

Review Article

Naming the System: Fredric Jameson's "Postmodernism"

VICTOR LI

AT A CONFERENCE in Urbana-Champaign in 1983, Fredric Jameson was moved to remark: "I have frequently had the feeling that I am one of the few Marxists left" ("Cognitive Mapping" 347). Though not without a trace of disappointment in its tone, Jameson's remark can be interpreted as a reaffirmation of Marxism designed to rouse others at the conference from their post-structuralist or postmodernist "slumbers." For what distinguishes Marxist theory, according to Jameson, what gives it its value and sets it apart from its fashionable detractors, is its injunction to totalize, that is, to connect the seemingly disparate phenomena of social life and to discern in them a meaningful unity.

Since 1983, Marxism both in its distorted institutional forms in Eastern Europe and China and in its more theoretical manifestations in Western academic circles has taken quite a beating, and there are even fewer Marxists left today than when Jameson spoke. Nonetheless Jameson's commitment to Marxism remains unshaken and in his latest book, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*,¹ he continues to argue for the critical function of totalization as he did twenty years earlier in *Marxism and Form* (1971). Then, reacting against the dominant ideology of Anglo-American empirical realism, he criticized its "check on social consciousness," its deliberate limitation of "all statements to the discrete and the immediately verifiable, in order to rule out any speculative and totalizing thought which might lead to a vision of social life as a whole." The "anti-speculative bias" of the Anglo-American tradition led in Jameson's view to an apolitical

attitude: "its emphasis on the individual fact or item at the expense of the network of relationships in which that item may be embedded, continues to encourage submission to what is by preventing its followers from making connections, and in particular from drawing the otherwise unavoidable conclusions on the political level" (368, x).

A decade later, the Anglo-American tradition, at least in the literary, philosophical, and cultural spheres, had been deconstructed and displaced by "French theory" and the Marxist-Hegelian theories of totalization now came under attack from a different quarter. In *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Jameson thus found himself facing poststructuralist repudiations of totalization "in the name of difference, flux, dissemination, and heterogeneity." The discrete, verifiable items of Anglo-American empiricism had become the disseminated molecular bits of French poststructuralism, the autonomy of verbal icons had changed into the pluralism of "petits récits," but, to Jameson, the new ideologies of difference, like the old positivisms they had replaced, merely "reconfirm the status of the concept of totality by their very reaction against it" (53). Though advocating openness, these new ideologies really function as local forms of closure, "strategies of containment" that only the concept of totality can paradoxically open up again. Moreover, though more openly political than their Anglo-American rivals, the new ideologies of difference end up similarly obstructing any concerted political program of radical change by forestalling "that systematic articulation and totalization of interpretive results which can only lead to embarrassing questions about the relationship between them and in particular the place of history and the ultimate ground of . . . production" (32).

Ten years on after *The Political Unconscious*, post-structuralist theories of difference have further consolidated their hegemonic status and Jameson's Marxist project of totalization has kept pace by expanding into a comprehensive and critical account of post-structuralism's place in a postmodernist culture. More significantly, in keeping with his totalizing project, Jameson uses the term "postmodernism" not as a periodization merely descriptive of a specific artistic style or cultural logic but as an ambitious con-

ceptual model in which aesthetic, cultural, and theoretical productions can be dialectically related to the contemporary global system and its mode of production, a system Jameson calls "late capitalism" after Ernest Mandel's book of the same name (published in 1978). Refuting socio-economic theories such as Daniel Bell's that proclaim the end of classical capitalism and the rise of a new type of "post-industrial" or consumer society, Mandel argues that far from signalling the demise of capitalism, the new and original social features that can be observed point to an expanded and purer third stage of multinational capitalism that has succeeded the earlier stages of market and monopoly capitalism. Mandel's historical periodization enables Jameson to acknowledge the originality of postmodernist culture and its difference from an earlier modernism without having to accept it on its own terms as a uniquely auto-referential moment which refuses the possibility of historical narrativization or of a critique conducted from an external ground. Armed with Mandel's historical scheme, Jameson can register the full significance and force of postmodernism and yet relate it to a historical totality in which it can be seen as "only the reflex and the concomitant of yet another systemic modification of capitalism itself" (xii). It is no wonder then that in the program essay that opens the book and gives it its title (as in the other essays that deal with such diverse subjects and forms as video, architecture, the *nouveau roman*, photography, "new historicism," deManian deconstruction, debates on market theory, science fiction and nostalgia films), Jameson can steadily analyze, with neither panic nor unnecessary moral rancour, the distinctiveness and ubiquity of such postmodernist traits as the new depthlessness that resists hermeneutic recovery, the replacement of historical explanation by "a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum," and the appearance of a "schizophrenic" or decentered subject together with a breakdown in signification and representation which results in a proliferation of random and discrete signifiers, each residing in its own intense "hysterical sublime," unable and unwilling to transcend its own isolation (6-38).

