Jameson's "Arrested Dialectic": From Structuralism to Postmodernism

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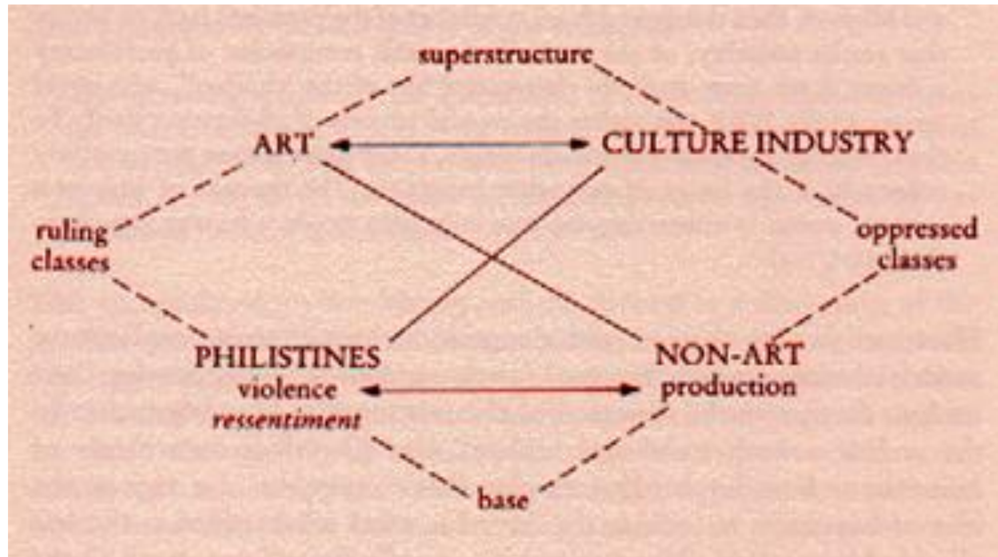

Diagram from Fredric Jameson's *Late Marxism*

As a Marxist literary and cultural critic, Fredric Jameson has maintained a commitment to dialectical criticism throughout his career, but the incorporation of postmodernist theory into his work has debilitated the critical power of his dialectical method. Jameson's dialectical consistency from his early to his later work becomes evident when one reads (almost thirty years after its publication) the last lines of the preface to *The Prison-House of Language*, where he states, "We have tended to take temporality for granted; where everything is historical, the idea of history itself has seemed to empty of content. Perhaps that is, indeed, the ultimate propadeutic value of the linguistic model: to renew our fascination with the seeds of time" (xi). One might say that the "propadeutic value" of *Prison-House* itself is the anticipation of the book Jameson writes twenty-two years later appropriately titled *The Seeds of Time*. There is of course no way that Jameson could have anticipated all facets of postmodernity as they have developed over the last three decades. At the least, he was able to envision how the structuralist (slash poststructuralist) moment would serve as the impetus to produce the need for a dialectical criticism that alone could adequately explain the historical emergence of postmodernism. But what has remained constant with Jameson throughout the course of his career is his conception of an "arrested dialectic," recognizable to the naked eye only in the shape of the binary or antinomy.

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In his earlier work, Jameson describes the difference between the binary and contradiction as one of degree rather than of kind, where the binary takes the form of a "stalled" or "arrested dialectic." In *Prison-House*, for example, he states, "It would not perhaps be too farfetched to see in [the binary] a kind of arrested dialectic. . . . The binary opposition is dialectical insofar as it is dynamic, insofar as it involves differential perceptions" (120). He acknowledges "a difference between [the] binary opposition, and what ordinarily . . . would be more properly described as a contradiction. The former is a static antithesis; it does not lead out of itself as does the latter" (36). But rather than view the binary and contradiction as qualitatively different, he categorizes the binary as a "paralyzed" dialectical form that "somehow 'reflects' some more basic contradiction in social life" (213).

