



SAMIR GANDESHA

## Dear Theo

### Late Marxism: Adorno, or The Persistence of the Dialectic by Fredric Jameson

New York: Verso, 1990.

Jameson's *Late Marxism* is yet another welcome contribution to the burgeoning literature on postmodernism. It comes as little surprise that Jameson has dedicated the book to Perry Anderson, a long-time editor of *New Left Review* and a prolific writer in his own right, who inaugurated a Marxist analysis of postmodern discourses in his *In The Tracks of Historical Materialism* (1983). However, unlike the broad brush strokes of Anderson's lectures, Jameson promises to provide a substantive response to the postmodern problems of late capitalism. Hence Jameson does not engage in the sort of interpretive *ressentiment vis-a-vis* postmodern discourses characterized by Ellen Wood's *Retreat from Class* and Noman Geras's collection of essays *Discourse of Extremity*. Nor does Jameson confine himself to a purely symptomological approach. Rather, in *Late Marxism* he synthesizes the subjective and the objective, the polemical and the symptomological.

The polemical dimension of Jameson's interpretive project is inscribed in the very subtitle of the text – "The Persistence of the Dialectic" – which can be read as a critical rejoinder to both Habermasian critical theory and postmodernist discourses which reject totality and, with it, dialectics. The symptomological aspect of the book is found in Jameson's attempt to provide a sophisticated theoretical response to the cultural problems of late capitalism. To this end, Jameson engages in a recuperative reading of Adorno's Marxism. He argues for "if not a 'post-modern' Adorno, then at least for one consistent with and appropriate for the current postmodern age."

Jameson's aims in this text are, broadly speaking, twofold: first, he attempts to argue against those who would suggest that Adorno was more of a Hegelian than a Marxist, that he remains firmly within the tradition of historical materialism; secondly, he attempts to draw attention to the similarities and differences between Adorno and poststructuralist theorists

such as Derrida and Foucault in the interest of suggesting the superior acuity of the former over the latter because of his dialectically nuanced, rather than "totalizing" critique of totality.

To the first end, Jameson offers a masterfully comprehensive interpretation of Adorno's discourse, availing himself of the "productiveness" of the hermeneutical circle. That is, Jameson's reading situates the parts – comprised of *Negative Dialectics*, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Aesthetic Theory* – in relation to the discourse as a whole which is itself only intelligible through these parts. Such an interpretation brings out with exemplary clarity the historical materialist structure of Adorno's discourse. At the same time, it reveals Adorno's own transformation of that structure through his introduction of the concept of "natural history."

Foregrounded throughout Jameson's reading is the centrality of the concept of "totality" in Adorno's discourse which, as Jameson notes elsewhere in his work on postmodernism, has fallen into disfavour among poststructuralists. It is thought that, with different degrees of subtlety, it is possible to trace a direct, genetic link from Hegel to Marx to the Gulag, based on the (totalitarian) concept of totality. For Jameson it is indeed a cruel irony that at the very moment that capitalist relations of production are being reconstituted on a global level the concept of totality is being rejected in favour of an undecidable logic of textual play.

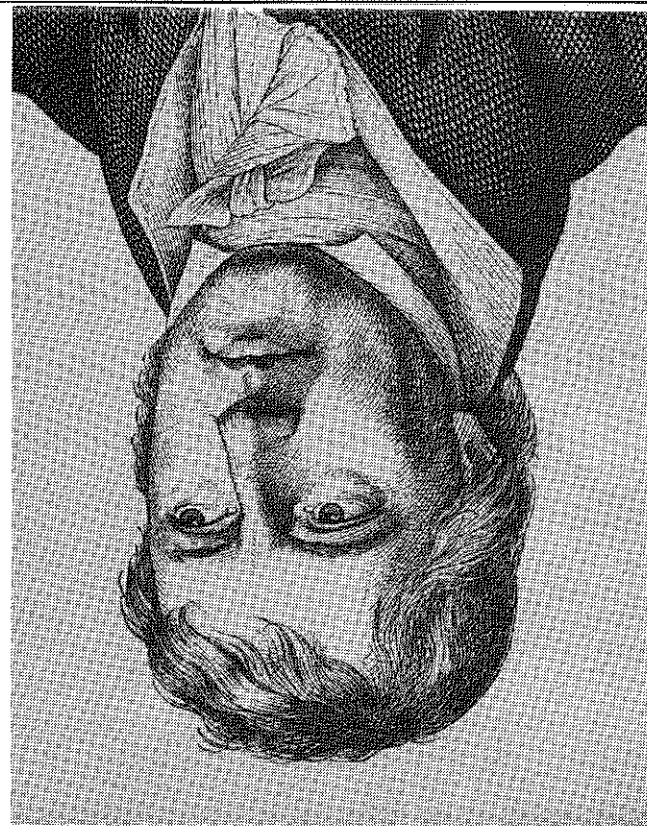
Adorno's discourse, then, is well-suited to our age for his work stands or falls on the concept of totality. Or, to be more precise, the concept of totality dialectically both stands *and* falls within Adorno's discourse; the concept is both true and false. It is true inasmuch as it serves to elucidate the very process of reification attendant on the logic of exchange culminating in what Adorno calls "total administration." It is false insofar as it is not a normative ideal in which all of the con-

