

# Fredric Jameson's Marxist Criticism

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**D**uring the last decade something quite odd has been happening. While Marxism was collapsing so completely that its viability as a political theory seemed almost at an end, in the universities of the English-speaking world its influence was increasing just as dramatically; anti-capitalist rhetoric is now heard more than ever among campus intellectuals. No one has been more central to this strange development than Fredric Jameson, and his recent activity is almost a symbol of the whole situation. While the Wall crumbled, Jameson was building a Marxist edifice of his own, in the form of no fewer than five new books, and his admirers added a volume of essays devoted to his thought:

*The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986*, Volume 1: *Situations of Theory*, Volume 2: *Syntax of History* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1988)[IT1, IT2];

*Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 1990)[SV];

*Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London and New York: Verso, 1990) [LM];

*Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991) [P];

*Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique*, edited by Douglas Kellner (Washington D.C.: Maisonneuve Press, 1989).

Jameson's current influence in literary studies cannot be overstated. He is certainly the most quoted of all American critics,<sup>1</sup> and citations of his work are commonly accompanied by almost abjectly respectful phrases such as "Jameson tells us that..." or "Jameson has shown us that..." With the publication of *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Jameson became in effect the patron saint of the "race, gender, class" criticism that would dominate university departments of literature over the next decade, and his influence has grown steadily during that time. His dictum "that there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed, that everything is 'in the last analysis' political"<sup>2</sup> became the central article of faith for all branches of the new wave in criticism, from feminism to cultural studies. But why should the popularity and influence of a scholar peak spectacularly at precisely the moment when the thrust and inspiration of his work seems most questionable?

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Though Jameson is primarily a literary and cultural critic, he insists that politics is inseparable from and indeed presupposed by criticism. If we follow Jameson's own priorities, therefore, we should look first at his political thought—even though his readers are in the main not political scientists but literary scholars. Before we consider Jameson as political thinker, however, it is as well to acknowledge a potential problem. Some of the material in several of these volumes is not of recent vintage: the two-volume *Ideologies of Theory* is largely a collection of essays written over the last twenty years, and the essays that make up *Signatures of the Visible* were written from 1977 to 1988. The speed of developments in the formerly Communist countries has been startling. Views expressed and predictions made just a few years ago have been cruelly treated by the passage of time, and much of what was written about the likely future course of events can easily now seem quite foolish. Is it fair to judge Jameson with what amounts to the benefit of hindsight? To be sure, the judgment of history is uniquely relevant to political ideas, and Marxists are especially committed to that relevance. ("Always historicize!" Jameson insists.) But Jameson himself abolishes this dilemma, for what is most characteristic of him sympathizers might call a remarkable consistency and constancy, while those less sympathetic will likely describe it instead as a dogged resistance to any change in his views, or to learning from experience. What is clear is that, when Jameson confronts events that must have surprised him, he shows a marked tendency to assimilate those events to the preexisting framework of his ideas rather than to let them modify it.

In the earlier essays, for example, Jameson's great admiration for Mao and Marcuse is evident. Maoism is for him the "richest of all the great new ideologies of the 60s," and Marcuse "the greatest Utopian thinker of that period" (*IT2*, 188, 76). In the years since Jameson wrote these words the reputation of both has declined sharply, and Mao in particular is now a largely discredited figure. One might assume, therefore, that Jameson would be somewhat embarrassed by these judgments. But that assumption would be wrong, for the same attitudes are re-expressed in the newly written *Late Marxism*, where Jameson still asserts, for example, that Marcuse is "the thinker of the sixties," (5) by which he means the decade, not simply the phenomenon now so labelled.

In the case of Mao, Jameson's determination to stick to his initial judgment produces extraordinary results. Take, for example, his view of Mao's Cultural Revolution. By now it is almost impossible to find defenders of this episode anywhere; Chinese and non-Chinese, communists and democrats are united in their condemnation. The stories of disrupted lives, of wastage of the nation's talent, of death, torture, cruelty, and humiliation are far too widespread to be ignored. Who now judges the Cultural Revolution to be anything other than the self-indulgence of an old man grown too used to absolute power?

