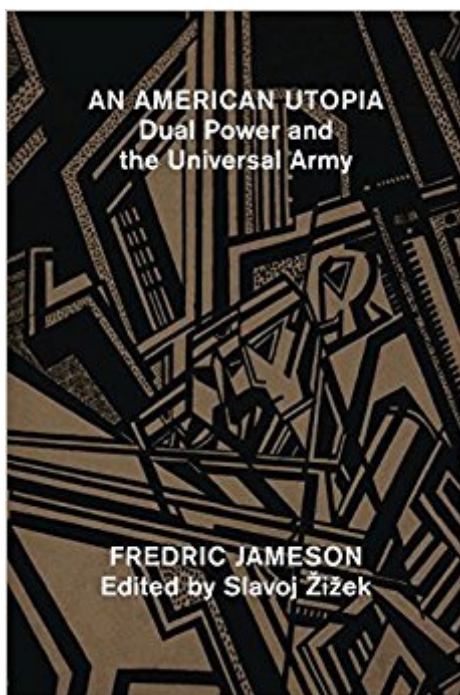


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An American Utopia: Dual Power And The Universal Army



Synopsis

Controversial manifesto by acclaimed cultural theorist debated by leading writers Fredric Jameson's pathbreaking essay "An American Utopia" radically questions standard leftist notions of what constitutes an emancipated society. Advocated here are "among other things" universal conscription, the full acknowledgment of envy and resentment as a fundamental challenge to any communist society, and the acceptance that the division between work and leisure cannot be overcome. To create a new world, we must first change the way we envision the world. Jameson's text is ideally placed to trigger a debate on the alternatives to global capitalism. In addition to Jameson's essay, the volume includes responses from philosophers and political and cultural analysts, as well as an epilogue from Jameson himself. Many will be appalled at what they will encounter in these pages "there will be blood! But perhaps one has to spill such (ideological) blood to give the Left a chance. Contributing are Kim Stanley Robinson, Jodi Dean, Saroj Giri, Agon Hamza, Kojin Karatani, Frank Ruda, Alberto Toscano, Kathi Weeks, and Slavoj Žižek.

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Customer Reviews

This is a major new debate over a potential future for an America driven by leftist political ideals, in this case, an American under non-Stalinist Communism, or one driven by the ideals of Western Marxism (along the lines of thinkers like Lukacs, Walter Benjamin, Gramsci, Sartre, Adorno, Marcuse, Ernst Bloch, and Fredric Jameson). The outlines of the debate are laid out by Fredric Jameson's programmatic essay that starts the collection, and to which all the subsequent responses

are devoted. That main essay is entitled simply "An America Utopia." For those who are unfamiliar with either Fredric Jameson and Western Marxism, let me start by saying that latter was often deeply critical of the events of the Soviet Union, though much of it was not (many on the Left looked at the Soviet Union with squinty eyes, so that it reappeared to them distorted, and in that distortion they saw a desirable form of government, one where the various Five-Year plans were, sorta, working, and that the Soviet Union was producing a better life for its citizen. Ironically, it was only after the fall of the Soviet Union and the institution of Putin's Russia, driven by Pirate-Capitalism, with its deep ties to organized crime, that Stalin's Soviet Union finally turned out to be better than anything; almost inconceivably, Russia under Putin has become worse than Stalin's Soviet Union on almost every level - this has to go down as one of the most astonishing mess ups in World history; life under Stalin was inconceivably nasty, but there was a certain degree of economic fairness, everyone had access to public health, dentistry, and vision, and just about anyone could get a first rate education; today, more and more Russians have no health care, let alone dentistry and vision, while the generation educated after the downfall of the Soviet Bloc are far less well educated than those from the Cold War era, while Russia has quickly become one of the most inegalitarian countries in the world; one theory that I have is that Marxist theory was taught to children for so many generations that Russians came to know only the horrors of capitalism and none of its virtues, and when they became capitalists, they believed the propaganda and became capitalists on the model of those from the school boy and girl days. And consider economic opportunity. In the Soviet Union, a woman had every opportunity to become a physicist or a doctor, but in Putin's Russia, a new patriarchy has been reinstated. It is not, I believe, an accident that in the past 25 years, under the leadership and funding of organized crime, that Russia has developed the world's largest porn industry, which preys on the limited economic opportunities facing women. Jameson has never, to my knowledge, been enthralled by anything that happened in the 20th Century in Russia, unless it is the extraordinary flowering of SF writing in the 1920s there. So he in no way would like to see us revisit anything like what happened in the Soviet Union. But neither does Jameson embrace Western, and especially not American, individualism (for a really great current book on the tortured and disturbing history of thinking on the obligations of the individual towards others in American society, see Colin Woodard's spectacular **AMERICAN CHARACTER: A HISTORY OF THE EPIC STRUGGLE BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY AND THE COMMON GOOD**; and while you are on it, read his previous book **AMERICAN NATIONS**, which does the best job of explaining the real differences between the various differences between the parts of the US and how this influences every aspect of our lives as Americans; not just a

