Post-Capitalist Futures: A Report on Imagination

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In the midst of ongoing and systemic crisis—world-political, world-economic and world-ecological—the century's second decade has witnessed not one but two golden ages: a golden age of crisis theory, together with a flowering of dystopian realisms. While this may seem to confirm the point that (critical) theory and (creative) practice tend to develop in tandem with the moving contradictions of capital itself, it's worth examining further the link between the drive to theorise epochal crisis and the drive to write it. For some thinkers on the left, the years since 2008 have seen a reinvigoration of debates over key categories such as value, labour, class and social reproduction, bringing in their wake an upsurge of formerly dormant utopian imaginings involving workless futures and full automation.[1] For others, the serial irresolution of world-systemic weakness has prompted a tonal shift from what Wolfgang Streeck calls "wishful demonstrations of the possible" to "a realistic accounting of the real."[2] Given this response, the galvanic charge of the May 1968 slogan – "Be realistic: demand the impossible" – may seem to invite recuperation as a matter of ethical necessity. Yet both theorists and imagineers of the bad new days confront a seismic shift in the landscape of the real that is their departure point.

Before presenting its diagnoses, for example, the new sobriety in theory has had to grapple with the full scope of current challenges to what counts, or might count, as "realism." These include the cardiac frailty of a global economy that routinely posts new highs on the major financial indices; the scale of endemic underemployment indexed against increasingly coercive labour conditions in core and peripheral regions alike; map-altering levels of mass migration and the resurgence of xenophobic nationalism; ramped-up applications of racialised state violence targeting populations already subject to historic levels of disciplinary policing; the profound alterations to social environments occasioned by online and digital media; the acceleration of climate breakdown coupled

with a kamikaze embrace of fossil-fuel extractivism; and alongside all these developments, a circumstance that Mark Fisher identified years ago as the generalised atrophy of any sense of futurity beyond continuation of the status quo.[3]

The extremity of such conditions serves to up-end prior assumptions about the common-sensical "real," to suggest that current "reality" is increasingly improbable, uncanny and removed from what were once taken to be routine expectations of regularity, order and stability. Amitav Ghosh notes that these expectations form the tissue of a self-conscious modernity consolidated during the nineteenth century and grounded in the experience of the everyday, in which conditions of predictability set the parameters of the realist outlook. "Quite possibly," he adds, in acknowledgment of widespread disattention to the implications of present-day climate chaos, "this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to be known as the time of the Great Derangement."[4] That is, of course, if there is a future era from which to look back and make such judgments.

For many writers, meanwhile, these conditions have occasioned less a return to older models of realist representation and more an embrace of the generic protocols of utopia's twin shadow. Fredric Jameson's much quoted aphorism—it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism—may no longer hold true, but only because both of these prospects are so easily conflated into a single looming terminus. (In this respect, we could recall the less-remarked outcome of epochal class struggle predicted by the *Communist Manifesto*: either "a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large" or "the common ruin of the contending classes."[5]) Getting real in crisis conditions such as these—a world, for example, where Royal Dutch Shell assumes in its corporate planning a global temperature rise of 4 to 6 degrees Celsius—means, for writers and other artists, pressing against the limits of even the dirtiest realisms.

THE RETURN OF REALISM?

When what is termed the realist outlook enters one of its recurrent crisis periods, it tends to be accompanied by a host of morbid symptoms. These are apparent not only in baroque strategies of avoidance, denial, myopia and wishful thinking with respect to the climate crisis itself, but in the shifts and slippages framing the question of cultural form. The difficulties in tracking realism's shifting ground are apparent particularly in recent critical debates over the adequation of earlier literary forms to current realities. In theory circles, the historic opposition of realism and modernism is now often augmented with a new antithesis between realism and speculative fiction.[6] Yet this formulation is deceptive, insofar as it masks a more fundamental struggle over the terms and stakes of realism itself.

Jed Esty's recent identification of a millennial turn to literary realisms after the exhaustion of a postwar modernism associated with both "minimalist" (Kafka, Beckett, Coetzee) and "maximalist" modes (Joyce, Borges, Pynchon, Rushdie) modes suggests a revival of the realist-modernist dichotomy that shaped mid-twentieth century debates in critical theory. Taking in a range of examples from contemporary global fiction, Esty argues that "worldly realisms are emerging as central to newly forming literary canons insofar as they appear to move us beyond the stale paradigms of the late twentieth century such as postmodernism or magical realism and to offer more direct access to problems of social and economic justice at the global scale."[7] This development is not restricted to novelistic practice alone; as he suggests, "new kinds of reality-based forms have challenged the social and entertainment value of fiction—its ability to sift and condense experience into aesthetic form, to reorganize the kaleidoscopic real into a legible pattern."[8]

