

WESTERN MARXISM REVISITS UTOPIA

THE LATEST BOOK by Fredric Jameson, *The Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia*, is more than a powerful intervention on the studies of a somewhat ignored literary genre. It is a statement on the function of Utopia in the present; and as such, it acquires great political significance for those of us on the Left who are in search for, to quote the name of this journal, a project for the radical imagination in our dire times.

The book is divided into two parts. The first one, “The desire called Utopia,” is a historical materialist theorization of Utopia, one that properly starts with Thomas More’s founding *Utopia* (1516) and ends with what I will claim is one of the most productive agendas for committed cultural theorists today. The second part, “As far as thought can reach,” collects previously published (with one exception) analyses of Science Fiction works, the earliest one dating back to 1973, thus demonstrating that this is not a recent interest. Many commentators have noted how much we have got from the attention granted by such a notable critic to this kind of literary form, and the second part is certainly a tribute to Jameson’s analytical power. Readers of LeGuin, Philip K. Dick, and Kim Stanley Robinson, to name the subjects of the most interesting analyses, learn from Jameson the psychological reasons why we take great pleasure in reading them. But it is the first part of the book that clearly allows me to substantiate a reading of the book as a possible figuration of ways in which criticism can help the flow of the desire called Utopia in our dark times.

Jameson himself diagnoses the specific ailments the form may be used to remedy: “What is crippling is not the presence of an enemy but rather the universal belief that not only this tendency [neo-liberalism] is irreversible, but that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio-economic system is conceivable, let alone practically available.”¹ It is in this context that Utopia acquires a new potency once it is, to revert to his words again, a form that is “itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness.” None of us can have anything against a form that defines itself against the overwhelming standardizing power of our present, a power that turns every

¹ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and other Science Fictions*, London, Verso, 2005, xii.

attempt at heterogeneity in all spheres of social life, from the more concrete political action to the more abstract cultural production, into more of the same. As Leftists, we are elated with the repetition of “radical” in the definition, whereas our more realistic minds immediately summon the endlessly rehearsed difficulties of the thought of the other in our mesmerized times.

And yet, in Jameson’s dialectical exposition, this is a thought of the other that is also a way of constructing a point of view from which to discern the pressures and limits of the current situation. In an early essay, which is not reprinted in the present book, Jameson famously reversed the conventional expectation on the specific nature of the otherness constructed by the form: “Utopia’s deepest subject, and the source of all that is most vibrantly political about it, is precisely our inability to conceive it, our incapacity to produce it as a vision, our failure to project the Other of what is, a failure that, as fireworks dissolving back into the night sky, must once again leave us alone with *this* history.”²

It then turns out that Utopia is a meditation on otherness and simultaneously a meditation on what is. What is gained by this contradiction? Every Utopia aims at imagining a system radically different from this one, and, by doing this, it configures an access to the systemic nature of society, the very thing that ideology works to efface. The specific political usefulness of the form is then that it goes against the fragmenting grain of current thought modes: by demonstrating the systemic nature of society it opens up the possibility of what I am tempted to call, using Lukács’ formulation, the thought of the totality.

The important thing here is not that Utopias compose blueprints for what this other system may look like. They are politically potent insofar as they figure our inability to imagine beyond the determined sameness of our times. But by doing so, they are also producing, in their very elaboration, what the system denies, that is, the desire for change. It gives this desire a “local habitation and a name,” thus enabling its perception. And lest, in our limitations as followers of protocols rather than as midwives of possibilities, we are still looking for ready-made recipes of what Utopia looks like, Jameson reminds us that “the Utopian text is not supposed to produce this synthesis [of what Utopia may look like in the future] all by itself, or to represent it: that is a matter for human history and for collective praxis. It

² Fredric Jameson, “Of Islands and Trenches: Neutralization and the Production of Utopian Discourse.” In: *Ideologies of Theory 2*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, 101.

is supposed only to produce the requirement for the synthesis, to open the space into which it is to be imagined.”³

