

# **The Utopia of Inefficiency: On Fredric Jameson's *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army***

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*An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, edited by Slavoj Žižek. New York: Verso Books. 2016. ISBN: 9781784784539. 336 pgs. Hardback: \$95; Paper: \$18.86.

Fredric Jameson, more than any other contemporary thinker, has long insisted on the importance of utopian writing and utopian thought. At their best, utopias offer us visions of societies radically different from our own—and at least in some ways better. Even in cynical, hopeless times like the present, utopias are at least a way of saying NO to the here and now, and envisioning “the future as disruption” (as Jameson puts it in his 2005 book about science fiction, *Archaeologies of the Future*). Utopian fiction endeavors to show us a way out. It reminds us that the world in which we actually live is contingent rather than necessary, and that (as the globalization protesters have said) another world is possible.

In Jameson's new book *An American Utopia*, he moves on from theorizing utopia to proposing a utopian vision of his own. While it is still an essay, rather than a work of fiction, *An American Utopia* self-confessedly pushes to the point “in which assessments of the current situation give way to personal and private visions of all kinds and in which rational revolutionary calculations necessarily give way to fantasy.” Jameson gives us a singular, surprising vision of the future: something that is not likely actually to happen, but that offers an illuminating contrast to our impoverished present. In addition to Jameson's speculative proposal, the volume also includes ten responses from prominent Marxist critics. I will concentrate my discussion here upon Jameson's own essay, though the responses are also very much worth reading, especially those by Jodi Dean and Kathi Weeks.

Jameson starts *An American Utopia* by acknowledging the difficulties of his task. We live in a society in which “we can no longer imagine the future.” Dystopia, rather than utopia, is our preferred speculative mode. Neoliberal capitalism seems able to swallow up everything it encounters. There doesn't seem to be anything exempt from what Marx called the *real subsumption* of labor (and everything else) by capital. Jameson notes that the two traditional Marxist approaches to change—revolution (or overthrowing the system) and reform (or changing the system from

within)—both seem impossible today. As Jameson and Slavoj Žižek are both reputed to have said, we find it easier to imagine the apocalyptic destruction of the world than any viable way out of capitalism.

In place of either reform or revolution, Jameson proposes what he calls *dual power*. This term, originated by Lenin but never widely used, refers to a second power structure that does not replace the State but exists in parallel, alongside it. Examples of dual power include the soviets (worker councils) that were active in Russia between the February and October Revolutions; the Black Panthers in the 1960s, providing free breakfasts and medical care to African American communities; and Hamas in southern Lebanon today, which has organized a wide range of social services for the people of the region. “In effect,” Jameson says, such organizations “become an alternate government, without officially challenging the ostensibly legal structure.” These dual structures simply step in to social spaces from which the State has withdrawn, or in which its services are inadequate. The classical model of revolution involves overthrowing the State first, and subsequently setting up new institutions. The dual power model reverses this; alternative support structures are set up first, and it is only when these are already working that the traditional State apparatus either withers away or has to be brought down by struggle.

Jameson starts to get seriously weird—a judgment I mean as praise, not criticism—when he considers the question of finding candidates for a second, parallel organization of power. He considers, and rejects, such possibilities as the post office, business and professional associations, health services, religious institutions, and the Mafia. He even rejects labor unions, which (as he acknowledges) might seem the obvious choice for a Marxist. This is because of the weakness of labor unions today, and the difficulties of organizing workers in an economy increasingly based upon precarity. Workers used to find themselves together in large numbers, and for extended periods of time, in the common work environment of the factory. But today people are compelled to continually move from one job to another, to work from home, to endure long stretches of un- and underemployment, and to find most of their work as provisional laborers, without job security or benefits, in the highly unstable, quasi-legal “gray market.”

