

## THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

# On Always Historicizing: The Dialectic of Utopia and Ideology Today

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“Always historicize!” The two-word sentence appearing at the beginning of Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* has taken on an almost talismanic quality for many readers, evoking the insights to be found within the book in such a way as to obviate the need to read it. Undoubtedly, thousands of scholars recognize the famous “first line” without having read *The Political Unconscious*, much like people who recognize the first four or eight notes of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony without listening any further. The fundamental paradox of the phrase has been frequently cited by Jameson’s detractors, as if Jameson himself did not know that the word *always* denotes a transhistorical imperative, and as if he himself does not mention this fact in the very next sentence, while also noting without ostensible irony that the phrase “always historicize” would turn out to be the moral of the book. (The irony becomes increasingly apparent as one reads on and realizes that a key part of Jameson’s argument entails the injunction to eschew morals entirely.) The exaggerated significance given to this slogan by Jameson’s critics is also notable when compared to the relative lack of emphasis accorded to his conclusion, where one might expect the key takeaway of *The Political Unconscious* to be ultimately found.

The hortatory phrase “Always historicize!” appears in the preface to *The Political Unconscious*, not in the main body of the text, and one could argue that it is thus not the actual beginning of the book. Given that a preface is usually understood to be a sort of hors d’oeuvre, apart from and prior to the main body of a work, it is especially odd to see a line from its text given as much attention as it has. For example, the first line of chapter 1, “On Interpretation: Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act,” is less pithy, but it certainly lets the reader know

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what to expect from *The Political Unconscious*: “This book will argue the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts” (17), which the book most certainly does.

Jameson’s conclusion, chapter 6 of *The Political Unconscious*, probably deserves greater attention. If the preface, as a genre, tends to have a privileged position even when it is considered outside the work, the conclusion as a genre would seem more likely to be authoritative. After all, it is generally considered not only a part of the main body of the text but the crucial final moment, the denouement if not the climax, in which the final meaning of the text might be revealed. That’s not exactly how it works in Jameson’s book, of course. For instance, Ian Buchanan has noted that the definition of the term “political unconscious” is not so much to be found within the book as to be slowly revealed throughout the course of its pages: “*The Political Unconscious* taken as a whole, is the definition of this concept—a very precise definition, to be sure, encompassing a panoply of nuances and permutations, but containing nothing inessential or extraneous” (233). The fact that Jameson gives his chapter 6 the title “Conclusion: The Dialectic of Utopia and Ideology,” rather than set aside a separate conclusion without a chapter number, may indicate his desire to keep it together with the main text. In any case, this chapter effectively concludes the argument about “the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts,” and it remains—like the book as a whole—a rich reservoir for critics today.

Here Jameson expands and refines the Marxist project of ideology critique by noting that even the most reactionary or conservative politics maintains a utopian kernel that cannot be ignored by a properly dialectical criticism. It opens with an epigraph taken from Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” specifically the passage with the famous observation that “[t]here has never been a document of culture which was not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin 256), thus introducing a fundamental contradiction at the heart of Marxist analysis of culture (that is, the copresence of the positive and the negative). But in this section Jameson invokes his

own version of a dialectical reversal of this idea, proposing “to argue the proposition that the effectively ideological is also, at the same time, necessarily Utopian” (*Political Unconscious* 286). Jameson takes up the idea of a “positive hermeneutic” (which he places in scare quotes) within Marxism, which had been accused of a sort of strictly “negative” approach to interpretation, but Jameson will also show how the distinction itself does not hold up well. The dialectic of utopia and ideology, more subtle and more powerful than the binary of positive versus negative (itself rooted in the traditional opposition of “good” and “evil”), preserves, transcends, and cancels these moralizing concepts in showing that both are inadequate for understanding our situation. Moreover, they tend to ignore a fundamental situatedness that affects everything about the way in which we make sense of the world through narrative art and through our interpretation of it.

In an interview in which he reaffirmed his indebtedness to a sort of Sartrean existentialism, Jameson asserts that a crucial aspect of dialectical thought entails “an emphasis on the logic of the situation, rather than the logic of the individual consciousness or reified substances like society” (“Interview” 194). He goes on to say that “[t]he emphasis on the logic of the situation, the constant changeability of the situation, its primacy and the way in which it allows certain things to be possible and others not: that would lead to a kind of thinking I would call dialectical” (194). The logic of the situation helps explicate the paradox of a slogan like “always historicize,” for it reveals the ways in which the subject is conditioned by the situation in which it is located, a situation and a situatedness that are implacably historical (and geographic), but from which the subject is also actively perceiving and interpreting the world. Along those lines, dialectical thinking tries to get at the multiple temporal frames of reference—our own biological span, a historical epoch, a geological age, and so forth—in which both the subject who interprets and the object to be interpreted are also situated. What Jameson has called “metacommentary,” “national allegory,” “cognitive mapping,” “the desire called Marx,” and a “desire for narrative” is the principal means by

which we variously make sense of our situation. The phrase “always historicize” itself becomes another name by which to characterize this impulse. *The Political Unconscious* is, in part, a book-length attempt to show how this dialectic works.

