

Archaeologies of the Future: Jameson's Utopia or Orwell's Dystopia?

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Abstract

This paper begins with the proposition that Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005) is the most important theoretical contribution to utopian and science-fiction studies since Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979). It argues that Jameson's derivation of 'anti-anti-Utopianism' from Sartrean anti-anti-communism will provide 'the party of Utopia' with as good a slogan as it is likely to find in the foreseeable future. It takes issue with Jameson over two key issues: his overwhelming concentration on American science-fiction, which seems strangely parochial in such a distinguished comparativist; and his understanding of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as an 'anti-Utopia' rather than a dystopia. The paper argues that, for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as for any other science-fiction novel, the key question is that identified by Jameson: not 'did it get the future right?', but rather 'did it sufficiently shock its own present as to force a meditation on the impossible?'. It concludes that Jameson fails to understand how this process works for dystopia as well as utopia, for barbarism as well as socialism.

Keywords

Jameson, Orwell, utopia, dystopia, science-fiction

Terry Eagleton has described Fredric Jameson as 'one of the world's most eminent cultural theorists' and 'a peerless literary critic in the classical sense of the term'.¹ Jameson himself once characterised his work more modestly as a 'vocation to explain and to popularize the Marxist intellectual tradition'.² But his Marxism owes far more to Adorno and the young Lukács than to Engels and one of its distinctive features has been an enduring fascination with utopia. Indeed, the category of the utopian is fundamental to Jameson's own method. In *The Political Unconscious*, the most influential of his works of literary criticism – and also, perhaps, the most theoretically original – he developed a systematic outline

1. Eagleton 2006, p. 26.

2. Jameson 1988, p. xxvi.

of a neo-Lukácsian ‘totalising’ critical method capable of subsuming other apparently incompatible critical methods, by ‘at once canceling and preserving them’.³ Against more conventionally Marxian understandings of art as ideology, Jameson argued for a ‘double hermeneutic’, which would simultaneously embrace both the negative hermeneutic of ideology-critique and the positive one of a utopian ‘non-instrumental conception of culture’. For Jameson, all art, indeed all class-consciousness, can be understood as at once both ideological and utopian: ‘the ideological would be grasped as somehow at one with the Utopian’, he wrote, ‘and the Utopian at one with the ideological’.⁴ The category reappears at another level, moreover, in his work on utopia as a specific literary and philosophical genre. In a 1982 essay written for the journal *Science Fiction Studies*, he famously defined the problem of ‘Progress v. Utopia’ through the question ‘Can We Imagine the Future?’.⁵ Jameson has worried away at this and related matters for more than thirty years and the long anticipated end-result is his *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*.⁶

From metamorphosis to archaeology

Jameson’s *Archaeologies* is the most important theoretical contribution to utopian and science-fiction studies since 1979, when Darko Suvin’s *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* transformed the latter from a ‘fan’ enthusiasm into a scholarly sub-discipline.⁷ It is dedicated to Suvin amongst others of Jameson’s ‘comrades in the party of Utopia’.⁸ Like Suvin’s *Metamorphoses*, its approach is Western-Marxist, more specifically Blochian, in theoretical inspiration; its disciplinary orientation primarily towards comparative literature and what we might term ‘critical cultural studies’. Like Suvin’s *Metamorphoses*, it treats utopia as science-fiction (henceforth SF). Indeed, Jameson cites with approval Suvin’s still controversial description of utopia as ‘the socio-political sub-genre of Science Fiction’ on no fewer than five occasions.⁹ Like Suvin’s *Metamorphoses*, it is also a defence of the continuing political relevance of utopia and SF. Indeed, Jameson’s derivation of ‘anti-anti-

3. Jameson 1981, p. 10.

4. Jameson 1981, p. 286.

5. Jameson, 1982. The essay is reprinted in Jameson 2005, pp. 281–95.

6. London: Verso, 2005.

7. ‘More than any other study... *Metamorphoses* is the significant forerunner of all the major examinations of the genre’. Hollinger 1999, p. 233.

8. Jameson 2005, p. vi.

9. Suvin 1979, p. 61; Jameson 2005, pp. xiv, 57, 393, 410, 414–15.

Utopianism' from Sartrean 'anti-anti-communism' will no doubt provide the party of utopia with as good a slogan as it will find for the foreseeable future. The terms of this derivation are interesting, nonetheless: Sartre, Jameson recalls, had invented this 'ingenious political slogan' so as 'to find his way between a flawed communism and an even more unacceptable anti-communism'.¹⁰ The inference is clear: utopia may be flawed, but anti-utopianism is even less acceptable.