masterpiece, but an incredibly fascinating read). Jameson is interested in how a joint life would be possible in America, one where everyone engages in their obligations as citizens (the greatest weakness in current free market capitalism is that its adherents doesn't even have to be active citizens at all - the goal of these kinds of libertarian theories is for the Scrooge McDucks of the world to be left alone to have a love affair with their money; seriously, didn't their always seem to be something just a little orgiastic in the cartoon images of Scrooge flopping around on the piles of gold in his basement?). Many would gladly and willingly do their civic duty, just as many participated in the Peace Corps and other humanitarian undertakings. But many would not, if they did not have to. Jameson feels that participation in civic life should not be optional, so he calls for mandatory conscription to work on civic projects. This is not unlike a universal draft that you see in Israel and some European countries, only it is not a call for universal military service. This is a good place to say a couple of things about Jameson and his brand of Marxism. But let me say something about the history of Marxist thought, or more specifically what we mean by Western Marxism as opposed to Marxism as such. "Western Marxism" is an attempt to distinguish themselves from what was happening in the Soviet Union. Some 20th Century thinkers like Antonio Gramsci and Lukacs came to depart from Leninist- Stalinist thinking, which tended to be inflexible and intolerant of different opinions. If, as they believed, there was a scientific method that allowed one to understand the workings of history, then if people were completely rational and not blinded by the interests of class, all would see things the same way, though in practice that worked out to mean, "Stalin Knows Everything." None of these is sanctioned by Marx. While Marx felt it was probably right, he had enough humility to understand that there were things upon which he could be mistaken. In fact, part of the difficulty in finishing Volumes Two through Four of CAPITAL (Vol. 4 has been published in English as THEORIES OF SURPLUS VALUE) was uncertainty about how all the pieces in his theory about the market and market forces and the role of capital in all of this fit together. He wrote with a sense of supreme confidence, but his work was filled with self-doubt, especially after his stroke shortly after the publication of Vol.1, which slowed him down somewhat, allowing him to add only a few thousands of pages to his notes for CAPITAL Vols. 2-4, rather than the tens of thousands of pages he might otherwise have composed. Jameson, like Gramsci and Lukacs and Bertolt Brecht and Sartre and Walter Benjamin and Marcuse and Adorno and Althusser and others who admire Marx but loathe Stalin and/or Mao, is a Western Marxist. This designation can mean all kinds of things: ideological splits with Lenin and/or Stalin, revulsion at the Stalinist oppressions (though keep in mind that while it was known that there were few personal freedoms such as that to protest as there is in the US, few individuals anywhere had any comprehension of the extent of Stalin's

atrocities until the Politburo revealed them under Khrushchev), a love of many things that the Soviets deplored, or deploring things that the Soviet Union adored, or any of a number of things. Marxist Ernst Bloch, for instance, left Germany for England upon Hitler's rise to power, but was as leery of the Soviet Union. So he moved to the US and there wrote his gargantuan masterpiece, THE PRINCIPLE OF HOPE, which was the major influence on the German Theologian Jurgen Moltmann, whose THEOLOGY OF HOPE has been the major influence on South American and poor world theologies, inspiring Liberation Theology. Western Marxists are not doctrinaire like Soviet Communists were. Few of them had any trouble disagreeing with Marx on major issues, whereas Soviet Marxists, or formal members of the Party almost anywhere, had to somehow twist their interpretation of Marx to make it sound like something they could believe. Or take culture. Hardcore Communists strove to hate writers the Party told them they had to hate. Communists were allowed to love Dickens or Tolstoy or even Balzac, but there was a Index of disapproved writers larger than that of the Church of Rome. Western Marxists, however, are more willing to like officially disreputable writers. More interestingly, most Soviet Marxists "even most Western Marxists" tend to be ridiculously high brow. If they write about a "popular" writer, it is to disapprove and demean. One isn't sure that they ever read to enjoy. Art isn't supposed to be fun. But when you read Walter Benjamin, you can feel his love for the enormity of Western Culture, and not just those writers he is supposed to approve of. The same is true of Ernst Bloch and Jameson. While Jameson has made writing on Modernism the heart of his work, he is liable to write about just about anyone . . . and imply that there isn't anything wrong if they aren't ideologically pure. So it would be mistaken to think of Jameson's essay as an attempt to update Lenin. In fact, the need for individual citizens to take an active role in their government, which is seen in much of what Jameson has to suggest, is part of republican theories of government, so there is more than one source for some of the more controversial parts of his essay. There may be more than one way to achieve some of the goals he wants to achieve, but my point here from the start of my review until the end that it would be a mistake to make superficial assumptions about previous political traditions that feed into his own. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that we will never see a world like the one that Jameson puts forward in his essay. Jameson knows this as well as anyone. Thomas More knew that when he wrote UTOPIA. In fact, few utopias have ever been meant to be taken as blueprints for a future government. But a great utopia provokes discussion. That certainly is the case with Jameson's essay, as can be seen by the string of intelligent responses. By the way, one of these responses is a fictional one, by the SF writer Kim Stanley Robinson. In fact, if you read the Acknowledgements at the back of RED MARS,

