

THE RIVER OF TIME

UTOPIA HAS always been one of Fredric Jameson's defining concerns. No intellectual thread has been more continuous in his work, from *Marxism and Form* through to *A Singular Modernity*, whose final words read: 'What we really need is a wholesale displacement of the thematics of modernity by the desire called Utopia. We need to combine a Poundian mission to identify Utopian tendencies with a Benjaminian geography of their sources and a gauging of their pressure at what are now multiple sea levels. Ontologies of the present demand archaeologies of the future, not forecasts of the past'.¹ Yet though present everywhere, this is a concern that for the first time comes into full focus in the essay published in *NLR* 25. 'The Politics of Utopia' offers his most comprehensive meditation to date on a subject central to his work.

I

Utopias, Jameson remarks, have always come in two dimensions—existential and institutional, visions of another human nature or an alternative civic order. Criss-crossed by traces of the manifesto, the constitution, the mirror of princes, of the prophetic or satiric, they occupy a peculiar political space, flourishing not in times of revolutionary upheaval as such, when popular demands concentrate on a short-list of immediate practical priorities—so to speak, bread, land and peace—but in the calm before the storm, when institutional arrangements appear unchangeable, but minds have been set free by some still unseen tectonic shifts to reinvent the world. Born at moments of the suspension of politics—if suspended in the sense of the legendary sword—utopias so conceived retain, for all their potential luxuriance of detail, at root a stubborn negativity, an emblem of what, despite everything, we *cannot*

grasp or imagine, and which the characteristic oscillations and oppositions within the utopian repertoire bespeak.

There are two reasons, Jameson now suggests, for that paradox, to which he has often alluded, but not hitherto explored: on the one hand, the ideological astigmatism that comes from any possible class position from which a utopia might be imagined; and on the other the constitutive fear that every human subject must feel at the dizzying notion of a loss of all familiar—habitual or sexual—coordinates of the self, in any complete systemic change. So it is that if we ask today what a utopian political programme might look like, perhaps—in the spirit of Adorno’s suggestion that emancipation be negatively defined as that state where no-one went without food—a contemporary answer might be: that condition where no-one, anywhere in the world, went without work; a demand capable in its modesty of overthrowing every social, economic and moral institution we know.²

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If such is a rough outline of the argument of ‘The Politics of Utopia’, two of its themes invite variations. The first is a striking passage in which Jameson locates the emergence of utopias in periods of stillness before revolutionary tempests. Historically, there is little doubt that this has indeed been a recurrent pattern. More’s own utopia, in 1516, preceded the outbreak of the Reformation that convulsed Europe, and consumed More himself, by less than a year. The next cluster of significant utopias—Campanella’s *City of the Sun* (1623), Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1627) and Robert Burton’s idiosyncratic digression in *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621–38)—appeared in the period before the outbreak of the English Civil War and the Neapolitan Uprising of the 17th century. The greatest utopian reverie of the 18th century, Diderot’s *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (1772), was written a generation before the French Revolution. In the 19th century, too, the remarkable set of utopian fictions in the last years of the century—Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888), Morris’s reply in *News*

¹ *A Singular Modernity*, London–New York 2002, p. 215. For earlier reflections, see *Marxism and Form*, Princeton 1971, pp. 110–59; *The Political Unconscious*, Ithaca 1981, pp. 281–99; *The Ideologies of Theory*, Minneapolis 1988, vol. 11, pp. 75–101; *Signatures of the Visible*, New York–London 1990, pp. 9–34; *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham–London 1991, pp. 154–80.

² ‘The Politics of Utopia’, NLR 25, January–February 2004, pp. 35–54.

from *Nowhere* (1890), Hertzka's *Freiland* (also 1890), to which we might add, as a pendant from the Far East, Kang Youwei's *Great Consonance* (1888–1902)—precede the turbulences of 1905–11 in Russia and China, the outbreak of the First World War, and the October Revolution. In the 20th century, again, the trio of great exile utopias written in Los Angeles and Boston—Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (1943–45), Ernst Bloch's *Principle of Hope* (1938–47) and Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955)—were composed long in advance of the explosion of the late sixties.