In view of this detail, I think that to characterize the dialectical critic as “suspicious” seems wrong-headed, for it is a matter less of assuming that some sort of truth is hidden (perhaps nefariously) than of recognizing the degree to which any truth cannot be ascertained in itself but is always mediated and conditioned by the situations in which it could be encountered. If critics following the Jamesonian practice are truly suspicious, it is not so much that they cast doubt on the text’s own apparently superficial meaning as that they would look askance at the certainty with which the surface readers stake their claim to the truth. This is also why Jameson has, throughout his career, remained skeptical of and opposed to judgments based on ethical or moral claims, for the situation from and in which such judgments are leveled is itself subject to constant change. As early as *Marxism and Form* (1971), Jameson wrote that

[t]he basic story which the dialectic has to tell is no doubt that of the dialectical *reversal*, that paradoxical turning around of a phenomenon into its opposite. . . . It can be described as a kind of leap-frogging affair in time, in which the drawbacks of a given historical situation turn out in reality to be its secret advantages, in which what looked like built-in superiorities suddenly prove to set the most ironclad limits on its future development. It is a matter, indeed, of the reversal of limits, of the transformation from negative to positive and from positive to negative. (309)

A change in situation is at once a profoundly significant modification of the subject’s own position and perspective and a noticeable alteration in the objective conditions for the possibility of such experience. Adherence to a sort of “surface reading” almost always presupposed a kind of transcendent subject along with a rather fixed object, thus denying to both their situatedness in time and space. To be critical, in this regard, is to reckon with the logic of the situation.

For those critics who have bemoaned the predominance of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” in literary and cultural studies, *The Political Unconscious* has become a particularly dark *bête noire*.<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur is almost always cited as the originator of the phrase “hermeneutics of suspicion,” but his work on the subject is rarely taken seriously beyond that point. He contrasts a hermeneutics of faith, in which the reader seeks to reveal hidden truths in the text, with that of suspicion, in which the reader seeks to show how the text hides the truth. But in Ricoeur’s own estimation, both modes can and do operate at the same time. He imagines this “suspicious” form of interpretation to be intimately, and perhaps necessarily, connected to the more “faithful” approach. In a line quoted directly by Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* (284), Ricoeur affirms that “[h]ermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen: vow to rigor, vow to obedience. In our time we have not finished doing away with *idols* and we have barely begun to listen to *symbols*” (27). In observing this distinction, Ricoeur infamously refuses to take sides, understanding that *interpretation* itself—we recall that the original title of his 1965 book was simply *De l’interprétation*, after all—involves both motivations at once, even if certain interpreters, such as the “masters of suspicion” Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, emphasize suspicion rather than faith.

*The Political Unconscious*, with its obvious invocation of Marx and Freud, along with its clearly Nietzschean commitments to thinking “beyond good and evil,” thus serves as a sort of apotheosis for this “school of suspicion” in contemporary literary criticism and theory. Jameson’s book has unsurprisingly featured prominently in what have been called “the method wars” in twenty-first-century literary criticism (see Anker and Felski 15–17). Related to but extending beyond the antagonism between formalism and historicism, which is itself part of the legacy of philology as a foundational discourse in literary studies (see, e.g., Said), these method wars pit a hegemonic form of critique, whose “methodological orientation” (Anker and Felski 15) involves “a persistent concern with drawing out shadowy, concealed, or counterintuitive

meanings” (15–16) against an self-imagined insurgency of critics who “have questioned the value of reducing art to its political utility or philosophical premises,” presumably being thus better able to focus on and to appreciate “the formal qualities of art and the sensual dimensions of aesthetic experience” (16). That this formulation of opposing sides clearly favors the one over the other is not accidental, and as Bruce Robbins observed of some of the more prominent “postcritical” texts, by establishing the enemy as old or old-fashioned, passé, out-of-touch but also somehow “dominant,” the rhetoric “assumes that which it would seem obliged to establish” (373). After all, who would openly support reducing art to anything, whether it is “political utility” or any other imaginary nadir? Such critics fail to see, as Jameson himself put it elsewhere, that attending to ways in which a literary text’s “political, psychoanalytic, ideological, philosophical, or social resonances might become audible (and describable) *within* that experience of literary language and aesthetic form to which I remain committed” quite obviously involves an enlargement of the literary text! As Jameson notes, “The stereotypical characterization of such enlargement as *reductive* remains a never-ending source of hilarity” (Introduction xxvii). The anti-interpretative and antitheory sentiments of those on the other side in the method wars facilitated the characterization of Jameson’s symptomatic reading as “paranoid” or worse, and the moralizing sense that theirs was the side of virtue, saving literature and the humanities from these dark forces of “critique,” animates the rhetoric of, along with what there is of the argument for, postcritical reading.

