to. The content of the future outstrips our representational capacities.

Although Jameson himself seems slightly apologetic about it, his view of the utopian is fundamentally negative: to repeat, the utopian is an absence, an unknowable (178). Jameson traces this negativity back to the structure of the wish itself, a structure best illustrated through the fairytale trope of the quest for the lost object (see chapter 6). For Jameson, the wish involves a contradiction. The obstacle to fulfillment is what generates the cathexis of the wish, and so fulfillment of the wish implies a mode of being that is radically other than the state of wishing itself. The statement “I desire/wish for that” is therefore contradictory in the sense that if the wish was fulfilled, then the “I” itself would be totally transformed. The fairy tale form, versions of which can be found in the Sci-Fi writings of the Strugatsky brothers and in Ursula Le Guin, gives figuration to this idea through the trope of dual worlds, or through the idea of total world transformation. Jameson specifically examines the link between the wish and total system through a discussion of Le Guin’s story *The Lathe of Heaven*. The basic idea here, familiar to most readers of Sci-Fi, is that reality is an integrated whole: change one part and the totality is transformed. In the language of time travel narratives, you cannot violate the “time-space continuum” without there being dire consequences.

Given this insight into the total system, the question is how change can ever occur at all. In other words, how do we explain or imagine the radical break between one total system, or world, and another? This is certainly a problem for narrative representation, and an awareness of this question often takes the representational form of the catastrophe, or of the attempt to hermeneutically recover the meaning, or at least the modus operandi, of a long lost civilization which is so advanced that we cannot comprehend its archaeological remnants (see chapter 7). For Jameson, such examples stage the unique

13. As I noted earlier, these elements are the discovery of the new world, the rediscovery of the classical world, the emergence of Protestantism and the role of monasticism. Each of these ideological elements contains specific values that are irreconcilable with the others.

structure of the radical historical break; his claim is that a temporal aporia is necessary for thinking the shift to the Utopian, and for thinking the notion of historical difference in general. Without this aporia, historical change is reduced to a slow quantitative accumulation of incremental changes, which reduces change itself to a matter of little consequence. The aporetic view of historical change also clearly displaces any idea that the new society can be the simple conscious application of a blueprint.

A great deal of Jameson's discussion of science fiction rests on the issue of whether it is possible to think otherness at all (see chapter 8 in particular). This is the type of problem that is revealed by the famous line from *Star Trek*: "It's life Jim, but not as we know it." For Jameson, Stanislaw Lem is the writer who best gives representation to this inability to comprehend otherness. In short, he seems to agree with Lem's view, explored in such works as *Solaris* and *The Invincible*, that the other is unknowable. The point, however, is to work out how one should respond to the encounter with the other, or the unknowable. Should we resign ourselves to the insularity of our humanness? The Sci-Fi examples that Jameson examines run through a range of possible responses to the other. While the most naïve response is a belief in the baleful nature of the other, and therefore in the need to destroy it, equally untenable is the belief in some shared essence that grounds the possibility of surmounting otherness altogether. One popular Sci-Fi ethic is to let the other be in its absolute difference: as Jameson points out, this is an ethic with all sorts of logical problems, for how can we forget about the other, having already encountered it? But for Jameson, the most sophisticated response is one which understands the otherness of the human itself; in other words, it is a position which understands that we ourselves are the aliens. Cyborgs and interspecies sex are two recent cultural manifestations which explore the othering of the self. The point is that otherness is immanent, not external or transcendent. Can such an insight become an ethic? Can the opening up to the othering of the self be a human project, or is the very notion of the project undermined by the traumatic encounter with otherness? The concept of project is recoverable in this context if we understand it in a properly existential manner; thus, as Sartre said, the project is an appointment we make to meet ourselves in the future, when there is absolutely no chance of knowing who our future self will be (cited by Jameson, 97).