Yet, in characteristic fashion, Jameson responds by redoubling his faith in Mao's correctness. The only problem with the Cultural Revolution, Jameson tells us, was that Mao stopped it too soon:

Mao Zedong himself drew back from the ultimate consequences of the process he had set in motion, when, at the supreme moment of the Cultural Revolution, that of the founding of the Shanghai Commune, he called a halt to the dissolution of the party apparatus and effectively reversed the direction of this collective experiment as a whole (with consequences only too obvious at the present time). (*IT2*, 207–8)

Jameson's dark parenthetical hint is tantalizing—he doesn't tell us just what consequences he has in mind—but his main point is clear enough: China would not be in the mess it is in now if Mao had just given it more of the same. Jameson does not shrink from the idea of an "experiment" with human lives, though the added word "collective" may betray some awareness of the need to make that idea more palatable. But it is a word hard to justify in the context of a decision first taken and then abandoned, as Jameson acknowledges, by one man.

The same determination to concede nothing, and to resist revisionism at all costs, is visible in Jameson's defense of Stalinism: "Stalinism is disappearing not because it failed, but because it succeeded, and fulfilled its historical mission to force the rapid industrialization of an underdeveloped country (whence its adaptation as a model for many of the countries of the Third World)" (*LM*, 250). This defense assures us of the success of Stalinism only by ignoring everything except industrialization.<sup>3</sup> Yet Stalinism is also extreme ruthlessness, cruelty, paranoia, senseless purges, the extermination of the kulaks, mass murder, government by terror, and much besides. Can the word "success" be applied in this unhedged way to Stalin's record? Jameson seems blind to the huge scale of the human misery caused by Stalin, but, even if we leave moral considerations aside, the revulsion against Marxism that resulted ought surely to be factored into any judgment of the "success" of Stalinism.

In all of these volumes the pattern of Jameson's moral judgments is in fact extraordinary. He is certainly capable of expressing outrage when discussing Mao and Stalin, yet the outrage is directed not at these two, for causing suffering on a vast scale, but at Jameson's intellectual opponents, for exploiting that suffering in their arguments. For example, he denounces the "current propaganda campaign, everywhere in the world, to Stalinize and discredit Maoism and the experience of the Chinese Cultural Revolution—now rewritten as yet another Gulag to the East—all of this, make no mistake about it, is part and parcel of the larger attempt to trash the 60s generally" (*IT2*, 189). Here Jameson presents a startling supposition: that criticism of the Cultural Revolution "everywhere in the world" (including, presumably, criticism by the present Chinese government, by East Europeans, and even by those who suffered during

it and survived) is motivated by nothing more than a desire to frustrate nostalgia for the sixties. How can it not have occurred to him that people who experienced the Cultural Revolution had more important things in mind—their own survival, for example—than damaging the image of the sixties? In Jameson's mental world, larger and smaller issues seem not to be distinguished. When he goes on to exhort his readers not to concede any of this terrain too quickly to "the other side," he leaves the impression that he has lost sight of the real human issues in these events, and that what matters to him when considering actions that make or break millions of lives is only how rival intellectuals may be able to use them to score points against each other.

Given his determination not to concede any point to critics of Marxism, Jameson's own Marxism is inevitably orthodox, conservative, and even somewhat antiquated. The thinkers to whom he returns again and again are from the early part to the middle of the twentieth century, for example, Georg Lukàcs and the Frankfurt school figures Adorno and Horkheimer. These are all men whose ideas were formed before Marxists had to face what Stalin had done. *Late Marxism* even offers us Adorno as *the* thinker for the nineties—surely an inherently improbable notion when so much that is critical has happened since Adorno's outlook was formed.

Not surprisingly, there is in these volumes no trace of the more recent (and more realistic) debate among political scientists about Marxism. Some Marxists have recently attempted to reformulate those aspects of Marx's thought that have not held up well, while retaining the general spirit of his work. It is not hard to see why this is necessary. For example, when the stores are full of goods that nobody wants but short of food while it rots in the fields, might this not be because Marx's labor theory of value—the essential basis for the bed-rock Marxist idea that workers are deprived of the surplus value they create—fails to grasp the importance of management and distribution? When the state owns and runs everything for the public good, a huge bureaucracy and a powerful state apparatus must be the result—but Marx also wanted the state to wither away. How can the two be reconciled? Does the destruction of the environment in the former socialist countries mean that Marxism is unable to provide the kind of vibrant public opinion needed if the environment is to be protected? Was Stalin's cruelty an aberration, or do the little Stalins of Albania, Romania, etc., indicate that Marxism fails to take account of the maxim that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely? Does a one-party state, in criminalizing all dissent in advance, inevitably require fear of a repressive secret police to make it "work"?