If I may be permitted for the sake of discussion to simplify what is a highly overdetermined issue, the central problematic that

emerges from Jameson's immensely rich and thickly-layered analysis of postmodernism is the struggle to overcome a postmodernist *nominalism* that is also ironically, as we shall see, given its fear of totalization, the best ideological defence of late multinational capitalism's global expansion and integration. The postmodernist traits described by Jameson all point to a denial of historical universals and interpretative totalities, a denial given theoretical prominence in the writings of Derrida, Deleuze, Baudrillard, and perhaps most succinctly and directly in the words that conclude Lyotard's essay "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?":

We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.

(*Postmodern Condition* 81-82)

In the concluding sentences of Jameson's *Postmodernism*, we can hear a direct response to Lyotard's nominalist call "to save the honor of the name":

The rhetorical strategy of the preceding pages has involved an experiment, namely, the attempt to see whether by systematizing something that is resolutely unsystematic, and historicizing something that is resolutely ahistorical, one couldn't outflank it and force a historical way at least of thinking about it. "We have to name the system": this high point of the sixties finds an unexpected revival in the postmodernism debate. (418)

As we have seen, a consistent aim of Jameson's writing since at least *Marxism and Form* has been to set the political and critical function of Marxist totalization against theories that in their positivist belief in facts or in their poststructuralist suspicion of universals promote an anti- or a-political nominalism, a refusal to make connections and hence a refusal of social consciousness. In *Postmodernism*, Jameson's criticism of nominalism is, however, complicated by the observation that the most challenging, radical

and innovative forces in contemporary theoretical discourse (post-structuralism and "new historicism") and political action (the small-group, non-class political practices which revolve around issues of race, gender, sexuality, health, and environment) have tended to be nominalist. Jameson is aware that this puts him in the awkward position of appearing to be hostile to progressive currents of thought, of "giving the impression, against [his] own deepest political convictions, that all the "enemies" were on the left" (408). Nonetheless, as he explains in a 121-page concluding chapter, a strong critique of the nominalist tendencies in post-structuralist theories and the new social movements is necessary in order to show how their anti-systemic valorization of differences replicate, on one level, multinational capital's own logic of differentiation and proliferation across the globe, while repressing, on another, the possibility of conceptualizing late capitalism's consolidation of its decentered network or system. As Jameson sees it: "[T]he apparent celebration of Difference, whether here at home or on a global scale, in reality conceals and presupposes a new and more fundamental identity" (357). In a book filled with brilliant analyses of postmodernist cultural forms and theoretical discourses, the most audacious and significant insight concerns this politically debilitating paradox in which postmodernism's declaration of emancipation from the older meta-narratives and totalities feeds into the market's decentered logic which encourages de-territorialization only in order to effect a greater penetration and colonization of the globe. Lyotard's attempt "to save the honor of the name" therefore ends up supporting the further consolidation of global capitalism whose complex system is precisely that which must be named and conceptualized ("cognitively mapped" in Jameson's terminology) if we are to transform it.

Though Jameson's critical project of placing postmodernism on late capitalism's global map is generally persuasive, there are certain aspects of it which need further clarification and qualification if a viable politics is to emerge from it. For instance, Jameson should address the possible danger of reifying capital in his constant reiteration of its universal triumph, of its expansion into "hitherto uncommodified areas," its "historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the Unconscious" (36).

Multinational capitalism has no doubt been highly successful, but its stories of success cannot conceal, as Mike Davis has pointed out, in what remains one of the best critiques of Jameson, the symptoms of crisis that continue to dog it (Davis 82-85). One could argue, for example, that the triumph Jameson claims for multinational capitalism is premature in so far as its rapid and highly speculative financial expansion has dangerously outstripped its relatively depressed industrial base as Black Monday (October 19, 1987) on Wall Street revealed so dramatically. Indeed, after a careful empirical analysis of the world market, the economist David Gordon has concluded that "we have been witnessing the decay of the postwar global economy rather than the construction of a fundamentally new and enduring system of production and exchange."²