Jameson himself has never imagined his own critical project in the way it sometimes gets characterized, and in fact he has consistently emphasized the degree to which any symptomatic reading of a text must pay attention not only to the ideological elements that may seem to conceal hidden truths but also to the utopian elements that the text figures forth.<sup>2</sup> As he puts it definitively in *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson insists on adopting

an enlarged perspective for any Marxist analysis of culture, which can no longer be content with its

demystifying vocation to unmask and to demonstrate the ways in which a cultural artifact fulfills a specific ideological mission, in legitimating a given power structure, in perpetuating and reproducing the latter, and in generating specific forms of false consciousness (or ideology in the narrower sense). It must not cease to practice this essentially negative hermeneutic function. . . but must also seek, through and beyond this demonstration of the instrumental function of a given cultural object, to project its simultaneously Utopian power as the symbolic affirmation of a specific historical and class form of collective unity. This is a unified perspective and not the juxtaposition of two options or analytic alternatives: neither is satisfactory in itself. (291)

A few pages later, Jameson repeats this positive hermeneutic as a concluding remark about Marxist hermeneutics in general, noting that if the terms “ideology” and “Utopia” don’t float your boat, then this could be rephrased: “a *functional* method for describing cultural texts is articulated with an *anticipatory* one” (296). In any case, both the “negative” and the “positive” versions of the hermeneutic “must . . . be exercised *simultaneously*” (296).

Notwithstanding the perseverance of critiques of his purported support for various embodiments of the hermeneutics of suspicion, paranoid reading, and symptomatic criticism, Jameson has maintained this fundamental position throughout his career. This is evident in nearly all his work, including his most recent book (as of this writing), *The Benjamin Files* (2020), in the final pages of which he takes up once again that same essay, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” that had provided the epigraph for *The Political Unconscious*’s own final chapter. Taking aim at the notorious vision of Benjamin’s famous “Angel of History,” Jameson again finds that, for all the apparent “negativity” of its vision of historical violence and catastrophe, it nevertheless contains in it that “affirmation that hope exists” (247)—that is, a fundamentally utopian element.

This dialectic of utopia and ideology thus turns out to inform *The Political Unconscious*’s famous slogan “Always historicize!” as well. One can see that the profoundly formalist approaches that have

been criticized by more historically oriented critics as ideological, precisely because of their denial of historical specificity or promotion of transhistorical “values” (e.g., organic unity, types of ambiguity, *différance*, and so on), themselves embody a utopian dimension or impulse in which these yearnings to escape from history—“History is what hurts,” after all (102)—find their form. And, on the flip side, the ideological straitjackets or enclosures attributed to the historicist model by its critics, who dispute the proposition that a given situation in a historical moment would absolutely determine the significance of a text, are themselves revealed to include a utopian dimension as well, as the collective situatedness in a given spatiotemporal matrix figures forth its own sort of existential moment of freedom: to wit, in the words of the Marxist theorist and revolutionary Victor Serge, “the only meaning of life lies in conscious participation in the making of history” (439). The famous exordium of *The Political Unconscious*’s preface ably sets the stage for the lengthy discussion to follow, reaching its crescendo in the final chapter.

The dialectic of utopia and ideology, as Jameson imagines it, renders obsolete the primary antagonisms of the so-called method wars in advance, *Aufhebung*-ing (sorry!) the whole positive versus negative contradiction, as well as form versus content, surface versus depth, affective versus critical, reparative versus paranoid, and other such oppositional pairings, and thereby moving the arguments to a different level of consideration in which all these, and more, are considered in relation to a broader totality. This dialectic also helps critics better survey the sociocultural terrain today, in what might be imagined as a late- or even post-postmodern epoch in which the daily experiences of individual subjects are saturated with the effects of global telecommunications, twenty-four-hour news cycles, the Internet, social media, and so on. Such a social and historical situation is arguably more vulnerable than ever to the sort of mystification that a proper *Ideologiekritik* is well suited to confront. In the face of an implacable and inescapable system sometimes referred to, after Mark Fisher, as “capitalist realism” (in which it is easier

to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, itself a reference to a comment made by Jameson as early as 1994 in *The Seeds of Time* [xii]), we inhabit a moment and a site where the utopian dimension is all the more relevant and desirable.

And thus, we might say, the “moral” of *The Political Unconscious* can serve as a crucial manifestation of the dialectic of utopia and ideology today, for to “always historicize” is also to recognize always our collective situatedness in this realm of necessity understood as history and, at the same time, to imagine alternatives. *The Political Unconscious*, so timely in its first appearance forty years ago, turns out to be just as critical to our current moment, for it is clear that we must be able to interpret the world in order to have any hopes of changing it for the better.

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## NOTES

1. Among the most famous examples, see Sedgwick; Best and Marcus; and Felski.
2. Felski does acknowledge this “positive hermeneutic” in Jameson, only to then assert that “utopian thought . . . simply constitutes the other face of critique” by reinforcing the “endemic suspicion of the present,” before dismissing Jameson’s revelation of “the romantic-imaginative yearnings” of the works of art discussed in *The Political Unconscious* as one of “the tenets of Marxist thought” (64).

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