

Fredric jameson and the limits of essay



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POSTMODERN THEORY

by

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The impetus behind this paper has been the recent publication of Fredric Jameson's 1991 Welleck Lectures, *The Seeds of Time*.¹ As these lectures were delivered a decade after Jameson's initial attempts to map the terrain of postmodernity it appeared to me to provide an occasion to reflect upon the current status of Jameson's highly influential and much criticised theory of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism. It also enables me to return to, what I consider to be, one of the most troubling aspects of Jameson's writing on postmodernism, that is to say, the "waning", to use Jameson's term, of the political imagination. As Jameson is probably the foremost Marxist theorist writing on postmodernism and one of the most influential of contemporary cultural critics, I find this paralysis of the political imagination in the face of postmodernism deeply problematic.

As most of you are probably aware postmodernism is inherently paradoxical and playful. There is, suggests Jameson a kind of winner loses logic about it, the more one tries to define what is characteristically postmodern the less characteristic it turns out to be. Postmodernism, by definition resists definition. Theoretically, postmodernism can only theorise its own conditions of impossibility; with neither a fixed subject nor object there can be no theory of postmodernism as such. This paradoxicality is what Jameson now identifies as the antinomies of postmodernity, the aporia or theoretical impasses which mesmerise postmodern theory and unlike the older

(modernist) discourse of dialectical contradiction remain unresolvable at a higher level of abstraction. Jameson identifies four fundamental antinomies of postmodernism: time and space, subject and object, nature and human nature, and finally the concept of Utopia. Today I will focus on just the first of these antinomies, what Jameson describes as the foundational antinomy of postmodernism, that is, time and space, and suggest that the failure to think beyond the antinomy is symptomatic of a more general failing in Jameson's theory as a whole. I shall also venture to suggest that a more dialectical understanding of temporality and spatiality may enable us to move beyond what Jameson sees as the limits of the postmodern. Before engaging with this debate, however, I will briefly recapitulate Jameson's original thesis and what I still consider to be the importance of his theoretical endeavour.

Jameson's initial intervention in the postmodern debate, in a 1982 essay 'The Politics of Theory',² was primarily an attempt to map the ideological landscape of postmodernism, however, the article concluded on a characteristic Jamesonian note, insisting on 'the need to grasp the present as history'. Jameson, then, initially seemed to suggest the possibility of a way through the impasse of the two most influential strains of thought emerging at that time in relation to postmodernism. On the one hand, one encountered an uncritical celebration of the concept by the postmodernists themselves, and, on the other, the charge of cultural degeneracy was being levelled by more traditional critics and older modernists. We must avoid, argued Jameson, adopting either of these essentially moralising positions, and rather develop a more fully historical and dialectical analysis of the situation. Whether we like it or not there was a perception that culturally

something had changed, we may disagree on what that change entails but the perception itself has a reality that must be accounted for. To repudiate such a cultural change was simply facile, to thoughtlessly celebrate it was complacent and corrupt; what was required was an assessment of this 'new cultural production within the working hypothesis of a general modification of culture itself within the social restructuration of late capitalism as a system'. It was this promise to historically situate postmodernism in relation to transformations in the capitalist system and the development of global multinational capital that, for many like myself who at once embraced aspects of postmodern theory whilst remaining critical of its often ambiguous political stance, was probably the single most significant aspect of Jameson's theory.