Moreover, the reference is to communism and anti-communism, utopianism and anti-utopianism, movements rather than texts. For, where Suvin's *Metamorphoses* was essentially a post-formalist analysis of the poetics of a literary genre, Jameson's *Archaeologies* attempts to situate this level of analysis in relation to what he terms, after Bloch, the wider 'Utopian impulse'.¹¹ *Archaeologies* comprises two relatively discrete parts: the second entitled 'As Far as Thought Can Reach', containing twelve separate essays, all but one of which have been previously published, the oldest as early as 1973, the latest as recent as 2003;¹² and the first a more or less continuous, more or less previously unpublished, thirteen-chapter argument entitled 'The Desire Called Utopia'.¹³ There is much to admire in the reprinted essays on (mainly) American SF, especially those on Ursula Le Guin, Philip K. Dick (whom Jameson famously dubbed the 'Shakespeare of Science Fiction'),¹⁴ William Gibson and Kim Stanley Robinson (whose thesis on Dick Jameson famously supervised).¹⁵ But the new material is in the book's first part and it is this that most clearly commands our attention. Eagleton once described Jameson's Hegelian Marxism, a little uncharitably, as part 'Californian supermarket of the mind', part 'unrepentant *bricoleur*, reaching for a Machereyan spanner here or a Greimasian screwdriver there'.¹⁶ For better and for worse, the same method and style informs *Archaeologies*. It exhibits the same strenuous '*mastering*' Eagleton once judged 'too eirenic, easygoing and all-encompassing' for Jameson's 'own political good'.¹⁷ There is the same commitment to *Aufhebung*,

10. Jameson 2005, p. xvi.

11. Jameson 2005, pp. 2–3. Jameson and others (compare Fitting 2006, p. 42) attribute a much more formal status to the distinction between 'Program' and 'Impulse' than I can find in Bloch. Nonetheless, it is clear from the overall structure of the whole argument that Bloch is at least as interested in utopian impulses as in utopian texts (see Bloch 1995).

12. Jameson 2005, pp. 237–416. See Jameson 1973, Jameson 2003a. The new essay is 'History and Salvation in P.K. Dick'. Jameson 2005, pp. 363–83.

13. Jameson 2005, pp. 1–233. An earlier version of the third chapter was published as Jameson 2003b.

14. Jameson 2005, p. 345.

15. Robinson 1984.

16. Eagleton 1986, pp. 70–1.

17. Eagleton 1986, p. 71.

the same scholarly erudition, the same elaboration and resolution through incorporation of formalist taxonomic binaries, even the same repeated invocation of Greimas's semiotic rectangle (though Macherey is much less in evidence).

The taxonomy proceeds by way of double focus on the utopian form and the utopian wish,¹⁸ to the slightly different distinction between the utopian programme, which is 'systemic', and the utopian impulse, 'obscure yet omnipresent', which surfaces across a wide range of human activities.¹⁹ This is, at one level, simply a reworking of Bloch. In Jameson's hands, however, it generates a distinctly odd classification of the utopian text alongside the intentional community, revolutionary practice, space, and the city as 'program', but the texts of political and social theory alongside political reformism, the individual building, the body, time, and the collectivity as 'impulse'.²⁰ The implication seems to be that More's *Utopia* is programmatic, but Bernstein's *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie* mere impulse – an improbably over-politicised distinction if ever there was one.²¹ Thereafter, we proceed through a classification of utopian enclaves, a reading of *Utopia* itself in relation to the genres of travel narrative and satire, and a more than passing nod to Marx in the chapter on 'utopian science' and 'utopian ideology'. Chapter Five, on 'The Great Schism' between SF and fantasy, rehearses the Suvinian aversion to the latter. Suvin now apparently has doubts on this score himself,²² but Jameson at least still keeps the cognitive-rationalist faith: 'the invocation of magic by modern fantasy ...', he writes, 'is condemned by its form to retrace the history of magic's decay and fall, its disappearance from the disenchanted world of prose, of capitalism and modern times.'²³ The implication seems to be that only a Tolkienesque reactionary could have written *Perdido Street Station*, *The Scar* and *Iron Council* – an improbably under-politicised observation if ever there was one.²⁴

One could easily continue with similar such criticisms, indeed one could even elaborate them into a critique of what Jameson ironically describes as his 'perversely formalist approach'.²⁵ And yet, whenever he turns his attention to writers he admires – Le Guin, Dick, Stapledon (an interestingly unfashionable

18. Jameson 2005, p. 1.

19. Jameson 2005, p. 3.

20. Jameson 2005, p. 4,

21. See More 2001, Bernstein 1961.

22. See Suvin 2000.

23. Jameson 2005, p. 71.

24. Their author, China Miéville, is a member of the Socialist Workers' Party and co-editor of this journal.

25. Jameson 2005, p. 85.

choice, this), Lem, even Asimov – we can see how right Hayden White was to describe Jameson as ‘the best socially-oriented critic of our time’.²⁶ Who but Jameson could describe Stapledon as ‘the Fourier of SF just as he is the Dante Alighieri of Utopias?’; or describe the conclusion to Asimov’s *Nightfall* as having ‘the literal force of the word *aesthetic* – in Greek designating perception as such’?²⁷ Quite apart from these particular judgements, however, the book’s more general thesis advances a powerfully political case for the continuing importance of SF and utopia. The argument is broached in the ‘Introduction’, where Jameson insists that:

What is crippling is... the universal belief... that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio-economic system is conceivable, let alone practically available.

