



Four Futures: Life After Capitalism

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An exhilarating exploration into the utopias and dystopias that could develop from present society

Peter Frase argues that increasing automation and a growing scarcity of resources, thanks to climate change, will bring it all tumbling down. In *Four Futures*, Frase imagines how this post-capitalist world might look, deploying the tools of both social science and speculative fiction to explore what communism, rentism, socialism and exterminism might actually entail.

Could the current rise of real-life robocops usher in a world that resembles *Ender's Game*? And sure, communism will bring an end to material scarcities and inequalities of wealth—but there's no guarantee that social hierarchies, governed by an economy of "likes," wouldn't rise to take their place. A whirlwind tour through science fiction, social theory and the new technologies already shaping our lives, *Four Futures* is a balance sheet of the socialisms we may reach if a resurgent Left is successful, and the barbarisms we may be consigned to if those movements fail.

Four Futures: Life After Capitalism Details

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From Reader Review Four Futures: Life After Capitalism for online ebook

James says

the introduction serves this book well, as it lays out how the author plans to tackle the issues of control and availability in lear, concise fashion, but also softens the letdown of a "social science fiction" book... a tad light big theories, but since the reader comes in knowing the author has no plans to argue certain points (ubiquity/progression of tech, for one) it does mean certain circularities or endless arguments can be avoided altogether... his matrix of communism, socialism, rentism, and exterminism was rather easy to understand and quite thought out... he references some other theorists and thinkers, but doesn't bog down in footnoting or just paraphrasing others' ideas... i would say the author is less hopeful of the positive outcomes, but that's OK with me, as i think people are shite and the planet can't wait for us to fuck right off and die already... when you have 2/3 of the wealth held by 1/100 of the population, something is WRONG, and not just in Denmark... hahaha! capitalism isn't broken (it's actually working fabulously as an economic model seemingly), capitalism is the wrong system... totally wrong... most who disagree want one of two things: to BE wealthy/powerful, or to NOT have their fantasy of being wealthy and powerful blow up in their face when they see the parasitic awfulness of capitalism destroy the lives of the overwhelming majority of the world... a good book to get you interested in where we may be heading, depending on what we choose to do (or choose to allow to be done to us)... there is surely enough for all to live well, but whateverthefuck we are doing right now is most assuredly NOT ever going to make that happen...

Kate says

This was a great read. So great, in fact, that I couldn't put it down. I read it in one day. It felt like the exact book that I needed at this moment. It answered the still lingering question: What's next? Where do we go from here? The biggest takeaway for me was the importance of a universal basic wage. If you have a knee-jerk reaction to the notion of people getting paid for doing nothing, then you should read this book. Technology will inevitably continue to replace workers and drive down the cost of labor (and thus the returns to labor). If that's true, then what are people for? (Credit goes to Wendell Berry for that question.) We're already seeing the effects that automation are having on jobs and wages. McDonalds is, right at this instant, developing technologies to replace its workers. The moment fast-food workers successfully win their bid for a liveable wage, they'll be replaced by machines. And if you think only low-skill workers are at risk, you're wrong. Technologies are already replacing white-collar workers, too. (See Suskind & Suskind, "The Future of Professionals.") But the takeaway is not all doom and gloom. A universal basic wage will allow all of us to live a life liberated from the oppressive forces of capitalism. We can embrace work that is meaningful, not just remunerative. We all wonder, at some point in our lives, what would we do if money didn't matter? Soon, maybe it won't.

James (JD) Dittes says

Is there a horror movie villain you can think of that has more lives than capitalism? Rumors of its demise stretch back to the era of the trust-busters and the Progressive Party. Every time a depression or war or rival ideology seems to have the system on its knees, its limbs burst to life and someone appears to proclaim, "I'm back!"

Considering the events since The Great Recession, along with growing numbers of Americans who support socialized college funding and medical insurance, this might be another time to contemplate Capitalism's demise. At least that's what Peter Frase sets out to do in this short, thought-provoking look into the future.

I'll admit that I was expecting something of a manifesto here, but that's not what I found. Frase presents the future in an imaginative way--including references to literature and sci-fi movies like "Star Trek" and "Elysium" along with the thoughts of political scientists. This adds levity to scenarios that are far-ranging, and I think that it makes the book more accessible to readers.

What replaces Capitalism? Frase frames his ideas in the growing calls for another basic tenet of socialism: the Universal Basic Income (UBI). Ten years ago, this was a laughed-at, pie-in-the-sky proposition. Now it is getting more serious consideration. Why? Because people recognize that automation--more than globalization--is eliminating jobs but not the need for human beings to have a basic standard of living.

Frase's futures include Communism--when the UBI is in place, and automation ends the role of scarcity in the economy. He takes a look at Renterism, where corporations own all the cars (Uber), the seeds/food (Monsanto), and other key elements of daily life, typical people will find their rights reduced in the face of production efficiencies. Frase's chapter on Socialism goes beyond current debates about health care and student loans into the theme of climate change and social-engineered energy production. His final chapter, on Exterminism, examines the possibility that excess workers will be sloughed off into even broader prison systems as the wealthy retreat into offshore utopias guarded by walls and private security forces.

