

RECONCILING MARXISM AND POSTMODERNISM: A CRITICAL STUDY OF FREDRIC JAMESON

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ABSTRACT

One of the most vocal critics in the English speaking world, Fredric Jameson views postmodernism not as an independent phenomenon but as a new stage in the history of capitalism. This puts him back in the line of classical Marxism which sees cultural phenomena arising from the economic conditions. His main target is the postmodern pretension of considering itself as a universal phenomenon. Rather, as he believes, it is a historical phenomenon. However, the most interesting part of the story is that while he critiques postmodernism, his Marxism itself is affected and re-shaped by postmodernism. The paper exactly tries to show how postmodernism has deeply influenced Jameson while at the same time that he is its most vociferous critic.

Keywords: *Heterogeneous, Homogeneous, Metaphysics, the Economic, Totality.*

INTRODUCTION

Jameson's ingenuity lies in the fact that he talks in classical Marxist terms against a phenomenon that has already made Marxist discourse look an old wives' tale. However, such a critique, as it were, would not be an easy task but must face all possible hurdles. And such hurdles would be first created by postmodernism which has enough resources of counter-attacking at its disposal. For postmodernism has rejected any notions of centre, an Archimedean point, it is a great challenge in front of Jameson. Jameson, on his part, is all the time fully aware of such a challenge. "I would not want to have to decide", he says in his 'Introduction' to *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, "whether the following chapters are inquiries into the nature of such "postmodernism theory" or mere examples of it" (x) [1].

Jameson locates the rise of postmodernism in the post-War period (after 1945). For him, the changes in the socio-economic scenario which happened after the war prepared the way for postmodernism. He also believes that postmodernism is a homogeneous phenomenon where there is hardly any trace of the 'other'. The "survival, the residue, the holdover, the archaic, has finally been swept away without a trace

. . . Everything has reached the same hour on the great clock of development” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 309-310) [1].

LIMITS OF PERIODIZATION

Postmodernism, however, loathes all sorts of historical periodizations. It vehemently rejects any “drama of totalization” (Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*) [2]. Its forte is difference and heterogeneity. Periodization erases difference and makes a period appear homogeneous. For this very reason, postmodernism considers any voluntary blocking of the free flow as an undesirable move. It is certainly such an issue from which nobody can turn his face away and Jameson is no exception, notwithstanding his Marxist leanings. Hence, Jameson pays due respect. Conforming to this postmodern belief, he says that history has not moved in a linear fashion through pure mechanical stages. On the other hand, each stage has shown some ‘residual’ and ‘emergent’ elements. In the similar vein, postmodernism was not a pure homogeneous phenomenon witnessed after the war with no traces of the past or future modes of production but only as a dominant mode which contained containing the residual traces of earlier historical stages. In this regard, Jameson notes:

[T]hose who think that cultural periodization implies some massive kinship and homogeneity or identity within a given period, it may quickly be replied that it is surely only against a certain conception of what is historically dominant or hegemonic that the full value of the exceptional . . . can be assessed. (*The ideology of Theory* 483) [3]

INEVITABILITY OF TOTALITY

Jameson does not altogether shun the idea of totality before the atomistic attitude of postmodernism. He believes that the various spheres of the social totality have not danced harmoniously throughout the historical progression but they have still somehow produced a totality. He exemplifies it by referring to the break after Second World War, the time ascribed by him assigns for the rise of late capitalism. This time is not commensurable with the rise of postmodernism because he ascribes the time of its rise in the 60s. This makes the whole idea of base determining superstructure incongruous because both are far distant in time. Jameson, however, does not find it incongruous and believes that the economic preparation for postmodernism had already begun in the 1950s. This should not mislead us in believing that postmodernism was waiting for late capitalism to come. Quite the contrary. Postmodernism was unaware of the capitalist transformation. It was moving independently. In the ‘Introduction’ to *Postmodernism*, he expands it in detail:

Thus the economic preparation of postmodernism or late capitalism began in the 1950s, after the wartime shortages of consumer goods and spare parts had been made up, and new products and new technologies (not least those of the media) could be pioneered. On the other hand, the psychic habitus of the new age demands the absolute break, strengthened by a generational rupture, achieved more properly in the 1960s

(it being understood that economic development does not then pause for that, but very much continues along its own level and according to its own logic). (xx) [1]

For Jameson, the base and the superstructure move independently at different speeds and in different trajectories. However, Jameson is still able to see totality emerging out of this unevenness.

