

Book Review

Frase, Peter. *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism*. Verso, 2016.

Review by: Adam Szetela

There are two issues that frame *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* by Peter Frase. On the one hand, there is the issue of automation. Today, researchers at Oxford University and elsewhere estimate that nearly half of the jobs in the United States and other countries are vulnerable to automation (2). On the other hand, there is the issue of ecological catastrophe. Unanimously, scientists around the world believe that global warming will desolate inhabitable and fertile land, clean water, and other resources. Against the backdrop of these two existential issues, Frase maps out four possible futures.

The first future is *communism*. In this future, the conflict between labor and capital no longer exists. In this future, automation has replaced necessary labor, and economic inequality is a remnant of the past. Moreover, technological advances have forestalled ecological catastrophe. For Frase, communism is marked by *equality and abundance*. It is the kind of world depicted in *Star Trek*, where people are free from hunger, homelessness, and necessary labor. It is a world where labor is an end in itself, whatever one chooses to do. In short, it is a world run according to Karl Marx's principle, "from each according to their ability, to each according to their need" (quoted in 48).

The second future is *socialism*. In this future, automation has not replaced necessary human labor. In addition, technology has not stopped global warming. So, there will be democratized systems of production, unconditional basic income (UBI), and so on. More importantly, there will be no capitalists. But there will also be real environmental problems and a need for human labor. In other words, socialism is a world of *equality and scarcity*. In this world, national service might replace the wasted labor of capitalism and militarism, insofar as the labor of human beings is still needed to solve problems.

The third future is *rentism*. In this future, patents are central to the economy. One finds the seeds for this future in the present, as intellectual property-intensive industries now make up 39 percent of GDP in Europe and 35 percent of GDP in the United States (79). At the same time, these percentages are expected to rise. In the rentist future, people will be forced to pay rents to the rentier class that owns the patents. In the absence of equalizing structures such as UBI, rentism will be marked by periodic economic crises, since most people's labor will be automated, rendering most people unemployed. In contrast to communism, rentism is a future marked by *hierarchy and abundance*.

The last future is *exterminism*. In this future, the rich no longer depend on workers, since automation has replaced human labor. Yet, technology has not resolved the problem of ecological catastrophe. The result is enclaves of automation and abundance for the rich—enclaves like those depicted in the film *Elysium*—and a landscape of destruction and scarcity for everyone else. As

Frase argues, “A world where the ruling class no longer depends on the exploitation of working-class labor is a world where the poor are merely a danger and an inconvenience.” (126). This is a world of *hierarchy and scarcity* where it is easier for the rich to kill off the poor, than to continually repress them.

Ultimately, Frase is not interested in the likelihood of one future over another. He believes the actual future will be a combination of all four futures. It will also be the changing product of struggle. That said, Frase does not spend a lot of time discussing the different kinds of struggles that might engender a communist or socialist future. To be sure, he does embrace struggles for UBI, shorter workdays, and the like. And he does connect these struggles to communism and socialism. But his work lacks the scrupulous examination of struggle, which one finds in other recent books such as *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century* by Erik Olin Wright. Since Wright influenced Frase, readers might benefit from reading these two books alongside each other.

This point aside, Frase’s book provides a useful framework to think about life after capitalism. This framework draws on social science, which deals with the present, and science fiction, which deals with the future. As he describes it, *Four Futures* is a work of “social science fiction” (24). In this respect, it will interest many people who read *Cultural Logic*.



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