For me, the demise of Communism came from its inability to reward innovation in the way that Capitalism can. I'm skeptical of Frase's ideas about an end to scarcity, because this is a chronic problem in communist countries--look at Venezuela's current food shortages, where were hampered by low oil prices and exacerbated by a command economy. Still, I buy the jobs-free technological future that he foresees, and I'm growing in acceptance of the UBI.

This is a thought-provoking, insightful look into four possible futures, should capitalism fall by the way side. Should rumors of capitalism's demise prove once again to have been greatly exaggerated, Frase's book still shines light on very real possibilities or adaptations for the future.

Special thanks to Net Galley and Verso Books for allowing me an advanced copy to review.

Thomas Estabrook says

This is a mildly interesting book that ultimately left me unsatisfied. I intend to use this review to untangle some of why that was, because I see its flaws as mirroring important flaws in the perspective and program of much of the mainstream left.

I approved of the book's overall goal of sketching out hypothetical futures. A lifelong science fiction enthusiast myself, I appreciated Frase's thoughts on science fiction as a means of social inquiry. I am also generally in agreement with Frase's overall thesis: ecological crisis and automation-induced unemployment pose problems that are insoluble under capitalism in its current form. From these, he derives two axes: scarcity-abundance and equality-hierarchy. These produce four archetypal futures: communism (abundant and egalitarian), socialism (abundant and scarce), rentism (abundant and hierarchical) and exterminism (scarce and hierarchical).

Each future has a chapter devoted to it, and I will record my thoughts chapter-by-chapter below. First, however, it is worth noting that Frase (as far as I could tell) bases the scarcity axis largely on whether or not society runs up on hard ecological limits; the unstoppable march of automation is largely taken as a given in each scenario. As I discuss at the end of this review, this reflects at best short-sightedness about how technology is developed and deployed under capitalism, and at worst an implicit reification of technology as a neutral social force of its own.

Frase begins by discussing his idea of “communism,” which he frames as a society of unlimited abundance and equal distribution of resources. His fictional paradigm in this case is Star Trek, and he returns frequently to the idea of “replicators” that can supply individuals with unlimited consumer goods. He spends the first half of the chapter arguing that being freed from their central role in the production process will enable humans to follow their bliss (as opposed to making everyone listless and indolent), and then shifts gears and discusses the ways that alternate forms of hierarchy and conflict (such as quantified forms of reputation serving as a new sort of currency) might emerge. The redditification of society, if you will. I found this section to be by far the least interesting for two reasons. First, I am dubious that the sort of abundance described in this chapter is viable without maintaining exploitative capitalist supply chains, thus rendering the hypothetical scenario more-or-less moot (unless arrived at by way of exterminism). Secondly, he largely bypasses what (to my mind) are the most interesting questions about a fully automated society. For example, to what extent does freedom from material scarcity necessarily overlap with the abundance of consumer products implied by the idea of “replicators”? Does eliminating work in favor of leisure actually reinforce or reify the work-leisure binary imposed by capital? To what extent and in what ways would the vast technological infrastructure needed to support such a society enhance or impede the freedom and well-being of its members? These are questions that Frase doesn’t grapple with, much to the detriment of Four Futures.

The next chapter deals with “rentism” – a society that has also developed the “replicator” technology from the preceding chapter but maintains economic hierarchies by using intellectual property laws to regulate how the replicators are used. The most interesting thing about this chapter was how implausible it all sounded. The contortions people in this world have to go through to maintain the existence of the money form in a world without work lend credence to the labor theory of value and point to something more sinister that Frase doesn’t explicitly mention: a sort of futuristic hydraulic despotism wherein the power of technocrats is embedded in the technological infrastructure.

Frase next turns to socialism, which he defines as an egalitarian society that must nonetheless grapple with scarcity (exacerbated by ecological crisis). Frase uses this chapter to map out how our society might go about securing an equitable future for all seven billion humans. It was this chapter that I found most objectionable – indeed, I found some of what he has to say about ecology actively abhorrent. At one point he argues that the only reason to save other life forms from extinction is because humans enjoy having other lifeforms around. This sort of reductive, anthropocentric thinking precludes a serious ecological perspective by reducing the question of how to interact with the complex life-systems in which we are all enmeshed to a matter of what gives humans (just one element in the system) the most satisfaction. In keeping with this shortsightedness, all of Frase’s suggested solutions to ecological destruction involve the intensified deployment of new technologies – even markets as a scheme (somehow divorced from capital) for allocating limited resources within a centrally planned framework. He thus conflates the radical interconnectedness of humans and nature with a need for intensified control by humans over nature.

