

## Fredric Jameson and Postmodernism: A Complex Engagement

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**ABSTRACT:** *Fredric Jameson is one of the most vocal critics of postmodernism in the English speaking world. He sees postmodernism from the classical Marxist perspective. Rather than having a universal validity, Jameson believes that postmodernism is a historical phenomenon. For him, it is the cultural logic of late capitalism. However, Jameson is himself deeply influenced by postmodernism at the same time when he is its vociferous critic. The present research paper will show how Jameson is deeply implicated in postmodernism. It will also attempt to highlight the problems that this influence creates for his Marxist critique.*

**Keywords:** *the economic, heterogeneity, metaphysics, totality, utopia*

It is a bold move on Jameson's part to talk in classical Marxist terms against a phenomenon that has shattered all pretensions to meta-discourses. However, such a critique must face all the odds before postmodernism which is resourceful enough to shake all claims of objectivity. Jameson is all the time fully aware of such a challenge. "I would not want to have to decide", he says in his 'Introduction' to *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, "whether the following chapters are inquiries into the nature of such "postmodernism theory" or mere examples of it" (x) <sup>[1]</sup>.

Jameson considers the post-War period (after 1945) as the ultimate socio-economic ground that paved the way for the mushrooming of postmodernism. Moreover, he believes that postmodernism is a homogeneous phenomenon where all the traces of the 'other' have vanished altogether. The "survival, the residue, the holdover, the archaic, has finally been swept away without a trace . . . Everything has reached the same hour on the great clock of development" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 309-310) <sup>[1]</sup>.

However, Postmodernism is not in favour of any historical periodization. It does not believe in the "drama of totalization" (Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*) <sup>[2]</sup>. It believes in difference and heterogeneity. To periodize is to obliterate difference and make a period appear homogeneous. Therefore, for postmodernism, such a voluntary blocking of the free flow is an undesirable move. It is certainly a demand that no one can wish away, let alone Jameson. Therefore, Jameson has his moment of

conformity. Paying due attention to this postmodern announcement, he says that history has not moved linearly through pure mechanical stages. Rather, there have been ‘residual’ and ‘emergent’ elements in each stage. According to him, postmodernism did not sprout innocently after the Second World War. It appeared not homogeneously but only as a dominant mode containing the residual traces of earlier historical stages. He observes:

[T]hose who think that cultural periodization implies some massive kinship and homogeneity or identity within a given period, it may quickly be replied that it is surely only against a certain conception of what is historically dominant or hegemonic that the full value of the exceptional . . . can be assessed. (*The Ideology of Theory* 483) <sup>[3]</sup>

However, Jameson is not willing to let go the concept of totality. The various spheres of the social totality, he believes, do not dance harmoniously throughout the historical progression, yet they manage to produce a totality. Take, for example, the break after Second World War, the time Jameson assigns to the incoming of late capitalism. It is incommensurable with the rise of postmodernism, the time of which he locates in the social transformation of the 60s. Critics thus raise fingers against his logic that the latter could be the outcome of the former, for these two are widely distant in time. Jameson, however, believes that the economic preparation for postmodernism had already begun in the 1950s. But it should not mislead us in believing that postmodernism was waiting for the capitalist transformation. It arose rather on a different level. In the ‘Introduction’ to *Postmodernism*, he explains it:

Thus the economic preparation of postmodernism or late capitalism began in the 1950s, after the wartime shortages of consumer goods and spare parts had been made up, and new products and new technologies (not least those of the media) could be pioneered. On the other hand, the psychic habitus of the new age demands the absolute break, strengthened by a generational rupture, achieved more properly in the 1960s (it being understood that economic development does not then pause for that, but very much continues along its own level and according to its own logic). (xx) <sup>[1]</sup>

For Jameson, these various levels run at varying speeds and develop unevenly. Nevertheless, when we see in hindsight, they seem bundling together to produce a totality. He continues in the ‘Introduction’:

Meanwhile, it is my sense that both levels in question, infrastructure and superstructure – the economic system and the cultural “structure of feeling” – somehow crystallized in the great shock of the crises of 1973 (the oil crisis, the end of the international gold standard, for all intents and purposes

the end of the great wave of “wars of national liberation” and beginning of the end of traditional communism), which, now that the dust clouds have rolled away, disclose the existence, already in place, of a strange new landscape. (*Postmodernism* xx, xxi) <sup>[1]</sup>

In this sense, the concept of totality that emerges is different from its traditional configurations. It is rather postmodern in orientation. Under the influence of postmodernism, Jameson redefines many traditional Marxian concepts. He believes that postmodernism is the result of late capitalism. Postmodernism vehemently rejects such economic reductionism on which traditional Marxism relies. For Althusser, “From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the ‘last instance’ never comes” (*For Marx* 113) <sup>[4]</sup>. Baudrillard too believes that the “theory of infrastructure and superstructure must be exploded” (*Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* 90) <sup>[5]</sup>. What Jameson does here is that he changes the configuration of the terms like the ‘economic’ and the ‘cultural’ by saying that their relationship should not be understood in terms of rigid causality. Capitalism does not give rise to postmodernism as leaves to a tree. It only provides a generative matrix which limits the frontiers of the superstructure. Jameson is caught up in two opposite directions. On the one hand he concurs with the postmodern rejection of economic reductionism, while on the other he tries to defend the primacy of the economic in any sort of analysis. He notes:

I would not want to say that Marx was an economic determinist, but for me the important historical, original, unsurpassable thing about Marx and Marxism is that it requires you somehow to include the economic. It requires you to work back in such a way that you finally touch economic structures. (Buchanan, *Jameson on Jameson* 182) <sup>[6]</sup>

Jameson also concurs with the postmodern unease with any teleological view of history. “We no longer believe”, Deleuze and Guattari say, “in a primordial totality that once existed, or in a final totality that awaits us at some future date” (*Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* 42) <sup>[7]</sup>. The way Jameson presents the dialectic of dominants and residues, it becomes clear that enough room is reserved for new possibilities which cannot be predicted in advance. The shifting dynamics of dominants and subordinates keeps history open to change from within without any irritable reaching after the final goal. Jameson strikes the postmodern note when he says that the attempt to predict is “one of the symptoms of a failure to think in a situational way” (*Marxism and Form* 361) <sup>[8]</sup>. This is the reason he rejects the Hegelian notion of the Absolute Spirit. He interprets Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* in a non-teleological manner and makes up for the Hegelian lapse into the Absolute Spirit by saying that we “must at any rate read Absolute Spirit as a symptom [of the prevailing conditions of the time] rather than a prophecy [or a moment in the historical process]” (*The Hegel Variations* 4) <sup>[9]</sup>.

Much in the postmodern fashion, he rejects the notion of utopia as a foolproof plan. For him, utopia is not lying ahead of time but present here and now. He finds this kind of utopia in postmodernism which, according to him, is trying to create not the utopian space but the *concept* of such a space. About Grober's installation, he says that it constructs not any already existing concept but "the idea of a concept that does not yet exist" (*Postmodernism* 163-165) <sup>[1]</sup>.

Jameson is all praises for postmodernism so much so that he seems to play in its hands. Like Derrida, he believes that we can never get out of metaphysics. However, it is this postmodern conception which he applies back on to postmodernism itself. If nothing can escape metaphysics, then postmodernism is no exception to it. This is here that Jameson admonishes postmodernism, for it tries to present itself as above the metaphysical closure. Jameson is wary of postmodernism and believes that it should overtly accept its historical genesis rather than trying to present itself as immutable. If postmodernism has had a beginning, it might have an end as well. Postmodern art is constrained by some structural limits posed by history and it is within these constraints it has to work, to generate new concepts by which it might be possible to represent the vast reality we are living in. The postmodern system is at one and the same time "freedom and determination: it opens a set of creative possibilities . . . as well as tracing ultimate limits of praxis that are also the limits of thought and imaginative projection" (Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* 129-130) <sup>[10]</sup>.

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