LARGER THAN LIFE

A note on the death of Fredric Jameson

Fredric Jameson was not just an intellectual giant, the last true genius in contemporary thought. He was the ultimate Western Marxist, fearlessly reaching across the opposites which define our ideological space – a “Eurocentrist” whose work found a great echo in Japan and China, a Communist who loved Hollywood, especially Hitchcock, and detective novels, especially Chandler, a music lover immersed in Wagner, Bruckner and pop music… There is absolutely no trace of Cancel Culture with its stiff fake moralism in his work and life – one can argue that he was the last Renaissance figure.

What Jameson fought throughout his long life was the lack of what he called “cognitive mapping,” the inability to locate our experience within a totality of meaning (even if his totality has to include the ultimate failure of meaning). The instincts that directed him in this fight were always right - for example, in a nice stab against the fashionable cultural-studies rejection of “binary logic,” Jameson calls for “a generalized celebration of the binary opposition” – for him, the rejection of sexual binary goes hand in hand with the rejection of class binary… Still in a deep shock, I can only offer here some passing observations which provide a clear taste of his orientation.

Today, Marxists as a rule reject any form of immediacy as a fetish which obfuscates its social mediation. However, in his masterpiece on Adorno, Jameson[[1]](#endnote-1) deploys how a dialectical analysis includes its own point of suspension: in the midst of a complex analysis of mediations, Adorno all of a sudden makes a vulgar gesture of “reductionism,” interrupting a flow of dialectical finesse with a simple point like “ultimately it is about class struggle.” This is how class struggle functions within a social totality: it is not its “deeper ground,” its profound structuring principle which mediates all its moments, but something much more superficial, the point of failure of the endless complex analysis, a gesture of jumping-ahead to a conclusion when, in an act of despair, we raise our hands and say: “But after all, this is all about class struggle!” What one should bear in mind here is that this failure of analysis is immanent to reality itself: it is how society itself totalizes itself through its constitutive antagonism. In other words, class struggle IS a fast pseudo-totalization when totalization proper fails, it is a desperate attempt to use the antagonism itself as the principle of totalization.

It is also fashionable for today’s Leftists to reject conspiracy theories as a fake simplified solutions - we all know the cliché about conspiracy theories as the poor man’s ideology: when individuals lack the elementary cognitive mapping capabilities and resources that would enable them to locate their place within a social totality, they invent conspiracy theories which provide an ersatz mapping, explaining all the complexities of social life as the result of a hidden conspiracy. However, years ago Jameson perspicuously noted that in today’s global capitalism, things happen which cannot be explained by a reference to some anonymous “logic of the capital” – for example, now we know that the financial meltdown of 2008 was the result of a well-planned “conspiracy” of some financial circles. A quick ideologico-critical dismissal of conspiracy theories is thus not enough: in today’s global capitalism, we ARE all too often dealing with effective “conspiracies” – back in the early 1950s, the destruction of the Los Angeles public transport network was not an expression of some “objective logic of capital,” but the result of an explicit “conspiracy” of car companies, road construction companies, and public agencies – and, the same goes for many “tendencies” in today’s urban developments. The justified critical dismissal of the “paranoiac” ideological dimension of conspiracy theories (they presuppose a mysterious all-powerful Master, etc.) should alert us to *actual* “conspiracies” going on all the time. Today, the ultimate ideology would be the self-complacent critico-ideological dismissal of conspiracies as mere fantasies. The true task of social analysis is to explain how contemporary capitalism opened up the space for such “conspiratorial” interventions.

In yet another of his counterintuitive moves, while Jameson proposed as a motto of his work “Historicize!”, he at the same time perspicuously noted that the universalized historicism has a strange ahistorical flavor: once we fully accept and practice the radical contingency of our identities, all authentic historical tension somehow evaporates in the endless performative games of an eternal present. There is a nice self-referential irony at work here: there is history only insofar as there persist remainders of “ahistorical” essentialism. This is why radical anti-essentialists have to deploy all their hermeneutic-deconstructive art to detect hidden traces of “essentialism” in what appears a postmodern “risk society” of contingencies. The moment they were to admit that we already live in an “anti-essentialist” society, they would have to confront the truly difficult question of the historical character of today’s predominant radical historicism itself - historicism is also the ideological form of the “postmodern” global capitalism.