flicts and diremptions to which capitalist rationalization gives rise are finally reconciled within the praxis of the proletariat. As Jameson indicates, Adorno ironically inverts Hegel to suggest that "the whole is false;" this is no simple inversion, however. In contrast to poststructural denunciations of conceptual thinking and totality, Adorno states that the task of negative dialectics is "to strive, by way of the concept, to transcend the concept." In other words, Adorno suggests that a random denunciation of identity thinking from outside is aporetic; what is necessary is a Benjaminian brushing of identitarian discourse "against the grain."

Though Jameson draws attention to the manner in which Adorno's critique of totality is similar to "poststructural synchronics," he ultimately fails to bring Adorno into a sustained dialogue with Foucault or Derrida on the horizon of the eternal present which is postmodernity. Instead, in a footnote, he refers the reader to Peter Dews' excellent book *Logics of Disintegration* which offers an acute, philosophically nuanced comparison of poststructuralism and Critical Theory. However, if Jameson is truly committed to a historicist approach, it is incumbent on him to foreground the precise manner in which the concerns of the (postmodernist) present animate and motivate his reading. This is where Jameson unfortunately comes up short.

Jameson would do well to follow Marx's reflections on the nature of the relation between totality, history and repetition which he presents in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. In this text, Marx attempts to come to terms with the "effectivity" of the past on the present and future. He thus follows Hegel in asserting that history repeats itself twice, adding: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. In his analysis of the "farcical" ascension to power of Louis Napoleon, Marx recognizes the profound weight of the past on the present in the form of the

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eternal return of the same, as that which places limits upon what Benjamin called the attempt to take the "leap in the open air of history."

Marx's reflections on the nature of repetition can serve as an interpretive key to unlocking the similarities and differences between Critical Theory and poststructuralism. Indeed, these reflections can provide an inoculation against the post-modern intoxication at having made the "leap" out of modernity and, presumably, out of capitalism. While Critical Theory tells a tragic story, a story fraught with paradox, of the demise of subjectivity at the hands of its own (instrumental) reason, Foucauldian discourse evinces a repetition of such a narrative with the difference that this story turns into *farce*.

For Critical Theory, the subject's liberation of itself from nature in the interest of self-preservation leads to its own, paradoxical, naturalization or reification. Hence, the "natural history" of the subject for the Frankfurt School comes very close to Nietzsche's meditation on tragedy. In the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche suggests that "the myth of Oedipus seems to wish to whisper to us that wisdom ... is an unnatural abomination; that he who plunges nature into the abyss of destruction must also suffer the dissolution of nature in his own person." In other words, Critical Theory views the passing of the subject, with the advent of total administration, with mourning. For Foucault, in contrast, the death of the subject or the death of "man," is an event that must be met with "laughter." This very death indicates the disclosure of a multiplicity of possibilities which had been excluded by that recent discursive formation called "man."

Both Critical Theory and poststructuralism, then, can be seen to critique the disclosure of totality in order to think difference and particularity outside of its interstices. Foucault understands the overcoming of totality in terms of a discursive intervention — a Nietzschean transvalua-



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tion of values — through the inscription of discontinuity, reversal, specificity and exteriority within the very process of interpretation. Adorno, in contrast, endeavours to show how the object — that which itself resists discourse — constantly and inexorably undermines the pretensions of the sovereign subject. In other words, Adorno's reconstructed materialism leads him to suggest that the subject is dependent on the object; indeed, the subject *is* itself suffused with objectivity.

The manifold and complex implications of the two forms of critique cannot be discussed in any length here. Suffice it to say that if Foucault's discourse is completely denuded of a conception of "nature," it can scarcely contribute to the increasingly immediate and urgent debates on technology and the relation between humanity and the ecological systems in which it plays an increasingly destructive role. A philosophy which leaves no discursive space for an alterity which, paradoxically, refuses discourse must succumb to the hubristic narcissism which it seeks to critique in the guise of humanism. This consideration of external nature (or ecological systems) at the same time brings once again to the surface — despite its rank unfashionability — the question of ontology.

The "persistence of Adorno's dialectic," its relevance to our historical moment, lies in its sustained attempt to engage in a retrieval and recollection of this relation — a relation all too easily forgotten in post-structuralism; it lies precisely in its insistence on the inextricability of social domination and the violence directed at nature. As Adorno states: "World domination over nature turns against the thinking subject himself .... The more the machinery of thought subjects existence to itself, the more blind its resignation in reproducing existence." ♦

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