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Dystopia and quarantined markets – an interview with James Fitchett

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ABSTRACT

We present an invited interview with Professor James Fitchett (University of Leicester) on the idea of dystopia and dystopic tendencies in the historical moment of the Covid-19 pandemic.¹ With his wonderfully nuanced background in psychoanalytic theory and a keen interest in understanding market phenomena critically through ideology, paradox, fantasy, simulation, narcissism and sadism among others, James provides a sweeping and sometimes surprising account of how utopia can be both quite selfish and mundanely bland, and how dystopia can be vastly attractive and deeply desired in consumption.

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“Dystopia” with James Fitchett

Alan Bradshaw: James, is it possible to talk about dystopia without first foregrounding utopia? The two concepts kind of correspond to each other.

James Fitchett: I think it is reasonable to think about the idea of utopia existing before the idea of dystopia, at least in a literal sense. But maybe we can also say that the idea of utopia has existed long before the concept of dystopia, and therefore it's also reasonable to think that dystopian ideas have an equally timeless quality about them. I'm always reluctant to be universalist about any social or cultural idea. Ideas such as happiness, love, satisfaction, terror, boredom, excitement are of course culturally relative, and we can imagine societies or historical periods where some of these ideas either did not exist at all or meant something very different than their current usage. But I think that utopian thinking – some kind of utopian imagination – has a universal quality, if only because human beings experience their lived realities and so can also presumably imagine other ways of being, some of which are worse, which we might call dystopian, and some which are better. For nomadic people, perhaps the utopian imagination was a place where the migration of animals was endless, or for people living in the first settlements, maybe it was a magic world where crops never failed or wild beast never attacked, or where the gods always answered your prayers and cured pestilence and disease. Plato's *Republic* is often considered to be one of the first Utopias and various visions of heaven served the medieval imagination with utopian content. So, if that is true, it suggests that there is also the looming fear of the dystopian imagination where animals never return, crops always fail, and prayers are never answered. Visions of hell are some of the most powerful and terrifying visions

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¹The discussion is based on a transcript of the recording Quarantined Market Podcast (episode 8) that has been edited for publishing in textual form. The podcast episode can be found here: <https://soundcloud.com/qmp-790368337/qmp8-dystopia-with-james-fitchett>. Essays based on this and other podcasts in the series also appear in *The Dictionary of Coronavirus Culture* published by Repeater.

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of dystopia that we have. Thus, before we go on to say something more about contemporary dystopian narrative, it is worth noting a couple of interesting observations about utopian imagination.

The first is that it is not altogether clear whether or not the idea of utopia was necessarily meant to be received as a vision of a better world. I'm thinking here of Thomas Moore's *Utopia*. First, Utopia is conventionally still derived from the term "nowhere," which would suggest that utopia is not anywhere, not an achievable or even desirable place. Secondly, Moore's "nowhere" or utopia does not automatically imply any moral or ethical valuation. It is quite literally nowhere at all. I'll use the modern usage of utopia here, that is, a preferable, desirable, altogether better imagined alternative society than the one we exist in today. Dystopia is then to be understood as the opposite. Of course, one person's utopia is another person's dystopia, and most utopian narratives are *exclusive* by their very structure. They tend to rely on the idea that some institutions, practices, and more importantly, some groups and individuals, will not exist or persist where others of those will survive and flourish.

The most obvious example of this is that the idea of Christian heaven, which is after all, a quite exclusive place reserved for the righteous and the blessed. So, we might say that all utopias imply a dystopia. While salvation is no doubt desirable in and of itself, it's made all the more so when one is able to observe all the wretched and damned, condemned to suffer in torment and misery. One of my favorite accounts of this is Francisco de Quevedo's *Dreams and Discourses* from the early seventeenth century, where he's permitted to travel through the halls of hell and then able to witness all of the evil and damned getting their comeuppance for all of their ill-lived lives.

