

The Dialectic of Postmodernism

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Born from strife and fire like Iblis in the Quran, the dialectic remains as relevant today as ever in the search for political practice, seeking the possibilities for generating a new world from the extinguished and dormant present. The powers of neoliberal capitalism—40 years of the employers’ offensive—nearly drowned determinate, dialectical thinking with an industrial deluge of exquisitely homogenous distractions. Fredric Jameson’s *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009) offers a firm overcoming of postmodernism’s anti-dialectical energy, but one flexible enough to absorb the challenges and lessons of capitalism’s fulfilled cultural logic.

Valences organizes recent reflections on the history of the present under loose rubrics: “The Three Names of the Dialectic,” “Hegel without Aufhebung,” “Commentaries,” “Entries,” “Politics,” “The Valences of History.” Practical and programmatic pieces – including work on commodification and ideology fit for a revolutionary textbook – are stuffed between two more recent, meaty, and previously unpublished exegeses: “The Three Names of the Dialectic” and “The Valences of History.” These new texts repair and restore dialectical materialism to its proper stature. Jameson presumes the positive powers of the associative, distracted, and even irrational advances

of the postmodern – all the ideological tropes of “theory” that dovetail nicely with the dispersed, segmented patterns of globalization – need to be channeled into the negative’s blast furnace for another round of smelting.

Jameson’s willingness to risk the red heat of more simple-minded, hardline comrades provides the requisite leftwing cover for a raid on camp hybridity, enriching our age’s thought-to-be demoted Marxism. “Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer,” as Sun-Tzu advised. The ambivalence generated by sympathetic interrogations of Paul Ricoeur or Fernand Braudel has proven productive as does one of the long, even tedious chapters of the book on Jacques Derrida, a leftish yet hermetical figure garnering such sympathy:

Derrida’s own rigorous and local analyses strike a cognate tone with much else at work in current doxa and contemporary or post-contemporary intellectual life, which for whatever reason is also hostile to such pure or solid-color, unmixed concepts, which it (the *Zeitgeist*) identifies as old-fashioned and outworn, the boring conceptuality of yesteryear that is somehow unreflexive and un-self-conscious (to use the vocabulary

of yesteryear, however); and that we need to replace today with something infinitely more mixed and incestuous, miscegenated, polyvocal and multivalenced.

Deconstruction is not without political consequence, even if it is shy about the categorical and doubtful of epistemological certainties. When the emphasis falls on Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx*, a new international comes into view “without a party, without a homeland [patrie], without a national community . . . without co-citizenship, without adherence to a class . . .” Such an effectively post-political imaginary of the present – whatever one makes of the rhetoric – goes hand in hand with postmodern spectrality, “which promises nothing tangible in return; on which you cannot build: what cannot even be counted on to materialize when you want it to.” Derrida holds out indefinitely the promise of a radical new formation – he has little use for older political formations of the Left; nothing is conceded to doctrines, positions, parties, or programmatically informed movements. One might even ask how this position differs from the majuscule script of our times, the neoliberal ideological order.

The lesson of Jameson’s strained rendezvous with Derrida might be the identification of the logic of the global capitalist system at every possible theoretical turn: “It’s base-and-superstructural!” Indeed, Jameson’s diagnosis of postmodernism turns on

a fundamental transformation of the base and superstructure: the commodity form penetrates the ends of the human psyche and the final frontiers of nature, making a world after its own market-instinct image. “Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good.” How this new cultural sphere and its modes of apperception scrambled traditional distinctions (like base and superstructure) and undid traditional hierarchies (time over space, for instance) emerges in several of Jameson’s mesmerizing lines on the fully human age:

an immense, all-encompassing ceiling of secularity which shuts down visibility on all sides even as it absorbs all the formerly natural elements in its habitat, transmuting them into its own man-made substance. Yet within this horizon of immanence we wander as alien as tribal people, or as visitors from outer space, admiring its unimaginably complex and fragile filigree and recoiling from its bottomless potholes, lounging against a rainwall of exotic and artificial plants or else agonizing among poisonous colors and lethal stems we were not taught to avoid. The world of the human age is an aesthetic pretext for grinding terror or pathological ecstasy . . .

This holding chamber of postmodernity, the dials of the historical clock stuck permanently in place, leaves an irrelevant, daily rhythm, which itself has accelerated so much that “it seems to have been suspended in a kind of freeze-frame.” Humanity languishes indefinitely in the waiting room of a system covering the earth in all directions – no exit. Entire life worlds become the vehicles for serial advertisements. In such a landscape, apologies for class domination must orient themselves to a situation where there is little sugarcoating of the harsh logic of the increasingly unequal system. The dialectical tension between proletariat and bourgeois has been smothered by various new social movements’ demands for recognition within the now-televisual politics of entertainments. Resistance, or the antagonism once concomitant with such “minor” subjects, has been largely evacuated. Revolution means the transformation of the mode of production, and today’s strategic gains give evidence of our historical standstill. Meanwhile the waning of genre or narrative categories marks a diminished set of resources for envisioning and enacting any further historical transformation. At the same time, Jameson speaks of unprecedented transformations to come.

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If 60s-era revolutionary desires marked *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, breaking the Marxist-Hegelian dialectic out of its increasingly stereotyped container.

Valences, by contrast, discloses the dialectical logic embedded in Jameson’s writings on postmodernity. Jameson elaborates the historical present so counter-intuitively as to estrange our clichés of the past. “An age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place,” this is in itself no merely theoretical act. The dialectic brings into view the underlying unity of what appear as distinct opposites—historicism and anti-historicism, for instance—and in the last instance culminates in the oneness of theoretical conception and revolutionary practice. Dialectical slipperiness does not give itself over to a fixed philosophical systematization, nor is it a ready-made method that can be picked up and utilized then dropped at will, though each of these divergent options reflects something of its current nature.