Before those more hardened among our comrades begin to shiver at so many mentions to the force of the imaginary, it is useful to remember that the paralysis of the imagination is one of the most crippling effects of contemporary society characterized best by anomie. This can be readily seen in the corresponding paralysis of high art, where the serious novelist, to keep in the camp of narrative, is no longer free to tinker with reality or to project experimental variations. This, in Jameson’s reading, is precisely “the historical opportunity for a pulp or ‘frivolous’ sub-genre such as science fiction to relax the tyrannical ‘reality principle’ that functions as a crippling censorship over high art and inherit the vocation of giving us an alternate vision of a world that has elsewhere seemed to resist even imagined change.”⁴

It is in this sense that Utopias are defined in the book as a thought experiment which attempts to solve a problem through the power of imagination. Those experiments are used to try to understand something practical through an analogy. Of course, Utopias constitute exactly a thought experiment, in that they provide an experimental variation on our empirical universe. Now, what sort of problem may they be said to be trying to solve? It is helpful to contextualize *Archaeologies* in the wider space of Jameson’s intellectual project, to understand not only the main argument in the book, but also why a leading Marxist critic in our times may want to spend so much time and energy on the subject.

The project is sometimes defined, in a number of introductions to his many books, as configuring a *Poetics of Social Forms*. When asked about it, he says it is “an experiment in combining the analysis of literary genre with historical perspectives on social and cultural change.” Poetics of course comes from “to make,” and Jameson’s breathtakingly varied intellectual project could be summed up as the effort to restore political content to cultural criticism; he sets out to explore the cognitive potential of cultural work and to use this special knowledge to promote social change.

Since the same crippling force that paralyzes high art also neutralizes criticism, he has to provide not only the key analyses, but also the categor-

³ Fredric Jameson, “‘If I find a good city, I will spare the man:’ Realism and Utopia in Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Mars Trilogy*.” In: Patrick Parrinder (ed.), *Learning from Other Worlds*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2001, 225; reprinted in *Archaeologies of the Future*.

⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 270.

ical inventions that enable materialist cultural criticism. Ever since its first post-dogmatic flowering that we call Western Marxism, its hallmark has always been the capacity to generate productive knowledge about the current situation.

In which sense does discussing Utopias fit in this project? At the beginning of the project, there was Georg Lukács, and, more specifically, his highly suggestive socio-economic description of how the consolidation of capitalism has extended its ways of producing to our consciousness: we perceive the world always already within the framework of its forces of segmentation, compartmentalization, overspecialization and dispersion. This ever-increasing process of reification is what suppresses our ability to make connections and to grasp the totality. That is what causes that “disease of the mapping function whereby we project and model our insertion into the collectivity.”⁵ In such situations, narrative, which depends on connections, has an important social role to play. It has to go against the fragmenting forces of the times to exist at all. Narratives in general, and Utopias in a more intensified manner, offer us an object lesson on how to think in terms of process and totality. This is at the basis of Jameson’s contention, in his path-breaking *The Political Unconscious*, that narrative is the central instance of the human mind and a socially symbolic act in its own right. This is a notion he adapts from Lévi-Strauss’s account of myth as the narrative construction of symbolic mediations or synthesis, whose purpose is the resolution, in the form of a story, of a contradiction which the culture in question is unable to solve. It then follows that narrative analysis is a potent instrument for discovering those contradictions that determine social life. Drawing from the Freudian analysis of the mechanics of dreams, Jameson goes on to propose that the most revealing aspect of narratives is not what is said, but precisely what cannot be said, what does not register in the narrative apparatus; hence the positing of a narrative unconscious, which is the job of interpretation to unearth and to inquire. It is because they give form to contradictions, that narratives play a key role in cognitive mapping. This is a notion that he coined himself to denote the necessity for maps in a situation defined by an ever increasing gap between individual positionality and the totality of class structures in which one is situated, between individual perception and a “reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience.”⁶ In this situation, it is important to foreground the cogni-

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971, 146.