In all these cases, Jameson's hypothesis holds good. What of its tacit corollary, that during revolutionary whirlwinds themselves, the voices of utopia fall silent? That seems more doubtful. In each great upheaval, arresting visions of a radically different future continued to be produced. During the English Revolution, we have only to think of Winstanley's astonishing *Law of Freedom*, or Harrington's *Commonwealth of Oceana*, which has claims to have been one of the two most influential political utopias of all times. During the cycle of the French Revolution, there was Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals under the Directory, and the lightning-flash of Fourier's *Theory of the Four Movements*, written as Napoleon was triumphing at Jena. The Russian Revolution saw apparitions of a peasant utopia, eerily ambiguous in the country's greatest writer, Andrei Platonov, and ingenuously affirmative in its most original sociologist, Alexander Chayanov.³ As for the eruptions of 1968 and after, this was the time of the feminist utopias that Jameson evokes in his conclusion: Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), composed as the US was finally driven out of Vietnam. Festivals of the oppressed, in Lenin's phrase—it could just as well be Bakhtin's—revolutions typically combine explosions of the immediate with saturnalia of the ultimate, rather than the one necessarily excluding the other.

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Where do these precedents leave us today? Jameson, after pointing out that apparently stationary political circumstances are capable of generating

³ Platonov's *Chevengur* (1927–28) has been brilliantly discussed by Jameson himself in *The Seeds of Time*, New York 1994, pp. 78–123. Chayanov's *Puteshestvie moevo brata Alekseya v stranu krest'yanskoi utopii* (1920) was reissued in New York, 1981. These were part of a much vaster utopian production that flourished in Russia after the revolution.

an intense utopian productivity, notes on the other hand that ‘most of human history has unfolded in situations of general impotence, when no revolts seem even conceivable, let alone around the corner’, yet also when no utopian images of the future ever surface. He invites us to wonder which of these two constellations might now be our own. In asking ourselves this question, two dicta—at opposite ends of the stretch of time that has elapsed since the last great period of political turmoil in the world—are worth recalling. In 1967, on the eve of an international chain of revolts the like of which had not been seen for over a century, Herbert Marcuse—utopian thinker *par excellence* of the dead season before it—gave a talk in Berlin. Its title was ‘The End of Utopia’. What did he mean? The true substance of utopianism, he argued, was not to be found in the creation of a realm of freedom beyond the realm of necessity, leaving an irreducible residue of unfree labour, as Marx had envisaged. It lay rather in the disappearance of alienated labour altogether, in the more plenary freedom imagined by Fourier, in which work and play became indistinguishable. That once extravagant prospect was now quite feasible. ‘All the material and intellectual forces’, he declared, ‘which could be put into effect for the realization of a free society are at hand’.⁴ Mobilization to release these forces in a social revolution no longer required any great leap of the imagination. In that sense, utopianism had run its course.

Three decades later, Immanuel Wallerstein, founder of one of the most influential critical theories of world capitalism in the interim, considered the question in 1998. The answer he gave in his book *Utopistics* was the same, but its import was the opposite. ‘Utopias’, he wrote in his opening sentences, ‘are breeders of illusions and therefore, inevitably, of disillusion. They can be used, and have been used for terrible wrongs. The last thing we really need is still more utopian visions’. In lieu of these, Wallerstein proposes a more modest notion—intending by the term ‘utopistics’ no more than a ‘sober and realistic evaluation’ of different feasible ways of organizing society, judged according to their degree of ‘substantive rationality’.⁵ He ends by sketching an order he reckons superior to the one we live under today: an economy whose units resemble non-profit institutions like public hospitals, a less unequal if still class society, an ecology that charges costs of damage inflicted on the biosphere to the polluter. Whatever its merits, this is scarcely the end of utopia Marcuse had in mind.

⁴ See *Das Ende der Utopie*, Frankfurt 1980, p.12.

⁵ *Utopistics*, New York 1998, p. 1.

What has happened in between the two? Essentially, three decades of nearly unbroken political defeats for every force that once fought against the established order. Intellectually, and imaginatively, that has meant a remorseless closure of space. With good reason Jameson concludes with lines from *Woman on the Edge of Time*, since historically that was perhaps the last utopian work of wide resonance to have been produced in the 20th century. Within three years of its publication, the tide of restoration that is still swelling around us had set in, with the installation of the first post-war regime of the radical right in London. It was Thatcher's rule that coined the new motto of the time: 'there is no alternative'. Soon it was no longer even necessary to proclaim that capitalism was superior to socialism, as if there could be a choice between them—it was the only conceivable social system, coextensive with humanity for all time to come; and so, if we look at the parameters of public debate across the globe, give or take a local euphemism or two, it substantially remains. In these conditions, it is little surprise that not just the political but the utopian itself has been in general suspension since the mid-seventies.