For us, the golden age of utopias was the nineteenth and twentieth century. In some regards, what postmodernists refer to as the grand narrative, where the big, bold, progressive visions of the future are defined and justified as the basis for present policies and action. Both twentieth century fascism and communism were utopian narratives, and there is certainly something distinctly utopian about the fragmentary grand narratives that struggle to maintain credibility in the twenty-first century, whether they emphasize technology, environmentalism or various forms of social justice and injustice. So all utopias imply a dystopia. Now, the classic dystopian novels of the nineteenth and twentieth century are all political dystopias. Orwell's *1984*, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, for example. What I mean here by political is that they suggest that political utopian ideologies often end up creating a living nightmare in which the state apparatus becomes an oppressive tyranny.

Joel Hietanen: I was really interested in the exclusionary ideas that come with the notion of utopia. Even seems that the concept of utopia implies a certain selfishness. I'm reminded of St. Augustine writing how when you enter heaven, you can peer through the clouds, so to speak, and observe the torments of people in hell. Of course, he had to write about that rather cleverly, saying that it's not that you enjoy this vision, but rather that you experience God's justice. So, what would you make of this idea of a certain selfishness that comes with the notion of utopian thinking?

JF: Well, I think the idea of the "self" is an interesting angle to take on utopia. Often, many classic and modern utopian narratives and have a strange relationship with the self in the sense that much of the utopian narrative is structured around the subordination of the self to some greater idea. We can think of fascism and communism as very good examples of that, whereby part of the problem in the contemporary dystopian reality is the construction of the self as it currently exists and that somehow needs to be transformed in some way. But of course, utopia is dependent on the perspective from which it is written. One is always in the preferred group. One never imagines oneself to be subject to the extermination necessary in order for the utopia to be realized. So, in a sense we could say that utopias are those imagined futures where my own personal interests or those of my class interest or group or clan or race or agenda or whatever, are given some kind of priority, and dystopias are those in which those identities are either eradicated or subordinated to some extent.

What is so desirable, what is so enchanting about the idea of using utopian narratives as a means to wreak revenge upon those groups that we, for whatever reason, have some distaste or dislike or a desire to revenge against? This happens to the poets for Plato, and in the Christian sadistic narrative, which I think is particularly delightful and relevant today. We imagine heaven to be a kind of fairly

boring and dull place. It's probably nice to get there and we can expect to meet other equally dull and righteous people, but one is always left with the question that is, what does one do here? What does one do with the eternity of bliss?

Well, presumably very quickly, the only thing that would really captivate our interest in that environment would be to be able to delight and indulge in witnessing the torment and suffering of the others who are damned. I think we could find lots of parallels for this, if we try and translate that into our understanding of contemporary capitalism and the way that consumer culture operates.

AB: On the one hand, we can say that utopian thinking is clearly very ancient, if not timeless. But on the other hand, looking at Raymond Williams's *Keywords* book, there is no reference to utopia. Nor is there an entry on discourse, on story, on narrative, which are all commonplace now within social sciences and humanities. My own instinct is that the academy became more interested in those issues as framing devices around postmodernism. But it is interesting how cultural studies itself doesn't seem to have an entry at least in Williams's book. Is that the case, that narratives, stories, discourse, *et cetera*, started to become more commonplace in the 1990s to do with postmodern? And if so, can we problematize this rise?

JF: Well, I think that with any set of terms or frames of reference that we use to try and explain social and cultural phenomena, there is always a danger of a kind of retrospective allocation. Going back to what I was saying, one could reason that any conscious human being who is able to symbolically represent aspects of their reality is therefore able to conceive of and understand alternative realities that could or should exist. I think it is almost certainly the case that this preference for explaining and describing cultural phenomena, using the language of narrative, of discourse and so on, has got particular relevance for us since the 1990s. It does not surprise me that that terminology does not feature in the critical and social theory of the 1950s and the 1960s as much.

AB: And yet, ironically, as authors like Owen Hatherley and Mark Fisher have been telling us, a lot of the architecture and political imaginarium of that social democratic era, including the Bolsheviks, was very utopian and futuristic. They were arguing that that goes into decline around the start of the twentieth century and continues today in the so-called post-political era. It does seem ironic that once upon a time not that long ago, there was a lot of utopian imagination at play. But perhaps cultural analysis was not really thinking of it in those terms.