By viewing binaries and antinomies as "arrested" forms of the dialectic, Jameson is able then to articulate a non-antagonistic relation between structuralism and Marxism, where structuralism represents an *incomplete* form of the Marxist dialectic. For example, in "Metacommentary" (originally published in 1971) he states that "a genuine transcendence of structuralism . . . means a completion, rather than a repudiation . . . of it" (1988: 13). He goes even further in *Prison-House* arguing that "[s]tructuralism may be understood as a distorted awareness of the dawning collective character of life" (196). Given this optimistic estimation of the collective power of structuralism, he might have well added that with the binary we have nothing to lose but our chains. But optimism aside, Jameson may be giving too much credit to the antinomy here. One could also characterize the "arrested dialectic" not as a "distorted awareness" of some Utopia, but as the historically necessary obfuscation of social contradictions. In dialectical terms, we might arrive at the same idea by posing the following *is-the-glass-half-full-or-half-empty* type of question: namely, is the difference between the binary and the contradiction a quantitative or qualitative one? In simpler terms, does the two-sided structure of the antinomy help us gain a better understanding of the dialectic, or does it obscure the real dialectical movement of contradiction?

These questions are not mere theoretical conundrums. To understand Jameson's conception of the relation between the binary and the dialectic, between antinomies and contradictions, is to arrive at one of the central theoretical tenets upon which his dialectical method is founded. In arguing that the binary and antinomy represent "distorted" or "arrested" forms of the dialectic, Jameson sets a precedence for then theorizing the way in which all methodologies or explanatory systems can be understood as partial or "arrested" forms of the dialectic. This is precisely what he means by stating in *Marxism and Form* that "it becomes possible to see much in modern thought as a kind of unconscious . . . striving toward this ultimate dialectical position," which tempts him to see "all the great schools of modern philosophy . . . pragmatism or phenomenology, logical positivism, existentialism, or structuralism" (373) as capable of producing a "dialectical reversal." And he adds that even "concepts such as Sartrean authenticity, . . . Wittgenstein's 'therapeutic positivism,' . . . Nietzsche's genealogies" and Freudian psychoanalysis can be considered "relatively specialized and distorted versions of what we have here described as dialectical self-consciousness" (373).

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Beginning, then, with *Prison-House* and *Marxism and Form*, the goal of Jameson's dialectical method--a method that he sometimes refers to as "metacommentary"--becomes the completion of the unfulfilled, stagnant, paralyzed or blocked dialectic in all non-dialectical methods and interpretive systems, a theoretical move that might aptly be described as playing a philosophical gambit, as in a chess game, where a significant piece of the dialectical project gets relinquished voluntarily in order to devour all the pieces on the opponent's side. With this move, Jameson is able to incorporate the entire Western philosophical tradition into his dialectical project, but the price he pays is none other than the socially critical and transformational power of contradiction, replaced by an arrested dialectic in the form of the antinomy.

More than two decades after the publication of *Prison-House* and *Marxism and Form*, Jameson continues to rely on the same conception of the antinomy as an arrested dialectic, no longer to describe the affinities between structuralism and Marxism, but rather to develop an explanation of postmodernism. In the introduction to *The Seeds of Time*, for example, he describes the first chapter of his book, an essay titled "The Antinomies of Postmodernity," as "an experiment at giving a certain representation to the way in which contradiction works, so that it might be called *dialectical* on one use of that term, even though what it sets out from is a stalled or arrested dialectic" (xiii). And he argues that postmodernity is "clearly more propitious for the antinomy than the contradiction" (2). This is so, supposedly, because the contradiction cannot be represented (5). Given its fluid and negative quality, any attempt to name the contradiction, according to Jameson, would result in its reification (or thing-ification), which is another way of saying that one cannot *posit a negative* since this is a contradiction in terms. By contrast, the antinomy's structure is inherently static and therefore lends itself to representation. Thus, in the contemporary postmodern period--or for that matter, in *any* historical period, if we follow Jameson's logic--one cannot represent real social contradictions but can only speculate about them by observing the antinomic structures of their effects: a theoretical claim that brings to mind the old McLuhanian argument that human subjects move through history blindly, as if driving a car forward by looking constantly through the rear view mirror.