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But this has not been just a sheer lack. Something has shifted within the recessive utopian combinatory itself. Historically, utopias had four commanding themes. First there was property—the topic More took from Plato, at the very origin of Western political thought. Then came work–play–art, conceived as a single continuum or interchange, from Schiller to Morris. After that arrived sexuality and its consequences: Diderot, Fourier and their descendants. Finally, nature as conquest or companion, Trotsky against Benjamin.⁶ Most utopias, starting with

⁶ Compare: 'Mankind will become accustomed to look at the world as submissive clay for sculpting the most perfect forms of life', learning 'how to build people's palaces on the peaks of Mont Blanc and at the bottom of the Atlantic' (*Literature and Revolution*, Ann Arbor 1971, pp. 251, 254), with 'The mastery of nature (so the imperialists teach) is the purpose of all technology. But who would trust a cane-wielder who proclaimed the mastery of children by adults to be the purpose of education? Is not education, above all, the mastery of the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery (if we are to use this term) of that relationship and not of children? Likewise technology is the mastery not of nature but of the relation between nature and man' (*One-Way Street*, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, Cambridge, MA 1996, p. 487).

Plato's, contained elements touching on more than one of these domains, but each was foregrounded as a principal concern in something like the epochal order described. What has happened to them under the post-modern eclipse that set in now some twenty years ago? Jameson's own work on the cultural logic of late capitalism suggests the relevant answers. What this period has witnessed is not any simple repression of the archetypal utopian themes, but rather—distinctively—their deturpation in a series of caricatures, mimicking and nullifying the hopes or aspirations they once represented.

Thus property: what could be a more democratic magicking away of its traditional limits than the spread of mutual or pension funds, the 'investor civilization' which mobilized so many popular savings behind Enron and WorldCom?⁷ Work and play: could there be a more effortless transcendence of their opposition than the central productive activity of our time, namely speculation—that is, the lofty traditional calling of the free-spirited philosopher? Art and daily life: have they not long become fused in processes of fashion and design shaping every second act of consumption? Sexual liberation: with a nation agog at the most intimate transactions between ruler and intern, not to speak of post-coital penance alongside the most progressive of divines, what sense does it make to talk any more even of repressive desublimation? As for nature, hasn't the Sierra Club long ago taken thought to conserve it? The spirit of the times, well caught by Thomas Frank, has no difficulty projecting its own virtualized utopia.⁸ Think of that advertisement depicting a yuppie lolling at his ease in bed, gazing at NASDAQ on his console, headphones clamped to his ears. Underneath the jubilant caption reads: 'From the Trading Floor to the Dance Floor without Leaving your Pajamas'. Could Guy Debord have improved on it?

But amidst all this revelry, one ancient utopian theme has taken a disquieting turn. For there was always, to use a newly pertinent phrase, a black sheep in the flock of liberating fantasms of a different and better future. Not property, work, art, sex or nature, but science. In Plato and More, the ultimate function of collective ownership is to secure optimal conditions for the life of the mind, but this is still conceived in philosophical—that is, contemplative—or ethical register. It is not till

⁷ See the vivid description in Adam Harmes, 'Mass Investment Culture', *NLR* 9, May–June 2001, pp. 103–24.

⁸ *One Market under God*, New York 2000, passim.

Bacon's *New Atlantis* that science as mastery of the laws of nature, and technology as their use for human purposes, became the supreme value of a utopia. Here was the beginning of a distinct line within the genealogy of utopian traditions, descending through Condorcet, Saint-Simon and Comte down to the communist Bernal and the behaviourist Skinner in the 20th centuries.⁹ What is striking about this pedigree is how early it not only attracted attacks from within the ranks of radicals themselves, but generated its own counter-forms. In the 19th century, on the Left there was Bakunin's furious polemics against Marx for proposing a dictatorship of science; on the Right, Dostoevsky's assault on Chernyshevsky in *Notes from the Underground*; in the Centre, Butler's mock-Darwinian story of machinery in *Erewhon*. In the 20th century, Huxley—an admirer of Butler—made of such reactions a canon with *Brave New World*. The dystopia is not just any anti-utopia. It is a nightmare, specifically, of technological domination: the corruption or distortion of what is most essentially human by malignant use of the powers of science.