History has forced thoughtful Marxists to take questions like these seriously, and as a result a number of attempts have been made (for example, by G.A. Cohen, Jon Elster, and John Roemer)<sup>4</sup> to reformulate Marxism accordingly. Jameson's writings are very different. By contrast with this tough-minded, analytical approach to political theory, his thought appears rather unsophisticated.

Rousseau's fantasy that before the ravages of civilization there existed a blissful state of primitive innocence is never far from the surface, the one difference being that Jameson makes Rousseau's general view that man's natural goodness is subverted by social institutions more specific: he limits the field to one institution, and that is capitalism. Accordingly, he tells us that "nature and the Unconscious" (*LM*, 5) are the last bastions, the "precapitalist enclaves" (*P*, 49) that late capitalism is at last penetrating. A variation of this has it that "the last vestiges of Nature" are "the Third World and the Unconscious" (*IT2*, 207).

Capitalism, according to Jameson, "systematically dissolves the fabric of all cohesive social groups without exception"; and "authentic cultural creation is dependent for its existence on authentic collective life, on the vitality of the 'organic' social group... such groups can range from the classical polis to the peasant village" (*SV*, 23). A fantasized original harmony is invoked here with dreamy words like "authentic" and "organic," but one can only wonder how long it would be before a Jameson in his morally beautiful and "authentic" Third World village discovered its (if judged by his Western standards) rampant sexism, authoritarianism, homophobia, tribalism, and racism, to say nothing of its much reduced life expectancy and vulnerability to disease and warfare. History shows that Rousseau had things backwards, as Jameson still does: only civilization manages to tame *some* of the natural nastiness in human beings, and it is always an uphill battle. Rousseau's fantasy of a condition totally without any of that nastiness is an exaggerated and misconceived response to the fact that the successes of civilization are never more than partial.

When Jameson tells us more about "authenticness," it turns out that his examples are mostly products of the Western society he disdains:

The only authentic cultural production today has seemed to be that which can draw on the collective experience of marginal pockets of the social life of the world system: black literature and blues, British working-class rock, women's literature, gay literature, the *roman québécois*, the literature of the Third World; and this production is possible only to the degree to which these forms of collective life or collective solidarity have not yet been fully penetrated by the market and by the commodity system. (*SV*, 23-4)

This politically correct grab bag must surely be among the most comic examples of the Western intellectual's fantasy of solidarity with the common people.

Jameson's world is evidently that peculiar mix of protest movements, blind Third World adulation, Utopian dreams, and hippie primitivism that was the sixties. He still relives the fantasies of that time when he tells us of "the widely shared feeling that in the 60s, for a time, everything was possible; that this period, in other words, was a moment of a universal liberation, a global unbinding of energies" (*IT2*, 207)—even though now forced to concede that this was a historical illusion. What he is unable to face, however, is that it was a

peculiarly Marxist delusion, for he remains at heart a sixties flower-child who really thought that the revolution was then at hand.

The quality of Jameson's contribution to the modern debate on more technical issues in Marxist theory can be judged from his comments on the notion of "class." The fluid social structure of modern America now looks very different from the rigid nineteenth-century European class system upon which Marx based his political theory. That fact raises the question whether Marxism might be a theory tied to a particular historical situation, and possibly doomed to obsolescence as that situation recedes into the past. Jameson deals with this difficulty by telling us that we can speak of "a fundamental class structure inherent in a system in which one group of people produces value for another group" only if we allow for "the dialectical possibility that even this fundamental 'reality' may be 'realer' at some historical junctures than at others" (*SV*, 37). After *Animal Farm*, this kind of obfuscation and evasion needs no further analysis: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."