Jameson goes to the end in this direction: as a true dialectician and materialist, he fearlessly advocated the stance of *rejecting* “objective reality”: when reality dissolves in “subjective” fragments, ((( *these fragments themselves fall back into the Real, losing their subjective consistency*. ))) Jameson drew attention to the paradox of the postmodern rejection of consistent Self—its ultimate result is that we lose its opposite, objective reality itself, which gets transformed into a set of contingent subjective constructions. A true materialist should do the opposite: refuse to accept “objective reality” in order to undermine consistent subjectivity. ((( The task is not to grasp how reality is “in itself,” independently of our mind; the task is to locate our mind itself, inclusive of its antagonisms, gaps and tensions, *and* inclusive of its symbolic constructions of “objective reality,” into a historical Real. )))

So where does materialism enter here? In one of the old science-fiction stories, scientists discover that the three stars which appear in the sky in the Bible as a good sign were effectively an effect of a terrifying cosmic catastrophe that annihilated an advanced alien civilization. The lesson of this story is not a deep-hermeneutical one of how the hidden truth of what appears to us a sign of triumph is an unimaginable horror but simply the radical incommensurability of events and their meanings. Imagine a kind of animal Nuremberg trial where we, humanity, are judged for all the suffering we cause to animals in order to get cheap food—how pigs and chicken are raised, not to mention the use of animals in laboratories for experiments and medical purposes. Although we vaguely know about this, we mostly ignore (or, rather, neutralize) this knowledge. The impossibility, the necessary failure of the attempt, to formulate a Meaning that would cover it all is the minimal definition of atheism. This is why even Derrida’s deconstruction, with its notion of infinite (and infinitely deferred) spectral Justice, remains a form of religious idealism: it continues to count on the indefinitely postponed virtual horizon of Justice when all accounts will be settled. Such a notion of Justice is the ultimate refined version of the big Other, the agency where the ethical meaning of all our acts is registered. Even if this horizon is posited as purely virtual, it remains operative in our symbolic universe, and materialism demands from us to fully renounce it.

Another Jameson’s insight which runs against today’s predominant post-colonial trend concerns his rejection of the notion of “alternate modernities,” i.e., the claim that our Western liberal-capitalist modernity is just one of the paths to modernization, and that other paths are possible which could avoid the deadlocks and antagonism of our modernity: once we realize that “modernity” is ultimately a code name for capitalism, it is easy to see that such historicist relativization of our modernity is sustained by the ideological dream of a capitalism which would avoid its constitutive antagonisms:

”How then can the ideologues of “modernity” in its current sense manage to distinguish their product—the information revolution, and globalized, free-market modernity—from the detestable older kind, without getting themselves involved in asking the kinds of serious political and economic, systemic questions that the concept of a postmodernity makes unavoidable? The answer is simple: you talk about “alternate” or “alternative” modernities. Everyone knows the formula by now: this means that there can be a modernity for everybody which is different from the standard or hegemonic Anglo-Saxon model. Whatever you dislike about the latter, including the subaltern position it leaves you in, can be effaced by the reassuring and “cultural” notion that you can fashion your own modernity differently, so that there can be a Latin-American kind, or an Indian kind or an African kind, and so on. . . . But this is to overlook the other fundamental meaning of modernity which is that of a worldwide capitalism itself.”

The significance of this critique reaches far beyond the case of modernity—it concerns the fundamental limitation of the nominalist historicizing. The recourse to multitude (“there is not one modernity with a fixed essence, there are multiple modernities, each of them irreducible to others”) is false not because it does not recognize a unique fixed “essence” of modernity, but because multiplication functions as the disavowal of the antagonism that inheres in the notion of modernity as such: the falsity of multiplication resides in the fact that it frees the universal notion of modernity of its antagonism, of the way it is embedded in the capitalist system, by relegating this aspect to just one of its historical subspecies. One should not forget that the first half of the twentieth century already was marked by two big projects which perfectly fit this notion of “alternate modernity”: Fascism and Communism. Was not the basic idea of Fascism that of a modernity which provides an alternative to the standard Anglo-Saxon liberal-capitalist one, of saving the core of capitalist modernity by casting away its “contingent” Jewish-individualist-profiteering distortion? And was not the rapid industrialization of the USSR in the late 1920s and 1930s also not an attempt at modernization different from the Western-capitalist one?