⁶ Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping” (1988), in Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks (eds.) *The Jameson Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 283.

tive and pedagogical dimensions of art and culture. As a reader of Brecht, he emphasizes, all through his work, the didactic function of art, with its capacity to renew perception. This capacity is again heightened in Utopias and makes for their special usefulness in a world in which “experience has solidified into a mass of habits and automatism.”⁷

With Lukács and Brecht, Marcuse and Bloch are also the key figures in this recovery of the political potential of Utopia. We remember that for Marcuse the new conditions of our society of abundance — where, for the first time in history, there is the possibility of attending to everyone’s needs — have occasioned the dialectical reversal of the classic Marxist analysis of Utopian thought as idle wish-fulfillment and of Utopians as producers of a “mish-mash of such critical statements, economic theories, pictures of future societies by the founder of different sects, as excite a minimum of opposition,”⁸ in Engels’s sardonic dismissal. Now it is practical thinking itself which represents a capitulation to the system, as it lends itself to endless cooptation. It remains then for the Utopian idea to keep alive the “negative hermeneutics of freedom” by stubbornly reiterating the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one.⁹

To this negative hermeneutics, the basis of the capacity that Utopias have of forcing us to face the limits of our world, one should add Bloch’s effort “at revealing the Utopian impulse which lies buried in everything future oriented in life and culture.”¹⁰ Jameson continues the incessant work or the renewal of the principle of hope by the detection of the Utopian impulse and its projection into a collective dimension. I suspect this may be the motivation for one of the most interesting aspects of this book, which is Jameson’s explorations of the power and attractions of fantasy, an inescapable component of all Utopias. Drawing on Feuerbach’s account of religion as a distortion of human productive powers that have been exteriorized and reified in figural form, he claims that fantasy should be read in the same vein, as “a figure for the enlargement of human powers and their passage to the limit, their actualization of everything latent and virtual in the stunted human organism of the present.”¹¹ It is in this sense that one should consider Utopias as both a diagnostic instrument of the constraints

⁷ Fredric Jameson, “Reflections on the Brecht-Lukács Debate,” in *Ideologies of Theory*, 2, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, 146-7.

⁸ Friedrich Engels, “Socialism Utopic and Scientific.” www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works p.12.

⁹ Fredric Jameson. *Marxism and Form*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971, 110-1.

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 2.

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 66.

of the present and as a vision of an unrealized — and perhaps unrealizable — future. The value of Utopia is that each of those opposites qualifies the other and keeps open the possibility of effective change, one that cannot be imagined within the limits of the present.

As in Bloch's work, Jameson's intervention aims at the future. This is spelled out in the last chapter of the first part, "The Future as Disruption." This extraordinary chapter gathers the main themes of the book — Utopia and anti-Utopia, the inescapable wish for change and its accompanying fear, the chasing contradiction of the Utopian impulse, pointing to a becoming, and the Utopian program, enclosed in choices, the tantalizing ways in which difference and otherness reverse into the same. Rather than succumbing to the temptation of giving a "solution," where none is available historically, Jameson's reading points out that antinomy is "the central structure and the beating heart of Utopia." It is by holding to antinomies rather than succumbing to the temptation of neutralizing them at the price of spurious solutions, that we can begin to follow the program required in our times of no alternatives.

The program is given at the title of the chapter: disruption is the appropriate strategy to keep the future as a possibility, and to fulfill Benjamin's injunction that it is necessary to burst open the continuum of history and stop the blind march of progress. Our times of cynical reason have to be disrupted and Utopia is the form such disruption necessarily takes. The Utopian form, which insists "that difference is possible and that a break is necessary, is the symbolic answer to the ideological conviction that no alternative to the system is possible, but it asserts this by forcing us to think of the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break."¹²

This chapter is a demonstration of how we can continue the powerful legacy of Western Marxism at a moment in which the idea of revolution — the enabling historical horizon of their cognitive efforts — acquires all the negative associations of the term Utopian. Our aim, both as cultural critics and as activists, should be to produce the break through which the desire called Utopia, the figure of Hope, may flow again. *Archaeologies of the Future* is an example of how this can be achieved. It thus demonstrates the continuing vitality of the tradition.

¹² Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 231-2.