Jameson's response to the difficulties of Marxism in the modern world is, as always, to concede nothing to critics—but at a considerable price. His "solution to the so-called crisis of Marxism" is to argue that we are entering the age of global capitalism and must therefore wait for labor to become global, too, that is, until "proletarianization, and the resistance to it in the form of class struggle, all slowly reassert themselves on a new and expanded world scale" (*IT2*, 208). He asserts "that a new international proletariat (taking forms we cannot yet imagine) will reemerge from this convulsive upheaval it needs no prophet to predict: we ourselves are still in the trough, however" (*P*, 417). In other words, when we have a united global proletariat, the socialist transformation really will follow after all. Thus Jameson brushes aside all that we might have learned from the practical experience of Marxism in nearly twenty very different nations. Once again, we can see the same formula: if something fails, more of it will succeed. But this is a formula that makes it quite literally impossible to learn from experience; no empirical test of anything will ever be allowed to count. Jameson never explains how Marxism on a global scale will be different from what it has always been locally, but the prospect of even more territory and power—in fact, all of it—for the next Stalin to abuse is hardly reassuring.

Jameson has his own characteristic methods of dealing both with anti-Marxist argument and with embarrassing historical events, but they fall well short of genuine counterargument. One is simply to cite the argument or event with its key terms in scare quotes, as if this scornful gesture were sufficient to deal with the substance of the issue. How does one deal with the preference of one nation after another for free elections and free speech? Easily: just talk of "freedom" of speech and "free" elections (*LM*, 250). What about the problem of socialism's failure in the real world? No problem: just refer to this as "'socialism does not work'" (*P*, 207). What about the problem of Utopian thought resulting so often in mass murder (Robespierre, Pol Pot, Stalin, Mao)? Simple:

just speak of “the ‘massacres’ of the French Revolution, etc.” (*P*, 335). Are the revelations about Paul de Man difficult to handle? Not if you make them “the now notorious ‘revelations’” (*P*, 256), and the same technique will work with the “notorious ‘anti-Semitic’ article” (*P*, 258). Is the equation of public ownership with a huge bureaucracy a problem? Then just label it “the anti-Marxist thematics of ‘bureaucracy’” (*IT2*, 189). Terrorism? It’s just “‘terrorism,’ as a ‘concept’” (*IT2*, 203). In none of these cases is any real argument offered.

Jameson also makes liberal use of all those fudging devices that Dario Fernández-Morera so wittily exposed recently<sup>5</sup>—for example, the habit of qualifying “Marxism” with the word “late” to remove it from the reach of objections to “classical” Marxism that could not otherwise be answered. A more characteristically Jamesonian device, however, is to accuse his opponents of exploiting historical facts when they fashion arguments that cite those facts. So he hints darkly that the “massacres” were “freshly rediscovered” during the bicentenary celebration of the French Revolution; that anti-Utopian sentiment was “helpfully revived” by the Cambodian atrocities; that “the twin Heidegger and de Man ‘scandals’ have been carefully orchestrated to delegitimize Derridean deconstruction” (*P*, 335, 401, 257); that the Cultural Revolution is being seized upon to discredit Mao. Jameson never explains why it is “exploiting” history to build an argument by analyzing real events, and he never hesitates to refer to historical events that he considers useful for his own purposes (“Always historicize!”).

What makes matters worse is that Jameson’s epistemology is riddled with contradictions. On the one hand, he wants to have it that Marxism is a science (*LM*, 6), which recognizes “fundamental realities.” On the other, he wants to pour scorn on the epistemological *naïveté* of people who refer to historical accounts “sometimes called ‘the facts’” to “‘prove,’ for example, that the French and Russian revolutions accomplished very little” (*LM*, 3). A similar contradiction appears when he suddenly drops the pose of epistemological sophistication and skepticism to rest his argument on the primitive and unanalyzed notion of “authenticity.” Still another example is the discrepancy between his attempt to shock us by asserting that Nazism and the New Deal are related systems (*P*, xviii) and his righteous indignation over “the networks’ truly obscene coverage of Gorbachev’s 1989 visit to Cuba, where Fidel [sic] was compared to Ferdinand Marcos!” (*P*, 354). While Nazism and the New Deal have little more in common than that they were both responses to the great depression, Castro (I cannot claim Jameson’s familiarity here) and Marcos are easily juxtaposed as obdurate, aging dictators, propped up by substantial superpower financial support, who installed close relatives in key governmental positions and imprisoned critics of their regimes, while avoiding the elections that could have deprived them of their power.