In addition to the economic objection, Jameson's reading of capital's triumph also poses a methodological problem. If, as Jameson argues, postmodernism is the cultural logic of a late capitalism that has penetrated and commodified all hitherto uncommodified and autonomous spaces (including culture itself), and if, consequently, culture's resistance to the commodity is now merely another form of cultural commodity, then where is there room for criticism of the postmodern condition? Critics like Robert Young have fastened on this apparent contradiction in Jameson's thought, a contradiction Young has succinctly characterized as a case of the critic "writing out his own critical position of enunciation" (117). Jameson responds to such criticism by pointing out that "the totalizing account of the postmodern always included a space for various forms of oppositional culture: those of marginal groups, those of radically distinct residual or emergent cultural languages." Postmodernism, Jameson insists, is "merely" a cultural dominant and to "describe it in terms of cultural *hegemony* is not to suggest some massive and uniform cultural homogeneity of the social field but very precisely to imply its coexistence with other resistant and heterogeneous forces which it has a vocation to subdue and incorporate" (159). The neo-Gramscian turn in the argument is a necessary and welcome qualification. But the critics may be forgiven their mistake that Jameson's notion of hegemony appears too much like homogeneity, more Lukácsian in its inflection than Gramscian. Jameson's problem is this: he must

establish the *reality* of postmodernism as a force that has radically changed the socio-cultural landscape of the present even as he has to argue that it is merely an *ideology* whose production can be traced to the logic of late capitalism and whose workings can be critically examined. As such he is faced with a dilemma: if he emphasizes the universality and reality of postmodernism then he undermines his own critical position; but if he is able to characterize postmodernism too readily as an ideology then he is in danger of presenting us merely with a paper tiger. To be sure, Jameson is aware of this dilemma: "As for systematic accounts of the postmodern, however (including my own), when they succeed, they fail" (158). He does not explain, however, how the dilemma can be avoided or resolved (perhaps it cannot, in which case he should account for its impossibility), and, so long as he does not, he will continue to invite the kind of criticism levelled by Young.

Jameson's call for a "cognitive mapping" of the postmodern has also invited the charge that he valorizes the critical and cognitive functions of theory while neglecting strategies of political action. Jameson has, in the past, shown an impatience with what he calls the "single-shot, single-function" view of political action which he attributes to "impatience with the mediated, with the long-term" and to "the desire . . . to show immediate results, feel some ego-satisfaction, make the tangible mark right now" ("Interview" 75). He is of course right to dismiss the romantic voluntarism of the ultra-left and to argue that the "long-term" of theory can also be a form of political practice. What is missing, however, in Jameson's work is an equivalent alertness to the view that practices may also yield theoretical understanding. Cognition is important (we can never have enough of it) but there is little dialectical emphasis on action and on action's importance in shaping cognition. The gap between theory and practice is of course a dilemma not unique to Jameson; it is one we all face in one way or another. It is, however, especially problematic in Jameson's work because the Marxist tradition to which he belongs reminds us that it is not enough just to understand or name the system, we must also act to change it. Jameson, of course, understands the problem and it surfaces in a remark such as the following in which the argument for present-day struggles on the discursive

sive or theoretical level is balanced by the promise of more active political practice when the need arises: "[T]he fundamental level on which political struggle is waged is that of the legitimacy of concepts . . . at least right *now* and in our current situation. At future times, politics will take more activist forms from that, just as it has done in the past" (264).

Jameson's postponement or deferment of more active forms of political engagement is symptomatic of another related problem in his work, namely, the lack of an ethnography of common or everyday culture. This lack is in fact a theoretical necessity because Jameson's argument for the critical role of totalization depends precisely on an estrangement from the immediacies of everyday life and on the adoption of what Jameson calls the "outsider" principle: "The conditions of thinking a new reality and articulating a new paradigm for it . . . seem to demand . . . a certain strategic distance from that new reality, which tends to overwhelm those immersed in it (this would be something like an epistemological variant of the well-known 'outsider' principle in scientific discovery)" (405). Jameson's argument for the critical necessity of estrangement from the everyday (which he implies, on another level of his thinking, is impossible in our postmodern period) resembles the modernist creation of a "great divide," on one side of which we have "outsiders," alienated authors and artists, and, on the other, the everyday culture of passive and mindless consumers.³ As a consequence, Jameson is guilty of writing off valuable work in cultural studies such as those of de Certeau, Radway, Fiske, and Willis, in which consumers are not seen merely as passive cultural dopes and everyday life is not summarily dismissed as a fertile ground of commodification but also conceptualized as the site of resistance. Without an ethnography of everyday life and resistance, Jameson's reading of postmodernism is not as systematic or totalizing as he thinks. His choice of cultural materials is limited mainly, for example, to what Dana Polan has called "that sort of upper-West-side-New-York-culture that is a source of clichéd parody in the films of Woody Allen" (52). We can also sense a theoretical deficiency in Jameson's assertion that "yuppies" are the leading class or class-fraction of postmodernism (407). This not only simplifies contradictions and differences among "yuppies"

