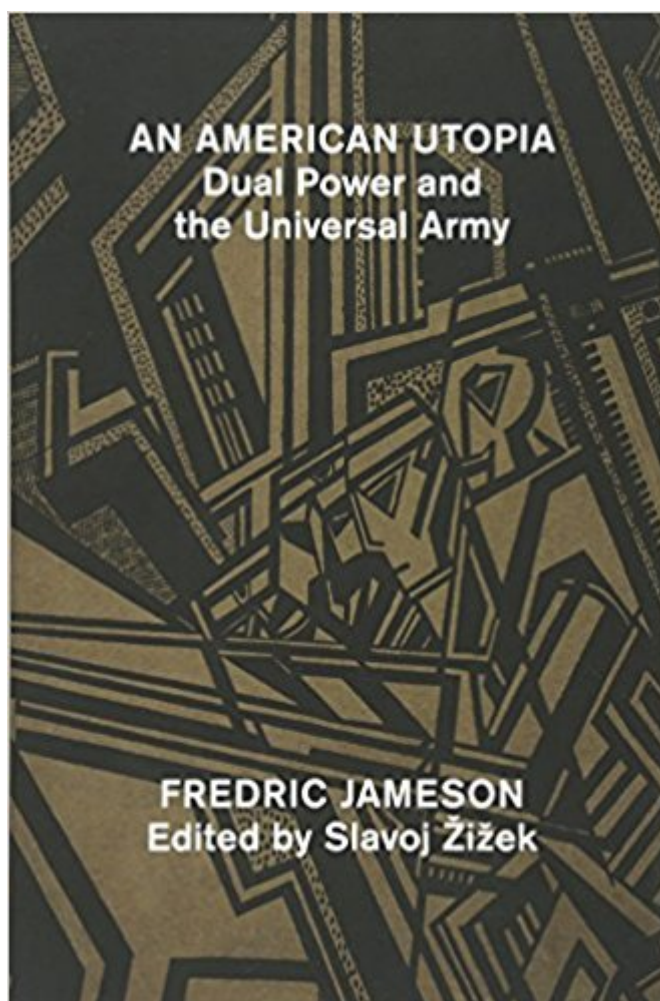


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An American Utopia: Dual Power And The Universal Army



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

"In An American Utopia, Jameson affirms the critical function of utopian thinking and the efficacies of the form itself. He insists that the fundamental function of utopias is to revive a sense of the future, which requires taking aim at the forces that prevent us from venturing out from the comfortingly familiar confines of the present." —Kathi Weeks "Jameson

gives us good reasons to call back utopia from obscurity. Rain Taxi

Fredric Jameson is Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature at Duke University. The author of numerous books, he has over the last three decades developed a richly nuanced vision of Western culture's relation to political economy. He was a recipient of the 2008 Holberg International Memorial Prize. He is the author of many books, including *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, *The Cultural Turn*, *A Singular Modernity*, *The Modernist Papers*, *Archaeologies of the Future*, *Brecht and Method*, *Ideologies of Theory*, *Valences of the Dialectic*, *The Hegel Variations* and *Representing Capital*. Slavoj Žižek is a Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic. He is a professor at the European Graduate School, International Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, Birkbeck College, University of London, and a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. His books include *Living in the End Times*, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, four volumes of the *Essential Žižek*, and many more.

nice large print was cool. my first effort with Jameson. he's a very able teacher, able to communicate and engage the novice

"Dual Power and the Universal Army" by Fredric Jameson offers an intriguing thought experiment about the practice of socialism in our time. Professor Jameson is a respected Leftist intellectual whose 96-page essay is challenged by a number of leading thinkers including Jodi Dean, Saroy Giri, Agon Hamza, Kojin Karatani, Kim Stanley Robinson, Frank Ruda, Alberto Toscano, Kathi Weeks and Slavoj Žižek (editor). The dialogue around Professor Jameson's proposal draws inquisitive readers into a fascinating discussion about the possibilities of radical change. Imagine that a socialist America has arrived: a guaranteed living wage, free healthcare and education, and so on. Professor Jameson suggests that a "Universal Army" comprised of every adult citizen could be called into being to manage a minimal work week; with ample free time for all. Can a utopian balance be maintained between the "Dual Power" of the bureaucratic state and the "Universal Army" of the people? Professor Jameson mulls the practicality of just such an apolitical future, drawing on great thinkers of the past to support his theory including Fourier, Freud, Lacan and others. In my view, the thought experiment is interesting but falls short. First, Professor Jameson would have done much better to draw on John Humphrey

Noyes's successful Oneida Community (and not Charles Fourier's disastrous phalanxes) to prove that American Utopianism might be feasible as a social and economic construct. The dissolution of Oneida was enforced by a state that was fearful of Noyes's revolution. The second problem is the absence of political conflict in Professor Jameson's utopia. This is altogether unrealistic. For example, it seems to me that a "Universal Army" of people eager to fulfill their daily four-hour work obligations might be coopted to intern at a major corporation as much as take up the more difficult task of repairing derelict housing in neglected urban neighborhoods. (Nor is there any guarantee that the individual's free time wouldn't be spent accumulating resources at the expense of the environment and society.) In fact, Jodi Dean powerfully retorts in her essay that a political project that directs the passions towards socially-beneficial purposes must necessarily be articulated for any proposed American Utopia to succeed. There is much more that can be said of course, but I believe the pleasure is in thinking for oneself. Ultimately, I believe this is what Professor Jameson hopes us to do. Anyone with an inquisitive mind can find much to enjoy in Professor Jameson's fascinating book.

This is a major new debate over a potential future for an America driven by leftist political ideals, in this case, an America 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 American 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.

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