

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

A Shudder in the World: Reading *The Political Unconscious* from the Periphery

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The year was 1984. I was a PhD literature student at the University of São Paulo, Brazil, on a research stay in England. I had heard of Fredric Jameson in Brazil—two colleagues had begun to translate *Marxism and Form* into Portuguese. Back in those pre-Internet days, news of recent books was hard to come by, and it was by sheer luck that I saw a copy of *The Political Unconscious* in a bookshop. As I started reading it, I immediately felt at home. Finally, in my studies of the then mandatory field of theory, I had found an outlook that was at the same time familiar—it echoed the way I was formed at the University of São Paulo—and challenging, in the sense that here was a way of thinking about literary interpretation that opened up new paths in the field of criticism.

As the eldest among us may remember, the towering figure in those days was Jacques Derrida and his deconstructive version of a world of texts. One of his main targets was precisely interpretation, the very theme of *The Political Unconscious*, with its extraordinary first chapter entitled “On Interpretation” (17–102). Today, deconstruction may well be read as a symptom of yet another moment of disillusionment, of a pessimism of the intellect founded on the political defeats of the 1960s, and the triumphant march of neoliberalism, paving the way for the predominance of vulgar capitalism all over the world today. If for Margaret Thatcher there was no alternative to capitalism, for cultural theory there was no possibility of interpretation. New buzzwords began to occupy center stage in the humanities, whose task had always been, in whatever fashion, to describe and interpret the meanings and values of a given culture. Those meanings and values were then pronounced undecidable, and no matter how sophisticated and intoxicating the taking apart of the components,

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arguments, and beliefs was, I could not help thinking that undecidability forms the soul of paralysis and leads to conformism and inaction. Strong interpretation implies considering alternatives, and taking sides, and it is the first fundamental step in helping transform the bleak reality deconstruction describes and accepts.

Let me give an example from my own part of the world. As one would expect, interpretations of Brazilian social reality have been historically based on binaries, such as metropolis versus colony, original versus imported culture, developed versus underdeveloped world, and, more recently, center versus periphery. The fact that these are all binaries cannot conceal their distinct imbalances, which were not only textual but very real. One of the introducers of deconstruction in the Brazilian academy, the critic Silviano Santiago, offered a rhetorical solution to do away with such binaries. In the characteristic syntax of a theory that, as Jameson quips, “neither affirmeth nor denieth” (*Valences* 136), Santiago argued that Brazil would not be either in the center or in the periphery of a global world but would occupy a “space in between,” and that no culture was dominating or dominated, and hybridity was the order of the day. If this solution makes everyone happier—who desires to live in the periphery or to express meanings and values constructed elsewhere?—it also leaves out the structural imbalances determined by the international division of labor. This failure to describe social reality makes for the loss of the explanatory function of theory.

For the dialectical tradition I was formed in at the University of São Paulo, the dual aspect of Brazilian social life is not a peculiar defect or a shameful lack but a historical result of the social organization of Brazil, which is “diverso mas não alheio” (“different from but not alien to”) the dominant world order that constitutes both center and periphery (Schwarz, *Sequências* 95).¹ It is different because metropolises did not create colonies in their image and likeness, and neither does the international division of labor exist to create equality among nations. Nonetheless it is a space of the same order, as it is subject to the dynamics of

world capital, which is what defines the movement and agenda and, crucially for interpreters of the national peculiarities, sets up the very terms and categories we use to talk about our social life. This historical situation molds the intellectual project of committed critics: our task is to use the powers of analysis to reveal the ways in which elements of social reality structure cultural products. The analysis of how those external elements become internal—that is, how the contents of history become aesthetic form—can then reveal dimensions that exceed the reigning ideology, or the artist’s conscious intentions. Thus, cultural criticism acquires a strong heuristic potential, as a way of discovering and interpreting social-historical reality, a way of “cognitively mapping,” to use a Jamesonian expression, our place in the totality of relations we call the world.