The last chapter of Four Futures is by far the most compelling, largely because it is a convincing depiction of the trajectory the world is presently on. Conceivably, at some point automation could push the rate of profit so low that simply by existing workers put more of a drain on profit than they can offset with their labor power (arguably, this has already happened in some areas). In such a circumstance, their extermination becomes an economic imperative. Frase paints a chilling picture of how this is already being put into action through militarized police forces, robotic weapons, eco-apartheid settlements, and space colonization. Accordingly, the most persuasive part of Four Futures is... a description of the present.

As a concluding thought, although Frase probably identifies as a “Marxist,” this isn’t really a Marxist book because the assumed power of automation largely allows him to bypass the topic of labor. In this way, his viewpoint actually seems to be a lot closer to that of the liberal technocrats that he criticizes. (For a much more nuanced look at how labor and technology have interacted throughout history, I suggest consulting the essays in George Caffentzis’ *In Letters of Blood and Fire*. For a look at how a future communist society might relate to technology, see the essay “Romantic Fictions” by Endnotes). His technological determinism is coupled with something even worse: an inability to think outside human subjectivity as it is constituted under capitalism. The inhabitants of all his futures rarely stray far from the atomized neoliberal consumer-worker that populates the present (hence his failure to address most of the questions mentioned above re: the “communism” chapter). Frase does not adequately consider that while we can speculate endlessly about what the kitchens of the future might look like, we can also consider the chefs.

Ultimately, I would not recommend *Four Futures* to others – it’s most interesting ideas can be easily picked up by reading the dust jacket insert, and the rest of the book just doesn’t have enough truly interesting material to justify a thorough read. It lives up neither to the hype surrounding its release, nor to the imaginative task it sets out for itself. I would be more sympathetic were it not for the clout that Jacobin and their anemic social-democratic (social-technocratic?) vision exert throughout the left – this book has enough defenders, and I will not be one of them.

Adam McPhee says

Science fiction is to futurism what social theory is to conspiracy theory: an altogether richer, more honest, and more humble enterprise. Or to put it another way, it is always more interesting to read an account that derives the general from the particular (social theory) or the particular from the general (science fiction), rather than attempting to go from the general to the general (futurism) or the particular to the particular (conspiracism).

With that in mind, Frase uses science fiction and social theory to look at four possible futures. He "posits that we can end up in a world of either scarcity or abundance, alongside either hierarchy or equality. This makes for four possible combinations."

They are:

Communism (equality and abundance): In this scenario he envisions a basic income that grows irrelevant as the tax base shrinks and as automation reduces the need for work. What's left of it, he argues, could be used as a kind of 'whuffie', the reputation-measuring currency in Doctorow's post-scarcity novel, and he looks at dogecoin as a sort of precursor to this (it's an internet currency that's essentially worthless, and so used for tipping people online).

Its chief pitfalls are that we'll never automate everything, and doing away with money might be possible, but we'll still have hierarchies (he cites infighting wikipedia editors).

Sci-fi examples: Star Trek, Corey Doctorow's *Down and Out in the Magical Kingdom* (view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

Rentism (Hierarchy and abundance): a really great look at how intellectual property rights aren't rights to property but to patterns, and how we're expanding the concept to include more and more patterns that we used to not think of as things that were commodifiable (he talks about fashion designers lobbying to copyright dress patterns, Monsanto copyrighting seeds, John Deere arguing that farmers can't use third-party software on its tractors, etc). This, combined with greater automation, creates wealth inequality as the amount things people can buy grows, but "squeezes human labor out of the system". Eventually, all that's left is a dwindling creative class, rentiers who collect payments without contributing to the system, and a class of guards who enforce the rentiers' rights.

For all these reasons, it seems that the main problem confronting the society of anti-Star Trek is the problem of effective demand: that is, how to ensure that people are able to earn enough money to be able to pay the licensing fees on which private profit depends. Of course, this isn't so different from the problem that confronted industrial capitalism, but it becomes more severe as human labor is increasingly squeezed out of the system, and human beings become superfluous as elements of production, even as they remain necessary as consumers. Ultimately, even capitalist self-interest will require some redistribution of wealth downward in order to support demand. Society reaches a state in which, as the French socialist André Gorz put it in his 1999 book *Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-Based Society*, "the distribution of means of payment must correspond to the volume of wealth socially produced and not to the volume of work performed."²³ Or, to translate from French Intellectual to English: you deserve a decent standard of living because you're a human being and we're a wealthy enough society to provide it, not because of any particular work that you did to deserve it. So in theory, this is one possible long-term trajectory of a world based on intellectual property rents rather than on physical commodity production using human labor. Ultimately, even capitalist self-interest will require some redistribution of wealth downward in order to support demand. Society reaches a state in which, as the French socialist André Gorz put it in his 1999 book *Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-Based Society*, "the distribution of means of payment must correspond to the volume of wealth socially produced and not to the volume of work performed."²³ Or, to translate from French Intellectual to English: you deserve a decent standard of living because you're a human being and we're a wealthy enough society to provide it, not because of any particular work that you did to deserve it. So in theory, this is one possible long-term trajectory of a world based on intellectual property rents rather than on physical commodity production using human labor. What Gorz is talking about is something like the universal basic income, which was discussed in the last chapter. Which means that one long-run trajectory of rentism is to turn into communism.