The value of the utopian form, he continues, thus consists precisely in its capacity as ‘a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and... the systematic nature of the social totality’.²⁸ This is a wonderfully precise thesis, which tells us most of what we need to know about the politics of the genre. Systematically followed through, it would surely also have led Jameson to more positive readings of (at least some) fantasy and, as we shall see, (at least some) dystopia, than those on offer in *Archaeologies*.

The argument is resumed in the superb last chapter of the book’s first part, where Jameson writes that utopia as a form provides ‘the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible’. It does so, he elaborates, ‘by forcing us to think the break itself... not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break’. Hence, the memorable conclusion that utopia is ‘a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right’.²⁹ Here, however, the argument is linked to a distinctly non-Marxist, but nonetheless not thereby mistaken, argument for the peculiar contemporary relevance of utopia. Ever since Marx and Engels, scientific socialism has asserted its superiority over utopian socialism on the grounds that it knows, scientifically and theoretically, how to achieve what utopians can only imagine in fantasy. Jameson, however, picks up on an observation of the ageing Lukács that, by the 1960s, this had already ceased to be so. The erstwhile weaknesses of utopianism, its inability to provide an adequate account of either agency or transition thus ‘becomes a strength’, Jameson

26. Or so it says on the back cover of my copy of *The Political Unconscious*.

27. Jameson 2005, pp. 124, 94.

28. Jameson 2005, p. xii.

29. Jameson 2005, p. 232.

writes, 'in a situation in which neither... seems currently to offer candidates for solution'. In the early twenty-first century, then, and for much the same reasons as before 1848, utopia 'better expresses our relationship to a genuinely political future than any current program of action'.³⁰ Surveying the scattered rubble of the Second, Third and Fourth Internationals, it is difficult to disagree. Which is why 'anti-utopianism' thus becomes the other of Jameson's text, 'anti-anti-utopianism' its slogan.

Historicising science-fiction: America and its others

At the pretextual level, Jameson is surely right to define himself against anti-utopianism: confronted by a capitalism as hubristic as at any time in history, we do surely 'need to develop an anxiety about losing the future... analogous to Orwell's anxiety about the loss of the past'. The book's first part finally closes with a moving invocation of Marge Piercy's Mattapoisett utopians travelling back in time 'to enlist the present in their struggle to exist'.³¹ Elsewhere, Jameson has used Piercy's time-travellers to even greater rhetorical effect, writing that: 'utopias are non-fictional, even though they are non-existent. Utopias in fact come to us as barely audible messages from a future that may never come into being'.³² It is as good a line as any in *Archaeologies* and somehow seems to belong there. But Jameson's juxtaposition of Orwell and Piercy also serves to remind us that his anti-anti-utopianism is textual as well as pretextual and that it is both informed by and in turn informs a clear preference for the utopian SF of his own time and place – American since the 'New Wave' – as against the tradition of early-mid twentieth-century European dystopian writing. The vantage-point from which Jameson writes is unavoidably that of an American 'sixties' radical set adrift in postmodern late capitalism. And this inner sympathy with Piercy and Le Guin, Robinson and Dick, provides the book with some of its real strength. But, to reverse Jameson's own reversal of Benjamin, the effectively utopian is also, at the same time, necessarily ideological,³³ and this is as likely to be true of anti-anti-utopianism as of utopianism itself.

There are two issues here: first, Jameson's overwhelming concentration on American SF, which seems strangely parochial in such a distinguished comparativist; and second, his aversion to dystopia, which sets him at odds

30. Jameson 2005, p. 232.

31. Jameson 2005, p. 233. See Piercy 1976, pp. 197–8.

32. Jameson 2004, p. 54.

33. Jameson 1981, p. 286.

with what many would regard as a tradition of central significance to SF. The American-centredness is apparent in much of Jameson's detail. So feminist SF is represented by Le Guin, Russ and Piercy, but not the equally distinguished Canadian, Margaret Atwood; fantasy and magic by Le Guin, but not the English China Miéville, whose New Crobuzon novels represent a serious theoretical challenge to Jameson; cyberpunk by Gibson and Sterling, but not the Australian Greg Egan; contemporary utopianism by Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy, but not its Scottish equivalent, Iain M. Banks's Culture novels; there is no mention at all of Karel Čapek, the greatest of Czech SF writers; nor of Fritz Lang, the Austrian film director, whose *Metropolis* effectively founded SF cinema; nor Michel Houellebecq, the leading contemporary French exponent of dystopian SF; whilst Dick warrants three chapters, his equally prolific and equally influential English counterpart, J.G. Ballard, rates merely a few pages. It is also true, however, of the schematic history of SF underpinning these details, which proceeds through six 'stages' (space opera, science, sociology, subjectivity, speculative fiction and cyberpunk), the first represented paradigmatically by Jules Verne, the others by Americans (Gernsback [*sic.*], Pohl and Kornbluth, Dick, Delany and, finally, Gibson).³⁴ This does real injustice to Verne, whose work was far more seriously 'scientific' than Jameson suggests – as Gernsback himself famously acknowledged.³⁵ That aside, it also seems an oddly old-fashioned way of thinking about the genre.