Marxism’s moral claims are even more extensive than its intellectual ones, but on the evidence of these books Jameson’s moral sensibility appears lack-

ing. His excuses for even the most outrageous behavior of anyone who is not on “the other side” are astonishing. For example, this is how he brushes aside the matter of the savagery of Stalin or Pol Pot:

[W]hat can be “postmodern” about these hoary nightmare images, except for the depoliticization to which they invite us, is less clear. The history of the revolutionary convulsions in question can also be appealed to for a very different lesson; namely, that violence springs from counterrevolution first and foremost, indeed, that the most effective form of counterrevolution lies precisely in this transmission of violence to the revolutionary process itself. (*P*, 401–2)

Jameson replies to the charge that responsibility for the millions dead in the killing fields of Cambodia, the mass starvation of the kulaks, the Stalinist purges, and much besides, must be laid at the door of a system that has so often given absolute power to monsters by asserting that the dead brought it on themselves, and in inviting their own murder they waged very effective propaganda warfare against Marxist regimes. But even the rapist who callously says that his victim would not have been hurt had she not resisted never has the gall to blame her, in addition, for his reputation for violence. It would, I am sure, not impress Jameson if one pointed out that in each of these cases the mass killings took place *after* the revolution had consolidated its power, and that most of the victims were helpless people who were not offering “counter revolutionary violence.” If he ran true to form, Jameson would surely concede nothing.

Of all the excuses for Paul de Man’s collaborationist (make that “collaborationist”) World War II journalism, Jameson’s is probably the shabbiest: it was “simply a job” (*P*, 257). Even the Nazis did better than this with their excuse of “*Befehl ist Befehl*”—they at least insisted that they were *coerced* by orders from above. Here, for once, Jameson is out of step with Stalin, who would never have accepted this defense; Waldheim is now the model. Jameson does his best to persuade us that one of de Man’s plainly anti-Semitic articles should really be read as a rebuke to anti-Semites, and he follows this up by attempting to explain away Heidegger’s fascism: Heidegger was “‘politically naive,’ as they like to say, but he was certainly political.” This fact earns him Jameson’s “sneaking admiration” (*P*, 257). It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Jameson’s morality works on a simple principle: there are ideological friends, who can do no wrong, and foes, who can do no right. For though he never expresses indignation at the “blood, torture, death, terror” in connection with the twentieth-century events that are obvious enough to everyone else, he does so, in just these words (*P*, 5), when predicting “a whole new wave of American military and economic domination of the world”—and this precisely when America’s global economic position is in doubt and its defense industry in recession. Jameson insists, nevertheless, that here he must “simply remind the reader of the obvious.”



What distorts Jameson's vision is an extraordinary animus against America. He speaks wistfully of a "diagnosis of the American misery whose prescription would be social revolution," of the "rat race of daily existence," and of "the increasing squalor that daily life in the U.S. owes to big business and to its unenviable position as the purest form of commodity and market capitalism functioning anywhere in the world today" (*SV*, 22 and 32). (What is "unenviable" according to Jameson is in fact very much envied, as we all know.) It makes him angry that the overwhelming majority of Americans do not believe their lives to be as miserable as he knows they really are, and so for him one of the virtues of reading Adorno and Horkheimer is their capacity to "restore the sense of something grim and impending within the polluted sunshine of the shopping mall—some older classical European-style sense of doom and crisis" (*LM*, 248). This is an alienated, elitist intellectual with a vengeance. Can Jameson really hope that everyone will drop his commodities, read Adorno, and become appropriately miserable, so that Jameson will really have been right about them and their lives after all? Perhaps we have here the key to Jameson's repeated lament that big business manipulates people and transforms them into identical consumers, for he would evidently like to control their minds, too. But neither the fantasy of the single, centralized uniform multinational corporate agenda nor Marxism's own dreams of conformity and control do justice to the real diversity of human life.