What Jameson avoided like a vampire avoids garlic was any notion of the enforced deeper unity of different forms of antagonism. Back in the early 1980s, he provided a subtle description of the deadlock of the dialogue between the Western New Left and the Eastern European dissidents, of the absence of any common language between them: "To put it briefly, the East wishes to talk in terms of power and oppression; the West in terms of culture and commodification. There are really no common denominators in this initial struggle for discursive rules, and what we end up with is the inevitable comedy of each side muttering irrelevant replies in its own favorite language."

In a similar way, the Swedish detective writer Henning Mankell is a unique *artist of the parallax view*. That is to say, the two perspectives – that of the affluent Ystad in Sweden and that of Maputo in Mozambique – are irretrievably »out of sync,« so that there is no neutral language enabling us to translate one into the other, even less to posit one as the »truth« of the other. All one can ultimately do in today's conditions is to remain faithful to this split as such, to record it. Every exclusive focus on the First World topics of late capitalist alienation and commodification, of ecological crisis, of the new racisms and intolerances, etc., cannot but appear cynical in the face of the Third World raw poverty, hunger and violence; on the other hand, the attempts to dismiss the First World problems as trivial in comparison with the »real« Third World permanent catastrophies are no less a fake – focusing on the Third World »real problems« is the ultimate form of escapism, of avoiding to confront the antagonisms of one's own society. The gap that separates the two perspectives IS the truth of the situation.

Recall the elementary logic of the Hegelian dialectical reversal best exemplified by the joke about Rabinovitch from the defunct Soviet Union: Rabinovitch wants to emigrate from the Soviet Union for two reasons: "First, I fear that, if the socialist order will disintegrate, all the blame for the communist crimes will be put on us, the Jews." To the state bureaucrat's exclamation "But nothing will ever change in the Soviet Union! Socialism is here to stay forever!", Rabinovitch calmly answers: "This is my second reason!" The very problem - obstacle - retroactively appears as its own solution, since what prevents us from directly accessing the Thing is this Thing itself. Is the logic of such a final reversal not exactly the same as that of Adorno’s analysis of the antagonistic character of the notion of society, a permanent reference of Jameson’s work? In a first approach, the split between the two notions of society (Anglo-Saxon individualistic-nominalistic and Durkheimian organicist notion of society as a totality which preexists individuals) seems irreducible, we seem to be dealing with a true Kantian antinomy which cannot be resolved via a higher “dialectical synthesis,” and which elevates society into an inaccessible Thing-in-itself; however, in a second approach, one should merely take not of how this radical antinomy which seems to preclude our access to the Thing ALREADY IS THE THING ITSELF – the fundamental feature of today’s society IS the irreconciliable antagonism between Totality and the individual.

Jameson again goes to the end in this direction and locates the basic antagonism into the way a subject relates to language itself as a “house of being”(Heidegger). The title of Jameson’s early book on French structuralism, “prison-house of language,” implies that language is also a torture-house: all the psychopathological phenomena described by Freud, from conversion-symptoms inscribed into the body up to complete psychotic breakdowns, are scars of this permanent torture, so many signs of an original and irremediable gap between the subject and language, so many signs that man can never be at home in his own home. This is what Heidegger ignores, this dark side of our dwelling in language, and is why there can be no place for the Real of *jouissance* in Heidegger’s edifice, since the torturing aspect of language concerns primarily the vicissitudes of the libido. It is also why, in order to get the truth to speak, it is not enough to suspend the subject’s active intervention and let language itself speak—as Elfriede Jelinek put it with extraordinary clarity: “Language should be tortured to tell the truth.” Language must be twisted, denaturalized, extended, condensed, cut and reunited, made to work against itself. Language as the “big Other” is not an agent of wisdom to whose message we should attune ourselves, but a medium of cruel indifference and stupidity. The most elementary form of torturing one’s language is called poetry—think of what a complex form like a sonnet does to language: it forces the free flow of speech into a Procrustean bed of fixed forms of rhythm and rhyme.