Esty concedes that "the problem of contemporary realism begins with the pressure of the recirculated, mediated, and curated 'real' bearing down even on traditional realisms."[9] But a further problem arises in the attempt to assimilate to a previous era's critical opposition between "realism" and "modernism"—singular terms in Esty's usage—the recent turn toward what David Shields terms "reality hunger," a cultural tendency by-passing the socially mimetic ambitions of realist fiction (as consolidated from the nineteenth century onward) in favour of a more direct route toward a presentation of the "real."[10] In aesthetic terms, this phenomenon is in fact closer to collage (or sampling) than the artisanal rendering of social detail associated with classic realism. Rather than depend on a laboriously artful reconstruction of "social reality" within a single medium, in other words, the collage principle's transposition of social materials from one medium to another throws a further complication into any attempt to cleanly dichotomise realism and its opposites—not least since collage remains the modernist principle par excellence, yet is mobilised most frequently for the purpose of introducing indexical jolts of the "real." As Walter Benjamin was to observe in his essay on art's auratic decay under the conditions of capitalist reproducibility, the modern desire to "'get closer' to things" entails their multiplication as copies detached from their original context and deployed in a new "alignment of reality."[11] The social materials of collage are in this case less tools of representation, and closer to aspects of a fundamentally environmental process of assemblage and dispersal that envelopes producers and consumers alike. The permanent availability of these materials, within the paradigmatic model of database archives rather than sequential narrative,[12] is in part what distances the present-day "return of the real" from Lukácsian models of historical realism.

CLI-FI AND CRISIS

But if older realisms and neo-modernist collage are alike stymied in fundamental ways by the challenge of responding critically to epochal crisis, where then is Marx's "musician of the future" to

be found?[13] One answer is hinted at in Esty's observation that "if new realist novels find ways to represent 'combined and uneven development' in the global frame where it cannot be mediated into the destiny of a single people, this may well explain the rising force of apocalyptic and Anthropocene models as ways to identify collective problems operating at planetary scale."[14]

As the spectre haunting all attempts to provide Streeck's "realistic accounting of the real," climate change poses threats not only in terms of global overheating, rising sea levels, desertification, super-storms, flooding and ecocide, but also to literature's capacity to grasp and make sense of these developments in narrative form. An extreme example of what Rob Nixon describes as slow violence, the processes and consequences of anthropogenic planetary heating raise questions concerning the potential of fiction—as well as other forms of cultural production—to adequately register the scale, complexity and dynamic of what is happening and about to happen.[15] Is Ghosh thus right to argue that world literature's failure to meet the challenge of the Anthropocene reflects a "broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis"?[16] How far does this purported failure of the imagination resonate with critical debates on the failures of realism, in an age of capitalist realism?[17]

For forecasts of catastrophes to come, we turn to our cultural meteorologists. A sample of contemporary realism from an interview with Canadian science fiction (SF) author Peter Watts:

> The system is a jumbo jet, overbooked, overweighted, out of fuel over the Atlantic and already ten thousand feet below cruising altitude. Short-term economic concerns led to the overbooking; profit margins dictated skimping on the fuel. But nobody gives a shit about those things now. Now, the guys in the cockpit are just trying to keep the nose up in the forlorn and desperate hope that by some miracle, everyone won't be killed on impact. Now, the best-case scenario involves being alive when the sharks find you.[18]

Watts's genre credentials draw attention to a basic feature of the contemporary culture of crisis, that is, its increasing recourse to modes, registers and representational strategies associated with speculative fiction (fantasy, SF, supernaturalism in horror and the paranormal). As noted, these registers are overwhelmingly cast in the dystopian key. A quick survey of recent bestselling fiction—from YA to adult, genre to literary—demonstrates the ubiquity of the new dystopian realism: this is the age of *The Hunger Games*, the return of *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Road*, *The Water Knife*, *Divergent*, *American War*, not to mention countless iterations of the zombie and post-apocalyptic franchises that dominate the multiplex and cable TV. Yet if such titles offer at least a partial response to Ghosh's charge of literary silence, it's worth asking, in light of this apparent hegemony, what forms of inoculation, screening, shielding and evasion might characterise the readiness with which the cultural rheostat is set to doom, especially in the higher income nations. When the Global North looks anxiously to the future for signs of dystopia, for example, to what degree does this mask the

dystopian actuality of wide zones across the Global South? As Australian author Claire G. Coleman writes, "We, the Indigenous people of this continent, now live in a dystopia"—the end-times have come and gone.[19] And as cyberpunk author William Gibson noted some time ago, "The future is already here, it's just not very evenly distributed."[20]

At the same time, the dangers of a rote and routinised catastrophism in public discourse—and with it, the apocalypse fatigue that once again distances representation from the real—are also becoming more widely recognised among theorists and cultural producers alike. In her essay "Great Chaos Under Heaven," Sasha Lilley notes problems with catastrophist rhetoric not only on the reactionary right, but on the left as well.[21] Two tendencies in particular, one determinist and the other voluntarist, converge in responses to the conjunction of the Great Financial Crisis and the threat of global overheating. The former, in adopting the formula "the limits to capital are capital itself," posit a self-triggered systemic collapse without the need, or indeed capacity, of human agency to bring it about; the latter heralds the acceleration of economic disaster, climate change and intensifying state oppression as the necessary, indeed only, conditions enabling the prospect of revolutionary transformation. Both responses mask, as Lilley points out, an underlying structure of feeling: that of despair. "Such political despair is understandable," she notes; "it needs to be resisted nonetheless."[22] Her collaborator Eddie Yuen is more direct: "the politics of failure have failed." And Doug Henwood adds, even more directly: "Dystopia is for losers."[23]