Borrowing from Franco Moretti's 'world-systems' approach to comparative literature,³⁶ we might tell this story much more productively as one in which: a genre is conceived in England and France at the very core of the nineteenth-century world literary system (Shelley initially, but above all Verne and Wells); it continues in both literary economies throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century (through Huxley, Orwell, Lewis, Wyndham, Hoyle, Clarke, Moorcock, Ballard, Banks, Macleod and Miéville in Britain, Rosny, Anatole France, Renard, Spitz, Boule, Merle, Walther, Brussolo, Arnaud, Dantec and Houellebecq in France); its frontiers expand to include the Weimar Republic (Gail, von Harbou and Lang, von Hanstein), early Soviet Russia (Belyaev, Bogdanov, Bulgakov, Mayakovsky, Platonov, Alexei Tolstoy, Zamyatin) and inter-war Czechoslovakia (Karel Čapek, Troska); exported to Japan in the post-Second World War period (Abé, Hoshi, Komatsu, Murakami), it also flourished in Communist Poland (Fialkowski, Lem, Wisniewski-Snerg) and more significantly in late-Communist Russia (Altov, Bilenkin, Bulychev,

34. Jameson 2005, p. 93.

35. Clute and Nicholls 1993, p. 311.

36. Moretti 1998, 2005.

Emtsev and Parnov, the Strugatski brothers, Tarkovsky). There is an American story, of course, but this comes later and only becomes central and eventually near-hegemonic, from the inter-war period (Gernsback, Campbell, Asimov, Heinlein and 'the pulps') through the New Wave (Delany, Dick, Ellison, Spinrad, Tiptree, Zelazny) and on to the present (Gibson, Sterling and post-cyberpunk; Le Guin, Russ, Piercy and feminism; Kim Stanley Robinson and the new humanism). Moreover, this eventual American hegemony extends from print to film (Whale, Kubrick, Lucas, Spielberg, Scott, Cameron, Burton and Verhoeven) and television (Roddenberry, Straczynski, Carter and Whedon).

The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century pattern exactly replicates the general Anglo-French literary hegemony Moretti sketched in his *Atlas of the European Novel*. Just as the earlier decades had been dominated, both in terms of sales and translations, by the historical novels of Scott and Dumas, so were the later by Verne's *voyages extraordinaires* and Wells's 'scientific romances'. The later geographical trajectory is less predictable. Csicsery-Ronay has argued it is best understood as a correlate of imperialism.³⁷ But Moretti's own approach suggests a more plausible explanation, namely that 'peripheral' literatures can in fact be 'sustained' by 'historical backwardness', that new geographical spaces can produce new fictional spaces.³⁸ Thus, what each of the non-Anglo-French SF 'nations' have in common – Poland and Czechoslovakia as much as the USSR and the Weimar Republic – is their semi-peripheral status in relation to the cultural core of the world system. And this is also true of the United States: American 'backwardness' eventually produced a paradigm-shift in this marginal sub-form, which later generalised itself across the entire field of popular culture, from novel to film to television, so as to become the nearest we now have to a 'postmodern epic'.

Anti-utopia and dystopia

At the specifically textual level, Jameson's anti-anti-utopianism requires him to counterpose 'anti-Utopia' to 'Utopia', rather than – as has become increasingly common in utopian and SF studies – 'dystopia' to 'eutopia'.³⁹ So Jameson

37. Csicsery-Ronay 2003.

38. Moretti 1998, pp. 195–7.

39. Lyman Tower Sargent famously defined the 'utopia (eutopia, dystopia, or utopian satire)' as 'a species of prose fiction that describes in some detail a non-existent society located in time and space'. Sargent 1976, p. 275. Whilst the terminology is slightly different – utopia for Sargent's eutopia – it is clear that Raymond Williams also insisted on the formal symmetry between 'utopia' and 'dystopia', as on that between other cognate forms, such as paradise and hell. Williams 1980, pp. 196–9.