After finding all these candidates wanting, Jameson finally puts forth his preferred institution of dual power: the Army. This is a brilliant move, because it is both outrageous and well grounded. I cannot avoid the suspicion that Jameson is to a certain extent trolling his leftist readers. For there is scarcely an institution that we have spent more time protesting against, and trying to dismantle, than the military (including

alongside it other quasi-military forces like local police departments). And there is no civil procedure more hated than the draft, which was discontinued in the United States in 1973 (admittedly for the cynical reason that without the threat of being drafted young people from the middle class would be less likely to protest against war). In the face of all this, Jameson proposes universal conscription for "virtually the entire adult population," meaning everybody without exception, regardless of gender or other status, from the ages of sixteen to sixty.

Let me put aside my knee-jerk reaction of horror at Jameson's proposal and explore what leads him to suggest it. For one thing, the United States Armed Forces already do constitute an instance of dual power—even though they are supposed to be subordinated to civilian control in the last instance. The Army is something of a separate culture—with its own conventions, traditions, and chains of command—immanently contained within the larger American culture. Because we currently have a so-called volunteer army, most soldiers enlist out of economic necessity, since they cannot get their needs addressed in any other way. But that is precisely the point: the Army already provides many basic and equitable services to soldiers (and former soldiers), such as food, clothing, shelter, education, and medical care. In every other sector of American society, such provisions are beyond the reach of many, simply because they are supposedly too expensive. Our whole society is grounded upon the big lie that market forces are inexorable and that scarcity is unsurpassable. Even things that are plentiful and cheap—like digital information—need to be rationed or made artificially scarce, since that is the only way to draw a profit from them. In contrast, the great virtue of the Army is that it simply ignores market constraints and artificial scarcities; regardless of these, it provides crucial goods and services to its members anyway. Jameson points to the network of veterans' hospitals as an example. Even in our society today, the Army gives the lie to the myths of scarcity and austerity upon which contemporary capitalism is based.

In other words, a universal Army of the sort Jameson proposes would solve, at a single stroke, all the problems of socializing and managing the means of production and reproduction. For the past century, we have been told by conservatives and liberals alike that a planned economy cannot work, and that the so-called discipline of the market is crucial for allocating resources efficiently and minimizing waste. In the last century, economists argued *ad nauseam* about what is called the "calculation problem"—the problem of how an economy could be coordinated efficiently, without "price signals" responding to supply and demand, and without the profit motive channeling investment where it would be most remunerative. But Jameson calls bullshit on these arguments, not

by refuting them so much as by postulating a situation on the ground that renders them irrelevant.

In a technologically advanced society like ours, Jameson says, “the real problem is not production and productivity, but rather distribution.” We do not suffer from scarcity; if anything, we already produce too much. This is not a moralistic matter of producing more than we minimally need, but a logistical one of producing more than we could ever possibly consume. We already live in a science fictional state; as William Gibson famously observed, “the future is already here—it’s just not very evenly distributed.” If we wish to improve everyone’s quality of life, it is far more important that resources be distributed equitably than that they be rationed out efficiently. The universal Army will start out from the pragmatic goal of providing for everybody, without exception. Indeed, Jameson rightly suggests that we need to systematically and entirely reject “the ideology of efficiency,” and instead recognize that “human nature” in itself is “essentially inefficient.”

In addition to pointing out the way that the Army allows us to simply bypass economic issues, Jameson also praises the Army for being “the only institution in modern society whose members are obliged to associate with all kinds of people on an involuntary, non-elective basis, beginning with social class as such.” In this way, the Army already offers us “the first glimpse of a classless society.” Universal conscription will not destroy local ties and allegiances, but it will force us to extend ourselves beyond the boundaries of class, race, religion, gender, sexuality and so on, and engage with others whom we might otherwise never meet, whom we might otherwise hate, and with whom we would otherwise never engage in the first place. In this way, “forced class promiscuity becomes the production of genuine classlessness and social leveling.”