You can then imagine how thrilled I was when I opened *The Political Unconscious* and read the first line on the “imperative of all dialectical thought”: “Always Historicize!” (Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 9). This injunction was followed by the resolutely trenchant statement “This book will argue the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts. It conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method . . . but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation” (17). And as I read and reread on and on, I became aware of a number of convergences and complementarities that made for the originality and productivity of dialectical thought in its different manifestations. I am here talking not of personal influences—a theme that is not central to a tradition that views thought as a response to a historical situation—but of convergences determined, each with its own specificities, by a shared intellectual outlook. This is especially true in the works of a Brazilian tradition of materialist criticism, of which Roberto Schwarz is the central figure.²

Let me give a central example. The awareness of the necessity of a strong interpretation that renders visible aspects of the social and historical forces that shape the works of art, thus turning criticism into a potent cognitive act, demands a new notion of aesthetic form, which marks the practice of Jameson and of the São Paulo tradition. To my

knowledge, the dialectical use of this category sets their respective works and those of other practitioners of the dialectic—apart from all other literary tendencies. Their different approaches notwithstanding, those theories all rest on a notion of aesthetic form as autonomous. No matter how sophisticated and diverse, they all seem to agree that the work of criticism is to describe and evaluate the object this form, usually accompanied by the adjective *organic*, creates. In Raymond Williams's memorable definition, "nearly all forms of contemporary critical theory are theories of *consumption*. That is to say, they are concerned with understanding an object in such a way that it can be profitably or correctly consumed" (45–46).

It is precisely the refutation of the principles of those theories of consumption—very much including autonomous form and the "mirage" of "immanent criticism" (Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 57)—that constitutes one of the central points of convergence between the São Paulo dialectical tradition and the decisive contribution *The Political Unconscious* makes to cultural theory. Here, for example, is Schwarz on aesthetic form:

Quanto a afinidades, estamos no universo do marxismo, para o qual os constrangimentos materiais da reprodução da sociedade são eles próprios formas de base, as quais mal ou bem se imprimem nas diferentes áreas da vida espiritual, onde circulam e são reelaboradas em versões mais ou menos sublimadas ou falseadas, formas, portanto, trabalhando formas. Ou, ainda, as formas que encontramos nas obras são as repetições ou a transformação, com resultado variável, de formas preexistentes, artísticas ou extra-artísticas. (*Sequências* 30–31)

As far as affinities are concerned, we are here in the universe of Marxism, for which the material constraints of social reproduction are in themselves basic forms that mark different areas of intellectual and artistic productions, where they circulate and are reelaborated, in more or less falsified or sublimated forms, so what we have is forms working on forms. In other words, the forms we find in works of art are the reproduction or the transformation,

with variable results, of artistic or extra-artistic preexistent forms.

Schwarz emphasizes that in artistic production every form has a reference in social reality. It materializes the complex heterogeneity of social-historical relations. In this view, historicity is not a background but the very substance of artistic form that is to be taken as objective, insofar as it is the potency of social and historical relations that structures the work of art:

The aesthetic formalization of social conditions; the structural reduction of external facts; the function of historical reality in constituting the structure of a work: these are differently angled formulations . . . that designate the moment in which a real form—one posited by practical life—is transmuted into a literary form; that is, into a basis for the construction of an imaginary world. In other words, these are expressions that mark the way in which aesthetic dynamics is bound to social dynamics, to the exclusion of other ways. (*"Two Girls"* 23–24)

This position entails a specific view of our practice as critics:

Se não for preciso adivinhar, pesquisar, construir, recusar aparências, consubstanciar intuições difíceis, a crítica não é crítica. . . . O resultado não é a simples reiteração da experiência cotidiana, a cuja prepotência se opõe, cujas contradições explicita, cujas tendências acentua, com decisivo resultado de clarificação. (*Martinha* 287–88)

If criticism does not decipher, investigate, construct, refuse appearances, if it does not substantiate difficult intuitions, it is not criticism. . . . Its end result is not the simple reiteration of everyday experience. On the contrary, it opposes the prepotency of daily experience, explicates its contradictions, highlights its tendencies. As such it has a decisive power of clarification.