By any reckoning of the imaginative or theoretical output of the past two decades, this form has massively outweighed residual utopian impulses. Characteristically, its figurations have fastened onto one particular topos: transmogrifications of the body. In the mainstream of utopian literature, the corporeal as such was never a significant datum in the repertoire of change. The human nature to be transformed was social, not biological. But in the scientific variant, there were hints of this from the beginning. Descartes, like Bacon, believed that all outstanding problems in the book of nature would be solved within a few years by science, including ageing and illness—people would soon live centuries rather than decades.¹⁰ Bernal, writing in 1929, looked forward to the shedding of flesh altogether, as human beings became cells of pure cerebration, migrating to the stars.¹¹ Later, Firestone and Piercy contemplated a lifting of the burdens of reproduction from women. But such positive versions were few and far between. The overwhelmingly dominant line here was the dystopian tradition set in place by

⁹ Skinner's *Walden Two*, the last in this line, appeared in 1948.

¹⁰ Descartes 'could not promise to render a man immortal', but was 'quite sure it was possible to lengthen out his life to equal that of the Patriarchs', about a thousand years: *Œuvres*, XI, Paris 1962, p. 671. Condorcet's *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1795) ends on the same note.

¹¹ *The World, The Flesh and the Devil. An Enquiry into the Future of the Three Enemies of the Rational Soul* (reissue), London 1970, pp. 34–46.

Huxley, in which somatic manipulation or manufacture drains existence of freedom and meaning.

Surcharged by the new genetics, it is this imaginary that has proliferated in postmodern times, in the world of prostheses, clones, implants, replicants, projected in cyberpunk and other fiction. The erasure of the boundaries between the organic and mechanical, already foreshadowed in different ways by Mary Shelley or Butler, and more recently given memorable expression by Gibson or Atwood, is now ubiquitous. But if this was long a staple of science fiction, the change today is that the same topoi have now become matters of public policy and official philosophy. Jürgen Habermas's latest book, *The Future of Human Nature*—subtitled “Towards a Liberal Eugenics?”—welcomes the potential medical advances of genetic engineering, but shakes its head responsibly over the morality of cloning: would it not amount to a new kind of slavery, impairing the Kantian autonomy of the personality?¹² More pregnantly still, in his newest work *Our Posthuman Future*, Francis Fukuyama revises his diagnosis of the end of history in the light of what he calls the biotechnology revolution. Explaining that he grew up in the fifties under the twin lodestars of 1984 and *Brave New World*, he remarks that, now the spectre of the former has been banished, it is the dangers depicted in the latter—always more subtle and far-sighted—that require our utmost attention.¹³

Here the crux of the change we confront is laid out with diagrammatic clarity. Fukuyama does not rescind his view that history, understood as the development of successive forms of society, has reached its terminus. Nothing can lie beyond liberal-democratic capitalism. At the social level, our institutions are final. Not only all utopias that dreamt of another and better future, but even those dystopias that feared a far worse one, are so many relics of a scarcely to be remembered past. In diametric contrast, on the other hand, at the biological level all is in flux. This is the only layer of life at which the notion of ‘revolution’ retains a meaning. Who knows whether Habermas’s forebodings for human autonomy or—at the other pole—Descartes’s dream of the conquest of death might not be realized? Jameson has famously remarked that people find it easier today

¹² For a bravura rejoinder, see Slavoj Žižek: ‘Bring me my Philips Mental Jacket’, *London Review of Books*, 22 May 2003.

¹³ *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, New York 2002, pp. 1–7.

to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. We can now add: easier too, to imagine the end of identity, or mortality.

5

In an exchange of the mid-sixties, Bloch and Adorno debated the destiny of utopia. Striking an unaccustomed note, Adorno declared that 'Inwardly, everyone knows, whether they admit it or not, that things could be otherwise. People could live not only without hunger and probably without fear, but as free beings'. But utopia involved something more than this. Its 'neuralgic point is the question of the abolition of death'. For the *bien-pensants*, that prospect was like 'throwing a stone at a police station and seeing a guard instantly emerge'—'the immediate reaction to the notion people might no longer die is that nothing could be worse or more horrifying'. Yet without this threshold, utopia could not be thought, for death was 'none other than the violence of what simply *is*', identification with which such fear of lifting it betrayed. Yet just that was the metaphysical reason why utopia could be spoken of only negatively. Any affirmative image of it must be untrue to this inherent tension.¹⁴

No scientific progress could alter that prohibition. For utopia could not be segmented. Its meaning was 'the change of the whole', and mere medical advance—as if the cancellation of mortality were simply a matter of 'crossing the threshold between organic and inorganic life through further discoveries'—would by itself have no more significance for it than television or supersonic flight. The utopian imperative was a transfiguration of *all* the categories of existence, not just one. Bloch did not dissent, though he stressed the differing conceptions of social plenty and natural law in which happiness and freedom had respectively been imagined, as distinct constituents of the dream of another world. But the final emphasis was his own. The spur to utopian longing came from the bare words heard in *Mahagonny*: 'something is missing'. They contained no promise of anything better, only a desire. The principle for which Bloch is remembered ensured that. 'Hope is the