If neither his political thought nor his moral stance offer us anything to admire, what of Jameson's actual interpretations of literature and culture? The trouble here is that Jameson is correct at least with regard to his own work when he takes the position that everything depends on politics, for his criticism is essentially the application of his political attitudes to cultural phenomena. The very considerable problems of the former automatically become the problems of the latter. Still, they are not the only problems. On the first page of *Signatures of the Visible*, for example, Jameson tells us that the "visual is *essentially* pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt mindless fascination.... [Films] ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body." Here he is simply following the structure of a well-known invalid inference: "All pornography involves staring; all staring is visual; therefore all that is visual is pornographic." Since looking is in fact not necessarily staring, nor staring necessarily either mindless or sexual, the equation of the visual and the pornographic is merely arbitrary. More arbitrary assertion follows when Jameson says that a tourist taking a snapshot is making the landscape into a commodity and thus into personal property. Don't vacationing Marxists also take photographs of people or places to remember them by?

When this persistently loose, *non-sequitur*-ridden argumentation is turned on a whole film the results are abysmal. Take Jameson's reading of *Jaws*. His interpretation is built on his view of the three main characters, Brody (played

by Roy Scheider), Hooper (Richard Dreyfus), and Quint (Robert Shaw). This is its core:

[T]he content of the partnership between Hooper and Brody projected by the film may be specified socially and politically, as the allegory of an alliance between the forces of law-and-order and the new technocracy of the multinational corporations: an alliance which must be cemented, not merely by its fantasized triumph over the ill-defined menace of the shark itself, but above all by the indispensable precondition of the effacement of that more traditional image of an older America which must be eliminated from historical consciousness and social memory before the new power system takes its place. (SV, 29)

The death of Quint is the “symbolic destruction of an older America—the America of small business...but also the America of the New Deal and the crusade against Nazism, the older America of the depression and the war and of the heyday of classical liberalism.” Quint is associated with the American past, we are told, “by way of his otherwise gratuitous reminiscences about World War II and the campaign in the Pacific.”

Anyone with a fresh memory of the film can easily see how badly Jameson distorts it. Quint’s reminiscences are of *sharks* circling and picking off his comrades in arms while they float in the water waiting to be rescued. What Jameson calls “gratuitous” reminiscences actually provide the central motivation for Quint’s place in the film as the obsessed shark-hunter. His death is that of an Ahab, consumed with a desire for revenge and punished for it; it has nothing to do with the demise of the American past. Jameson’s political interpretation of Quint is so arbitrary that it transforms the bloodthirsty shark-killer into a classical liberal. The other characters are similarly misinterpreted. The Hooper of the film makes a familiar kind of contrast with Quint: he is the young and inexperienced academic, as opposed to the shrewd, and worldly, practical older man. As such, Hooper is about as far removed from the idea of multinational corporations as possible. Nor does Brody fit Jameson’s stereotype of law and order; he has moved to the island to escape his role as a big-city tough cop, and there he is an anguished liberal public servant, not a repressive tyrant. Jameson’s “allegory” thus projects Marxist categories of thought indiscriminately onto subject matter that has nothing to support them. He concludes that *Jaws* is an “excellent example...of ideological manipulation” and of tapping “genuine social and historical content” (SV, 29), but the ideological manipulation is his own, not the film’s.

There is more of the same throughout these volumes. Van Gogh’s “A Pair of Boots” shows, according to Jameson, “the whole object world of agricultural misery, of stark rural poverty, and the whole rudimentary human world of backbreaking peasant toil, a world reduced to its most brutal and menaced, primitive and marginalized state” (P, 7). Again, this has nothing to do with the

painting, which shows a very strong, exceptionally well-made pair of boots—the kind that were certainly never owned by the abjectly poor.