JF: Yes, that is certainly one reading. I suppose part of me reads it slightly differently, which is when we look at those big revolutionary moments of the twentieth century, and I'm thinking particularly about the Russian revolution or the suffragette movement. I think that when we look back upon those moments now from the vantage point of the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, we make this assumption that there was a utopian or socially progressive narrative in play. But I am not sure that we can necessarily do that. I think that a lot of those movements are grounded in a sense of pragmatism within the material conditions of class politics and gender politics of the time, having much to do with a practical response to lived experience of oppressed groups, groups of people that were really living in absolute states of crisis and demands for change. Whether or not they saw themselves as utopian or not, I don't know, but I think it is convenient now for us to label those movements as such. I think that in some ways, this is the thing that differentiates what I would call genuine progressive politics and a kind of pseudo-progressive politics. So, fascism, for example, was always designed as a utopian project. In fact, we could almost say that its utopianism was used as a means to justify its terror. Instead, I again find that progressive political movements, the emergence of the trade union movement, the progress towards civil rights in the US and gender emancipation were not primarily grounded in grand narratives of utopianism but rather in material pragmatism. It's when they become co-opted as utopian narratives that they seem to become defanged to a certain extent. That's where I think that there is a real crisis for progressive and utopian thinking today in what you call the post-political. What we seem to lack is the ability to ground that in material practices, everyday realities, because primarily our main source of action, at least as we conceive it, is around marketplace behavior, which by its very nature makes it very difficult to enact those kinds of pragmatic responses to social change.

AB: Just one question before we move on to consumer culture. There was a review on The Guardian recently of *Picard*, which is Amazon Prime's new *Star Trek* show, where they revisit the character Jean-Luc Picard. I gave it a go and I concluded that it was unwatchable. But one of the comments was that it's remarkable how *Star Trek* in the 1960s was such a utopian show, and this latest iteration of it now is stripped of any type of utopian representation at all. The characters are quite bratty, there is a pessimism to it all, and it's quite telling that even in *Star Trek* itself, there is this absence of optimistic utopian thought. Is there something in the *zeitgeist*, do you think, which prohibits utopian thinking?

JF: Absolutely, and I think this is where we're going to move onto. There is a simple answer as to why it is really very difficult to conceive of utopias today. And that's because we *are* in utopia today. The reason why it is very difficult to imagine utopian futures is because we are in the utopian future. What does it mean to imagine utopia from utopia? Let's go to Thomas Moore's utopia and ask this question. What do the utopians dream of? That is the condition, that is the challenge that we face in, at least in what we might pejoratively term "The West." Or to use Baudrillard's comment from *Fatal Strategies*, "Too bad. We're in paradise."

JH: James, that is a very interesting comment. And now that you already mentioned Mark Fisher, I am also reminded of his development of Derrida's notion of "hauntology," to sort of illustrate our present condition where the "future is increasingly being canceled." We no longer seem to have an idea of anything ever changing in the future, the idea of a promising future being increasingly foreclosed. Some of that is very dystopian scholarship, a part of which is also referred to as accelerationist thinking. Of course, in accelerationism, some radical ideas might see this dystopia as an actual utopia in the sense that the only way you could expect to see any change is a complete reconfiguration of thinking within capitalism. In accelerationism, this would mean not to resist capital, but to rather accelerate its paradoxical tendencies to the point of collapse, or at least to the point of complete reconsideration of the entire system we live in. These forms of thought incline to the dystopian. Could you talk a little bit more about how you see the present condition as potentially utopian instead?