The particular problem with the idea that contradictions cannot be represented is that social relations and history consequently become unrepresentable, as well. (For what is history if not the story of class contradictions--their formation, sharpening, and unraveling?) Jameson nonetheless makes this claim fully aware of attempts by Marxists and non-Marxists alike to debilitate the dialectic and, in some cases, to call for its eradication altogether. He points out, for example, that Althusser's "postmodernizing" intention was to "cleanse Marxism of all its Hegelian . . . baggage" (1994: 3), and he adds that ultimately Althusser "meant . . . to stigmatize and exorcize the very notion of contradiction itself: something he in fact inspired his more distant anti-Marxist followers Hindess and Hirst to go on and do" (3). Obviously, Jameson is thinking here of Althusser's scathing critique of Marxist dialectics in "Contradiction and Overdetermination." These attacks against the concept of contradiction by Althusser and others have resulted in methods of interpretation for both literature and history that are highly skeptical of a text's capacity to refer objectively to social reality. Despite his

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knowledge of this history and the fact that he even writes critically about it, Jameson nonetheless moves forward with his argument that postmodernity prevents us from *naming* contradictions. Shrouded by postmodern thought, we are able to identify only their *symptoms*.

To be fair, there is much to be learned from Jameson's "symptomatology" which allows him to make use of various antinomies to describe the problems of late capitalism. He analyzes rather astutely, for example, the way in which certain characteristics of postmodernity, when placed under close scrutiny, actually manifest their opposites, that is, where the thesis and antithesis of the antinomy turn out to be "the same" (7). Thus, a social system apparently centered on absolute change (such as that of a capitalist market that strives for the ever-newness of products) can be understood essentially as changeless (in terms of class relations); where heterogeneity and a system that claims democratic status through the proliferation of difference can more accurately be characterized as an extreme model of homogeneity, or, in Jameson's words, as "the most standardized and uniform social reality in history" (32); and where the antifoundationalism of much postmodernist thought, when stood upright, reveals quite paradoxically staunch foundationalist politics and strategies, a condition that Jameson calls the "fundamental antinomy of the postmodern" (46-7). Above all, he rightly argues that the nihilistic thinking of postmodernism should not be taken as a "self-defeating exercise in futility" in that it forces "us to conceive of at least the possibility of . . . alternate systems" (70).

The problem with this symptomatology, however, is that history, much like the "arrested" dialectic itself, remains at a standstill, emptied of the possibility for social transformation, and thus limited in its role as the informant for any political praxis aimed at the construction of a future society based on collectivity and egalitarianism. "Despite his elevation of antinomy over contradiction," as Barbara Foley explains, "Jameson never discusses the crucial dialectical principle of the negation of negation--that is, the process by which one pole in an opposition engages dialectically with its opposite and, through a process of struggle, supersedes it. The postmodern condition would seem to require that we oscillate perpetually between bad and partial categories" (422). This perpetual oscillation between the poles of antinomies represents a movement void of any transformational power as with contradiction. Ultimately this leads Jameson to describe our historical condition as one of "blockage," "paralysis," and as the "absence of any sense of immediate future" marked by our inability to "imagine historical change," where we exist like captives within "an eternal present" (70-71). And despite the fact that Jameson acknowledges the possibility of Utopia, it remains an impossible, unreachable Utopia, separated by an unbridgeable gap between the prison-house of the present and a vague, unattainable future. Thus, we find ourselves frozen in our historical tracks. Or, as Jameson himself states: "It is a situation that endows the waiting with a kind of breathlessness, as we listen for the missing next tick of the clock, the absent first step of renewed praxis" (71).