(view spoiler)

Sci-fi examples: Charles Stross' *Accelerando*, "Anti-Star Trek", Warren Ellis' *Transmetropolitan*

Socialism (equality and scarcity): Similar to communism, but with the realization that we live in a finite world and have to deal with climate change. "In general," Frase writes, "the struggle is over how to recognize and control the waste products of human civilization, rather than imagining that we can ever separate ourselves from nature." He argues we need a "state-driven project that can mobilize resources and labor in a way that's beyond the capabilities of either the free-market or (a) communist free-for-all."

He warns against the obstructive tendencies of modern politics, where the left believes it's too late to take meaningful action, and the right can't be bothered because climate change will only effect the poor.

He makes a case for a centrally-planned economy, and that humans have to take their place as custodians of the planet on a large scale that probably involves geoengineering, but also restructuring our daily lives.

Sci-fi examples: Kim Stanley Robinson's Pacific Edge, Mars Trilogy, 2312. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.

Exterminism (hierarchy and scarcity): The scariest of the four, made all the worse because it's basically already happening. With the need for labour diminished by automation the rich no longer have the need for the working classes, who are no longer working, they're just poor. He cites the algorithmic drone targeting in the war on terror, the militarization of America's police and the growing prison industry. It's terrifying.

In a 1983 article, the Nobel Prize-winning economist Wassily Leontief anticipated the problem of mass unemployment that has been contemplated throughout this book. In what he calls, with some understatement, a “somewhat shocking but essentially appropriate analogy,” he compares workers to horses.

One might say that the process by which progressive introduction of new computerized, automated, and robotized equipment can be expected to reduce the role of labor is similar to the process by which the introduction of tractors and other machinery first reduced and then completely eliminated horses and other draft animals in agriculture.⁵

As he then notes, this led most people to the conclusion that “from the human point of view, keeping all these idle horses ... would make little sense.” As a result, the US horse population fell from 21.5 million in 1900 to 3 million in 1960.⁶ Leontief goes on to express, with the cheery confidence of a mid-century technocrat, his confidence that since people are not horses, we will surely find ways to support all of society’s members. Echoing Gorz and other critics of wage labor, he argues that “sooner or later ... it will have to be admitted that the demand for ‘employment’ is in the first instance a demand for ‘livelihood,’ meaning income.”⁷ However, given the contemptuous and cruel attitudes of today’s ruling class, we can in no way take that for granted.

Fortunately, even the rich have developed norms of morality that make it difficult to reach for this Final Solution as a first resort. Their initial step is simply to hide from the poor, much like the characters in Elysium. But all around us, we can see the gradual drift away from just corralling and controlling “excess” populations, into justifications for permanently eliminating them.

Sci-fi example: Blomkamp's Elysium

anjana says

peter frase quoted arjun!!!!!!!!!!!!!! twice!

Peter Mcloughlin says

This is a short simple book that lays out four scenarios of the future, Abundance and egalitarianism, Abundance and Hierarchy, Scarcity and Egalitarianism, Scarcity and Hierarchy. Four types of life possible outside capitalism. Interesting but it seems like a pretty straightforward extrapolation of noncapitalist societies running on these the four categories based on these two dichotomies.

Anna says

Just from looking at it, you can tell that 'Four Futures' will only describe each of its scenarios briefly. This a 150 page book, after all. Yet somehow the brevity disappointed me nonetheless. (It probably didn't help that I read it in the throes of insomnia.) Not that I disagreed with what was said, nor that the choice of four options didn't seem sensible, rather that the introduction (more than a fifth of the total page count) set up slightly unrealistic expectations. Specifically, it claimed to be 'social science fiction' - my absolute favourite sub-genre of fiction - rather than futurism. Then the scenarios themselves lacked the detail and colour to really live up to that. Frase was most likely trying to keep it simple, whereas I wanted more depth and density. That said, I really liked the up-front assumption that capitalism is destroying itself, based on this excellent Wolfgang Streeck quote:

The image I have of the end of capitalism - and end that I believe is already underway - is one of a social system in chronic disrepair, for reasons of its own and regardless of the absence of a viable alternative. While we cannot know when and how exactly capitalism will disappear and that will succeed it, what matters is that no force is on hand that can be expected to reverse the three downward trends in economic growth, social equality, and financial stability and end their mutual reinforcement.

Frase cites a fairly limited selection of sci-fi novels to support each of the four futures, so the rest of this review will discuss each in turn and suggest additional relevant sci-fi references. Let's be honest, this is one of those books that I liked although part of me was always thinking, 'I would have written this a little differently'.