JF: The easiest way for me to do that would be to step onto some slightly firmer ground for me, and that is to try and locate this much more in the expanse of the market. If humankind once invested its utopian desires in spiritual afterlives or future political salvation, then we could argue today it's invested in the market. In practical terms, at least, the market is the source of utopian aspirations we look at consumption and consumer culture as the space where we can realize our utopian hopes and dreams, a better world, the better world, no longer only needs to be imagined or glimpsed at. We could actually go to it. We can visit it. We can observe it. And occasionally, some of us at least can acquire it, or parts of it. In order to make sense of that I think it's useful to distinguish between what we might call the *spectacular* utopian and dystopian spaces and the more *mundane* and everyday ones. This goes back to what I was just talking about with Alan, about why we have utopian narratives today, but we do not seem to have utopian action. What I mean is that we can imagine brave new futures in which artificial intelligence or genetic engineering or some other advanced form of technology completely transforms our world, satisfying all our desires, eradicating the mundanity of work, and healing us of all ills. But these grand utopias are just that, they are grand an imaginary, and, of course, they all have their associated dystopias. We have the dystopia of artificial intelligence taking over the world, or genetic engineering creating a new race of humans and so on. Whilst I find them very appealing and they make good Netflix series and so on, I'm not that interested in them apart from entertainment, simply because they will not impact most of us. But there's another form of utopia today, a mundane every day, what we might or so call a democratic kind of utopia that many of us can and have the ability to experience. The market and consumption are central to it. Let me explain what I mean by that with a rather trivial example.

When you go into an IKEA furniture store, you are nudged on to a one-way walkway, kind of like a promenade, which takes you through various domestic room layouts. First, we have a series of

living rooms, then bathrooms and kitchens and bedrooms. Each layout is like a stage set, almost as if a family had just left to the adjacent room and will return at any moment. There are books on the shelves, cookware, crockery on the kitchen work surfaces, teddy bears and pajamas in the beds. Each room is appropriately lit with lamps and shades, soft and hard furnishings and so on. Each of these spaces is kind of like a mini-utopia, a little piece of domestic desire. But of course, we also know that if we tried to create these spaces in our own homes, they would not be like it in real life. Reality would be less than perfect. In this respect our everyday reality in consumer society becomes a kind of mundane and everyday micro-dystopia that we set against the mundane and small every day utopias that are continually being simulated for us by advertising, social media, retail and marketing. Marketing in this sense is the organization and the materialization of mundane utopias.

James Cronin and I have recently did some work on *Huel*, which one of these meal replacement brands, what we might have traditionally called a diet replacement food product. But the way it positions itself is a kind of little bit of utopia in every powdered mouthful. Žižek is instructive on this point, when he talks about the desire for things without any of the negative consequences. So, he talks about coffee without caffeine. So, coffee that is good, that is utopian, does not exploit farmers, it's grown ecologically and so on. What we want is utopian coffee, but whilst we might try to convince ourselves that this is what we're actually buying, in reality we know that we are actually buying dystopian coffee. It is probably quite bad for us, probably exploits workers, probably it destroys the environment. This is what I mean by mundane dystopia and utopia. Now, the problem is that utopia is actually then somewhat of an anticlimax. What we thought was a utopia turned out to be not what we all dreamed of, but consumer society is not a complete dystopia either. In fact, it would probably be better for all of us if it was. Rather, we are left with a kind of miasma, a bland utopia and with it a bland dystopian feeling as well. There are both utopian and dystopian elements to it, but in a general bland mundanity that really does not offer us much to get particularly happy about or particularly angry about.

JH: So, utopia inherently comes with its dark side? Plasticine, barren landscape of consumption, at least the few would invoke Baudrillard again.

JF: Maybe. But again, I am going to go back to these little mundane utopias, which provide us with momentary opportunities to indulge in. Almost like democratic fantasies that we do not really invest a great deal in, that are easy to consume and easy to dismiss. I don't think we should underestimate the importance of those fragments in helping us to navigate and get through everyday life in a consumer society. In a way consumer society can be understood as a continual struggle and search for small utopias, and then the inevitable dissatisfaction that we all experience when they fail to really live up to the promise.

AB: I am thinking of a Talking Heads song, perhaps you know it. It's called *Flowers*, which imagines a utopian wilderness, and in it is some poor person who is just missing Pizza Huts and candy bars and microwaves. It finishes off with "don't leave me here, I can't get used to this lifestyle."

JH: I'm also reminded of Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy*, with a scandalous section where he talks on behalf of an English worker saying that "don't expect us to want any revolution." We just want to, in quotes, "swallow the shit of capital until we burst," all its commodities and so on.