While it might be true that otherness is unknowable from the epistemological perspective, utopias still need to represent or narrate something. What Sci-Fi can do, is imagine combinations of elements from the known world that are logical possibilities (or representational ones) at least. This is the creative impulse behind the various attempts to imagine the alien body and, by extension, alien modes of production (which include systems of reproduction). To imagine a sentient plant being, for example, is to imagine a solution to a limitation of the human body, namely its parasitical dependence on other organic beings. If we could get our energy directly from light or minerals, then this would radically transform our relation to labour. What is the value of such thought experiments? They at least provide us with the idea that other worlds are possible, even if their imagined worlds are not as other as they think they are. Perhaps they also have

the value of defamiliarising those more obvious characteristics of the human that we usually pass over (see chapter 9).

Shifting to the idea of utopia as political program, the formalism of Jameson's position may well be dissatisfying for those readers with a hard nosed need for concrete details when it comes to plans for the future, or who think that political strategies are more important than idle daydreams. On the other hand, this formalism may well be satisfying for readers of a more poststructuralist bent, seeing that it seems to gel quite well with the messianic thinking outlined by Derrida in *Specters of Marx*. I for one wouldn't be too hasty in assimilating Jameson and Derrida's positions, given the latter's hostility to the concepts of contradiction and totality, concepts that Jameson relies upon here.¹⁴ Moreover, Derrida's concepts of the spectral and the messianic seem to undermine the possibility of qualitative epochal change. The danger is that the poststructuralist version of the messianic (or utopian) becomes merely transgressive; in other words, it remains in the shadow of the law.

In response to those who have qualms about the formalism and negativity of his concept of the utopian, Jameson turns to Adorno's zero-degree assertion of the most general content attributable to the concept of the utopian. This is the idea that utopia would be a world in which no one goes hungry. The simplicity of such a position is designed to undercut idealist, or overly productionist, talk about realizing humanity's full creative potential. Obviously, Adorno's position says little about how this goal is to be achieved; furthermore, this point seems open to the Dostoyevskian argument that you can steal people's freedom by giving them bread. The point, however, is to shake us out of our complacency by focusing our attention on suffering and to awaken in us the full existential weight of the desire for the utopian. For Adorno, it is not playful, hedonistic utopian daydreaming that is needed, but an unwavering awareness of suffering, of the nightmare of history. But Adorno's idea isn't as simple as it first seems; hunger and suffering are not merely caused by unequal distribution; he sees the root of the nightmare that is history to lie in the instinct of self-preservation. Idolatry of the self, which is, "something like a form of property, the very first form," (174) undermines the possibility of solidarity and turns us against each other. Obviously, human beings who have overcome this instinct would be radically different from how they are now. If, as I noted earlier, form has a content of its own, then in this case content also returns to form. Thus Adorno's degree zero utopian content returns to formalism insofar as the negativity of his position calls for a contentless opening to the not-yet.

While the utopian impulse itself is an irrepressible drive, the role of the critic is clearly to reveal its truth. Desire has to be educated. This is not, Jameson insists, a question of becoming self-conscious, or reflexive. Still, it seems that we can distinguish between authentic and inauthentic expressions of the utopian. What we have seen so far is that overtly utopian texts are not necessarily fully conscious of the real nature of the utopian. It is not full self-awareness, but rather the will to totalize, that Jameson sees as central

14. See Jameson's own discussion of Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, "Marx's Purloined Letter," *New Left Review*, 209 (Jan/Feb 1995): pp. 75-109.

(4). What this means, in essence, is that the authentic text must have the courage to give full expression to its own irreconcilable contradictions. Jameson's heuristic opposition of Fancy and Imagination (taken from Coleridge) corresponds to this distinction between amorphous impulse and totalizing drive. While Jameson seems to value both aspects of the utopian, the Imaginary mode clearly seems more politically potent.