Meanwhile, it is my sense that both levels in question, infrastructure and superstructure – the economic system and the cultural “structure of feeling” – somehow crystallized in the great shock of the crises of 1973 (the oil crisis, the end of the international gold standard, for all intents and purposes the end of the great wave of “wars of national liberation” and beginning of the end of traditional communism), which, now that the dust clouds have rolled away, disclose the existence, already in place, of a strange new landscape. (*Postmodernism* xx-xxi) [1]

This kind of totality is totally different from its traditional counterparts. Its mode is postmodern. The influence of postmodernism on Jameson is clear.

THE ECONOMIC IMPERATIVE

Within the orbit of postmodernism, he changes the configuration of many traditional Marxian concepts. He is firmly of the view that postmodernism is the result of late capitalism. However, Postmodernism strongly rejects this economic reductionism on which traditional Marxism bases itself. For Althusser, “From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes” (*For Marx* 113) [4]. Baudrillard also follows the same suit by announcing radically that the “theory of infrastructure and superstructure must be exploded” (*critique of the political Economy of the Sign* 90) [5]. Jameson on his part changes the valence of the terms like the ‘economic’ and the ‘cultural’. This he does by saying that the relationship of the base and the superstructure is commonly understood in terms of strict causality which is not the case. Capitalism does not give rise to postmodernism as leaves to a tree – naturally, smoothly and spontaneously. It just creates the environment which restricts the ventures of the superstructure. However, it must not miss the casually inspecting glance that Jameson is caught up in two varying directions. He does concur with the postmodern idea that rejects economic reductionism but he also keeps on trying to defend the importance of the economic in every social analysis. He observes:

I would not want to say that Marx was an economic determinist, but for me the important historical, original, unsurpassable thing about Marx and Marxism is that it requires you somehow to include the economic. It requires you to work back in such a way that you finally touch economic structures. (Buchanan, *Jameson on Jameson* 182) [6]

NON-TELEOLOGICAL HISTORY

Jameson also agrees with postmodernism that history has no teleological progression. “We no longer believe”, Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari say, “In a primordial totality that once existed, or in a final totality that awaits us at some future date” (*Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism Schizophrenia* 42) [7]. In the same manner, Jameson’s dialectic of dominants and residues keeps just enough room for new possibilities

which cannot be, however, predicted in foresight. The fluctuating dialectic of dominants and subordinates makes history an open-ended affair and keeps it open to change from within without any forced desire for any conclusion. Jameson turns out to be highly postmodern when he says that the attempt to predict is “one of the symptoms of a failure to think in a situational way” (*Marxism and Form* 361) [8]. This view provides the rationale for his rejection of the Hegelian notion of the Absolute Spirit. Notwithstanding the tremendous influence of Hegel on Jameson, he turns out to be a reformist Hegelian by reading Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* in a non-teleological manner. In this way, he compensates for the Hegelian lapse into the notion of the Absolute Spirit by saying that we “must at any rate read Absolute Spirit as a symptom [of the prevailing conditions of the time] rather than a prophecy [or a moment in the historical process]” (*The Hegel Variations* 4) [9]. He is a postmodern par excellence when he rejects the notion of utopia as something waiting for us in the future. He is radical by saying that utopia is not waiting in the future but present here and now. This unconventional form of utopia is in postmodernism itself which, as he says, is trying to create not the utopian space but the *concept* of such a space. Here he gives the example of Grober’s installation about which he says that it constructs not any concept that might already exist but “the idea of a concept that does not yet exist” (*Postmodernism* 163-164) [1].

CONCLUSION

Jameson compliments many facets of postmodernism in such a manner that he seems to be a postmodernist rather than a Marxist. He follows Derrida in believing that we are trapped in metaphysics and can never get out of it. However, his ingenuity lies here in that he applies this feature of postmodernism back on to postmodernism itself. If this is a truism that nothing can escape metaphysics, then postmodernism too must bear this brunt. And here Jameson takes on postmodernism with force. Postmodernism tries to present itself as above the metaphysical closure for which Jameson admonishes it. He believes that it should overtly accept its origins in history but unfortunately it tries to present itself universal. If postmodernism began somewhere, it might end as well. There are some structural limits to postmodernism created and maintained by history and it is only within these constraints it must work. It has to generate new concepts within the historical limits by which it can be possible to represent the vast reality we are living in. The postmodern system is at one and the same time “freedom and determination: it opens a set of creative possibilities . . . as well as tracing ultimate limits of praxis that are also the limits of thought and imaginative projection” (Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* 129-130) [10].

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