Communism

In this future of abundance and equality, sadly the least likely of the four, ubiquitous automation releases the population from unwanted work, the benefits of this are shared through a basic income, and climate change can be easily dealt with using technology. The chapter focuses on how meaning in life might be found without late capitalism's emphasis on paid work as identity. Frase mentions pseudo-currencies online based on status and social media likes. The elision between personal identity and hierarchies of 'esteem' was interesting in itself. Without a job to provide a group that you're part of ('postdocs' in my case), activities currently minimised as hobbies could provide similar groupings. Would they need to be hierarchical, though? I think work hierarchies are all about competition for a scarce resource: promotion to more senior, allegedly better jobs. Without that scarcity, I think the word hierarchy might be less immediately applicable. While social media esteem does involve a jockeying for popularity, there isn't the same sense that only a strictly finite number of people can be recognised for whatever reason. Surely abundance and equality would also allow for more co-operation rather than competition.

The communist scenario reminded me of the Culture novels, especially *The Player of Games*, in which games and love affairs occupy the leisurely lives of citizens. Particularly interesting to me in that novel was the discussion of Culture language, which is deliberately structured to restrict hierarchies and prevent sexual discrimination. It strikes me that a communist world would radically alter the meaning of words like value and work. I imagine such a world would also place great emphasis on experiences: travel, sports, and art in particular. I wonder what sort of literature it would produce? Unfortunately, we're very unlikely to find out.

Rentism

This future involves abundance thanks to automation, without equal distribution of the gains involved. In such a world, a privileged elite holds the patents and extracts rents from everyone who wants a copy. Again, climate change has somehow been fixed by technology. I liked the use of Transmetropolitan and its 'maker codes' as an example here. I was also reminded of a totally OTT cyberpunk novel in which media piracy carried the death penalty. This was applied in a darkly absurd fashion by the inevitable cyberpunk hired killer, who executed the offender then used some of their brain matter to improve the performance of coaxial cables in his stereo system. (I'm pretty sure that's a real book and I didn't just dream it. Can't remember the title for the life of me, though.) Cyberpunk as a sub-genre is predicated on ubiquitous computing with strongly-enforced corporate gatekeeping.

Rentism has the plausibility of already being visible everywhere. The most valuable corporate assets these days are forms of intellectual capital, not machines or buildings but algorithms, designs, DNA, and databases of personal information. The extent to which this undermines the operation of capitalism is the theme of Paul Mason's *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* and should be obvious to any A-level economics student. If the supply of a good is infinite, because it can be copied at effectively zero cost, the price falls to zero. Free market economics cuts its own throat! Only monopolism, a so-called market failure, prevents this. According to Mason, and in my view as well, this situation is inherently unstable due to the difficulty of preventing piracy.

Socialism

Now we come to the futures in which climate change cannot be handily swept aside by technology. In the socialist scenario, there is scarcity but relative equality thanks to government intervention and planning. This calls to mind several sci-fi novels that I have known and loved. Gwyneth Jones' *Bold as Love* series, in which an anarchic government of rockstars steers England through economic and environmental collapse. Ken McLeod's *Intrusion* and Julie Zeh's *Corpus Delicti: Ein Prozess*, both of which explore how interventionist governments that deal effectively with environmental collapse can also take an unnecessary level of interest in women's bodies. The former series is hopeful to a point, the latter two are less willing to put their faith in governments. *Intrusion* is very much a Labour utopia/dystopia, which encouraged me to compare it with the Conservative austerity and privatisation that happened instead. If your freedom is constrained, do you prefer it to be for a greater public good or for higher shareholder returns?

I was a little surprised that the socialism chapter didn't mention carbon rationing, which was briefly discussed as a potential (Labour) government policy back in the halcyon days of 2008. The *Carbon Diaries 2015* and sequel spin out the consequences of such a policy. It did, however, talk about economic planning in Francis Spufford's fascinating book *Red Plenty: Inside the Fifties' Soviet Dream*. Could supercomputers plan the economy for us? I would hope they could at least monitor environmental limits and warn against activities that would cross them - a carbon cap and trade scheme would obviously require automated monitoring and control. Frase's take on cap and trade was interesting: that if the government controls the price mechanism then it's not a capitalist market per se. To my mind, the truly subversive and anti-capitalist element of cap and trade is placing a hard quantitative limit on carbon emissions, production of some good, or whatever. This is antithetical to the magical thinking in free market economics that wealth can increase

infinitely and that the Earth will costlessly absorb infinite pollution forever.

Of the four futures, I think socialism is the best we can now hope for. I believe that we've missed our chance for a smooth, technology-led climate change mitigation. If that was ever possible (and there are structural reasons why not cf Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming), it certainly seems too late now. A world in which everyone has a basic income and carbon ration, however, looks vanishingly distant, simply because it would require a reckoning with the tiny elite who control a disproportionate share of global wealth.