POST-CAPITALISM: THEORY AND PRACTICE

A rejection of routinised dystopia lays the way open for a return of more explicit forms of utopian thinking: in cultural terms, the revival of radical fantasy, SF and other forms of speculative fiction; in sociological terms, a renewed interest in models of post-capitalist transition, organisation and planning. Yet the dominance of dystopia in literary circles shows little sign of giving way to the efflorescence of utopian imaginaries that marked the last spring tide of speculative experimentation during the crisis period of the late 1960s to early 1970s, when socialist-feminist authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Samuel R. Delany, Marge Piercy and Joanna Russ took up the brief of imagining radical alternatives to the status quo in fictional form. Then, the emancipatory energies of the civil rights and new social movements, coupled with the crisis in American imperialism marked by the war in Vietnam and stirrings of a worldwide response to environmental degradation, led such writers to map alternative projections of a social and natural order beyond the settled determinations of mid-century modernisation. But although the veteran SF writer Kim Stanley Robinson retains a continuing interest in heterotopian modelling (as in his *New York 2140*), the overwhelming majority of contemporary SF, particularly in work falling under the banner of cli-fi, is resolutely set to the key of apocalypse. In contemporary sociological theory, however, the outlook has seemed healthier. A

brief survey of twenty-first-century titles indicates a current upsurge in post-capitalist speculation, from David Schweickart's *After Capitalism* (2002) to Michael Albert's *Parecon: Life After Capitalism* (2003), Harry Shutt's *Beyond the Profits System: Possibilities for the Post-Capitalist Era* (2010), Erik O. Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010), Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams's *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (2015) and Paul Mason's *PostCapitalism: A Guide to our Future* (2015).

As with other "post"-prefixed terms, "post-capitalism" has a mixed and often prevaricating history, most usually indicating a desire to avoid the naming of socialism or communism as possible futures.[24] In usage dating from the 1950s, when the consolidation of welfare state societies in the advanced industrial world prompted weak speculation that an evolution beyond monopoly capital was already underway, this history led C. B. Macpherson to wonder: "How much has capitalism changed? Are we in an era of post-capitalism?"[25] In the 1990s, by contrast, management theorists such as Peter Drucker read the tea-leaves of a post-Cold War order as indicating a techno-determinist supersession of class struggle, in favour of the inevitable historical transition to an AI future: "The real and controlling resource and the absolutely decisive 'factor of production' is now neither capital, nor land, nor labour," he writes in *Post-Capitalist Society* (1994), "it is knowledge."[26]

While this cheerleading of so-called cognitive or creative capitalism[27] under the guise of a paradigm shift is increasingly discredited today—if still hugely influential in policy circles—left theorists have shown themselves to be not immune to the tendency of detaching the technological from the political. The embrace of accelerationist and technologically driven programs for a transition out of capitalism's terminal contradictions has engendered further, intractable problems of its own. According to Paul Mason's argument in his 2015 survey *PostCapitalism*, "the ultimate market signal from the future to the present [is] that an information economy may not be compatible with a market economy."[28] As David Runciman put it in a largely positive review of Mason's book, "this tension between knowledge (which is limitless) and ownership (which is limited) represents the basic contradiction of capitalism. Earlier thinkers caught sight of it from various different angles. Now the digital revolution has laid it bare."[29] But the digital revolution has in fact worked much along the lines of previous disruptions to business as usual, generating new sources of profit through a combination of appropriation (of common goods) and exploitation (of labour, both paid and unpaid). The book's argument for epochal change triggered by a technological paradigm shift overlooks the history of previous such transitions as exemplary of capitalist development.

Mason assumes that the existence of "sharing economy" exchanges represents an encroachment against capitalist commodification, when these may simply support the development of commercial applications as a form of unpaid work. The degree to which the sharing of information actively feeds the profit margins of the tech sector, for example, is sufficiently

recognised to pass for received understanding; the category of "prosumption" in studies of the new landscape of labour, erasing the dividing line between production and consumption, further attests to the assimilability of the information economy to capitalist imperatives.[30] What Mason effectively ignores in his analysis is the attention paid by social reproduction theory to the symbiosis of paid and unpaid work as drivers of capitalist accumulation. This oversight points to the necessity of caution when it comes to interpreting as insurmountable contradictions what turn out instead simply to be capitalist opportunities. The climate crisis fuelled by a carbon economy is of course one of these.

Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams's *Inventing the Future*, meanwhile, at least recognises the potential importance of cultural imaginaries in augmenting the task of social-scientific speculation: "From predictions of new worlds of leisure, to Soviet-era cosmic communism, to Afro-futurist celebrations of the synthetic and diasporic nature of black culture, to post-gender dreams of radical feminism, … the popular imagination of the [postwar] left envisaged societies vastly superior to anything we dream of today," they write.[31] Inheriting this legacy, today's left should thus "mobilise dreams of decarbonising the economy, space travel, robot economies—all the traditional touchstones of science fiction—in order to prepare for a day beyond capitalism."[32] Srnicek and Willliams's reading of the present, as with the autonomist tradition from which they draw, finds utopian potential in the very symptoms of apparently terminal malaise: from the spectre of mass unemployment following the relentless expansion of automation into service and professional sectors, to the crisis of profitability signalled by open-source software and copy-left erosion of intellectual property, to the easy availability of 3D printing systems for the production of formerly restricted consumables. Yet the most striking feature of *Inventing the Future* is the basic modesty of its proposals and, as with Mason's *PostCapitalism*, its silence on the specifics of transitional struggle. Sam Kriss notes that Srnicek's and Williams's critique of current left politics as incoherent conceals its own form of incoherence: the authors have "seen a deficiency in the means the left uses, and propose to correct it with a new set of aims. This is a category error—it's like saying that we're not walking quickly enough, so we should decide on a different destination."[33] And, as Owen Hatherley remarks:

> In the end postcapitalism, like postmodernism, is the name of an absence, not a positive programme. Like the anticapitalism of the early 2000s, it tells you what it's not: in this case, the old left, folk politics, social democracy or Stalinism, with their hierarchies and lack of cool free stuff. … Postcapitalism tells you that the forces of production make something possible, then suggests either that you demand it, or that you're already doing it.[34]

An old and threadbare model of historical change underpins this emphasis on technology as productive force over and against the fetters of social relations. Above all, the question of how a "productive force" can be imagined outside the matrix of capitalist determinations goes unasked.

READING (POST-)CAPITALIST POSSIBILITIES

This conceptual short-circuiting continually stymies the efforts of post-capitalist theorists. Moishe Postone has framed the problem, deeply embedded in positivist strands of the Marxist tradition, as follows: "The difficult task is to conceptually separate out the emancipatory dimension of the possibilities generated by capitalism from the non- or anti-emancipatory forms in which they have been generated."[35] In his insistence that any critical account of capitalism must grasp the basic forms and categories of its analysis—value, labour, commodity, capital itself—as historically specific, not transhistorical and neutral, Postone argues for a different understanding of capital's contradictions than autonomist or rigidly determinist interpretations, one that emphasises the logic of the growing gap between what is and what could be. This interpretation suggests that such a gap can be conceptualised in implicitly utopian terms, not as the inevitable conflict between forces and relations of production, but as "a gap between social labor as it is presently structured and social labor as it could be structured."[36] The contingency of capitalist arrangements can be discerned in the surplus of subjective forms, including cultural figurations, that are associated with different phases and conjunctures of capitalist history. "These forms are neither completely contingent nor are they preprogrammed. … That is to say, capital can generate the conditions of possibility of a society beyond capital, but the dialectic of capital is not a transhistorical dialectic of history. Capital will not change itself into something else."[37] In his differently inflected account of what Fredric Jameson made theoretically notorious, for example, Postone argues that postmodernism—or present-day capitalist culture in the high-income nations—can be understood "as a sort of premature post-capitalism, one that points to possibilities generated, but unrealized, in capitalism. At the same time, because postmodernism misrecognizes its context, it can serve as an ideology of legitimation for the new configuration of capitalism, of which it is a part."[38] "I agree with the image of capitalism as a runaway train," Postone concludes, nodding to Benjamin's revision of Marx's revolutionary locomotive of history, "although I think revolution entails more than just pulling the cord."[39] It is striking, however, how often struggles against a fossil-fueled climate crisis reach for the emergency brake in precisely these terms. The suspension of questions of agency—who pulls the cord, under what conditions—too often assumes a basic continuity in the exercise of political power.

The problem of revolutionary transition is deliberately bracketed in what is one of the more interesting recent examples of post-capitalist theory. In his little book *Four Futures*, Peter Frase lays out what he terms four "ideal types" of post-capitalist scenario, each responding to two determining factors, economic and ecological: the emergence of a jobless future by means of the fully automated workplace, and the threat of scarcity triggered by global overheating.[40] "Two specters are haunting Earth in the twenty-first century," he writes, "the specters of ecological catastrophe and automation."[41] Frase's thought experiment posits distinct outcomes for each factor. In the case of an

automated future, the result at one end of the spectrum of possibilities would be an egalitarian society, in which all benefit from the new leisure afforded by machines doing the work for us, and at the other end, a hierarchical society in which those who control the technology call the shots. As for ecology, the threat of climate change could bring about a decisive turn to renewable energy and consequently a new level of material abundance, or else it could usher in a new age of scarcity, in which finite resources dictate parsimony rather than wasteful consumerism as the only way forward. The resulting society-types present four possible combinations: of abundance and equality, which Frase nominates as communism (and illustrates with reference to the *Star Trek* series); of scarcity and equality, or socialism, in which the collective guardianship of precious resources leads to what Ivan Illich calls a "convivial austerity";[42] of abundance and hierarchy, or rentism, in which the few who own and control the intellectual property on which social organisation depends become near-absolute in their power; and scarcity and hierarchy, or exterminism, in which the increasing disposability of human populations reaches its logical end-point in their wholesale liquidation at the hands of a militarised elite. In this scenario, the current forever wars of the Middle East, western Asia and central Africa share a commonality with the wars against immigrants and the poor—boats sunk in the Mediterranean, black teenagers shot down on the streets of the US—in what Christian Parenti calls "the politics of the armed lifeboat."[43] Exterminism is then one version of the barbarism that Rosa Luxemburg predicted would be the inevitable outcome of capitalist decay.