This aspect of Jameson’s proposal reminds me a bit of old Hollywood war movies like Zoltan Korda’s *Sahara* (1943), in which a small squad of soldiers of different nations, ethnicities, and class backgrounds all pull together (under the leadership of Humphrey Bogart) not only to survive under harsh conditions but even to defeat a much larger enemy force. Such a reference might seem facetious, but it has a serious point. Utopias are often accused of idealizing human nature, by envisioning a perfection that real people will never be able to attain. But this is nonsense. Jameson rightly insists that antagonism and envy will continue to exist in any conceivable society. The advantage of a classless society is that these antagonisms and envies will be brought back to the personal level where they belong, instead of being projected in the form of racism, sexism, and other sorts of prejudice. Donald Trump will still be a sociopathic asshole under any social arrangement—but in an egalitarian

framework he simply would not have the power over others that he has in our society, and therefore wouldn't be able to do anywhere near as much damage as he does today.

Jameson also raises important questions about work time: "How long would everyone have to work (in the sense of ordinary drudgery, the necessary tasks, and the like) in order for everyone's needs to be fulfilled?" He oddly complains that the question of reducing work time, much discussed in the 1960s, "is never posed anymore and is felt to be of absolutely no practical or theoretical interest." But in fact, minimizing work time is central to the program of what has come to be called *accelerationism*. Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, in their recent book *Inventing the Future*, advocate automating work as much as possible, and providing a universal basic income, so that nobody *has to* work. This entails entirely rejecting the crippling ideology of the "work ethic." Jameson seems to be thinking along similar lines when he suggests that service in his universal Army would take up no more than "three or four hours in the morning"; for the rest of the day, everyone would be free to do as they please. Nobody likes doing tedious work—but "if everyone has to work, then you don't feel quite so resentful." Jameson doesn't say much about new computing and communications technologies, and as a result he doesn't seem to imagine as radical a reduction in necessary work time as Srnicek and Williams do. But to the extent that unpleasant work still needs to be done, sharing the tedium equally, as well as reducing its quantity through new technologies, is clearly the best solution.

Let me put this another way. Personally, I loathe the very thought of being conscripted into anything like an Army. Jameson's point, however, is that his proposed Army service will *replace* the many forms of coercion and toil that we are forced to accept today. Because we take our current conditions of existence for granted, we don't find them as distasteful as being conscripted would be. And yet I cannot honestly maintain that service in Jameson's Army would be any worse than all the annoying things I am forced to do now, from folding the laundry to coming up with rent money to obeying orders from bosses. We may never be able to escape some degree of coercion in any society—but in Jameson's military utopia, such coercion will at least be visible and transparent, will be applied in the same way to everyone, and will not weigh over us during the 20 or 21 hours each day that we are not subject to forcible toil.

Marxists have long distinguished between the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom. The former is associated with capitalism, and the latter with communism. But even in an emancipated society, there will still be remnants of necessary toil. As Marx writes, "the true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins

beyond [necessary labor], though it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis” (*Capital* Vol. 3, chapter 48). To the extent that we are still subject to necessity, Jameson’s Army allows us to deal with it as transparently and equitably as possible. On the side of freedom—which means all of life beyond necessary work time—an unlimited pluralism should reign. Jameson laudably insists that his utopia “must welcome the most outrageous self-indulgences and personal freedoms of its citizens in all things.” All sorts of pursuits must be accessible, “beginning with religion and art and running the gamut, not excluding asceticism, renunciation, self-mutilation, and a whole array of other pleasurable non- or anti-pleasures which it is the duty of every self-respecting utopia to take into account and to provide for.”

Needless to say, Jameson leaves a lot of questions unanswered. Though he rightly insists upon starting from what already exists, rather than spinning his utopia out of thin air, he doesn’t explain the problem of transition: how the Army could actually move away from its present status to its establishment as a viable dual power. In addition, he doesn’t even address the two most obvious (and most undesirable) features of all actually existing armies: their function of exerting and monopolizing violence and their hierarchical chains of command. (To the first point, at least, perhaps a *truly* universal Army, extended across the entire globe, would have nothing outside itself at which to point its guns.) But these omissions do not vitiate the essay’s significance as a thought experiment. Jameson writes social theory as science fiction. To my mind, utopian extrapolation of this sort offers us at least a prospect of breaking out of the prison of thinking (as Margaret Thatcher infamously said, and as nearly all politicians of both American parties continue to maintain) that There Is No Alternative.