The film *The Godfather*, for Jameson, is not really about the Mafia, but (again predictably) about “American capitalism in its most systematized and computerized, dehumanized, ‘multinational’ and corporate form” (SV, 31). Jameson’s obsessions blind him once more, to the way in which, for example, the notion of a *family* and its degeneration is explored in the *Godfather* films. Kafka is also subjected to Jameson’s routine interpretation: “The pleasures of Kafka, the pleasures of the nightmare in Kafka, then come from the way in which the archaic livens up routine and boredom, and an old-fashioned juridical and bureaucratic paranoia enters the empty workweek of the corporate age and makes something at least happen!” (P, 309). Jameson finds his *idée fixe* in architecture, too:

[T]his latest mutation in space—postmodern hyperspace—has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself... [T]his alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment...can itself stand as the symbol and analogon of...the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects. (P, 44)

All of these very different phenomena are emptied of their own individual content so that they can be made to say the same thing, again and again. Jameson thinks that he is thereby enlarging their meaning, and so he complains that “the stereotypical characterization of such enlargement as *reductive* remains a never-ending source of hilarity” (IT1, xxvii). Let me spell out, therefore, what it means to say that this habit is reductive: it reduces a diverse world of endlessly varying phenomena to the same shape by the repetitive assertion that they are all about the same thing, regardless of what their specific individual content may be. To do this is to end up not with more, but with very much less content.

The most ambitious of these books is *Postmodernism*, and it is Jameson’s work on “the postmodern” that currently attracts the most attention. As the subtitle *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* suggests, his analysis of postmodernism suffers from the same problems noted above, but it also has further weaknesses all its own. “Postmodernism” is a notoriously vague concept, and for good reason; for to identify and thus define something by referring to its time of origin—with words like “new” or “modern”—not only avoids a more useful descriptive title, but also must eventually leave us with words that refer to something old, and growing older. The “present” time for the “New Critics” was half a century ago, which means that the word “new” has become a nuisance. “Postmodern” compounds the problem by hanging on to a long-past present and then pointing indefinitely forward from it. (Even worse,

we now sometimes have the term “post-postmodernism”.) This increasing vagueness should tell us that a descriptive term ought to have been used in the first place.

The first duty of anyone who writes on “postmodernism” is to clear up the confusion (to the extent that is possible) by giving a descriptive explanation of what postmodernism is. Jameson shirks that duty. His first chapter begins with an exceedingly strange explanation:

The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the ends of this or that (the end of ideology, art or social class; the “crisis of Leninism,” social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.); taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism. (*P*, 1)

This peculiar definition essentially makes doubts about socialism and Utopianism the defining feature of postmodernism. In *Late Marxism*, on the other hand, we are told that the postmodern is “the fulfillment and abolition of liberalism as well, which, no longer tenable as an ideology and a value... can function more effectively after its own death as an ideology” (*LM*, 249). Further attempts occur in the passage previously cited, which identifies postmodern culture as the expression of “a whole new wave of American military and economic domination” (*P*, 5); and in another where Jameson asserts that postmodernism must be thought of not as a stylistic but as a historical phenomenon (*P*, 45–46). And there are still others: “Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good,” and “Postmodernism, postmodern consciousness, may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility, which consists primarily in the sheer enumeration of changes and modifications” (*P*, ix).

The confusion and the incoherence are endless. Each one of these explanations can be criticized individually. (To take just one, it is a mistake to take “stylistic” and “historical” as fundamentally distinct because, on the one hand, styles are historical facts, too, while on the other, historical phenomena cannot be referred to without some kind of descriptive account of them; to say that something occurs in a certain historical context presupposes that one can identify what is being spoken of.) But analysis of each of these attempts at a definition would not get us to the root of the problem, which lies in Jameson’s logic. He has no conception of the difference between those uses of “is” that define and those that simply inform, that is, of the difference between “The Book of Kells is a ninth-century Irish gospel book” and “The Book of Kells is the subject of a new book from Blackwell.” That is why Jameson’s attempts to identify and define postmodernism are hopelessly jumbled together with other kinds of interpretive or historical statements.

At this point we face a puzzle. Jameson's political thought is rigid, narrow, and derivative; he seems to lack a moral sense, and his actual moral judgments are repellent; his argumentation is exceptionally poor, and the concepts he uses ill-defined; and his literary and cultural interpretation amounts to little more than the indiscriminate and inappropriate imposition of Marxist ideas on texts and objects that have no real place for them. What, then, is the basis of the extraordinary vogue that he now enjoys? To this question I see only one possible answer. The timing of Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981) was exquisitely suited to the developing mood of literary studies in this country. His assertion that "everything is 'in the last analysis' political," was exactly what the rising tide of "race, gender and class" critics needed to legitimate their exclusive focus on oppression as the basic theme of all literature.