It should be stressed that for Frase these futures represent ideal types rather than the messy and hybrid actuality of any conceivable transition to a post-capitalist state; he is interested in exploring the intersecting logics of societies in which the capital-labour relation is abolished, or in which monopoly over the means of existence becomes absolute. In so doing, he teases out the fault-lines defining present-day social and political struggles and exposes how provisional and historically contingent many of our hardwired skepticisms and prejudices concerning possible futures turn out to be. Throughout, as well, Frase makes liberal use of illustrative examples drawn from speculative fiction, from Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* (1952) to Kim Stanley Robinson's Three Californias trilogy (1984–1990) and Mars trilogy (1992–1996), to Andrew Stanton's *WALL-E* (2008) and Neil Blompkamp's *Elysium* (2013). Interleaved with references to Marx, André Gorz, Luxemburg and an array of contemporary social scientists, the effect is to highlight the overlap between speculative science fiction and speculative social science. As models for grasping aspects of a present reality, Frase's futures draw inspiration from the work of the SF canon as much as the social-theoretical one.

At the same time, Frase is careful to avoid any neat classification of his futures into static utopias or dystopias. As he points out, any of the scenarios he envisages could conceivably mutate into another; the road to communism may, as in classic Marxist analyses, emerge from capitalist contradictions, but it may also lead through the horrors of an exterminist phase of history:

> What's left when the "excess" bodies have been disposed of and the rich are finally left alone with their robots and their walled compounds? The combat drones and robot executioners could be decommissioned, the apparatus of surveillance gradually dismantled, and the remaining population could evolve past its brutal and dehumanising war morality and settle into a life of equality and abundance—in other words, into communism.
>
> As a descendant of Europeans in the United States, I have an idea of what that might be like. After all, I'm the beneficiary of a genocide.[44]

"We don't necessarily pick one of the four futures: we could get them all," he argues.[45] It is, in other words, not the abstract process of working toward a future goal, however complex and contradictory, that determines the likely course of human action, but rather the nature of the collective power built in the present. That power is the result of social struggles that are anything but speculative.

THE POLITICS OF TIME (TRAVEL)

In light of recent critical theorising, as well as SF writing, it may well seem that the stumbling blocks to living otherwise than the dystopian status quo—developing agency, building practical power, extending and connecting struggles—operate in speculative work as anamorphic blots or smears in the landscape of the present. Their blurred focus, that is, introduce a necessary lack of clarity to visualisations of the continuum linking present and future, which otherwise so easily lends itself to a conception of the "homogeneous, empty time" against which Benjamin's figure of the historical materialist must contend.[46] A revolutionary task: making time malleable again, restoring contestation over the time not just of wage labour or social reproduction in the abstract, but the innumerable live connections joining historical and contemporary struggles in such a way as to discompose the teleologies and narrative assumptions bringing "history" into alignment. For this, the trope of time travel, long a leading motif in speculative fiction but in a sense intrinsic to literary production generally, can offer useful guides.

We might think, for example, of the role of counterfactuals as a matter of reading as well as writing fiction: as in Roberto Bolaño's hallucinatory renditions of the Pinochet era, written partially under the influence of SF works such as Philip K. Dick's *Man in the High Castle* (1962), which serve as a reminder that, for much of Latin America, fascism—not liberal democracy—was actually victorious after WWII, and thus that counterfactual histories are embedded in the combined and uneven dynamics of the world-system. Raymond Williams's "resources of hope" might emerge, from this perspective, not simply in moments of past history, any more than in blueprints of the future, but instead in forms of connection or articulation between nodes of past, present and future conflicts: fuel for the future in imaginative reconstruction of our baseline infrastructures.[47] We can learn, as Jameson has suggested with respect to all utopian experiments, from past failures as well.

LOOKING BACKWARD AT *LOOKING BACKWARD*

Time travel is of course the vehicle for many of the utopian SF works of the last two centuries. Of these, Edward Bellamy's speculative romance *Looking Backward* is by some measure the most successful in terms of circulation and historical impact. Published in 1888, it sold slowly in its first months, but by the end of the following year was selling 10,000 copies a week. Reviewed favourably by literary adjudicators, including William Dean Howells and Mark Twain, it eventually became the third best-selling American novel of the nineteenth century, after Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Lew Wallace's *Ben Hur* (1880).

Its impact on late Victorian culture is hard to measure. On one level, it provoked an entire genre of 'answer' novels:

Arthur Dudley Vinton, *Looking Further Backward* (1890)
Richard Michaelis, *Looking Further Forward* (1890)
Arthur William Sanford, *Looking Upwards* (1892)
J. W. Roberts, *Looking Within* (1893)

Nor were these just topical responses by unknowns and amateurs. Some of the best-known authors of the day, including those celebrated for their realism, were prompted by Bellamy's book to try their hands at utopian romance:

William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (1890)
William Dean Howells, *A Traveller from Altruria* (1894)
H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (1905)
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (1915)

In assessing this influence, it's worth noting the different stances on the scope of individual agency in Stowe's anti-slavery novel and Bellamy's ostensibly anti-capitalist one. Whereas Stowe urges her readership to accept both collective and individual responsibility for implication in the system of slavery, Bellamy appeals to a middle-class sense of personal guilt over the inequities of the nineteenth-century class system, while essentially by-passing the possibility of individual or group redress. Based as it is on an evolutionary model devoid of conflict, the social change in *Looking Backward* appears to take place without the agency of any individual or social collectivity whatsoever.