Exterminism

The final and most plausible future is one in which climate change causes scarcity and the wealthy retreat to their citadels, while everyone else struggles to survive. Unfortunately this can already been observed in the horrific and inhumane treatment of refugees in America, Europe, Australia, et al. At a national level, racism and xenophobia allow rich countries to turn a blind eye to the suffering and death of refugees. At an international level, the richest insulate themselves further by building bunkers and retreats in New Zealand. (If you feel like being incandescently angry, read this very long New Yorker piece on super-rich survivalists. These people seem unwilling or unable to face the fact that they caused, and are still causing, the instability that they fear. Their greed for wealth and privilege has undermined the social contract and faith in politics. Their lifestyles are changing the climate. Their espousal of neoliberalism has split society, undermined trust, and depleted the public realm. And now they want to buy their way out of the country, indeed the world, that they've wrecked for short term gains!)

Anyway, Frase's first sci-fi example in this chapter is the film Elysium, which he admits has a political economy that is 'somewhat difficult to extract'. I found it a rather unsatisfactory dystopia, in which the shock was that a white American guy had to deal with a similar daily life to a developing-world slum inhabitant. The plot's focus was on getting healthcare for the underclass, without any explanation of why it was so scarce in the first place given total automation. Why aren't the elite extracting rents on the technology? Anyway, the film's resolution seemed to me like a metaphor for Obamacare: now you can get basic healthcare, no need to concern yourselves with all the other problems caused by structural inequality. A more apposite example of a rich elite quite actively trying to kill off an unemployed underclass can be found in The Ballad of Halo Jones. The main character lives in an overcrowded and dangerous ghetto for the unemployed, until in desperation she signs up for the army as a way to escape. The war she joins is brutal and pointless, quite possibly only happening as a way to simulate production of weapons and kill off the unemployed. That seems to me the most likely form more active exterminism would take: fomenting wars. Actually, this also a theme in the last novel I read, S. N. U. F. F.. Given the resource shortages that climate change will continue to cause, it probably won't take much encouragement.

The most depressing thing about 'Four Futures' is that it was published in 2016, yet since it was written the world has moved significantly closer to an exterminist future thanks to Brexit and Trump. I don't think that's just the sleeplessness talking. Still, a thought-provoking book that provides a tidy taxonomy for life after capitalism. I just wish it had been at least twice as long.

Vivian Zhang says

I actually used to imagine the fourth future as a kid - it's scary to think that this could be our potential future. The precedence we've already seen make a lot of the ideas brought up in this book very plausible and I wonder what role I will play in shaping the future as time goes on.

Robert Clarke says

This book is a chilling account of humanity trying to cope with the "endgame" of capitalism, which up to the upcoming age of climate change and automation-induced unemployment, had enriched everyone's lives extraordinarily well.

Frase's fourth scenario, "Exterminism" is a horrifying amalgamation of *Elysium*, *Atlas Shrugged*, *BioShock*, *The Terminator*, *Manna*, and *Ender's Game* - where the isolated wealthy elite in charge of the robots use those robots to genocide the immiserated "buggers" left unemployed and redundant on Earth, as indirectly and guilt-free as possible. Knowing the depths of human greed, it's sadly not an unlikely scenario that people in power would systematically kill off the redundant, revolting humans left on the surface to have more of Earth's resources for themselves. Ruthless psychopaths inclined toward power would nuke the Earth's surface if it meant they got to rule over the ashes.

The irony is that the end-state, a post-scarcity Communist utopia not unlike *Star Trek* or *The Culture*, would be realized whether it's for 7 billion humans each given a universal basic income of \$30,000, or 30,000 billionaires and their families living on inherited wealth after a mass die-off similar to that of America's original inhabitants making way for wealthier European colonists. Since robots do all the work, people would be left to do whatever they want to. All the world's resources are essentially free to them, as they would be in a post-scarcity communist society - albeit more shared. They get an exponentially lesser share if they don't exterminate the poor, therefore the poor must be exterminated to make *Lebensraum* for the master race.

You know, as if the so-called "master race" couldn't help genetically inferior "untermenschen" transcend their biological limitations, or mine space for more resources to share. The Nazis had grand ambitions for space as well - unfortunately only after a greater Holocaust against all Eastern Europeans, explicitly modeled after American colonization. An exterminist future is a consequence of closed minds lacking in distinctly human traits like imagination or empathy. You could build a Death Star and blow up Earth to sate the primitive reptile brain at the heart of fear and greed, but it'll never be enough for our reptilian overlords. (Just ask David Icke.)

4/5, could've been longer and more in-depth. I'm also not a fan of this guy's stereotypically leftist antipathy to capitalism as the root of all modern evil, rather than a free market system that amplifies evil already present in human nature while also enabling humanity to thrive at scale and individuals to succeed on their own merits, as opposed to the feudalism that came before.