¹⁴ 'Etwas fehlt . . . Über die Widersprüche der utopischen Sehnsucht' (1964), in Ernst Bloch, *Tendenz-Latenz-Utopie*, Frankfurt 1978, pp. 353–61. *Minima Moralia* is the expression of these injunctions.

opposite of security, of a naive optimism. Within it always lurks the category of danger'.¹⁵

6

Forty years later, it is not hope but its antonym that haunts the idea of an alternative order. With the approach of genetic engineering, the fear before utopia on which Jameson dwells—at the idea of a loss of the constituted self—has acquired a new and sharper edge. Against this background, the ironic minimalism of the utopian demand he poses, full employment across the world, is all the more pointed as a simple political arrow. The first condition of any revival of the utopian imagination would be to regain the social ground, of institutions and ideologies, systems and states. For its part, the biological ground can no longer—if it ever could—be left to those devoted or resigned to the established order of capital; it will have to be invested in new ways too. In all of this, a kind of judo effect can be expected from the very insistence surrounding us that capitalism is immutable. That could be seen already in the virtually universal unease, even among those who shared his political outlook, aroused by Fukuyama's original announcement of the end of history. The tedium of what will always be the same is not a good calling card. In Baudrillard's words: 'The allergy to any definitive order, to any conclusive power, is happily universal'.¹⁶

No thinker understood that more deeply than Fourier. His utopia was founded on a theory of human passions—'the mistresses of the world', as he described them. Of these, the three most precious were the Cabalist, the Composite and the Butterfly. The Cabalist was the spirit of intrigue, by which he set much store: we might call it the ingenuities of political calculation. The Composite was the enthusiasm for combining pleasures of existence, physical and spiritual, social and somatic. The Butterfly was the ineradicable human desire for change as such—for variation of hopes and horizons, diversity of senses and scenes. 'It is the passion', he wrote, 'which in the social mechanism holds the highest rank; it is the universal agent of transition. The complete expression of this passion gives rise to a form of happiness attributed to the Parisian

¹⁵ *Tendenz-Latenz-Utopie*, pp. 366–67.

¹⁶ *L'esprit du terrorisme*, Paris 2002, p. 12.

sybarites': 'the art of living so well and so fast'.¹⁷ In his day, people were astonished that Fourier could take the butterfly as such an emblem of change; today, chaos theory would be less surprised.

Classically, utopias were imagined as islands, enclaves or colonies—delimited spaces, either segregated within the world, or projected beyond it. Today, would not the appropriate utopia have to be globalized, the whole earth brought under the wing of that butterfly, fluttering so well and so fast? But we can also envisage the renewal of utopian energies more historically. No-one has captured that other tempo more strikingly than Jameson, in one of those unexpected sentences that are his signature. It comes from *Brecht and Method*, where he writes:

Stasis today, all over the world—in the twin condition of market and globalization, commodification and financial speculation—does not even take on a baleful religious sense of an implacable human nature; but it certainly seems to have outstripped any place for human agency, and to have rendered the latter obsolete. That is why a Brechtian conception of activity must go hand in hand with a revival of the older precapitalist sense of time itself, of the change or flowing of all things; for it is the movement of this great river of time or the Tao that will slowly carry us downstream again to the moment of praxis.¹⁸

Lao Tse floating towards Marx. Is the torrent of capital now churning too fast for such a rendezvous? Later, Jameson raises that objection himself. Others might question the paradox of an activism delivered by a drift with the stream. But the power of the image remains. It requires no *attentisme*. The *Tao Te Ching* is also a cry of social anger, a *ça ira* of its times. 'Exterminate benevolence, discard righteousness'—'the people will be a hundred times better off'.¹⁹ Few words knock so sharply on our door, in an age of institutional piety of which Confucius could only have dreamt. Should we call them too utopian?

¹⁷ *Le Nouveau Monde Industriel et Sociétaire*, in *Œuvres*, vol. II, Paris 1845, pp. 145–46.

¹⁸ *Brecht and Method*, London–New York 1998, p. 4.

¹⁹ *Tao Te Ching* §19. Appropriately, Le Guin has produced her own version of its 'indestructibly outrageous' maxims: Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Boston 1997.