

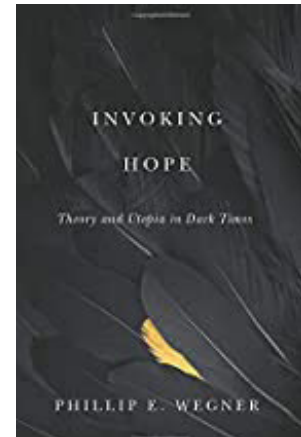
### *Invoking Hope: Theory and Utopia in Dark Times,* by Phillip E. Wegner



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Phillip E. Wegner. *Invoking Hope: Theory and Utopia in Dark Times*.  
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The hope of this review of Phillip E. Wegner's *Invoking Hope: Theory and Utopia in Dark Times*, or rather this non-reading of *Invoking Hope*, is to not fall into the trap of the review, or the anti-reading, as the author states in his introduction: the moralizing criticism "aimed either at dissuading engagements on the part of later readers or, at least, narrowing and directing the avenues down which any future non-reading might travel" (9). Indeed, approaching a book that is so interwoven with theory and utopia can be rather daunting, for in reviewing such a delightfully dense and enjoyably ensconced text, I will most assuredly not touch on all the positive aspects of the project nor critique and construct as many future narratives and critical impositions as are possible. The main takeaway I have from Wegner's work is that those interested in utopia, reading, or the world in general should read it; it is a book that crosses academic boundaries and allows us to refocus our efforts on striving for a better, even utopian, world.



As Wegner is very clear about in his introduction, *Invoking Hope* is written as a response to a(n) (un)certain time and a (non-)specific event: the 2016 inauguration of a media and real estate mogul as the President of the United States. Wegner does not necessarily make his book an anti-Trump text; instead, he weaves together a series of essays, split into two parts, that shows readers how to use utopia to (non-)read and then (non-)reading utopia through disparate texts. He wishes to show how an act of reading can be a utopian act that subverts and overcomes—by living through—even the darkest of times.

Wegner's approach to utopia and the current moment is theoretical and philosophical rather than historical or practical (meaning a step-by-step instruction guide). This methodology is seen beautifully in the first chapter, in which he outlines a Greimas semiotic square, realized through the work of (and Wegner's work on the work of) Fredric Jameson, to approach the Chicago school of New Critics; he then uses this approach to read with Alain Badiou's *Plato's Republic* (2013), itself a translation and re-reading (or re-writing/non-reading) of Plato, and collectively shows that one of the fundamental problems with democracy, especially in the United States, is its emphasis on

individual economic prosperity rather than collective political good. Wegner, then, creates the theoretical apparatus needed to show how, with semiotic square and Lacanian orders mapped onto each other, he is able to read, or rather *non-read*, utopian genres in order to invoke hope.

Having established a semiotic approach to utopia, he further engages in this conundrum in chapter two by arguing for the art of non-reading, as formulated by Pierre Bayard and his reviewers. Non-reading, for Wegner, is what people do when they approach a text through literary criticism; they are at both times *reading* the text and *remembering* the text as they write their own text. He then proceeds to non-read More's *Utopia* (1516) to show that "utopia is located in *Utopia*, More's book itself, and most particularly in the figure of a dialogue it offers us" (84). This non-reading of *Utopia* echoes through the rest of the book as Wegner approaches texts as utopian inside and as the text itself, rather than attempting to create or formulate a utopian mindset or utopian way of approaching the world around them.

Establishing this practice of non-reading allows Wegner to move beyond an ethical reading, which he does in the subsequent chapters. Instead of trying to read morality out of a text, then, he is attempting to non-read utopia through the text. This effort is seen in his recapitulation of the Henry James–H. G. Wells debate during the modernist period, in which James considered novels to need strict rules, while Wells was open to more fluid motion within a text. While James, for some time, won this debate, which led, in Wegner's argument, to the rise of ethical reading and the New Criticism discussed in the first chapter, he shows how his non-reading can overcome this approach to four specific genres: the universal history, the *kunstlerroman* or artist's story, the comedy of the (re-)marriage, and the science fiction. He concludes that utopia is "never nowhere, an imagined perfected future, but in fact always already potentially exists in the concrete now-here, in our collective fidelity to the project of making a world we so desire rather than a world we fear" (218): indeed, the hope of utopia that is invoked in the use of theory in the book is the striving toward the future that comes from non-reading, as Wegner shows as he non-reads such unique and seemingly unconnected texts as Du Bois, "Babette's Feast" (1950), *50 First Dates* (2004), *2312* (2013), and *Cloud Atlas* (2004).

While the theory in the book is astute, diverse, and vast, much of the book is rooted in and heavily relies on the work of Fredric Jameson. This reliance makes sense: Wegner's career has been focused on Jameson's work as the central thinker with whom he engages. And yet, it seemed as if Jameson had something to say about every single topic in which Wegner engaged. In this way, then, parts of the book feel to be utopia and theory through Jameson rather than through Wegner. Thus, I read *Invoking Hope* as a new and innovative text that synthesizes many literary and utopian schools of thought in brilliant ways, and it is a part of Wegner's project, seen through his other work (*Imaginary Communities* [2002], *Life Between Two Deaths* [2009], *Shockwaves of Possibility* [2014], and *Periodizing Jameson* [2014]), that continues to develop Jameson's (and Wegner's) thinking together. The book does invoke the hope needed during dark days that have passed and the dark days of the future as we collectively move toward utopian ideals and theoretical advancements.

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