

The Beginning and The End Of Utopia

The Beginning and The End Of Utopia - Irfan Ajvazi

Utopians' mistake was not to think that the present is awful but to imagine that what exists must therefore describe reality.

In *Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal*, Kropotkin compared anarchist conceptions of politics with astronomical understandings of the universe. In both realms, he argued: 'The idea of force governing the world, pre-established law, preconceived harmony, disappears to make room for the harmony that Fourier had caught a glimpse of: the one which results from the disorderly and incoherent movements of numberless hosts of matter, each of which goes its own way and all of which hold each in equilibrium'.

A second item of interest would be the observation by French philosopher Alain Badiou that there is no postmodern moment. I interpret this as saying that 'postmodernism' is best understood as the cultural expansion of a process whose 'being' is essentially continuous with the historical extraction and accumulation of capital values in the modern period. What the term actually denotes therefore is a stylistic cultural phenomenon rather than a distinct mutation of the capitalist system. This observation would then be followed by the counter-insistence of Fredric Jameson that the postmodern moment is sufficiently complex and important to have established itself as the cultural dominant of 'late capitalism. Late capitalism' is Ernest Mandel's periodization of the expansion of capitalism in its 3rd historical stage, roughly from the end of the Second World War to the present. Jameson also refers to Mandel's 'late capitalism' as 'monopoly,' 'multinational,' or 'consumerist' capitalism.

In this period, according to Jameson, late capitalism evolved 'a dominant cultural logic' whose operative impact was to set in place 'a new systematic cultural norm' [PM 6] that 'does more than merely replicate the logic of late capitalism; it reinforces and intensifies it' and 'effectively abolishes any practical sense of the future'

Jameson sees this period as completing 'the prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas of the planet' The exceptional insight and coherence of Jameson's work in isolating the key features of postmodernism's 'cultural logic' and its purging of dialectic, together with the post-Meltdown financial crisis and subsequent economic stagnation are sufficient to establish that Badiou's assessment of the phenomenon is correct,[7] and that what Jameson actually established in his insistence on the historical significance of postmodernism is its place in the history of style. The modernist 'antonym' had two main aspects and many individual and programmatic forms. It began in the 19th Century with open hostility among educated elites to the accumulationist cruelties and stupidities of the bourgeois-capitalist social formation, and with active and theoretical resistance by avant-gardes seeking a 'utopian' alternative. Foremost among the topics discredited is the one labeled

"utopia," which capitalist ideology dismisses as unrealistic and counters with its "non-utopian" consumerist society based on market growth. This paradigmatic "reality-based" free-enterprise fiction is then used to generate anxieties about the loss of commodious living in any "utopian" alternative.

This idea of utopia is sometimes defined as anti-utopian utopianism, to distinguish it from what is sometimes called the blueprint tradition that extends from ancient thought. Anarchists have rarely discussed utopianism in these terms, though the critique of utopianism that Abensour believes to be essential to persistent utopianism – what he calls the 'movement of suspicion of utopia within utopian culture'

In anarchist traditions, utopian thinking has often fastened on practical experimentation; anarchists have found their utopian excess in critiques of capitalism, bureaucracy and top-down systems of organisation. And in asking questions about the constraints that existing capitalist societies impose, they have often sought to develop forms of organisation within the body of the state either to address problems of revolutionary action – Kropotkin's *Conquest of Bread* is an example – or to find creative space to develop alternatives in everyday life: Paul Goodman and Colin Ward are two of the most significant contributors to this tradition in the twentieth century and their work explores urban planning, education, work, play, leisure and architecture as areas of utopian experimentation.

It is this task that Pierre Bourdieu spoke of when he said that, "We need to invent a new utopianism, rooted in contemporary social forces, for which – at risk of seeming to encourage a return to antiquated political visions – it will be necessary to create new kinds of movement." (2002: 67)

The crisis of Utopianism is often related to and explained by the critique-numbing effects of capitalism. The existing analyses of the interaction between the Utopian in literature and our current politico-economic system carefully look into the mechanisms of capitalism and its perverting consequences, while omitting any extensive observations of the Utopian.

An American Utopia consists of the Fredric Jameson essay by that name and a number of responses to his ideas, followed by an epilogue by Jameson. Jameson generally points out the many problems with so-called democracy, namely that it is all in service to capitalism and the illusion of a free market. He argues for a dual-state approach and uses conscription into the military as a way to create a viable second state. There is not a great deal of logistic detail on how this might be accomplished but the end product, from Jameson's description, sounds significantly better than the miserable state of affairs we are currently in.

The abolition of poverty and misery is possible in the sense as are the abolition of alienation. The progressive reduction of physical labor power in the production process (the process of material production) and its replacement to an increasing

degree by mental labor concentrate socially necessary labor in the class of technicians, scientists, engineers, etc.

In the Grundrisse Marx showed that complete automation of socially necessary labor is incompatible with the preservation of capitalism. We already know what cybernetics and computers can contribute to the total control of human existence.

\nIn The Principle of Hope Bloch provides an unprecedented survey of human wish pictures and daydreams of a better life. Yet it is precisely this category of totality that presides over the forms of utopian realization: the utopian city, the utopian revolution, the utopian commune or village, and of course the utopian text itself, in all its radical and unacceptable difference from the more lawful and aesthetically satisfying literary genres.

Materialism is already omnipresent in an attention to the body which seeks to correct any idealism or spiritualism lingering in this system.

All of this can be said in another way by showing that, if Soviet images of Utopia are ideological, our own characteristically Western images of dystopia are no less so, and fraught with equally virulent contradictions. The thesis concerning the structural impossibility of utopian representation outlined above now suggests some unexpected consequences in the aesthetic realm.