JF: This is where I think that utopia and dystopia are really important ideas to understand modern society, probably more so than ever before. The reason is that utopia and dystopia provide valuable means to structure and organize social reality and the social imagination as a system of values. The problem is what happens when we end up in a consumer society in which they become realizable? One of the striking differences between utopian thinkers in previous eras and now is that by definition utopias were far off no-places, maybe a thing to be aimed for, and striven for, or avoided. But now we have utopia or as Baudrillard says "too bad we're in paradise." Illusions are no longer possible. One of the problems today then is not how to achieve utopia, but how to live with it. And frankly, it's quite unbearable. Effectively, there are some things we can do about it. *We can dream and desire dystopia.*

If mundane utopias come with the core commodities of material consumer culture, what you just referred to Joel as that kind of mundane detritus, then I would say that dystopian fantasies are the commodity of the post-material and the postmodern. While we have always desired utopian futures, whether or not be a land of milk and honey or to live in the big rock candy mountain where all the cops have wooden legs, the bulldogs have rubber teeth and the hens lay soft boiled eggs, or in IKEA where all the furniture matches and coordinates with one's perfect advert-like children, we have always desired something else as well. We have always desired the opposite of these things, the dystopian. My feeling has always been that our desires or dystopia will always be stronger than the desire for utopia. Now it falls to the market to regulate, control, order, ration, and serve dystopian desires and impulses.

If we did actually realize IKEA, of course, something like *The Truman Show* or *The Stepford Wives*, we all know what happens next, right? We all know the next step of the story, and I'm drawn to Georges Bataille here. After all, we cannot understand animal and human sacrifice, or religious inquisitions and witch trials, or the massacres in warfare, as anything other than the desire for the dystopian. I am often reminded of the revisionist history of the First World War here, and this kind of "lions led by donkeys" argument, that has never been particularly convincing to me. Sure, it appeals to my anti-elitism, but it also neglects the fact that Europe went willingly to war in 1914. I was really struck by the recent documentary, *They Shall Not Grow Old*, which showed this really well. Faced with the relative utopia of the Edwardian age, the masses on the whole marched gleefully to war. The question is, how does the market in consumer culture regulate what I think is essentially a kind of death drive, this desire for the dystopian.

AB: I'm thinking now of Ernest Gellner, the anthropologist who understood consumer culture as there to provide that type of regulation that by channeling our desires into commodities, that that would somehow help pacify the population. Is that what you are getting at?

JF: I have a favorite example that I use to illustrate this. It is also certainly not very literary, so that's even better – watching *Jurassic Park* or *Jurassic World*, which are some of my favorite movies. The one I'm thinking here is the reboot, *Jurassic World*, where we all know what happens. We go along to a theme park, which is on a tropical island and when you arrive there, it's like getting to one of these big theme parks, but of course the unique feature about this particular entertainment environment is that there are dinosaurs there. Real dinosaurs that have been brought back to life through the miracles of genetic science or manipulating DNA. Now, in *Jurassic World*, it's slightly different from the previous movies, in that they have not just brought back dinosaurs from the past. They have created a new dinosaur; a dinosaur that is synthetic. It is a completely made up creature that's got bits of *Tyrannosaurus rex* and other dinosaurs called the *Indominus rex*. It has amazing qualities. It has some kind of intelligence, it can disappear into its surroundings like a chameleon and so on. Essentially, we have created this creature that we can invest all of our dystopian fears and concerns in. Now, a great question that this movie poses at the beginning is this: What kind of world do we live in where we get bored by the idea of looking at normal, everyday dinosaurs? What happens when marketers and the focus groups have to go out of their way to create something even more spectacular, even more dangerous, even more terrifying, as if seeing traditional dinosaurs is kind of passé, boring, and isn't going to continue to generate enough revenue and reproduce capital? What kind of world do we live in when we get bored with the idea of looking at *Tyrannosaurus rex*?