Make no mistake Jared Diamond, the human race was never predominantly tolerant or egalitarian, not even in hunter-gatherer bands. Where do you think the word "tribalism" comes from? Why don't you ask the chief and his harem of wives! The animal kingdom of literal Darwinism couldn't care less for any sort of justice outside "you were too slow and got devoured by a wolf". Human brains are supposed to be above such reptilian urges - but alas, Social Darwinist tribalism couldn't be more alive in the age of President Trump.

In spite of this, I hope humans will someday come to their senses, stop bickering about identity politics, and look to the stars in search of greater horizons as each human individually self-actualizes. Together we could rule the galaxy and find a way to escape entropy, but we're trapped upon this dump of a rock on a collision course with extinction, as Donald Trump and friends grow richer at the expense of everyone else.

Get a fucking grip, humanity. Trump won't bring your redundant factory job back and he knows it. We're at a

point where all unfulfilling work could be automated away, leaving us at long last with lives of leisure to pursue our passions - working not because we have to, but because we want to. But that's only if we want to.

Philippe says

Peter Frase's essay is an exercise in what is commonly known as 'scenario planning'. The author himself seems to be totally agnostic about this intellectual discipline that has a rich, decades-long history. But that doesn't detract from his attempt to visualise a range of post-capitalist futures. The basic idea behind the methodology is straightforward: identify a limited number of critical uncertainties and investigate how they might interact to shape different, but plausible and coherent futures. In this book, Frase identifies three uncertainties:

- * The extent to which automation will make human labor superfluous;
- * The extent to which climate change will lead to scarcity of natural resources and human habitat;
- * The type of coordination and redistribution mechanisms relied on by our societies.

Frase makes a very strong, almost theoretical hypothesis about the impact of automation: *all the futures discussed in this book assume that the need for human labor in the production can be eliminated*. That renders the whole analysis rather speculative to my mind. But admittedly it leads to interesting questions. So, if automation is the constant, then the impact of the ecological crisis and the tensions and accommodations between classes are the variables.

As far as the impact of climate change is concerned, the spectrum runs from scarcity to abundance. In other words, we may or may not be able to transition to more environmentally benign infrastructures and behaviours. Politically we may evolve towards a more egalitarian or a more hierarchical society. So this leads to either more distribution or concentration of political and economic power.

Combining these two critical uncertainties leads to a typology of four scenarios: egalitarian-abundance ('communism'), egalitarian-scarcity ('socialism'), hierarchical-abundance ('rentism'), hierarchical-scarcity ('exterminism').

Given the political assumptions that define the various futures, each scenario embodies different solutions to deal with both the impact of total automation. As a result four distinct storylines appear:

- * The story of Communism revolves around the way we construct meaning when life is not centered around wage labor;
- * Socialism reflects an egalitarian society that works together to rebuild and deepen its relationship to nature;
- * In the Rentist future intellectual property becomes a key component of the property held by the capitalist class;
- * Finally, in the Exterminist future the ruling classes find no better response to the threat of impoverished, restless, idle masses than to incarcerate or eliminate them.

The shock of reading this book is that the most cynical, dystopian scenario seems the most plausible one. Given the abundance of telltale signs in the world today one could easily elaborate this story into a full-length book.

It is also interesting to note that Frase foregrounds the concept of a 'basic minimum income' in each of the three other scenarios. But it seems to play a different role and assume a different weight in each scenario.

Clearly, this book encapsulates an interesting thought experiment, obviously within the limits of the foundational hypothesis of total automation. Although Rentism strikes me as the least likely of the bunch, none of the scenarios can be easily dismissed. They should give all of us pause for thought.

3,5 stars.

Stephen says

I am often astonished at the power of a really simple futuring technique - such as 2x2 matrices - to generate such interesting results. This book represents one such exercise. There are many of the conclusions that I don't agree with, there are some parts where I feel that the model is ill-defined, but the overall product is one that ought to commend our attention.

The basic premise of the book - that the liberal order established by the Washington Consensus has moved beyond its shelf life. It's very difficult to argue against that belief. However, that in itself is uninteresting because it fails to consider what comes next. A futurist would keep one eye on what is likely to replace the Washington Consensus. This is what the author tries to do.

The analysis has two critical uncertainties - the axes of the 2x2 matrix - a world of hierarchy as opposed to a world of equality and a world of abundance as opposed to a world of scarcity. This gives rise to four possible worlds - equality with abundance, hierarchy with abundance, equality with scarcity, and hierarchy with scarcity. Underpinning each of these worlds are the twin issues of automation and climate change. These rather colour the approach to each of the futures.

Each future is characterised by the dominant features that the author believes will be apparent. Equality and abundance is characterised by communism. Not the Soviet communism to which we have become accustomed. More the communism described by Marx, where the state withers away and we can all live our lives in relative harmony. Many have described this rather utopian vision, but the author sees it as possible if the singularitarians and transhumanists are any where near correct.

Hierarchy and abundance is a different matter, however. In this case, automation leads to material abundance, but the protection of intellectual property rights leads to the benefits of automation accruing to only a few. The 1%, if you like. This scenario is dubbed as one of Rentism, as a fortunate minority benefits from the rents accruing to technology. These are 'Rents' in the Ricardian sense. In modern times, we would call this passive income.