argues that there are two main kinds of loosely ‘dystopian’ text: the ‘critical dystopia’, which functions by way of a warning, through an ‘if this goes on’ principle; and the anti-utopia proper, which springs from a quite different conviction that human nature is so inherently corrupt it could never be salvaged by any ‘heightened consciousness of the impending dangers’.⁴⁰ Jameson borrows the term ‘critical dystopia’ from Tom Moylan⁴¹ and, like Moylan, he argues that this form is essentially utopian in intent and import and thus a kind of ‘negative cousin’ of utopia.⁴² Only the second variant, the anti-utopia, is a true antonym of utopia, a systemic and textual equivalent to the anti-utopian impulse in politics, ‘informed by a central passion to denounce and to warn against Utopian programs’.⁴³ There are other examples of what Jameson terms the ‘classic Cold War dystopia’, from ‘horror films to respectable literary and philosophical achievements’, but the key instance, he argues, which establishes several of the form’s ‘symptomatic and paradoxical features’, is Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.⁴⁴

Jameson has some interesting observations on ‘the elegiac sense of the loss of the past’ and ‘the uncertainty of memory’ in Orwell’s dystopia. He is less convincing on the supposed inconsistency between Oceania’s advanced surveillance-technologies and the novel’s insistence that science cannot function under totalitarianism: as Jameson must know, science is by no means coextensive with technology. And he is surely mistaken to read Orwell’s ‘linguistic anxieties’ as a ‘critique of the dialectic’ – Derridean deconstruction would have far more plausible, if anachronistic, pretensions to be ‘the original double-speak, in which any utterance can have two diametrically opposed meanings’ – but right to describe these as evidence of ‘a convergence theory in which Stalinism and Anglosaxon commercialism and empiricism are sent off back to back’.⁴⁵ He is right, too, to insist that the novel should not ‘be reduced – via pop-psychological notions of sublimation – to the mere disguised expression of other impulses such as those of sexuality (or even personal frustration)’.⁴⁶

But these are essentially secondary matters, tangential to Jameson’s central analysis, which proceeds by distinguishing three levels at work in Orwell: an ‘articulation of the history of Stalinism’, which the novelist had ‘observed and

40. Jameson 2005, p. 198.

41. Moylan 2000, pp. 198–9.

42. Jameson 2005, p. 198.

43. Jameson 2005, p. 199.

44. Jameson 2005, p. 200.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Jameson 2005, p. 201.

experienced empirically'; a supposed 'historical universalization' of this experience into a vision of human nature as 'an insatiable and lucid hunger for power'; and the conversion of this 'conjuncture' into 'a life-passion'. This passion, Jameson insists, has 'become the face of anti-Utopianism in our own time'.⁴⁷ Comparing Orwell's 'Cold War public' to that for eighteenth-century 'gothic nightmares of imprisonment and... evil monks or nuns', Jameson concludes that these two 'dystopian awakenings' can each be considered 'collective responses of the bourgeoisie':

the first in its struggle against feudal absolutism and arbitrary tyranny, the second in its reaction to the possibility of a workers' state. This terror clearly overrides that other collective impulse which is the Utopian one, which, however, as irrepressible as the libido, continues to find its secret investments in what seems most fundamentally to rebuke and deny it: thus the projected oppressors, whether of clerical or party-bureaucratic nature, are fantasized as collectivities which distantly reproduce a Utopian structure, the difference being that I am included in the latter but excluded from the former. But at this point, the dynamic has become that of group behavior, with its cultural envy and its accompanying identity politics and racisms.⁴⁸

What are we to make of this latter sentence? The conjuncture of identity-politics and racism is hardly self-evident; in any case, they are each almost entirely absent from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; and Orwell himself was famously hostile to both. Jameson must have a point, but it is not clear what exactly it might be. The import of the preceding sentences is brutally apparent, however: Orwell's anti-Stalinism is essentially 'bourgeois' in character and prompted by hostility to the very idea of a workers' state. It may best be understood, Jameson continues, as 'a dispirited reaction to postwar Labor Britain' or 'a depressive symptom of revolutionary discouragement'.⁴⁹ Later still, he extrapolates from Orwell in particular to the generalising conclusion that:

there is a systemic perspective for which it is obvious that whatever threatens the system as such must be excluded: this is indeed the basic premise of all modern anti-Utopias from Dostoyevsky to Orwell and beyond, namely that the system develops its own instinct for self-preservation and learns ruthlessly to eliminate anything menacing its continuing existence without regard for individual life.⁵⁰

47. Jameson 2005, p. 200.

48. Jameson 2005, pp. 201–2.

49. Jameson 2005, p. 202.

50. Jameson 2005, p. 205.

The objection is immediate: surely, Jameson cannot mean *all* modern anti-utopias? Zamyatin's *We*? Čapek's *R.U.R.*? Huxley's *Brave New World*? As we have noted, he ignores Čapek, but Jameson has the other bases covered: in Zamyatin, 'it is not the personal and the political that are confused but rather aesthetics and bureaucracy'; and if the novel is an anti-utopia, it is one 'in which the Utopian impulse is still at work, with whatever ambivalence'; in Huxley, we find 'an aristocratic critique of the media and mass culture, rather than of any Orwellian "totalitarianism"'.⁵¹ It follows, then, that neither is an anti-Utopia in Jameson's sense.