In the same vein, Jameson, already in *Marxism and Form*, spells out a notion of form that affirms both the key contribution of a Marxist cultural criticism and the interconstitutive nature of the relations between social and aesthetic forms:

In the long run, however, there is no need to justify the socio-economic “translation” which Marxism sees as the ultimate explanatory code for literary and cultural phenomena. Such justification is already implicit in the dialectical notion of the relationship between form and content. . . . For the essential characteristic of literary raw material or latent content is precisely that it never really is initially formless . . . but is rather already meaningful from the outset, being neither more nor less than the very components of concrete social life itself. . . . The work of art does not confer meaning on these elements, but rather transforms their initial meaning into some new and heightened construction of meaning; for that reason neither the creation nor the interpretation of the work can ever be an arbitrary process. (402–03)

This conception of form is among the conditions of possibility of Jameson’s central proposition in *The Political Unconscious* that narrative is a socially symbolic act:

The literary or aesthetic act . . . always entertains some active relationship with the Real. . . . Insofar as symbolic action . . . is a way of doing something to the world, to that degree, what we are calling “world” must inhere within it, as the content it has to take up in itself in order to submit to the transformation of form. . . . [T]he literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction. (81–82)

Of course, I am not saying that either of the two critics invented this notion of form that, in its twentieth-century version, is very much present in the Western Marxist tradition, especially in Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, a common reference for both Schwarz and Jameson. But what I want to emphasize are the affinities between Schwarz’s and Jameson’s positions and the ways each of these positions represents a continuity and an advancement of the dialectical tradition. It is no coincidence that both contribute to seeing Marxism as the “untranscendable horizon” of thought (Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 10) and to correcting the more mechanistic views of what Jameson refers to as “vulgar materialism” in *The Political Unconscious*

(82). Their notion of form as sedimented social content, as Adorno would put it, takes us far away from the theories of reflex and homologies that leave Marxism open to critiques of reductionism and overdetermination.

In 1970 Schwarz wrote a mock essay to comment ironically on a list of malpractices of cultural criticism. The short essay consists of nineteen principles for literary theory. All of them are ludicrous. Among my favorites is “Muito cuidado com o óbvio. O mais seguro é documentá-lo sempre estatisticamente. Use um gráfico, se houver espaço” (“Be very careful with the obvious. The safest thing is to document it, always with statistics. Use a graph, if you have the available space”; “*O pai*” 93). One of the principles is repeated verbatim three times: “Não esqueça: o marxismo é um reducionismo, e está superado pelo estruturalismo, pela fenomenologia, pela estilística, pela nova crítica americana, pela formalismo russo, pela crítica estética, pela linguística e pela filosofia das formas simbólicas” (“Don’t forget, Marxism is a reductionism, and it is superseded by structuralism, by phenomenology, by stylistics, by American New Criticism, by Russian formalism, by aesthetic criticism, by linguistics, and by the philosophy of symbolic forms” [93–94]). The juxtaposition of the ridiculous principles tinges with derision the often-repeated notion of Marxism as superseded and reductionist, a Brechtian way of refuting nonsensical common sense. Schwarz’s work, as well as, of course, Jameson’s, can be read as a continuous and productive way of demonstrating how a dialectical Marxist approach subsumes all the other interpretative codes, showing their structural limitations and the local manner in which “they construct their objects of study and the strategies of containment whereby they are able to project the illusion that their readings are somehow complete and self-sufficient” (Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 10).

One of the central objections traditionally leveled against Marxism stems from the working principle of a determining base and a determined superstructure, fundamental to any Marxist cultural theory, though, as Jameson puts it, it has been subject “to many serious qualms and reservations . . . virtually from Engels

himself onward" (*Late Marxism* 45). Jameson's own solution is that "everything changes when you grasp base-and-superstructure not as a full-fledged theory in its own right, but rather as the name for a problem, whose solution is always a unique, ad hoc invention (46).