A closer look at how this works reveals paradigmatic difficulties in the utopian enterprise. In Chapter XV of the novel, the nineteenth-century narrator, Julian West, is given a book to read as an example of what twentieth-century literature is like. He comments: "At the first reading what most impressed me was not so much what was in the book as what was left out of it," and goes on to note the absence of "all effects drawn from the contrasts of wealth and poverty, education and ignorance, coarseness and refinement, high and low, all motives drawn from social pride and ambition, the

desire of being richer or the fear of being poorer, together with sordid anxieties of any sort for one's self or others."[48] This chimes with what Bellamy's reader may be thinking as well.[49] It's hard to imagine a book in which there is "love galore," as West puts it, but which lacks completely all the conflict and social contextualisation that help spark love in the first place.[50] It's hard not to conclude that such a book could only be colossally boring.

In terms of fictional satisfaction, we're constrained to admit that *Looking Backward* can get quite boring itself. With very little dramatic action and long stretches of patient, tedious explanation, it's less a novel than a series of static monologues. Moreover, this is not the tedium of perfection, the productive boredom of a vision of utopian leisure, but something more uncanny and unsettling—a transformation that transforms nothing, a non-redemptive redemption, in a kind of reverse optic from the messianic power that was so important for thinkers such as Benjamin and Adorno.

But if, like Julian West reading the twentieth-century masterpiece "Penthesilia," we ask ourselves what is left out of *its* vision, it becomes more interesting—not as a utopian blueprint for the twenty-first century, but as a cultural document of nineteenth-century failures of imagination. Consider, for example, what's missing in the following description of the brave new world of Boston in the year 2000:

> Miles of broad streets, shaded by trees and lined with fine buildings, for the most part not in continuous blocks but set in larger or smaller inclosures, stretched in every direction. Every quarter contained large open squares filled with trees, among which statues glistened and fountains flashed in the late afternoon sun. Public buildings of a colossal size and an architectural grandeur unparalleled in my day raised their stately piles on every side. … Raising my eyes at last towards the horizon, I looked westward. That blue ribbon winding away to the sunset, was it not the sinuous Charles? I looked east; Boston harbor stretched before me within its headlands, not one of its green islets missing.[51]

The topography may be all there, but what *is* missing is any sign of people. There is, in *Looking Backward*, an almost spooky lack of social life. The novel contains only three speaking characters other than the narrator, all of them members of the Leete family. For the rest, we encounter a silent if efficient waiter and an equally efficient clerk; but even when the Leetes (a name that rhymes suspiciously with "elites") take Julian out to eat at the local public dining house, they're ushered into a private room where they eat by themselves. It's as if Bellamy can't imagine the benefits of a nationalised economy without sneaking in the old values of privatised space, possessive individualism, and personal seclusion through the back door.

The lack of sociality in *Looking Backward* points to more than just a weakness of representation. It shows a crisis in the public-private divide that goes to the heart of Bellamy's utopian vision. For though the changes brought about by nationalisation and the creation of the industrial army are enormous, they leave curiously intact many of the structures of late Victorian life,

including separate spheres for men and women, marriage, church, the nuclear family with a patriarch at its head, a clear hierarchy in the organisation of occupations, the defining split between mental and manual labour, privatised enjoyment of high culture within the sanctum of the home, and so on. By the novel's end, when we learn that twenty-first century Edith Leete is the descendent of Julian's old fiancée from the nineteenth century, also named Edith, we begin to suspect that what *Looking Backward* really wants to do is reassure us that, no matter how great the changes effected by nationalisation, things will basically stay the same. We won't have to give up too much and we won't have to face serious change at either an individual or a class level.

This may explain why capitalists and financiers were among the most enthusiastic supporters of Bellamy's scheme. The horror driving Bellamy's utopian vision is ultimately not the suffering of the poor, but the class conflict that results from it. The strikes and labor agitation of the late nineteenth century are what alarm Julian West and keep his house from being built; only when the source of this conflict is removed, suggests the novel, will the nation be able to rebuild its postwar house on a peaceful foundation. But the means of removing conflict remain as mysterious by the novel's end as they are at its beginning.

The word "utopia" famously pivots on a pun on the Greek for both "good place" and "no place." In light of Bellamy's experiment in utopian fiction, what can we conclude about the fortunes of the idea of utopia, as well as of the genre of speculative romance? *Looking Backward* spawned an entire industry in the project of imagining society otherwise. Hundreds of thousands of copies of utopian novels were sold during the last third of the nineteenth century. Yet today, two decades on from Bellamy's benchmark year 2000, there is no outstanding example of utopian thought in the twenty-first century that has achieved success on a mass scale. Representations of dystopia abound, including scenarios built on environmental catastrophe, terrorist destruction, totalitarian takeover, foreign or alien usurpation. Utopia is reserved for the margins and islands within darker speculative science fiction scenarios, if it has any place at all in contemporary culture.