The danger should be obvious: that the category of anti-utopian text becomes virtually coextensive with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. At one point, Jameson asks: 'Can we separate anti-Utopianism in Orwell from anti-communism?'⁵² We might equally ask: Can we separate anti-anti-utopianism in Jameson from anti-anti-communism? The answer seems in the negative, which is doubly unfortunate if only because, as Jameson himself notes, 'the history of the communist adventure is not co-terminous with the history of socialism as such'.⁵³ Orwell's place in this latter history deserves far greater respect than Jameson accords it. 'Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936', Orwell insisted in 1946, when he was already actively engaged in writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 'has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic Socialism'.⁵⁴ This question of Orwell's peculiar politics, a combination of anti-fascism, neo-Trotskyism and libertarian socialism, cannot legitimately be dismissed, after Jameson's fashion, as 'mere biographical affirmation'.⁵⁵ It might be excusable to argue thus if the politics were merely personal or found no expression in the novel. But neither is true: Orwell belonged to an important and continuing tradition of anti-Stalinist leftism; and those politics clearly inform the text of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The problem arises essentially because Jameson treats both the politics and the novel as products of the Cold-War 1950s, an oddly perverse move in a theorist renowned for the injunction to 'Always historicize!'⁵⁶ *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published in June 1949 and its author was already dead by the end of January 1950: both were necessarily products of the two decades that preceded the Cold War, but not of the latter itself.

51. Jameson 2005, p. 202.

52. Jameson 2005, p. 201.

53. Jameson 2005, p. 21.

54. Orwell 1970a, p. 28.

55. Jameson 2005, p. 198.

56. Jameson 1981, p. 9.

Orwell and the Left

Jameson's misreading of Orwell and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is no minor matter: it is, in fact, the central point of weakness in *Archaeologies*, from which we are able to trace out and untangle the thread of most that is wrong with the book. To justify this assertion will require me briefly to elaborate, firstly, on Orwell's politics and, secondly, on his novel. Whatever we make of the particular details, it is clear that Eric Blair the man and George Orwell the author were moved to anti-imperialism by the experience of British rule in Burma, to populist sympathy for the poor through living rough in Paris and London, positive identification with the working-class Left through reportage in the industrial North of England, and support for revolutionary socialism by fighting on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. This is well-known biographical material, easily garnished from the obvious Orwell texts, *Burmese Days*, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and *Homage to Catalonia*. No doubt, it has a strongly autobiographical element, but this is more than mere biographical affirmation, for these are also what Jameson would easily recognise elsewhere as intertexts. Indeed, the main source for Orwell biographies – Bernard Crick's for example – is in the writings, in the texts. And it is the writing, whether considered biographical datum or intertextual referent, that renders Jameson's reading radically suspect.

There is no doubting Orwell's anti-Stalinism, nor its origins in the experience of the Spanish Revolution, but there is no evidence at all to suggest that it was ever universalised into either a blanket-pessimism about human nature or a life-passion. Reflecting on his Spanish experiences from wartime Britain, Orwell concluded that:

one sees only the struggle of the gradually awakening common people against the lords of property and their hired liars and bumsuckers. The question is very simple... Shall the common man be pushed back into the mud, or shall he not? I myself believe... that the common man will win his fight sooner or later, but I want it to be sooner and not later... That was the real issue of the Spanish war, and of the last war, and perhaps of other wars yet to come.⁵⁷

There is no universalised pessimism here, rather the very opposite, a belief that, no matter how dire the current circumstances, the working-class cause will eventually triumph. Yet this essay was written in 1943, when Orwell was already at work on *Animal Farm*. Jameson himself suggests in parentheses that the narrative force of Orwell's fable springs from the same conviction about the inevitably corrupting effects of power on human nature which later

57. Orwell 1966a, p. 245.

inspired *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.⁵⁸ This is simply incompatible with the text of *Animal Farm* itself – there is nothing corrupt about Boxer, surely? – and with what we actually know to have been Orwell's self-declared beliefs at the time of its composition. If universalised pessimism ever became a life-passion for Orwell, then it was only very briefly so, no more than in the last three years before he died. And even that seems distinctly improbable, as we shall see when we turn to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

In Spain, Orwell had fought for the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM), the United Marxist Workers' Party, rather than the Communist-led International Brigades. As the name suggests, it was an independent – that is, non-Communist – Marxist organisation. It was also the Spanish sister party of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in Britain, which had split from the Labour Party in 1931. Throughout the 1930s, the ILP managed to combine a significant parliamentary representation, always substantially larger than the Communists, a national organisation and membership, and a policy of 'revolutionary' socialism, suspicious of and increasingly hostile to both the USSR and the local Communist Party. The ILP was effectively swept aside by the Labour landslide in 1945, but it remained an important precursor for the British New Left of the 1950s. In the concluding chapter to *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell insists on the urgent necessity to:

bring an effective Socialist party into existence. It will have to be a party with genuinely revolutionary intentions, and it will have to be numerically strong enough to act.⁵⁹

Clearly, such an effective socialist party would be neither the Labour nor Communist Party, dismissed in the same pages as respectively 'backstairs-crawlers' and a 'stupid cult of Russia',⁶⁰ but rather an expanded version of the political party he would eventually join in June 1938, the ILP.