What happens in the movie is that everybody arrives at the park and there's all these usual kinds of Hollywood narratives there, about relationships or whatever, and everything seems fine to begin with. The question is, how long do you want to watch *Jurassic World*, where people are actually at this amazing theme park, having a nice time in utopia? I would say about five minutes is probably pushing it. Then after that, of course, what do we really want to see? We want to see everybody getting eaten by dinosaurs! There is something democratic about the dystopia of *Jurassic World* too, because we want to see everybody getting eaten by them. We want to see young people, old people, disabled people, people of different ethnic backgrounds get eaten. Everybody is super democratic

about the terror of *Jurassic World*, in which everybody is equal when it comes to their potential to be dinosaur food. The reason this is a super narrative is because it illustrates that given the choice between wanting to indulge in dystopian visions or utopian ones, the dystopian ones are far, far more valuable. They are far more attractive and ultimately, they are much more desirable. Which is why, to answer one particular question, it is far easier for us to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. Somewhere in the unconscious, but not so deep down, this is what we really desire and this is what we invest in the market for.

JH: This has also been a key interest of mine, as it would seem that in much of critical literature, capitalism is sort of seen as an epiphenomenon, this vampiric force that comes from the outside. But what if instead we would look at it as a product of our very desiring relations itself? I'm also reminded of the movie *Alien*, where they often refer to the alien as the perfect creature. As psychoanalytic literature would inform us, when you reach perfection, when you reach the utopia, what you get is naturally the nightmare.

AB: If I could just add to that there was a psychoanalyst writing around the time of the Second World War called Edward Glover, who warned that he thought that a lot of the pacifists who were trying to campaign for peace could not be trusted, that they might be warmongers themselves. That at a certain point, the psyche in the desire for peace, corresponds with the desire for destruction and war, and hence we should be very cautious of pacifists.

JH: Žižek made the example, I think it was of an old Italian novel, where the general plot is that there are two cities separated by a river. On paper, they are in war in the story, but there has been no act of war committed for ages. Of course, what happens then is that somebody takes something like a rowing boat, rows next to the next city and throws a stone at them to commit an act of war, because this peace time was, in the end, way too unbearable. A utopia, in a sense, that must be ruptured.

JF: This is how I interpret Baudrillard's and Žižek's "too bad you're in paradise" argument. It is basically that the one thing you want to be worried about more than anything else is getting what you want, because if you do, then the consequences of it are terrifying psychologically, socially, and philosophically. The market operates by continually putting our desires ever so slightly out of reach. Unfortunately, compared to organized religion or other channels of desire, perhaps it puts them a little bit too close to us.

Let's think about some of the classic utopian narratives of capitalism. Like *Robinson Crusoe*, which is often considered to be a foundational myth for capitalism. But it portrays a very individualistic utopia, one that is perhaps not very imaginative. I think what's more interesting as foundational market ideology and utopia is Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*. Mandeville tells the story of the bees in the hive that at one point manages to create perfect harmony, happiness and ease. Consequently, the hive descends into weakness and decline, and is eventually dominated and overrun by much, much more innovative, entrepreneurial, aggressive, and destructive hives. So essentially, Mandeville's argument is to say, we could achieve utopia simply by being selfish, avaricious, violent, and so on. By actually pursuing the dystopian, one of the outcomes will be utopia! I think this is absolutely brilliant, for me it consists of the fundamental underlying mythological narratives of contemporary capitalism. What it says is, you could still have utopian ambitions and desires for the future, but the best way to achieve that is to be completely selfish, self-oriented, destructive and avaricious now. In fact, you could say you have a duty to do that. Consequently, if you want to save the environment, if you want to save polar bears, the best thing you could do is burn oil. Now, you might not be able to understand how that dystopic behavior now will create the utopia in the future, but Mandeville's lesson is that you do not need to worry about that. In fact, if you do worry about it now, you will create the dystopia. This is the ultimate logic underlying much of the kind of center and far right market-oriented fundamentalism, which essentially uses it as a basis to criticize social democratic or more socialist-oriented policies and practices. I think that this is a much more sophisticated understanding of why dystopia rather than utopia is far more important for us to understand the mechanics of contemporary society.

AB: Which takes us to our present moment, which clearly is extremely dystopian in that we are in [Covid-19 related] lockdown. There is a huge amount of death, risk and fear. But on the other hand, we have this environmental fantasy that the flights are grounded, that sustainability now becomes something of a possibility, that people are staying at home from work and so on. It seems that again we get this correspondence of the best of times and the worst of times.