At the same time, however, the precise nature of the relationship between postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon and late capitalism as a system was left somewhat under-theorised and, for myself at least, this has remained one of the most troubling aspects of Jameson's theory of postmodernity. That is to say, Jameson's notion of postmodernism as a cultural dominant, or the cultural "logic" of late capitalism. Very briefly there are three broad uses of the term, postmodernism or postmodernity, to have emerged in the 1980s: firstly, as a cultural category, deriving mainly from debates in architecture but also applicable to the other arts and literature. In this sense postmodernism is defined in relation to modernism and specifically the high modernism of the inter-war years. The second sense concerns the notion of epistemic or epochal transition has taken place. That is, Lyotard's much heralded theory of the end of grand universalising

narratives. This is also linked to the specifically cultural definition of postmodernism through the idea that the arts can no longer be associated with a wider socio-historical project of human emancipation. The whole Enlightenment project, argued Lyotard, has come to an end, how can we still meaningfully speak of human progress and the rational control of the life world after Auschwitz and Stalin's gulags. This seems to me to be a particularly spurious argument but perhaps we can return to it later. The third use of the term postmodernism has been to define, albeit rather imprecisely, some recent trends within French philosophy, particularly what have been called the "new Philosophies". Again I remain rather unclear about what is imputedly postmodern here as many of the philosophical positions adopted are strikingly modernist in tone and substance.

Jameson's use of the term attempted to straddle or incorporate these debates within a more totalizing theory of postmodernity. That is, Jameson takes postmodernism to be a periodising concept, it is neither a narrowly cultural category designating specific features which distinguish postmodernism from modernism proper; nor a global category designating a new epoch and radical break with the past; rather, the term serves to 'correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order'. What has become known as "late" or multinational capitalism.

I should, perhaps, point out that the problem for Marxists with the notion of postmodernism, particular in the second sense in which I defined it above, as a new economic and social order, is that at a stroke it abolishes Marxism's founding premise. That is to say, its historical emancipatory narrative.

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Marxism, along with psychoanalysis, is exemplary of the kind of grand narratives that postmodernism has, allegedly, delegitimated. The significance of the theory of late capitalism, as it was developed by the Ernest Mandel, therefore, cannot be understated in relation to Jameson's overall project. The theory of Late capitalism at once acknowledges a further development and restructuration of the capitalism on a global scale but does not posit a radical break with the past. Late capitalism, consumer society, the post-industrial society, what ever one wishes to call it, is still fundamentally the same economic system. There are two other important factors regarding late capitalism that will concern us later: firstly each successive expansion of the capitalist system entails a corresponding technological revolution. Secondly that changes in the social and economic spheres involve a change in the spatial paradigm. I will come back to both of these points below.

Late or advanced capitalism therefore does not present us with a radically new system or life world; Baudrillard's world of protean communication networks, simulacrum and hyperreality but rather a restructuration at higher levels of production of the same system. Postmodernism represents not so much a break with the past but a purer form of capitalism, a further intensification of the logic of capitalism, of commodification and reification. Indeed, argues Jameson, late capitalism marks the final colonisation of the last enclaves of resistance to commodification: the Third World, the Unconscious and the aesthetic. Unlike modernism, postmodernism does not attempt to refuse its status as a commodity, on the contrary it celebrates it. Postmodernism marks the final and complete incorporation of culture into

the commodity system. Hence the slippage within Jameson's work between the two terms, postmodernism and late capitalism, as both come to signify the same object and to be equated with the totality itself.

In Jameson's first extended attempt to specifically define the postmodern, he suggested, that postmodernism was characterised by a new experience of time and space. Our experience of temporality has been radically transformed and dislocated through the dual effects of the dissolution of the autonomous centred subject and the collapse of universal historical narratives. Drawing on Lacan's work on schizophrenia and the Deleuze's notion of the nomadic or schizoid subject, Jameson argued that our sense of temporality was now radically disrupted and discontinuous. Without a coherent or unified sense of the subject it becomes increasingly difficult to speak of temporality in terms of memory, narrative and history. We are condemned to a perpetual present, the immediacy of seemingly random, unconnected signifiers. In short, Baudrillard's world of simulacra and hyper-reality, a world without reference or fixed meaning. The positive side of this, if one can speak of it in such terms, is that individual isolated signifiers appear to become more real, shorn of any residual meaning they become more literal and material in their own right. We now experience moments of schizophrenic intensity rather than modernist duration, of aesthetic boredom and estrangement.