For this very reason, Jameson was - as all good Marxists - in his analysis of art a strict formalist. He once wrote about Hemingway that his terse style (short sentences, almost no adverbs, etc.) is not here to represents a certain type of (narrative) subjectivity (the lone hard-boiled cynical individual); on the contrary, Hemingway's narrative content (stories about bitter hard individuals) was invented so that Hemingway was able to write a certain type of sentences (which was his primary goal). Along the same lines, In his seminal essay »On Raymond Chandler,« Jameson describes a typical Chandler's procedure: the writer uses the formula of the detective story (detective's investigation which brings him into the contact with all strata of life) as a frame which allows him to fill in the concrete texture with social and psychological apercus, plastic character-portraits and insights into life tragedies. The properly dialectical paradox not to be missed here is that it would be wrong to say: »So why did the writer not drop this very form and give us pure art?« This complaint falls victim to a kind of perspective illusion: it overlooks that, if we were to drop the formulaic frame, we would lose the very »artistic« content that this frame apparently distorts.

Another Jameson’s unique achievement is his reading of Marx through Lacan: social antagonisms appear to him as the Real of a society. I still recall a shock when, at a conference on Lenin that I organized in Essen in 2001, Jameson surprised us all by bringing in Lacan as a reader of Trotsky’s dream. On the night of June 25 1935, Trotsky in exile dreamt about the dead Lenin who was questioning him anxiously about his illness: “I answered that I already had many consultations and began to tell him about my trip to Berlin; but looking at Lenin I recalled that he was dead. I immediately tried to drive away this thought, so as to finish the conversation. When I had finished telling him about my therapeutic trip to Berlin in 1926, I wanted to add, ‘This was after your death’; but I checked myself and said, ‘After you fell ill…’”

In his interpretation of this dream, Lacan focuses on the obvious link with Freud’s dream in which his father appears to him, a father who doesn’t know that he is dead. So what does it mean that Lenin doesn’t know he is dead? According to Jameson, there are two radically opposed ways to read Trotsky’s dream. According to the first reading, the terrifyingly-ridiculous figure of the undead Lenin “doesn’t know that the immense social experiment he single-handedly brought into being (and which we call soviet communism) has come to an end. He remains full of energy, although dead, and the vituperation expended on him by the living – that he was the originator of the Stalinist terror, that he was an aggressive personality full of hatred, an authoritarian in love with power and totalitarianism, even (worst of all) the rediscoverer of the market in his NEP – none of those insults manage to confer a death, or even a second death, upon him. How is it, how can it be, that he still thinks he is alive? And what is our own position here – which would be that of Trotsky in the dream, no doubt – what is our own non-knowledge, what is the death from which Lenin shields us?”[[2]](#endnote-2) But there is another sense in which Lenin is still alive: he is alive insofar as he embodies what Badiou calls the „eternal Idea“ of universal emancipation, the immortal striving for justice that no insults and catastrophes manage to kill.

Like me, Jameson was a resolute Communist – however, he simultaneously agreed with Lacan who claimed that justice and equality are founded on envy: the envy of the other who has what we do not have, and who enjoys it. Following Lacan, Jameson totally rejected the predominant optimist view according to which in Communism envy will be left behind as a remainder of capitalist competition, to be replaced by solidary collaboration and pleasure in other’s pleasures; dismissing this myth, he emphasizes that in Communism, precisely insofar as it will be a more just society, envy and resentment will explode. Jameson’s solution is here radical to the point of madness: the only way for Communism to survive would be some form of universalized psychoanalytic social services enabling individuals to avoid the self-destructive trap of envy.

Another indication of how Jameson understood Communism was that he read Kafka’s story on Josephine the singing mouse as a socio-political utopia, as Kafka’s vision of a radically-egalitarian Communist society – with the singular exception that Kafka, for whom humans are forever marked by superego guilt, was able to imagine a utopian society only among animals. One should resist the temptation to project any kind of tragedy into Josephine’s final disappearance and death: the text makes it clear that, after her death, Josephine “will *happily* lose herself in the numberless throng of the heroes of our people”(my emphasis added).

