

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Synchronous Coexistence and Temporal Overlay

JONATHAN CULLER

As a specialist in critical theory, I naturally read *The Political Unconscious* when it was published in 1981, and, seeing that it was clearly an important book, I collaborated with Leonard Green and Richard Klein on a special issue of *Diacritics* devoted to it, featuring essays by Hayden White, Terry Eagleton, Geoff Bennington, Satya Mohanty, Jerry Aline Flieger, and Michael Sprinker and accompanied by a substantial interview with Fredric Jameson himself (Green et al.). As we know, *The Political Unconscious* offers an extraordinarily sophisticated, comprehensive, nonreductive version of Marxist theory and criticism. But it aims to do more: “One of the essential themes of this book will be the contention that Marxism subsumes other interpretive modes or systems; or, to put it in methodological terms, that the limits of the latter can always be overcome, and their more positive findings retained, by a radical historicizing of their mental operations” (47). The juxtaposition “of the ‘methods’ or approaches current in American literary and cultural study today,” Jameson writes,

with a dialectical or totalizing, properly Marxist ideal of understanding will be used to demonstrate the structural limitations of the other interpretive codes, . . . allowing us to measure the yield and density of a properly Marxist interpretive act against those of other interpretive methods—the ethical, the psychoanalytic, the myth-critical, the semiotic, the structural, the theological—against which it must compete in the “pluralism” of the intellectual marketplace today. . . . Marxism is here conceived as that “untranscendable horizon” that subsumes such apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations, assigning them an undoubted sectoral validity within itself, and thus at once cancelling and preserving them. (10)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the context of the theory wars of the late 1970s and 1980s, this statement could only be seen as a power play:

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situating and incorporating the insights of other critical approaches in its Marxist dialectic would demonstrate the superiority of Marxism. In his 1984 study of *The Political Unconscious*, William Dowling maintains that Jameson

is trying to neutralize the entire program of contemporary poststructuralism by enclosing it within an expanded Marxism: in effect, trying to swallow up the enterprises of Derrida, Foucault, et al. by showing that they are incomplete without a theory of history that only Marxism can provide (and that, when it is provided, reduces them to the level of second-degree or merely critical philosophies). (12)

But since Marxism is enlisted both as one of the competitors in the marketplace of ideas and as the horizon within which the competition takes place, the contest cannot but seem rigged: Marxism is ultimately the judge that will assign each method its limited sectoral validity.

With hindsight, though, we can say that whatever its role as a move in the struggles among theories in the late twentieth century, Jameson's strategy did not, after all, establish the dominance of Marxism in literary studies in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. Rather, *The Political Unconscious* produced a framework for the remarkable and immensely varied series of books on the interpretation of cultural forms that Jameson was to produce over the next forty years. The project of *The Political Unconscious* could be read as fulfilling Jameson's call at the end of *The Prison-House of Language* for a hermeneutic that would "by disclosing the presence of preexisting codes and models and by reemphasizing the place of the analyst himself, reopen text and analytic process alike to all the winds of history." It is only thus, he explains, that the "twin, apparently incommensurable demands of synchronic analysis and historical awareness, of structure and self-consciousness, language and history, can be reconciled" (216).

Of course, to reconcile the synchronic and diachronic and incorporate the insights of other critical approaches, assigning them some limited sectoral validity, risks vitiating those insights by denying

their own claims to account for other theoretical perspectives. This has been one significant line of criticism of *The Political Unconscious*.¹ It is certainly possible also to question the fundamental presumption that the human experience has what Jameson famously calls "the unity of a single great collective story . . . the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity"—a struggle whose traces his multilevel interpretive project will reveal (*Political Unconscious* 19). Can we believe that, as he writes, the mystery of the cultural past can become intelligible to us "only if the human adventure is one" and that "[t]hese matters can recover their original urgency for us only if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story" (19)? Are there not, rather, multiple stories? Today one is likely to imagine that only multiple stories can grasp the mystery of the incommensurable episodes of the cultural past, and that any single story will distort or omit the experiences of other collectivities. In "Single, Great, Collective?" Bruce Robbins writes that this formulation—"single great collective story"—"will raise hackles, assuming there are any hackles not already raised by the idea of 'the human adventure' as 'one'—not just a unifying story of emancipation and/or enlightenment, the meta-narratives that Lyotard had just declared over and done with, but *any* story of humanity taken to be single and collective" (789–90). In fact, the human adventure that today seems to have the best chance of counting as the one single, great story is a tale not of wresting Freedom from Necessity but of the destruction of the human life-world in the Anthropocene. Such a perspective leads one to ask, as Michael Sprinker did before the notion of climate change was bruited—to ask, with only a change of predicate—whether the utopian horizon that serves as teleology for Jameson's single story is not, above all, a wishful attempt to manage "the much deeper historical pessimism, which sees little on the horizon but the further domination of ever more corners of the globe by capitalist commodification" (71).