This gloomy conclusion to "The Antinomies of Postmodernity" demonstrates precisely the inevitable and debilitating result of a dialectical criticism that has replaced contradiction with a conception of an "arrested" dialectic in the form of the antinomy. For

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political practice, the limitations of an "arrested" dialectic become evident with strategies that are unable to imagine a transition from the present to the future. For literary criticism, a dialectic centered on the static structure of the antinomy presents the greatest problems--indeed, one might even say a *danger*--for those literary and cultural systems that emerge as the negation of the hegemonic order while simultaneously imagining some kind of alternative to the present (even if only metaphorically--or partially) as, for example, in literature written by ethnic, women, and working class writers.

I would argue that Jameson remains limited in his ability to envision the "first step of renewed praxis" because his dialectical criticism has come under the influence of postmodernist theory. I would argue further that the *absent* first step of social praxis and literary criticism alike can be found in a method that restores the transformational power of contradiction to the dialectic, rather than limiting the dialectic to its various "arrested" forms. Before being able to make use of such a method, though, we first need to understand how the arrested dialectic emerges from a politics of defeatism that stands at the center of postmodernist theory.

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In *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Terry Eagleton constructs a hypothetical scenario. He states: "Imagine a radical movement which had suffered an emphatic defeat. So emphatic, in fact, that it seemed unlikely to resurface for the length of a lifetime. . . . What would be the likely reaction of the political left to such a defeat?" (1) The rhetorical gesture may be hypothetical, but the reference could not be more historically concrete. Eagleton is referring to the so-called defeat of anti-racist, anti-imperialist and working class struggles in the Western world during the first half of the century up through the 1960s. On a global scale, no doubt, he is also alluding to the reversal of socialism in the Soviet Union and China and to what certain critics have disdainfully termed "the death of Marxism." The answer he offers to his own question is that the left would retreat into ultra-pacifist forms of self-defeating "resistance" to a dominant hegemony that possesses the power to incorporate and thus neutralize all forms of opposition. These strategies of "resistance" would opportunistically remain veiled behind philosophies and theories based on skepticism, nihilism, infantile idealism, relativism, ambiguity and indeterminacy. Concepts such as "class, ideology, history, totality, material production" (24) and--God forbid!--*revolution* would be construed as reductive and obsolete--perhaps even fascist. Moreover, capitalism would come to be considered so natural and eternal that the "left" would find itself unable to imagine a future beyond capitalism, much less strategize how to get there. But then, to complicate matters, Eagleton throws a wrench into his hypothetical scenario.

> Imagine, finally, the most bizarre possibility of all. I have spoken of symptoms of political defeat*; but what if this defeat never really happened in the first place?* What if it were less a matter of the left rising up and being forced back, than of a steady disintegration, a gradual failure of nerve, a creeping paralysis? What if the confrontation never quite took place, but people *behaved* as though it did? As though someone were to

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> display all the symptoms of rabies, but had never been within biting distance of a mad dog. (19) [Eagleton's emphasis]

As is evident in this passage, as well as from the title of his book, Eagleton stands more closely with critics who argue for an understanding of postmodernism as an "illusion" implying rather forcefully that the "left" may have given up the fight before the bell even rung--as if heeding Roberto Duran's famous words in stopping his title fight against Sugar Ray Leonard. *No Mas!*

On the other side of the debate, David Harvey argues that postmodernity--far from an illusion--marks, among other things, the emergence of an actual material condition, characterized by extreme social fragmentation and differentiation, skepticism toward universal systems, a preference for localized politics as opposed to mass movements, and the depthlessness of aesthetic production. This condition, according to Harvey, began to emerge around 1970 with the development of advanced manufacturing and marketing technologies, resulting in a more "flexible" system for managing financial services, markets and labor. These changes in turn produced new cultural values, beliefs and practices, consistent with the overall anarchy and irrationality of this new chaotic form of capitalist control. Harvey explains that with the shift from Fordism to the "flexible accumulation of capital,"