JF: Yeah, I need to be fairly careful on how I talk about this, because I realize it is very close to peoples' lived experience of the moment. Generally speaking, I see most of the representation of the current crisis as being fairly dystopic. But it is a dystopia that we desire, and we have been dreaming and fantasizing about this kind of collapse for a long, long time, and now that it has happened we are "enjoying" the moment. Obviously, there's going to be all kinds of problems and consequences. There will be a big hangover from this, and that is to put it mildly. But at the moment, I do not think that we can really contemplate exactly what that is going to be like, so I would *encourage us all to indulge in the dystopia for the moment*. It is a space in which we can achieve and realize many of our deeply repressed fantasies and desires of destruction, Armageddon, and catastrophe.

One of the things I'm struck by when I pick up upon the news reports every day, is that there really is not much news at all apart from more and more people are dying from this virus, which is a fairly predictable and unchanging narrative. And yet, this insistence, this kind of global focus, this global attention that we're all thinking about the same thing at the moment, gives us a great feeling and sense of global solidarity. I think that we can understand the current crisis pretty much as one in which we can realize some of those fantasies for the end of the world, for want of a better way of putting it.

JH: You also mentioned technological dystopias. When we think of social media these days and how they are largely guided by algorithms, there is a sense that we are sort of giving away something of our humanity to the machines. Ray Brassier, in his development of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic [of Enlightenment]*, said that the problem with modernity was that modernity's ideal of rationality sacrificed itself. Well, that is a problem, because even if you think you can do away with sacrificial thinking, it always comes in through the back door, all these destructive tendencies, this desire for dystopia and annihilation. So, I was thinking about the global stock exchange and how much humans still have control over it. Now in the *Terminator* movies, of course, the Skynet as the technological harbinger of the end of humanity can only act when it gains self-awareness, essentially creating an image of a humanity itself. But I would argue that we already have a sort of a Skynet in the form of the global stock exchange, because nobody can really stop it at this point. And when you look at how it functions, it is massively ran by automated algorithms with decreasing human input at any point of the system. Nobody can pull the plug anymore, really. So, what we see there is a stock exchange that has no anthropomorphic need for silly self-awareness to still function perfectly. So, will we see more of this what Alan has also called the "hollowing out," so machines removing the need for human skill, human participation in any systemic activity. And might this be, ironically, utopian?

JF: I think the *Terminator* franchise is a brilliant illustration of this, of course, and it explains exactly what you said. For a start, it fulfills everything that we have been talking about – this desire for dystopia. I was watching the original *Terminator* movie only a couple of weeks ago, actually, for various reasons. With regards to the way in which Skynet has evolved over the franchise, in the last version Skynet's completely been replaced by a different organization in an alternative timeline. But what the Skynet example illustrates from a retro point of view, is that Skynet does not need to become self-aware in order to fill that dystopian vision. This is why I think that it was ultimately our fantasy of an otherwise benevolent or malevolent capitalism. The illustration of that was comparable to what I was recently reading Max Tegmark's book *Life 3.0* about the future of General Artificial Intelligence. Let's say we're going to build a dam in order to generate electricity, and we built a structure and we flood the valley and when we do we destroy all of the ant colonies in the valley as a result. We did not even know the colonies were there. We certainly had no ill will towards the ants at all. They did not feature at all in our plans or thoughts about constructing the dam.

Tegmark's point is that when we do finally manage to create General Artificial Intelligence we need to be sure that we are not the ant hills. It is not that the AI dam builders are going to think that this is really going to be bad for humanity and take some kind of self-protective or self-defensive pre-counterstrike because the humans might pull the plug. AI, and you've just described about the stock exchange, can continue to reproduce itself without any consideration at all for what we might call the human. That is the ultimate kind of dystopian outcome, because the dystopia is not one in which humans are being punished or being subject to the ill will or manipulation of any other agency or structure. On the contrary, humanity, our existence, and our values are literally completely irrelevant in the grand scheme of things. It is in this sense that dystopia gives us an opportunity to try to imagine bringing some kind of system of values back into our social imagination.

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