Which explains why he fought for the POUM: he had 'slight connexions, mainly personal'⁶¹ with the ILP and was broadly sympathetic even before going to Spain. By contrast, the vast majority of Communist and Labour Party volunteers fought in the International Brigades. This broad sympathy grew into close agreement, as he would later elaborate:

58. Jameson 2005, p. 198.

59. Orwell 1962, p. 202.

60. Orwell 1962, p. 190.

61. Orwell 1970b, p. 352.

I was with the I.L.P. contingent in Spain. I never pretended, then or since, to agree in every detail with the policy the P.O.U.M. put forward and the I.L.P. supported, but the general course of events has borne it out. The things I saw in Spain brought home to me the fatal danger of mere negative ‘anti-Fascism’. Once I had grasped the essentials of the situation in Spain I realized that the I.L.P. was the only British party I felt like joining – and also the only party I could join with at least the certainty that I would never be led up the garden path in the name of capitalist democracy.⁶²

Orwell’s objections to Stalinism were clearly neither bourgeois nor predicated on hostility to the idea of a workers’ state. Rather, he had been inspired to join the ILP by the lived experience of working-class power in Catalonia: ‘It was the first time I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle’, he wrote of his arrival in Barcelona.

Practically every building of any size had been seized by the workers . . . Practically everyone wore rough working-class clothes . . . There was much in it that I did not understand . . . but I recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for.⁶³

For Orwell to choose the POUM and Barcelona, as against the OGPU and Moscow, was to opt for a workers’ state that might still have a future, as against the counter-revolutionary terror that had already destroyed a previous one.

Nineteen Eighty-Four

What, finally, of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* itself? Clearly, it is not a dispirited reaction to postwar Labour Britain: the very suggestion – Clement Attlee as Big Brother – would be risible were it not seriously entertained in the United States. Hence, Orwell’s own explanation to the American United Auto Workers’ Union, written six months before his death, that his novel

is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralised economy is liable and which have been partly realised in Communism and Fascism.⁶⁴

62. Orwell 1970c, pp. 374–5.

63. Orwell 1966b, pp. 8–9.

64. Orwell 1970d, p. 564.

The reference to fascism here is important: Ingsoc was designed to signify not so much British Labourism as National Socialism, that is fascism (and also, as it happens, Stalinist Communism).

To read the novel as a symptom of revolutionary discouragement might remain plausible, however, especially given the Spanish Fascist victory in 1939, not reversed in 1945, even more especially so if we assume, as Jameson does, that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ends with:

But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.

immediately followed by:

THE END⁶⁵

But the novel actually continues, in my edition for over fourteen more pages, until the conclusion to the *Appendix* on Newspeak: ‘It was chiefly in order to allow time for the preliminary work of translation that the final adoption of Newspeak had been fixed for so late a date as 2050’.⁶⁶ In content, these lines add little, but their form is redolent with meaning. For, as Margaret Atwood observes of the whole *Appendix*, it

is written in standard English, in the third person, and in the past tense, which can only mean that the regime has fallen, and that language and individuality have survived. For whoever has written the essay on Newspeak, the world of 1984 is over.⁶⁷

This must be right: the *Appendix* is internal to the novel, neither an author’s nor a scholarly editor’s account of how the fiction works, but rather a part of the fiction, a fictional commentary on fictional events. And, although Atwood fails to notice this, it is anticipated within the main body of the text, by a footnote in the first chapter, which assures us, again in standard English, in the third person, in the past tense, that: ‘Newspeak was the official language of Oceania’.⁶⁸ Atwood uses a similar device in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the first of her own dystopian SF novels, which concludes with an extract from the proceedings of a ‘Symposium on Gileadean Studies’, written in some utopian

65. Orwell 1989, p. 311.

66. Orwell, 1989, p. 326.

67. Atwood 2005, p. 337.

68. Orwell 1989, p. 5n.

future set long after the collapse of the Republic of Gilead.⁶⁹ Moreover, she readily admits that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* provided her with a ‘direct model’ for this.⁷⁰ If she is to be believed, then both Orwell’s Appendix and her ‘Historical Notes’ work as framing devices, by which to blunt the force of dystopian inevitability so as to establish what Jameson would understand precisely as a ‘critical dystopia’.