One of the essays included in *The Ideologies of Theory*, "Pleasure: A Political Issue", expands upon this view of "the political" as a category fundamental to all others, and in so doing spells out some of its consequences. Here Jameson tells us that "the right to a specific pleasure, to a specific enjoyment of the potentialities of the material body...must always in one way or another also be able to stand as a figure for the transformation of social relations as a whole" (IT2, 74). That is, pleasure, if it is not to be mere hedonism, "must always be allegorical"—it must be capable of being "taken as the *figure* for Utopia in general, and for the systemic revolutionary transformation of society as whole" (IT2, 73).

Again, this is tailor-made for "race, class, gender" criticism: our response to and enjoyment of literature can now only be about political liberation, and that will justify narrowing criticism to a single issue with three variants. But this argument contains a fatal flaw. Suppose that we reached Jameson's Utopia. What then? It would be natural to assume that when his politics has done its work (assuming, for the moment, that the *really* real Marxist transformation is indeed possible), we shall have reached a state where life's pleasures are now justly distributed at last. The trouble is that, if we accept Jameson's model of pleasure, they cannot count as genuine pleasures, for only those conducive to the coming transformation can be counted as such. And what this *reductio ad absurdum* shows is that "the political" cannot be an independent category of value to which all others are subservient. Politics is about the way in which life's pleasures are regulated and distributed—it is a means, not an end. The enjoyment of power is the only exception to this rule, but Marxism can scarcely admit that this is a pleasure, for in the coming Utopia nobody may wield power over anyone else. This confusion also lies at the heart of Jameson's claim that everything is "in the last analysis" political, one that runs together and confuses two quite different assertions: namely, "There is a political dimension to everything" and "Politics is the essential basis of everything." The first is obviously true, though it is just as true that there are psychological, ecological, physical, economic, chemical, etc., dimensions to everything, too. The second

is false precisely because the first is not unique. If you want to do a political analysis, no fact or event is in principle irrelevant to that analysis, but the same is just as true of many other types of analysis. *Generality is not the same as priority*. The fact that everything has a political dimension does not substantiate the claim that political analysis is the most fundamental kind of analysis.

If I am correct, Jameson's influence derives neither from the power of his argument nor from the moral force of his position, nor from any insight offered by his criticism, but instead only from his having furnished what seems to those who use it a serviceable underpinning for the victim-centered criticism that has overtaken university literature departments; yet that underpinning consists in an entirely fallacious argument. Here lurks a profound irony, for, if we were to agree that political analysis is the most fundamental and important of all analysis, we should be committed immediately to finding the most sophisticated, learned, and intelligent political analysis available. The field of political science itself would beckon, and it is by no means clear that Jameson and the crude political thought dear to contemporary academic literary critics would then survive.

The Modern Language Association of America gave its 1991 James Russell Lowell Prize "for an outstanding literary or linguistic study" to Jameson for *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. This action tells us a great deal both about Jameson's enormous moral and intellectual authority in college literature programs across the nation and about the kind of work now highly esteemed by the MLA. Its message could not be more depressing for those who still expect humanistic scholarship to be judged by its intelligence and its humane values, and not by its conformity to a confused, contradictory, and ultimately very inhumane radical politics.

## Notes

1. John W. Kronik, "Editor's Column," *PMLA* 160 (October 1991), 200–4, tabulated citations in articles printed in publications of the Modern Language Association from 1981 to 1990. The results showed that Jameson was cited more than any other American literary critic. The only living figure cited more often than Jameson was Jacques Derrida.
2. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 20.
3. The final collapse of the Soviet economy shows that even with regard to the one issue that Jameson will allow it to be judged on—industrialization—Stalinism was scarcely an unqualified success.
4. See David Gordon, *Resurrecting Marx: The Analytical Marxists on Freedom, Exploitation, and Justice* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Books, 1990.)
5. Dario Fernández-Morera, "Materialist Discourse in Academia During the Age of Late Marxism," *Academic Questions* (Spring 1991), 15.