Before discussing the sources of anti-utopianism, it is necessary to briefly examine the premises behind Jameson's assertion that the utopian impulse is a primary, and therefore irreducible, human impulse (201). We usually think of desire as a matter concerning the individual. For Jameson, however, the human individual is social to its core, therefore desire itself is primarily social. While human being is social from the very start, this social being is also blocked (by an ontologically, but not chronologically, secondary reactive egotism perhaps) from fully realizing itself. The utopian impulse is therefore the collective impulse for transformed collective relations. This also explains, to a degree, Jameson's theoretical claim that the utopian is able to mediate between history and desire, the transindividual and the subjective. Utopia itself is often depicted as a reconfiguration of the relation between individual and collective (see Jameson's discussion of Stapledon, 8). The claim is that a post-individualist collective is possible, without totally subsuming the individual within an organic collective. While such an ideal is clearly worthy, in my view its ontological basis remains undertheorised. To say that we are presently alienated and therefore unable to theorise such a relation (a response implied by the dependence on the not-yet) seems to me to be inadequate.

The fear of the utopian is therefore always reactive and defensive: a flight from freedom to use an old terminology. Jameson runs through the whole range of anti-utopianisms, from the psychological and the existential to the political. According to Jameson, the overt reasons these theories give against utopia mask a fear of the novum. Political anti-utopianism claims that the utopian leads to the terror and totalitarianism. Psychoanalytic and existential anti-utopianism claim that a life without conflict would be soul crushingly boring. The error of this second complaint is that it fails to understand how Utopia may well lead to a heightening of anxiety in relation to our personal lives, once the false conflicts linked to sheer survival are eradicated. Turning to the political critique, its error is in universalizing its specific historical concerns. The fear of state terror simply doesn't make a convincing case for the necessary relation between the utopian and state or mass violence, which happens all too often without the rationalization of a utopian goal. And the political fear of the alienating effect of anonymous state bureaucracy tells us more about the failings of corporate culture than about utopia. Lastly, Jameson claims that the utopian impulse is even present in disguised forms within anti-utopian texts; even a text such as Orwell's *1984* contains a repressed utopian drive (201-2).

One of the main purposes of this text is to diagnose the ideological crisis of our post-modern age and to intervene in it. That crisis is summed up by the acronym coined by Margaret Thatcher: TINA. Ours is an age in which (seemingly) *There Is No Alternative*. Ours is an age of triumphant, expanding and shameless capitalism. And yet, the left's

malaise is not so much a symptom of this triumph of the market, but rather of our own inability to believe in the possibility of there being any alternative. Consequently, Jameson is calling for a refocusing on the utopian as a way of breaking out of this prison house of political resignation. Why not simply posit a political program? The answer seems to be that the collapse of communism has stifled any possibility of conceiving an alternative system to capitalism; given this historical development, our political demands have been diminished to a feeble reformism. Moreover, the condition of postmodernity itself seems to preclude the totalizing model utopias require. But while the name "Communism" is now corrupted beyond all political usefulness, the older name of Utopia can and must be invoked. This is quite deliberately a stepping back, a regression. Thus Jameson reworks an idea of Lukacs's, claiming that we are now, in terms of our ideology, in a situation that is equivalent to that which existed prior to the utopian socialism of the nineteenth century; that is to say, we are pre pre-revolutionary. What is at stake in the struggle to revive the name "utopia" is the capacity to imagine the novum, or the capacity to remain open to an otherness to come. Jameson's solution to this dilemma is not simply an ahistorical reassertion of the utopian form; rather, he claims that we need a utopianism for postmodernity.

This postmodern utopianism would have to take account of the distinctive contours of our present ideological landscape (see chapter 13). It can not be modernist in its form (177), which is to say it cannot rely on reflexivity and irony in order to overcome the limitations in our ability to imagine the radically new. If we cannot imagine some single shot totalising element that can transform society, such as the abolition of money, how then are we to think the utopian? For Jameson, one of modernity's solutions to this representational dilemma is to be both for and against the utopian simultaneously, or to be ironic: this is its way of falsely reconciling the contradictory elements of utopian content, and closing off the negativity discussed earlier. Similarly, the modernist strategy of reflexivity also conceals negativity; thus, not being able to come up with new utopian content, reflexivity represents instead the desire for utopia itself (213). For Jameson, in contrast, contradiction needs to be deepened; we need to understand the irreconcilability of these contradictory utopian ideals within this world, without the safety valve of ironic detachment or reflexivity. As Jameson notes, this irreconcilability is "the biblical stumbling block, which gives Utopia its savor and bitter freshness" (180).