Such critiques are certainly possible and plausible. But returning to *The Political Unconscious* after forty years, I am struck not by the pertinence of

these critiques but by a sense that even though the book claims “the perspectives of Marxism as necessary preconditions for adequate literary comprehension” (75), in fact what emerges, particularly in the final chapter on Joseph Conrad, is a result that does not seem particularly Marxist at all, in that its categories of periodization and, in particular, those of mode of production, “draw on a linear fiction or diachronic construct solely for the purpose of constructing a synchronic model of coexistence, nonsynchronous development, temporal overlay, the simultaneous presence within a concrete textual structure of what Raymond Williams calls ‘residual’ and ‘emergent’ or anticipatory discourses” (218).² Jameson insists that it is no longer a matter of determining whether a given text belongs to a particular socioeconomic conjuncture by which it was overdetermined but of tracing in each text the wide variety of forces at work and the ways it appears at different levels of consideration and from different vantage points. A succinct example is a paper he delivered at an international conference on the lyric in Toronto in 1982, “Baudelaire as Modernist and Postmodernist.” Jameson does not proceed, in the manner of Walter Benjamin, reductively to diagnose Baudelaire’s writing as a *symptom* of nascent capitalism but works instead to identify the multiple strata of a complex text that responds to different critical vantage points and that selects and retains much of the past, as it projects a future. There are, he explains “many Baudelaire’s”: first, the post-Romantic Baudelaire, whom he cavalierly dismisses as of little interest, in a gesture that seems, at the very least, historically irresponsible; second, “the Baudelaire contemporary of himself (and of Flaubert), the Baudelaire of the ‘break,’ of 1857, the Baudelaire the eternal freshness of whose language is bought by reification” (247), who he grants is the hardest to grasp and of whom he chooses not to speak, perhaps because this is just a brief essay; third, “the Baudelaire inaugural poet of high modernism (of a today extinct high modernism)”; and, fourth, “the Baudelaire of postmodernism, of our own immediate age, of consumer society” (248). This is an extraordinarily complex Baudelaire, graspable at multiple levels, the product of

divergent, conflicting forces, where the perspectives of the interpreter or interpreters need to be integrated in any attempt at comprehensive description. As he remarks elsewhere, “the dialectic requires you to say everything simultaneously whether you think you can or not” (*Modernist Papers* ix). And it requires shifts in levels and vantage points.

This case demonstrates how a Jamesonian analysis, in its very insistence on historical conditions, ends up positing synchronous coexisting forces, as illustrated at greater length in the very rich account of Conrad’s *Lord Jim* and *Nostromo* in *The Political Unconscious*, where Jameson detects in Conrad not just the elements of the premodern, of realism, of expressionism, of modernism, and even of a certain postmodernism but especially the tense interrelation among such elements. “Conrad’s stylistic practice,” he writes, “can be grasped as a symbolic act which, seizing on the Real in all of its reified resistance, at one and the same time projects a unique sensorium of its own, a libidinal resonance no doubt historically determinate, yet whose ultimate ambiguity lies in its attempt to stand beyond history” (237). Or “this is the delicate part of the modernist project, the place at which it must be realistic in order in another moment to recontain that realism which it has awakened” (266). The ideological and the utopian are always interimplicated, in a literary practice such as Conrad’s, and in a thought such as Jameson’s, which insists on the dialectical transcendence of such oppositions and finds utopian impulses in even the most retrograde forms of class consciousness. And Jameson inquires whether it is not possible for a text “to embody a properly Utopian impulse, or to resonate a universal value inconsistent with the narrower limits of class privilege which inform its more immediate ideological vocation” (288). For a reader today, it seems to me, less concerned about which critical school can claim to have the upper hand, there is in *The Political Unconscious* a potent resistance to what Jameson calls “the instrumentalization of culture,” which is “a temptation or tendency within all Marxisms” (282); and because of this resistance, at a time when

critics, young and old, seem all too eager to condemn this or that text for its complicity with the various evils of our modernity, Jameson's theory and practice are both extraordinarily refreshing and a cause for hope.

NOTES

1. For an early, perspicacious critique, which both develops this line of thought and explores the indeterminacies of Jameson's version of the concept of mode of production, see Bennington.

2. The demands of Jameson's multilevel system seem to insure that "mode of production" no longer refers to the actual economic arrangements of a given society but works, rather, as the fiction of a social totality. See Dowling 135–38; Bennington 31–32.

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