> the primary effect has been to emphasize the values and virtues of instantaneity (instant fast foods, meals, and other satisfactions) and of disposability (cups, plates, cutlery, packaging, napkins, clothing) . . . [which has] meant more than just throwing away produced goods (creating a monumental waste disposal problem), but also being able to throw away values, lifestyles [and] stable relationships. (1990: 341)

Harvey, however, would no doubt disagree with Eagleton as to whether a "defeat" of the left has actually taken place. For Harvey, the shift from Fordism to a flexible political economy signifies more than simply a radical change in capital's control of labor processes and markets. In fact, it means more than simply a change in the cultural values, attitudes and practices of academics, artists and other intellectuals. The end of Fordism also marks a significant setback (if not an outright defeat) for working class politics: the breaking of a social contract between capital and labor that functioned more as a sort of "*truce* after a long period of bitter class warfare" (Limón: 102), a politics highlighted by the collaboration of classes that included concessions by capital in the form of higher wages and better working conditions. This contract, beginning in the early twentieth-century and running up through the early 1970s, came about largely as the result of sharp class struggles organized by labor unions, socialists, anarchists, and other forces on the left. These struggles in effect *forced* capital into accepting the demands of labor.

But this contract came about also because capitalists eventually came to realize that production could be organized more efficiently, and that profits could be increased, if workers were granted certain material incentives and were thus made to believe that they were in fact somehow equal partners with their employers (and the state) in reaping the

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benefits of a capitalist system. This arrangement may have been driven largely by economics, but its primary aspect was political. The end of Fordism signals the end to this so-called truce. It opened up the doors to more "flexible" methods of social control, which essentially has meant downsizing, two-tier wages systems, the dismantling and discrediting of labor unions, the reduction of real wages, the disintegration of health care programs and other social services, the institutionalization of workfare, the normalization of part-time and temporary work, and, more recently, the use of prison "slave" labor by major manufacturing companies.

It must be pointed out, of course, that the shift to a "flexible" social mode has not affected all sectors of the working class equally. In *Dancing With the Devil*, for example, José Limón explains that "industrialization and urbanization came to Texas" (102) in the period that Harvey characterizes as the zenith of Fordism, specifically the post-World War II period. Yet, "Texas and its Mexican population experienced an 'uneven development,' a less than ideal version of the Fordist contract" (102). In other words, Mexican immigrants in south Texas and other locations along the border working in agriculture and the service industries have never benefited from a "truce" between capital and labor nor from the kinds of concessions that may have been granted to workers in other industries. One might even consider the conditions for many immigrants and other unskilled minimum-wage workers as pre-Fordist, and in some cases perhaps even pre-modern.

Ultimately, a Fordist analytical framework may be guilty of severely underestimating the extent to which capitalism remains vulnerable to class struggle and class-consciousness. Despite this potential theoretical flaw, the point that Harvey wants to emphasize--and what stands as undeniably valuable from a materialist perspective--is that postmodernism should not be considered simply a misguided or fashionable trend among academics, artists and intellectuals. Nor should it be considered a mere illusion. Rather, postmodernism represents a way of thinking about social reality that functions much in the manner of ideology--although not necessarily as false consciousness. Postmodernism has produced not simply a distortion of the real relations of production but a *real* effect in the cultural values and practices of the population at large and in the way people prioritize issues such as cultural identity in terms of race, gender and class. While it has become a commonplace to use these three terms (and sometimes others) as a kind of total representation of social divisions, in effect, the concept of class as a strategy for political organization has been largely discredited in the contemporary postmodern period.