I want to argue that *The Political Unconscious* is precisely that theoretical and practical invention in its proposition of the three horizons of interpretation, all of which establish ways to comprehend the transit between the base, taken as "specific activities of men in real social and economic relationships, containing fundamental contradictions and variations and therefore always in a state of dynamic process" (Williams 35), and cultural production.

Thus, the first horizon of the individual formal structure sees cultural production not merely as a text or as any other cultural artefact but as a symbolic act that attempts to represent formally a "solution" to a real social contradiction. Of course, the rewriting of this horizon is made possible by the conception of dialectical form mentioned above. The second horizon, likewise, takes on another aspect of the formal structure, the ways in which it represents the discourses of class struggle. It is here that Jameson introduces the notion of ideologue, the smallest unit of class ideology. It is presented as both a sociological category and a formal one, a construct that must "be susceptible to both a conceptual description and a narrative manifestation all at once" (*Political Unconscious* 87). The third horizon sets the work in history, conceived in its "vastest sense of the sequence of the modes of production" (75): "These dynamics—the newly constituted 'text' of our third horizon—make up what can be termed the *ideology of the form*, that is, the determinate contradiction of the specific messages emitted by the varied sign systems which coexist in a general artistic process as well as in its general social formation" (98–99). I have been continuously wrestling with those formulations ever since that first encounter in England. I have taught *The Political Unconscious* many times, written about it, revised its translation into Portuguese in 1992, but I don't think I can say I fully understand all the implications it has for our practice as critics. Every

time I work with it, it presents one more interpretative challenge and opens up new perspectives. The publication of *Allegory and Ideology* in 2019 represented the horizons in an expanded light. We now have the four original medieval levels discussed in *The Political Unconscious*—the literal, the allegorical or mystical, the moral, and the anagogic—refunctioned in contemporary terms as the textual object, the interpretative code, the psychological level of the individual, and the anagogic, the level of collective history. The new book presents seven essays that demonstrate the productivity of those levels to a Marxist analysis of a host of artistic and intellectual manifestations, ranging from symphonies to discussions of nationalism.

While reading the chapter "Psychoanalytic: *Hamlet* with Lacan" in *Allegory and Ideology*, I came across a remark that enabled me to see more clearly the interconnections between the different levels of artistic representation, individual experience, and historical and political categories. Here Jameson argues that "categories of our political unconscious such as succession and usurpation are profoundly unsettled by certain kinds of representations as well as certain kinds of events" (88). They are related and find expression in what are supposed to be "more private or subjective categories, such as incest, marriage, the paternal function, and so forth; and when the two shift, there is a shudder in the world, like the premonition of an earthquake, or like the body's spasm when an elevator falls" (89).

A "shudder in the world" may well be what the book whose forty years we are celebrating here caused in academic discussions. Jameson is, of course, always the best formulator of the issues he raises:

What I would propose *The Political Unconscious* to affirm today is that the political and the aesthetic are not the same, but that both confront in their different ways the representational contradictions inherent in the more abstract categories they share, for example, which pose problems in political organization analogous to those posed in narrative (and probably also in questions of personal identity). So we still need to maintain the close affinity of politics, art and consciousness; but to assert

that affinity by way of the exploration of the deeper categories in which they all share or partake (to use Plato's formula). It is those categories which, I would want to say today, make up a true political unconscious. (Fredric Jameson)

This formulation clarifies that the political unconscious—constitutively informed by the sequence of the modes of production that coexist at a certain historical time—shapes the deep and abstract categories we deploy for thinking, and then generates a number of representations of ourselves, and of our fantasies about history and reality. In turn, those representations have to be interpreted to tell us what we think of ourselves, of others, of the meanings and values of our culture, and of the world we live in.

Base and superstructure indeed!

NOTES

1. All unattributed translations are my own.

2. Though they met briefly at Yale University in the 1980s, Fredric Jameson and Roberto Schwarz began to meet more regularly in Brazil and the United States in 1992 and have become comrades. Jameson dedicated his *Valences of the Dialectic* to Schwarz.

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