themselves but also mistakenly assumes that agency in the post-modern period is mainly shaped by "yuppie" values such as determining "the main chance," making money, reorganizing the market, and so on (408). Missing in this account is a description of other classes, other groups, other agents who may be operating within late capitalism's market framework to ends other than that of replicating its values. And this lacuna is especially evident in the book's lack of engagement with the emergent forces that resist postmodernist capitalist hegemony.⁴ In a book 430 pages long, feminism as a topic appears only four times in the index and an examination of those instances reveals very little.

The criticism of Jameson as an *haut Marxiste* whose appreciation of popular culture consists of watching films like *Body Heat* and *Blue Velvet* can be extended to the dazzling but also unrelentingly abstract and academic nature of his prose. What Terry Eagleton has described as the "intense libidinal charge" (14) of Jameson's prose is to some extent a strategy aimed at reversing "the waning of affect" (10) that Jameson discerns in the post-modern era. But what the "charge" of Jameson's prose often accomplishes is the transformation of the reader into an awed spectator of the author's performance, thereby unintentionally distracting attention from the issue under discussion. In other words, the recovery of affect in Jameson's prose is author-centered, confirming a distinctive, "high modernist" signature. There is nothing wrong with this, except that one must also point out that affect can be recovered and directed to other ends such as empowering and moving the reader. A comparison of Jameson's virtuoso style to Edward Said's or Terry Eagleton's more impassioned or polemical prose is instructive in this respect.

Despite the omissions and problems I have listed, Jameson's work remains of signal importance. Though his cautious assessment and critique of the "micropolitics" of small groups can be questioned, it can also be claimed that his work preserves the spirit of a revolutionary and Utopian imagination that will be satisfied with nothing less than the transformation of the society we live in. We can also agree with Jameson that in an era of global crises what we need is not calls for cognitive humility, "weak thought," or the "smaller voice" of a "finite, gendered being

bounded by particular horizons, perspectives, experiences, knowledge" (Hebdige 11), but an expanded "depth-wish" able to offer more comprehensive accounts and stronger theories. Surely one of the major lessons learnt from the recent Gulf War is that linkages must be sought and local conflicts related to a large history of Western economic interest in the region. Thus, the project of totalization, though beset with problems, is, at the same time, the strongest theoretical aspect of Jameson's work. For, as he reminds us, the commitment to social change comes "not from the reading of the 'Marxist classics,' but rather from the objective experience of social reality and the way in which one isolated cause or issue, one specific form of injustice, cannot be fulfilled or corrected without eventually drawing the entire web of interrelated social levels together into a totality, which then demands the invention of a politics of social transformation" (*Late Marxism* 251). It is this thought which will remain long after Marxism's distorted official and institutional forms have passed away.

NOTES

- ¹ Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991. pp. xxii, 483. \$34.95.
- ² For a discussion of David Gordon's analysis, see Callinicos 137-46.
- ³ See Huyssen.
- ⁴ The one extended discussion of the politics of resistance (on the League of Black Revolutionary Workers of Detroit) raises the important issue of coordinating local to global struggles only to note despairingly that "having acceded to a larger spatial plane, the base vanished under them" (414). Resistance is raised only so that its failure may be of cognitive use, a lesson to be learned.

WORKS CITED

- Callinicos, Alex. *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990.
- Davis, Mike. "Urban Renaissance and the Spirit of Postmodernism." *Postmodernism and Its Discontents*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. London: Verso 1988. 79-87.
- de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.
- Eagleton, Terry. "Fredric Jameson: The Politics of Style." *Diacritics* 12:3 (1982): 14-22.
- Fiske, John. *Understanding Popular Culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989.

- Hebdige, Dick. *Hiding in the Light*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Marxism and Form*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1971.
- . *The Political Unconscious*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981.
- . "Cognitive Mapping." *Marxism and the Interpretation of Cultures*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. London: Macmillan, 1988. 347-57.
- . *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic*. London: Verso, 1990.
- . "Interview with Fredric Jameson." *Diacritics* 12:3 (1982): 72-91.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1984.
- Polan, Dana. "Postmodernism and Cultural Analysis Today." *Postmodernism and Its Discontents*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. London, Verso, 1988. 45-58.
- Radway, Janice. *Reading the Romance*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1984.
- Willis, Paul. *Common Culture*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1990.
- Young, Robert. *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*. London: Routledge, 1990.