The spatial corollary of this loss of temporality has been the pervasive flattening of space. Initially structuralism bracketed the referent and any notion of the referentiality of language, post-structural and postmodernist theory took this a step further and bracketed any sense of a signified. Words,

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signs, images no longer refer us to anything other than other words, signs, images in endless chains of signification. Postmodernism, then, discredits all the old depth models of understanding: the hermeneutic of inside and outside, the existential of authenticity and bad faith, the dialectic of essence and appearance, and the Freudian of latent and manifest. Meaning is perpetually deferred, constantly slipping beyond our reach. For the postmodernist, any notion of the real has been banished to the realm of the unrepresentable and the unknowable; what we have left is a limitless plane of immanence.

What particularly interested Jameson in postmodern spatiality was its tendency to disrupt our traditional conceptions of space. Postmodern spatiality attempts to dissolve distinctions between inside and outside, surface and depth, front and back. Postmodern architecture does not separate itself from its immediate environment as a monument to its architect's Utopian vision but incorporates the vernacular. It celebrates the diversity of contemporary urban life.

Jameson's debates on space and spatial theory proved to be some of the most persuasive elements of his postmodern theory. Throughout the late 80s he undertook a sustained spatial analysis of contemporary culture. However, these analyses increasingly marginalised questions of temporality. In Jameson's monumental book on postmodernism, published in 1991, nine out of the ten chapters were predominantly concerned with spatial analysis. Only one chapter was devoted to temporality and that was too an analysis of the *nouveau roman*, a form that Jameson alone persists in calling postmodern. This spatial turn within Jameson's theory is closely tied to what I have

described as a waning of his political imagination, or, what Jameson may describe as the failure to conceive of a properly postmodern form of politics. It is also, I contend, as a consequence of his elevation of a particular kind of space, of what Henri Lefebvre has called, the “Conceived” or “Representations of space”, to the detriment of “Lived” or “social” space that Jameson is unable to conceive of politics in spatial rather than temporal terms. I will come back to this in a moment, but first wish to consider Jameson’s recent reflections on space and time in *The Seeds of Time*.

In *The Seeds of Time*, Jameson observes how both postmodern temporality and spatiality are marked by a fundamental paradox. Postmodern temporality is characterised by an accelerated rate of change, the turn over of fashions, life styles, beliefs even, has rapidly increased over the last twenty or thirty years. What is unusual about this is that it appears to be change without any opposite, it is change without real transformation. As I have already suggested, Jameson sees correlations between postmodernism and the globalisation of the world’s economy. The transition from nationally based economies to a multinational economy has been accompanied by a change in both the form of production and regimes of capital accumulation. That is, from Fordist production line methods which entail large factories and long production runs of exactly the same commodity to post-Fordist forms of production which allow for greater flexibility of both production processes and commodities; as well as greater mobility of capital and production bases. Similarly capital accumulation has transferred from large scale investment in infrastructural and capital projects to much more flexible forms of accumulation; share speculation etc. On the one hand, these transformations

facilitate the acceleration of the pace of life, everything turns over and changes much more quickly. On the other hand, these changes are accompanied by the absolute standardisation of the life world. That is to say we can now buy the same commodities the world over. We simultaneously experience an unprecedented rate of change and a complete standardisation of the life world which would appear to be incompatible with just such mutability. We must distinguish, therefore, between change within the system and change of the system itself. In terms of individual experience one can almost daily change one's life, but at a deeper structural level we appear to be unable to imagine change at all. Contrary to postmodernism's celebration of difference, heterogeneity and radical otherness, social life has never been so standardised and 'the stream of human, social, and historical temporality has never flowed quite so homogeneously' (ST, 17). As Jameson puts it, we are now in a situation in which the sheer momentum of change slides into its opposite, into stasis. The deeper logic of postmodernism is that whilst everything is submitted to the change of fashion, the image and the media, nothing fundamentally can change any longer. As Foucault once put it in *The Order of Things*, we are faced with the monotony of absolute dispersion and absolute difference.