UTOPIA AS REDEMPTIVE (CLASS) STRUGGLE

In the second of his theses from "The Concept of History," Benjamin cites the now largely forgotten metaphysician Hermann Lotze: "'It is one of the most noteworthy particularities of the human heart,' writes Lotze, 'that so much selfishness in individuals coexists with the general lack of envy which every present day feels toward its future.'"[52] It is possible to read this citation as darkly satirical: only our complete lack of imagination, the philosopher might be suggesting, saves us from coveting a better world than the one we live in; or, conversely, our present course of destructiveness ensures that there won't be any future worth envying. But Benjamin reads Lotze differently: "This observation indicates that the image of happiness we cherish is thoroughly colored by the time to

which the course of our own existence has assigned us. There is happiness—such as could arouse envy in us—only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to. … In other words, the idea of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the idea of redemption."[53] And this capacity for happiness, grounded in the present, thereby lays a (weakly messianic) claim on us, as surely as do the defeats and suffering of past generations: we are charged, like Benjamin's historical materialist, with a redemptive task in confronting the ruin of both past and present.

Similarly, Adorno and Horkheimer note that "whatever abundant anguish men suffered in their primal history, they are still incapable of imagining a happiness which does not live off the image of that history."[54] The distinction to be made concerns what Ernst Bloch differentiates as "abstract" and "concrete" utopias—those that are based in compensatory fantasy in isolation from present conditions, and those that develop out of real potentialities and tendencies in the present.[55] Even so, Adorno doesn't subscribe to Bloch's anticipatory understanding of art's utopian content: art doesn't, in his view, offer snapshots of the utopian future already residing within the present. Instead, as might be expected, he argues that it can, in its engagement with the materials of its time, both preserve and transform their negatively charged potential according to the procedures it undertakes. His own vision of redemption involves an altered way of seeing that depends on a necessary impossibility: "The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. … Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light."[56]

No less a social documentarian of the new dystopias than Mike Davis chimes with Adorno in this regard:

> Only a return to explicitly utopian thinking can clarify the minimal conditions for the preservation of human solidarity in face of convergent planetary crises. … To raise our imaginations to the challenge of the Anthropocene, we must be able to envision alternative configurations of agents, practices and social relations, and this requires, in turn, that we suspend the politico-economic assumptions that chain us to the present.[57]

Alternative configurations, estranging perspectives, suspended assumptions: the imaginative tasks required for a world subject to anthropogenic climate heating are, it turns out, precisely those required for practical organisation in the fight against capitalist dystopia. At the same time, a politics of the imagination in the absence of active struggle—even more, motivated by avoidance or minimisation of struggle—reveals itself as paralysed from its inception.

WHY UTOPIA IS SO HARD

Fredric Jameson has recently suggested that "utopian thinking demands a revision of Gramsci's famous slogan, which might now run: cynicism of the intellect, utopianism of the will."[58] In a previous essay, he elucidates one reason why utopian thinking is so little in vogue these days:

> Is it not possible that the achievement of utopia will efface all previously existing utopian impulses? For as we have seen they are all formed and determined by the traits and ideologies imposed on us by our present condition, which will by then have disappeared without a trace. But what we call our personality is made up of these very things, of the miseries and the deformations, fully as much as the pleasures and fulfillments. I fear that we are not capable of imagining the disappearance of the former without the utter extinction of the latter as well, since the two are inextricably and causally bound together.[59]

That is, if conflict is simply what gets in the way of perfecting ourselves and our situation, then removing social conflict becomes the royal road to utopia, conceived of as a condition of harmonious stasis. But if conflict is what makes us who we *are*, constitutes us at both the collective and the individual level, then only a utopia that retains change, heterogeneity, variousness, unpredictability and conflict—a heterotopia, in other words—can have any purchase on our imaginations at all. At the same time, such a heterotopia must be able to excise the cancer of a value regime premised on endless growth from the body of human (and extra-human) history. Which remains considerably harder to imagine than looking backward from a steady-state nirvana.

The thinker most identified with the project of utopia and its fictional forms in recent years is of course Jameson himself, whose career-long investment in the modalities of social science fiction reached a culmination of sorts in the 2016 publication of *An American Utopia*. It came as no surprise to those familiar with *Archaeologies of the Future*, *Valences of the Dialectic* and *Representing Capital* that for Jameson, the fundamental bifurcation in utopian possibility concerns the question of labour, in which either a future relieved of the need to work for a living or a future in which all must do so on equal terms beckon as alternatives. Nor is it surprising that for Jameson, the latter option forms the most compelling utopian horizon. Full employment, for a child of the 1930s, must always retain a degree of lustre as an ideal that later generations, for whom paid work is simultaneously degraded and unavoidable, find harder to detect. And the notion of a nationally conscripted army is less foreign to one who came of age in the aftermath of the Second World War than to those who inherit the legacies of Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq.

What might appear counter-intuitive, however, is that Jameson's vision of a national (but globally ubiquitous) army ensuring full employment is so much closer to Bellamy's industrial state than, say, to Morris's pastoral craft utopia. For Jameson, the utopian value of full employment is that it ensures a break with a capitalist system that relies on a reserve army of the unemployed and the

permanent availability of new horizons for appropriating cheap labour. At the same time, his vision's checklist of difficulties to be overcome en route to this transformation, ranging from the political to the organisational to the psychological, echoes that of Bellamy's thought experiment, in which class struggle becomes a bad (nineteenth century) dream from which the utopian sleeper awakes into a state of well-marshalled harmony. An imaginative inability to confront the logic and logistics of historical transition bedevil *An American Utopia* as much as it does *Looking Backwards*.