one of the people Robinson thanks is Fredric Jameson. Robinson actually studied with Jameson, who directed Robinson's doctoral thesis on Philip K. Dick. So there is a pretty deep connection. As a final comment, it is really important that people interested in leftist political issues debate issues in forums like this. Many people believe that today - after forty years of the Right making nonstop promises about the great changes that free-market capitalism can bring about for everyone, only to see a tiny minority of Americans actually benefit - America is poised for a shift back to exploring leftist political solutions. I definitely believe that this is the case. But the left needs to offer more than the failures of the Right, it needs to make constructive suggestions about solutions to the problems Americans share. Many have made some extremely constructive suggestions such as the need for a Universal Basic Income and the need to consider shortening the work week, to 30 or 21 hours a week, or revisiting national healthcare to provide a single-payer public option. Historically, nearly every important change in American history has taken place because ideas originating from the far left have been placed on the legislative plate by center-left politicians. These have included things such as the abolition of slavery, the abolition of child labor, the introduction of workplace safety standards, workers' comp, Social Security, Medicare, the right of all Americans to vote, product safety standards, the 40 hour (as opposed to mandatory 70 or 80) week, religious freedom (instead of the mandatory following of only one national option), affordable and equitable education, the banning of practices (as opposed to opinions) that discriminate on the basis of religion, race, gender, or sexual preference, and an almost uncountable number of additional ideas. The Right, on the other hand, merely pushes through more tax cuts for the wealthy. The Left has only recently started to suggest new legislative ideas in the future. We will all benefit from when that day arrives, but in the meantime we have books like this. I recently read a book that quoted the writer the leftist political activist Gar Alperovitz, who stated that we are still at the tail end of a long period of right wing dominance in American political life. But we also stand at what could be called the pre-history of the American future. Ideas that are being discussed today, like a shortened work week, or a \$15 an hour minimum wage, or a single-payer health insurance system, will be public policy in the future. I can't wait for tomorrow. In the meantime, I am delighting in books like this one. I disagree with many of Jameson's suggestions, but it is in working through our agreements and disagreements that we can help revitalize the American dream.

Having recently re-read Thomas More's groundbreaking and eponymous utopian novel *Utopia* and Voltaire's brilliant philosophical satire *Candide*, confronting Fredric Jameson's analysis of the nature

of utopian thinking and its literary face as well as the efficacy of utopian thought seemed appropriate. Given the dark and turbulent nature of recent history and the cloudy prospects for the future, reading about utopian thought seems like a study in irony bordering on the absurd but we should never forget that the very nature of imagined utopia is meant as a response to perceived hopelessness and human inadequacy in the face of overwhelming difficulties. Thomas More wrote in response to burgeoning religious warfare and civil disorder, a level of strife that eventually cost him his life. Utopia as imagined by More is a world based on rationality and order and not a society based on fantasy or entirely unreasonable hope. Jameson seems to adopt a similar viewpoint, confronting the nature of utopian thought and applying a careful degree of rigor as to its application. He doesn't shy away from discussing fundamental human nature as a limiting factor in creating utopia. Humanity is limited by selfishness and greed with envy a powerful factor in any society. Unless these fundamental human traits are properly recognized and taken into account, no form of utopian society (such as socialism or communism) is possible. A discussion of global capitalism and consumerism as putatively inevitable economic and political paradigms in the face of the fundamentally human attributes of greed and envy will probably generate the most controversy, because it is where the tired old clichés of liberal and conservative, and traditional left and right political discourse make themselves most depressingly felt. Capitalism and relentless consumerism are a reflection of fundamental human traits. Their dismissal as factors compromises any serious hope of utopian society. Jameson requires a new political and economic discourse and provides it by advocating universal conscription as one way of limiting inequality. He acknowledges that the classic (Marxist) divisions between leisure and labor cannot be overcome, which essentially makes a classically defined Communist society unworkable, with serious consequences for a Socialist model as well. This bracing discussion includes other contributions, including an intriguing short story by the author of the utopian Martian Trilogy, Kim Stanley Robinson. If the nature of utopian thought interests you and if you are as convinced of its impossibility as a human political reality as I am, you may find certain of your assumptions seriously challenged by this book. It's an interesting and increasingly pertinent discussion whose intensity will probably only increase as our older, less effective political and economic structures break down.

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