In short, temporality, argues Jameson, has become essentially spatial. As with his earlier theorisation, Jameson continues to insist that postmodernism can be characterised as a spatial experience. Further more it is a spatial experience that negates or represses temporality. Jameson writes in *The Seeds of Time*:

Space does not seem to require a temporal expression; if it is not what absolutely does without such temporal figurality, then at the very least it might be said that space is what represses temporality and temporal figurality absolutely, to the benefit of other figures and codes. (ST, 21)

What I want to come back to in a moment is the all or nothing rhetoric of Jameson's notion of postmodern space, the initial qualification that space cannot completely annihilate temporality is immediately undercut by the assertion that, on a representational level, it is precisely spaces ability to absolutely repress temporality that is the issue. I have not time to develop this here but what I would suggest is that there is a discrepancy between the theoretical and the experiential. At a theoretical level Jameson is able to hold open certain possibilities of, what he calls, non-synchronicity, that is of distinct and discrete modes of development within postmodernity. This, however, collapses at an experiential level whereby Jameson appears to find postmodernism so overwhelming and ubiquitous that he is unable to hold open any possibility for alternative forms of experience.

The paradox of postmodern or late capitalist spatiality has been summed up rather well by Stuart Hall, Hall observes that the global now situates itself as the local. ³ There is now undeniably a global culture whilst at the same time we find a resurgence of ethnic conflicts and nationalism. Whilst multinational corporations spread themselves across the globe they package and market themselves through specific national identities within individual countries. As a strategy to combat multinationalism, more properly national companies are also increasingly emphasising their local and regional identities. In other words, globalisation masquerading as regionalism.

On the one hand, then, we find the complete standardisation of space in a single world market and on the other a celebration of the local diversity. Ethnic identity and life styles are now packaged and sold on the world market as so many options for an affluent West. The ideology of a single standardised global market has sold us back a global space and postmodern city as, to quote Jameson, 'a well-nigh Bakhtinian carnival of heterogeneities, of differences, libidinal excitement, and a hyperindividuality that effectively decenters the old individual subject by way of individual hyper-consumption' (ST, 31). As with temporality, therefore, postmodern spatiality appears to fold into its opposite; heterogeneity passes over into homogeneity. What is probably the most standardised and uniform social reality that we have ever known is celebrated in all its diversity and otherness.

This rather bleak and pessimistic scenario seems, as I indicated at the outset, to have paralysed Jameson's political imagination. Faced with the enormity of a fully global capitalism Jameson can only resort to a rather politically vague notion of cognitive mapping; which places the individual subject in the unenviable position of trying to map, or represent, an unrepresentable global system, the totality itself. As this, by definition, is impossible, an individual subject's last resort appears to be the hope for some as yet to be theorised form of political response. Much of the energy of Jameson's recent writing has revolved around this need to retain a Utopian impulse, to restore a properly Utopian dimension to current cultural and critical practice. To keep alive the sense of a qualitatively different form of society. It is ironic, remarks Jameson, that whilst we are all too ready to

conceive of a complete world ecological crisis we seem to be utterly unable to conceive of a different form of social organisation. For Jameson, then, we must try to detect and retrieve from within the fragmented, schizoid, and heterogeneous elements of postmodern culture the smallest remnants of a repressed collective experience, a collective experience that will allow us to once more think the alternative to a global capitalist system.