According to Jameson's well-known interpretation, however, utopia is precisely what marks, even celebrates, an essential negation of imaginative capacity. "Its function," he writes, "lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future—our imprisonment in a non-utopian present without historicity or futurity—so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined."[60] Here we might note that the failure to imagine is a constant motif in Jameson's work, not least in the notorious pronouncement concerning capitalism's end. What bears investigating, however, is the conception of utopian capacities—"seeds of time," in Jameson's own phrase—encrypted within the very artefacts of (neo)realism and (neo)modernism in our own time, dystopian or otherwise.[61]

WHY UTOPIA IS SO NECESSARY

For the structure and potential of utopian thought experiments retain their power—particularly in their catalysation of the time-travelling potential intrinsic to future imaginaries. One utopian novel written a century after Bellamy's offers an eloquent reminder of this power when *its* visitors from the future explain their reasons for making contact with the present:

> You may fail us … You individually may fail to understand us or to struggle in your own life and time. You of your time may fail to struggle altogether . . . [But] we must fight to come to exist, to remain in existence, to be the future that happens. That's why we reached you.[62]

Or, as poet Kevin Davies puts it in sci-po, if not sci-fi, terms:

> What gets *me* is
>
> the robots are doing
> *my* job, but I don't get
> the *money*,
> some extrapolated node
> of expansion-contraction gets
> my money, which *I* need
> for *time travel*.[63]

In a landscape simultaneously petrified and molten with accelerating catastrophe, it is precisely the heat-induced ripples of another time that require collective attention. An ethics of such attention may be one aspect of the political struggle – in solidarity with other times, other places – in our present moment of climate emergency.

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NOTES

[1] Aside from those works examined below, see, for example: Weeks, *Problem with Work*; Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory*; Larsen et al., *Marxism and the Critique of Value*; "Misery and the Value Form."

[2] Streeck, "Social Democracy's Last Rounds."

[3] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2ff.

[4] Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 11.

[5] Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, chap. 1.

[6] See the perceptive discussion in McNeill, "Reading the Maps."

[7] Esty, "Realism Wars," 323.

[8] Esty, "Realism Wars," 318.

[9] Esty, "Realism Wars," 318.

[10] Shields, *Reality Hunger*.

[11] Benjamin, "Work of Art," 105.

[12] See Manovich, *Language of New Media*.

[13] Marx, *Capital*, chap. 6.

[14] Esty, "Realism Wars," 336.

[15] Nixon, *Slow Violence*.

[16] Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 8.

[17] As David Graeber notes, "We seem to be facing two insoluble problems. On the one hand, we have witnessed an endless series of global debt crises, which have grown only more and more severe since the seventies, to the point where the overall burden of debt—sovereign, municipal, corporate, personal—is obviously unsustainable. On the other, we have an ecological crisis, a galloping process of climate change that is threatening to throw the entire planet into drought, floods, chaos, starvation, and war. The two might seem unrelated. But ultimately they are the same." Graeber, "Practical Utopian's Guide."

[18] Watts, "Wildlife, Natural and Artificial," 609.

[19] Coleman, "Apocalypses."

[20] Gibson, "Science in Science Fiction," 11:22.

[21] Lilley et al., *Catastrophism*.

[22] Lilley, "Introduction," 8.

[23] Lilley et al., *Catastrophism*.

[24] See Nathan Brown's review of Srnicek and Williams: Brown, "Avoiding Communism."

[25] Macpherson, "Post-Liberal-Democracy?" 13.

[26] Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society*, 5.

[27] See, for example, Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy*.

[28] Mason, *PostCapitalism*, 81.

[29] Runciman, "*PostCapitalism* by Paul Mason Review."

[30] See, for example, the collection *Digital Labour and Prosumer Capitalism*.

[31] Srnicek and Willliams, *Inventing the Future*, 11–12.

[32] Srnicek and Willliams, *Inventing the Future*, 183.

[33] Kriss, "Future Has Already Happened."

[34] Hatherley, "One Click at a Time."

[35] Postone, *History and Heteronomy*, 106.

[36] Postone, "Labor," 325.

[37] Postone, "Labor," 329.

[38] Postone, *History and Heteronomy*, 106.

[39] Postone, "Labor," 329.

[40] Frase, *Four Futures*, 27.

[41] Frase, *Four Futures*, 1.

[42] Illich, *Right to Useful Unemployment*, 36.

[43] Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos*, 11.

[44] Frase, *Four Futures*, 252–253.

[45] Frase, *Four Futures*, 149.

[46] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 395.

[47] See Williams, *Towards 2000*, 241–269.

[48] Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 145.

[49] See Jameson's seconding of Robert C. Elliott's thesis: "a utopia can be judged by the quality and position of the works of art it foretells; most, like More's, are either mute on the subject or distinctly unsatisfying, as in Morris and Bellamy alike." Jameson, *American Utopia*, 37.

[50] Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 114.

[51] Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 66.

[52] Hermann Lotze, *Mikrokosmos*, vol. 3 (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1864), 49, quoted in Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 389.

[53] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 389.

[54] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 64.

[55] See Bloch, *Principle of Hope*.

[56] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

[57] Davis, "Who Will Build the Ark?," 45.

[58] Jameson, *American Utopia*, 11.

[59] Jameson, "Politics of Utopia," 52.

[60] Jameson, "Politics of Utopia," 46.

[61] Jameson, *Seeds of Time*.

[62] Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, 213.

[63] Davies, *Comp*, frontispiece.