The world of equality and scarcity is characterised as one of socialism. In this case, the scarcity of climate change has outweighed any benefits accruing from automation. However, the scenario has a sense that society sees itself as being in it all together, and the climate induced hardships are shared out on a widespread basis. There is a lot to commend this view of the future.

The final scenario - hierarchy and scarcity - is perhaps the darkest. The author labels this a world of exterminism. In this world there isn't enough to go round, and those at the top of the hierarchy secure the lion's share for themselves. It leads to a widespread reduction in population numbers, a scenario characterised by the dominance of security issues and, ultimately, genocide.

As with all futures, there are elements of each of these which are evident in the present. For example, one dimension of exterminism could be seen as the apparent indifference towards the poorer nations displayed by the richer nations. One could argue that the recent moves towards co-ordinated climate action represents a

socialist solution - the pain is distributed amongst those most able to bear it. Equally, it could be argued that the world of Rentism is evident in the technology sector today, where the winner takes all, protected by barriers of intellectual property law. The world of communism is less evident today, but one could argue that the NHS exhibits elements of that world.

If each of the scenarios are present today, it is not unreasonable to take the view that elements of each scenario will be present in the future. In many respects, this is how we ought to approach 2x2 matrices. They highlight potential dominant themes rather than produce a specific blueprint for the future.

This is all to the good, but there were points at which I felt a little short changed. This was over both the critical uncertainties and the dominant issues. With a focus on two critical uncertainties - social relations and material abundance - I felt that the book missed more than it caught. For example, I would have liked to see more prominence for the mechanism of distribution (market based or centrally planned?) to complement the issues of social relations (ownership and control). I feel that the author missed something important here.

One major omission in the book was a time frame in which all of this was to happen. A sharper focus on this would, I feel, have shed better light on the dominant issues. For example, if the book had a time horizon of a couple of hundred years (it was sub-titled 'Life After Capitalism'), then perhaps climate change might not be a dominant issue because the climate damage would have already been done. Equally, in two hundred years time, ought our current concerns about automation seem quaint?

By not grasping the issue of time, the author opens himself to all sorts of challenges in the realms of dominant issues. I would imagine that most futurists would be able to identify five off the top of their heads (mine would be war, security, space exploration, the funding of public services, and the re-invention of humanity). By omitting a time frame, the author opens himself to the criticism that he ought to have talked about 'those' issues instead.

I quite liked the book. It is short and to the point. It is readily readable. The author has an engaging style of writing which makes the prose just flow along. It is an important work on an important topic that is not a hard read. If only academic texts could follow this lead.

Herzog says

This is a disturbing, if not prescient, book. As the title makes clear, Frase outlines 4 possible post-capitalism futures: 1. A utopia of equality and abundance envisioned by Keynes in which all share in the fruits of a society without work. The idea of the elimination of work, while popular, seems ill considered. We will not easily automate home construction, the work of tradesman or menial work such as housework. 2. What Frase terms "rentism" where a wealthy class owns the technology that produces wealth, but where there is a means to tax that ownership for the benefit of all. 3. Socialism in the face of climate change forcing small groups of people to share resources resulting in small scale success. And 4. "Exterminism" where the wealthy either isolate themselves in enclaves or simply exterminate the poor in order to not have to be bothered with their demands. Initially I thought that this might be hyperbole, but Frase's argument is compelling citing examples such as South Africa, Nigeria and mass incarceration in the U.S. Frase concludes that each of these futures is unfolding to a degree.

Kars says

“Something new is coming.”

Fuck yes this is good. Short, well-written exploration of what the twin challenges of automation and climate change might bring us in the future. Not as prediction but as a call to arms. Frase mines the history of leftist thought for useful ideas and uses recent sci-fi pop culture as metaphors for exploring them. The book covers a lot of ground in a small package and ties together a lot of ideas that any ‘progressive’ interested in technology has likely already come across but adds value by tying it all together in a coherent if somewhat cheeky two-dimensional framework. Essential.

Sanjay Varma says

This book is really concise. I skimmed the whole thing but was put off by his writing style from giving it more attention. He proposes two axes on which to understand social organization:

Hierarchy --> Equality
Scarcity --> Abundance

He does a business 101 comparison of the four possible quadrants in this matrix. Many of his examples are drawn from sci-fi novels. He tries to squeeze socialism, capitalism, and communism into quadrants, but I think this was unnecessary, and didn't enhance his argument.

I felt like the Hierarchy+Abundance future is the most likely. Though we have abundance enough to provide everyone on earth a good life, this will not happen, the rich will take it all and leave the rest of us to toil and worry each day. Today's "financialization" of the economy is the heaviest chain yoked on humanity's neck since the invention of religion. And the internet is a most ingenious addiction with infinite potential to compensate oppressed people with cost-free imaginary palliatives.