Taking his cues from Brecht, Jameson gives primacy to the particular situation at hand, especially the way the current global economic conjuncture reveals itself in contradictions: “what defines the dialectic above all,” Jameson writes, “is the observation – everywhere and always – of contradictions as such. Wherever you find them, you can be said to be thinking dialectically; whenever you fail to see them, you can be sure that you have stopped doing so.” The resolution of certain dead ends in thinking may call for different kinds of doing. Perennial problems appear suddenly historical, contingent. When did such divides and separations of levels appear in the first place? How did they become naturalized?

Jameson’s work is to crystallize yet again the constitutive contradictions and see whether they may not generate new problems, for “[c]ontradiction . . . is a clash in historical time, and the seizure of a unique historical instant, whatever its outcome.” With respect to globalization, the dialectician analyzes the contradiction between political or cultural difference and the identity of a homogenous global economy.

Jameson’s careful speculations result in the undoing of any simple clear-cut victory for either the employers or the employees. Changing the very grounds the opposition’s intelligibility, his logic is an intermeshing of the positions of the contenders, a syllogism with an ambiguous outcome; what does winning or losing mean given the transformations of the political subjects that once occupied the field? Our situation calls for a shift in emphases and exemplifications in the foreign and rather disequilibrating context of the defeat of the left. The Utopian strategy of changing the valences that Jameson deploys all through the work is one of “converting the gloomy indices of the pessimistic diagnosis into vital promises of some newly emergent historical reality to be welcomed rather than lamented.” Jameson suggests that Utopia now depends upon “an imperative to hold the opposites together, and, as it were, to abolish the autonomy of both terms in favor of a pure tension [that] one must necessarily preserve.” The disclosure of “strange rifts, or multiple dimensions,

in which different laws and dynamics obtain” within the postmodern, reveals, like so many clandestine cells, the logic of revolution in the tension within “the unthinkable gap between two systems, the untheorizable break between two distinct synchronicities,” as Rousseau, by sheer dint of reasoning, discovered in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*.

Jameson alights upon utopian prospects in the culminating chapter, “The Valences of History.” A sketch of the argument might prove provisionally useful: the negative charge of the writing moves through rather generous and dexterous appraisals of unlikely figures or dimensions of the existing order. After extending Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of time and narrative beyond their explicit ideological confines, Jameson cuts a line straight to History as the narrative of class struggle. Faithful to the Rousseauistic imperative to think the unthinkable, Jameson pushes theory’s tropes—dispersed and decentered fragments of incommensurability—to their extreme limit, toward “a postmodern principle of collage, in which it is the sheer fact of juxtaposition, rather than that of synthesis or harmonization, which is the operator of a new kind of unity or closure.” Whereas in a different age, structural causality à la Althusser was meant to undo the grip of historicism and mechanical explanation, here just the right configuration of all the dispersed temporalities allows the collective time of History to become palpable once again. Only in full postmodernity, it

seems, does historical rather than timeless existence appear as the most authentic, yet occluded, Being. This negative view of the triumphs of neoliberal capitalism brings with it not only those “flashes of light” or “baroque sunbursts in which rays from another world suddenly break into this one,” but also the need for the steady illumination of a torch distinguishing and burning away a world created by the imperative to accumulate diminishing surplus value.

Visiting Mallarmé about Acting Today

David Lau

Stephane Mallarmé’s essay “Restricted Action” begins with a kind of narrative declaration about an admiring young visitor, a friend urged toward some sort of *engagement*: “Several times the same Comrade, this other, came to me and confided his need to act: what did he have in mind?” This need resembles “the occupation of creating or succeeding in words, which would seem to dominate.” Mallarmé organizes the essay around several key themes of activity, whose part of speech is the verb; the prose—a strange version of the idiomatic impersonality of literary French—demonstrates writing’s relation to conjugation as such. Each act of writing establishes predication under conditions of disappearing appearances (“the immediate disappearance of the written”), and this activity will take us from one infinitive (to act), to another infinitive (to write), to a final imperative (publish). In the ghostly, dangerous spume of phraseological dimensions a kind of Platonic hierarchy gets mobilized for the front.

To act is first up, “le besoin d’agir” its first ensorcellment into a phrase. The need to act becomes, in the course of a paragraph, “to unclench/relax the fists” as in a pugilistic bout with the idea. There’s a dialogue-of-body-and-soul fullness to the scene. The comrade’s youthful feeling seems to work on something deep within Mallarmé. There is also a generational and political dynamic; Mallarmé thinks the youth politically disinterested and physically lazy. The repression of the Paris Commune (many killed, many others exiled) has scattered historical memory of bruising, street-fighting politics. That’s the outer limit of the suggestion here I think. Or the young like to ride bikes, the latest form of exercise.

We find ourselves enmeshed into the difficult, laboring intensity of thought. The first take on action doesn’t look promising. We’re told that we think we push upon the webbing of the word and world and produce an original movement, so to speak, but we can’t be sure that anything happens, or, by extension, that we exist *a priori*. Instead, we run up against the problematic nature of the “subject” in modern philosophy (numinous for some, changeling for others), the thwarted, continuous difficulty of trying to establish determinations of ourselves and of the world. This “subject” accompanies the externalization of mankind’s powers into tools and their later alienation into large-scale machines. We emerge out of a paleontologically thicketed