In *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*--a work that analyzes the conflict between postmodernism and dialectics in both theoretical and practical ways--Harvey illustrates his point about postmodernism's antagonism toward the politics of class by pointing to the example of a fire that happened at the Imperial chicken processing plant in North Carolina in 1991. Twenty-five of the 200 mainly black women workers in the plant died because the exit doors had been locked from the outside by management. Harvey bitterly resents "the general lack of [a] political response to this cataclysmic event" (337). He compares the Imperial fire to another fire that took place at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in 1911 in which 146 workers died. In response to that "accident," 100,000

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people marched in the streets of New York to express their collective anger, while organized labor pressured the state to ultimately pass laws protecting the health and safety of workers generally. But with the 1991 fire, most labor unions and civil rights organizations, "apart from the Rainbow Coalition and Jesse Jackson . . . remained strangely silent on the matter, while some ecologists (particularly the animal rights wing) exhibited more sympathy for the chickens than for the workers" (341). From this example, Harvey concludes that

> This weakening of working-class politics in the United States from the mid-1970s on can be tracked back to . . . the increasing fragmentation of "progressive" politics around special issues and the rise of the so-called new social movements focusing on gender, race, ethnicity, ecology, sexuality, multiculturalism, community, and the like. These movements often become [the] alternative to class politics of the traditional sort and in some instances have exhibited downright hostility to such class politics. (341)

If Harvey is correct in linking postmodernism to the most basic interests of capitalism--namely, the eradication of social class as a primary category for social analysis and the discrediting of class struggle as a primary strategy for social change--and if he is correct also in concluding that identity politics and the new social movements function as postmodern ideological projects antagonistically opposed to working-class politics, then we can begin to understand with greater clarity the source of Jameson's claim that postmodernity is "more propitious" for the "arrested dialectic" than the contradiction, because the "arrested dialectic" replicates, in both form and content, the defeat of the political left that Eagleton describes in his hypothetical scenario, as well as the cancellation of the social contract between capital and labor theorized in the shift from Fordism to flexible accumulation. In short, the "arrested dialectic" represents class struggle at a standstill.

No doubt the absence of a mass working class movement seems to confirm the objective truth of this standstill, but political cynicism can itself be considered an objective condition that functions as an obstacle to change while, at the opposite end of the spectrum, political optimism should be considered an objective necessity, not an idealist fantasy, for any theory of practice. In a rigorously critical yet sympathetic analysis of Adorno's pessimism, for example, Carl Freedman and Neil Lazarus strike a convincing chord in favor of political optimism, stating that the act of imagining a future society based on equality and the abolition of classes "is no facile optimism but is integral to the humanism that lies at the core of all Marxism" (1988: 95). They add, "the very process of Utopian speculation participates in the production of Utopian possibility" (96). These comments cannot help but remind me of an inspiring passage from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, in which the ex-slave, Baby Suggs, preaches to a wretched community of fellow ex-slaves during Reconstruction. Her audience finds it difficult to believe in a future free of suffering and humiliation, given the seemingly endless hell of racism in America. So Baby Suggs tells them "the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it" (1987:

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88). Like the ex-slaves that Baby Suggs addresses, Marxist critics would do well to understand that political optimism is absolutely essential for any revolutionary theory of practice.

There are, of course, many ideological and structural factors that have given rise to postmodernist theory, but the attack on the concept of contradiction by "Marxist" critics has indeed contributed in a significant way to the emergence of this potentially reactionary political formation. Needless to say, Jameson's concept of an "arrested dialectic" comes as close as his Marxism will allow to a well-nigh repudiation of contradiction and class politics. It comes as no surprise then that critics have accused him of class collaboration for negotiating a peaceful merger between various bourgeois methodologies and Marxism. Eagleton, for example, argues that *The Political Unconscious* lacks the "impetus of a militant working class movement" (1981: 64) and that Jameson's method is generally "over-appropriative and over-generous" (1982: 17) to these bourgeois systems. Eagleton and others certainly have valid reasons for making such criticisms, but at the same time we would be terribly naïve and one-sided ourselves to ignore the dynamism of Jameson's dialectical criticism, whatever its limitations might be. It is precisely for this reason that we must demand a critical re-evaluation of the ideological implications of his dialectical method for the purpose of pushing it beyond its own limits.

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