There are good reasons to take Atwood seriously, not least her own SF novels. But I myself have pursued this matter further, by way of an analysis of the ‘problem of ending’ in four intertexts to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, with all of which Orwell was himself familiar: Zamyatin’s *We*, in Cauvet-Duhamel’s French translation as *Nous autres*; Huxley’s *Brave New World*; and Selver’s British translation of Čapek’s *R.U.R.*⁷¹ Insofar as dystopian fictions do share a utopian intent, then they typically confront the problem of how to represent a naturalistically plausible danger sufficiently terrible to be threatening, but insufficiently so as to be demoralising. And this is precisely the problem faced by Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. We know he was much impressed by *Nous autres*: in 1946, he wrote approvingly of it in his famous essay on Burnham; in 1948, he offered to review a proposed English translation, which failed to eventuate, for the *Times Literary Supplement*; in 1949, he urged it on Fred Warburg, who had published *Animal Farm* and would shortly publish *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. And we know *Nous autres* is organised into forty chapters, or ‘Notes’, the penultimate of which is entitled ‘LA FIN’. But it actually continues for a further six pages after ‘LA FIN’,⁷² just as the first edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* continues for a further fourteen after ‘THE END’.⁷³ Given Orwell’s familiarity with the other texts, especially *Nous autres*, it seems very plausible that the Appendix on Newspeak was in fact a deliberate invention, an experiment in relation to the genre of SF, designed to achieve the effect Atwood describes in her own work.⁷⁴

These are formal solutions to formal problems of a kind critical theorists such as Jameson are peculiarly well-equipped to understand. Why, then, should his analysis prove so thoroughly misconceived? Why should such a distinguished literary critic ignore the entirety of the last fourteen pages of a

69. Atwood 1987, pp. 311–24.

70. Atwood 2005, p. 337.

71. Milner 2006.

72. Zamyatin 1929, pp. 227–32.

73. Orwell 1949, pp. 299–312.

74. Interestingly, there is no trace of the Appendix in what remains of Orwell’s manuscript. Given its dilapidated state, this proves little. But it is suggestive of the possibility that the Appendix was written last, as the real ‘END’ to the novel, the solution to a problem that had become apparent only when the main text was more or less complete.

text? The answer must be, in part, because Jameson is located in the United States, rather than Western Europe, and his reading is therefore perhaps unavoidably overdetermined by the novel's American Cold-War reception. But it is also, I fear, because – like the *New Left Review* in Britain, which often publishes his essays – Jameson inherits from the Trotskyist Fourth International a peculiar loyalty to a certain legacy of Stalinism. To cite the obvious example, his reference to Stalinist Russia as a 'workers' state' repeats a long-standing Trotskyist formulation, which seems utterly perverse: Stalin's Russia was in no sense a workers' state, but rather a primitive form of monopoly state-capitalism, not so much 'socialism' as 'barbarism', to rework Luxemburg's famous formulation.⁷⁵ It is also interesting to note that Jameson's single most influential work, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, is famously underwritten by the analysis of 'late capitalism' developed in the first instance by Ernest Mandel, the most distinguished of 'orthodox-Trotskyist' intellectuals after Trotsky himself.⁷⁶

This is not to suggest that Orwell's life, his politics and his dystopia remain immune to criticism. But Raymond Williams showed far more insight than Jameson, when he sought to situate *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in relation to Orwell's 1946 essay on James Burnham. Like Burnham, Orwell had believed capitalism finished; unlike Burnham he hoped to see it replaced by democratic socialism; but like Burnham he acknowledged the strong possibility that a quasi-socialist rhetoric would be used to legitimate 'managerial revolution' and bureaucratic dictatorship. Burnham anticipated this prospect with some relish – witness his involvement with the CIA – Orwell with much fear. Hence, the latter's insistence that 'the question is whether capitalism, now obviously doomed, is to give way to oligarchy or to true democracy'.⁷⁷ This was, for Williams, Orwell's crucial mistake: to have imagined capitalism already beaten and, hence, the central issue as that between different 'socialisms'. As it turned out, what Orwell most failed to anticipate, Williams concludes, is the 'spectacular capitalist boom', which falsified 'virtually every element of the specific prediction'.⁷⁸ There is much truth in this judgement. But we all misread the future, utopians as much as anyone. For *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as for any other SF novel, the key question remains that identified by Jameson: not 'did it get the future right?', but rather 'did it sufficiently shock its own present as to force a meditation on the impossible?'. What Jameson misses is that the process works for dystopia as well as eutopia, for barbarism as well as socialism.

75. Luxemburg 1970, p. 327.

76. Jameson 1991, pp. 35–6; see Mandel 1975.

77. Orwell 1970e, p. 198.

78. Williams 1991, p. 117.

So this is more than a passing mistake about either Orwell or *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: it is, rather, a crucial failure to theorise adequately one of the central forms of contemporary science-fiction.

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