In his late long essay “American Utopia,” Jameson shocked even most of his followers when he proposed as the model of a future post-capitalist society the army – not a revolutionary army but army in its inert bureaucratic functioning in the times of peace. Jameson takes as his starting point a joke from the Dwight D Eisenhower period that any American citizen who wants socialized medicine needs only to join the army to get it. Jameson’s point is that army could play this role precisely because it is organized in a non-democratic non-transparent way (top generals are not elected, etc.).

With theology it’s the same as with Communism. Although Jameson was a staunch materialist, he often used theological notions to throw a new light onto some Marxist notions – for example, he proclaimed predestination the most interesting theological concept for Marxism: predestination indicates the retroactive causality which characterizes a properly dialectical historical process. Another unexpected link with theology provides Jameson's remark that, in a revolutionary process, violence plays a role homologous to that of wealth in the Protestant legitimization of capitalism: although it has no intrinsic value (and, consequently, should not be fetishized and celebrated for itself, as in the Fascist fascination with it), it serve as a sign of the authenticity of our revolutionary endeavor. When the enemy resists and engages us in a violent conflict, this means that we effectively touched its raw nerve...

Jameson’s perhaps most perspicuous interpretation of theology occurs in his little-known text “Saint Augustine as a Social Democrat” where he argues how St Augustine’s most celebrated achievement, his invention of the psychological depth of personality of the believer, with all the complexity of its inner doubts and despairs, is strictly correlative to (or the other side of) his legitimization of Christianity as state religion, as fully compatible with the obliteration of the last remnants of radical politics from the Christian edifice. The same holds, among others, for the anti-Communist renegades from the Cold War era: as a rule, their turn against Communism went hand in hand with the turn towards a certain Freudianism, the discovery of psychological complexity of individual lives.

Another category introduced by Jameson is the “vanishing mediator” between the old and the new. “Vanishing mediator” designates a specific feature in the process of a passage from the old order to a new order: when the old order is disintegrating, unexpected things happen, not just horrors mentioned by Gramsci but also bright utopian projects and practices. Once the new order is established, a new narrative arises and, within this new ideological space, mediators disappear from view. Suffice it to take a look at the passage from Socialism to Capitalism in Eastern Europe. When in the l980s, people protested against the Communist regimes, what the large majority had in mind was not capitalism. They wanted social security, solidarity, a rough kind of justice; they wanted the freedom to live their lives outside of state control, to come together and talk as they pleased; they wanted a life of simple honesty and sincerity, liberated from primitive ideological indoctrination and the prevailing cynical hypocrisy . . . in short, the vague ideals that led the protesters were, to a large extent, taken from Socialist ideology itself. And, as we learned from Freud, what is repressed returns in a distorted form. In Europe, the socialism repressed in the dissident imaginary returned in the guise of Right populism.

Many of Jameson’s formulations became memes, like his characterization of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism. Another such meme is his old quip (sometimes wrongly attributed to me) which holds today more than ever: it is easier for us to imagine a total catastrophe on the earth which will terminate all life on it than a real change in capitalist relations – as if, even after a global cataclysm, capitalism will somehow continue… So what if we apply the same logic to Jameson himself? Although he treated with respect Heidegger’s notion of being-towards-death, his entire way of life was much closer to what the French call *lapalissades*, the tautological statings of the obvious attributed to the mythical figure of Monsieur la Palice, like: "One hour before his death, Monsieur la Palice was still fully alive.” For Jameson, death didn’t exist as long as he was still alive. I learned from Jameson’s closest family members that he continued reading and writing till the last moments of his life: a day or two before his death, he asked them to bring him to the hospital a couple of books and a notebook… So it was not Jameson who died, death just happened to him – *it is easier to imagine the end of capitalism than the death of Jameson.*

1. # See Chapter 1 in Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, Or, The Persistence of the Dialectic*, London: Verso Books 1990.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. # Fredric Jameson, “Lenin and Revisionism,” in *Lenin Reloaded*, Durham: Duke University Press 2007, p. 59.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-2)