For Jameson then, the negativity of the utopian can only be maintained if the utopian becomes the plurality of utopias. His aesthetic model here is Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy*. The hope is that through this pluralism of utopias, negativity is reinscribed within the utopian (217). But how do you have a plurality of utopias without a conflict that leads to domination? Jameson turns to Yona Friedman's *Utopies realises* (1975) as a model, the details of which I won't go into here. The basic point is that we need a model of unity in difference, or a model in which "difference relates", to use the structuralist phrase preferred by Jameson. Friedman's claim is that unity can come through economic interdependence rather than political centralization, thereby overcoming fears of totalitarianism and closure. We need to add the proviso that the various economic

models that are in relation to each other do not allow capital accumulation. While Jameson seems to invest a lot in Friedman's model, he is really only putting it forward as one possibility for a postmodern utopianism. The main point is to renew the utopian imagination, not to come up with a specific plan to be implemented (see 228-9).

Despite Jameson's commitment to the possibility of a new postmodern utopianism, I would maintain that there is a deep despair in his analysis of the present. According to Jameson (Friedman aside), we are not even up to the task of imagining alternative societies; our task is rather to recapture the sense that the world could be otherwise in the first place. There is, perhaps, an echo of Heidegger here, because for both thinkers, it is the moment of total negativity that contains the possibility of transformation: where the greatest danger is, there lies the saving grace, as Holderlin noted.¹⁵ Hope is snatched from the maw of despair, but this is hardly an easy gesture; as Kafka famously noted, there is hope, infinite hope, but not for us.¹⁶ Such a position must not be confused with acceptance or resignation: there is an injunction here to continue to tarry with the negative.

The real problem for the utopian is not anti-utopianism, but rather the universal cynicism that characterizes our post-hegemonic ideology (on cynicism, see 229). Making money is now its own justification: it has been freed from the Protestant work ethic. (I would maintain, however, that this ethic persists as a retrospective rationalization that is applied to people's lives.) For Jameson, this fixation with money implies an alienated temporality that reduces the past and the future to quantitative measures: the future has become colonized and turned into the futures market.

Given Marx's own hostility towards the utopian socialists, it may well seem like an admission of defeat for a Marxist theorist to be acknowledging that the utopian is the best hope for praxis. Is the return to the utopian merely a symptom of defeat? Jameson is all too aware of this reasoning (see 232), and he seems to concede to it, provided we understand that this is merely an acknowledgement of our historical situation and its limits, rather than an acceptance of total defeat. Utopianism is the possibility of change that you can cling to when there is no clear agent for change present. At one time this separation from agency was its weakness; Jameson wants to turn this around and say that given the present state of things, this is its strength (232).

Although the book is compelling when characterizing our postmodern malaise, some readers may find this dissatisfying, primarily because of the uncompromising negativity of Jameson's view. Other readers may harbor the kind of postmodern fear or anxiety about totalizing that Jameson himself analyses in this text. No doubt other readers will respond with the familiar frustrated cry of "Yeah, but I want to actively do something, I want to make a contribution to improving the world." When read correctly, the utopian strips such a position of its complacent egotism, undermining the idea that

15. See also Slavo Žižek's discussion of this trope which he traces back to Saint Augustine. In *The Parallax View*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2006, pp. 76-77.

16. Cited in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Trans: Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, New York, 1969, p. 116.

the subject is in any sort of position to impose a solution *on the world*. The limits of the world need to be gauged before anything else. The utopian as radical negativity? That may strike some readers as paradoxical; in my view, our task is to think its truth. This doesn't mean that all action is impossible, but that it arises as an authentic possibility only after one has undergone the trauma of the negative. Only then can an act remain open to the impossible, meaning here that which is not possible within the strictures of our capitalist world.

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