What I now want to suggest, is that somewhere along the line Jameson has missed the point. That the situation is not quite as bleak as Jameson paints it and furthermore our only option need not be some undefined utopianism. It would seem to me that Jameson's pessimism is a consequence of two aspects of his theory, which I will briefly touch upon: firstly, what I have already indicated as the totalizing character of his theory, and secondly, what we could describe as the residual modernism in his discourse. The first dilemma concerns the lack of mediation in Jameson's schema, Jameson can breathtakingly move from the experiential to the global in a single sentence and the readings he can generate from discrete cultural artefacts are quite extraordinary. But one gets very little sense of how the one relates to the other. In terms of postmodern spatiality what Jameson wishes to emphasize is the alarming disjunction between the individual's perception of their own bodies and their immediate surroundings and the global environment that we now find ourselves within. Jameson finds this new spatiality particularly disorientating and suffocating, he writes, that postmodern space 'involves the suppression of distance ... and the relentless saturation of any remaining voids and empty places, to the point where the postmodern body ... is now exposed to a perpetual barrage of immediacy from which all sheltering

layers and intervening mediations have been removed'. Postmodern spatiality is a realm of chaotic immediacy, in which our bodies are bereft of any spatial co-ordinates and are incapable of distantiation. Although, I would venture, that if Jameson paid more attention to the mediating role of institutional, local and national aspects of postmodernism he would find postmodern spatiality a little less bewildering. However, such concerns are ruled out, a priori, by Jameson's overly totalizing perspective, postmodern spatiality is, by definition, without mediation, I can elaborate on this later if anyone wishes.

Quite simply, the problem with this is that it reinstates the position that Jameson and a number of other notable theorists were trying to get away from in the first place. The emphasis on spatial analysis in Jameson's work, and postmodernism generally, has emerged from a much wider debate within the social sciences and particularly from the work of Marxist geographers in the mid-70s. The new geographers challenged the privileged position accorded to temporality in social theory, insisting on the necessity of a more dynamic conception of space. Space had always been assigned a secondary position in relation to time; temporality is history, it is dynamic, the site of the dialectics, it is the potential for change and transformation, the historical possibility of revolution. Space, on the other hand, has always been seen as static and inert, space is simply given, a neutral category, an emptiness which is filled up with objects. The new geographers challenged the contemporary conceptions of space insisting that space is not given but produced. Socially produced space, spatiality, is not inert and static but is itself constitutive of social relations. Spatial relations and spatial processes

are in fact social relations taking a particular geographical form. Therefore, we cannot simply take space as a given but require what Henri Lefebvre called a unitary theory of space, a theory of space which brings together all its elements: physical space, mental space and social space. What Lefebvre calls the perceived, the conceived and the lived. For the postmodern and Marxist geographers spatiality is differential, conflictual and contradictory, the very antithesis of Jameson's conception of postmodern space.

Whereas, originally the transformation of space was a constitutive feature of postmodernism by the late 80s it had become the constitutive feature of postmodernism. Modernism was seen as essentially temporal whereas postmodernism became spatial. Modernism was valorised as dynamic, the site of history, narrative and memory, in short, the potential for change. Postmodernism the site of pure immanence, immediacy, stasis and above all a disorientating and disempowering realm of space. Space is the place from which no meaningful politics can be conceived. Despite Jameson's ostensible intentions space he has once more become negatively defined in relation to time. In an interesting article on the politics of space and time, Doreen Massey has observed how Jameson's dichotomy of space and time is clearly linked to a second dichotomy, that of transcendence and immanence: temporality is ascribed transcendence and spatiality immanence. 4 Faced with the horror of multiplicity of postmodern space Jameson can only vainly call in the wind for new forms of cognitive mapping.

This is what I referred to a moment ago as Jameson's residual modernist sympathies, sympathies clearly indicated in the opening chapter of *The Seeds of Time*, 'The Antinomies of Postmodernity' with its echoes of Lukacs

and the antinomies of bourgeois thought. Jameson comes out of an essentially literary and modernist tradition, his concern with spatiality has always been a concerned with what I called early “conceived” space. Jameson reads space as a text, and the semiotics of space its grammar and syntax. Jameson has no sense of space as either lived physical space or social space. Jameson’s notion of cognitive mapping is founded upon a dialect of perception but it lacks any real sense of the physical and spatial practice that would follow from it. The flattening of space that Jameson identifies as characteristic of postmodernity is itself a symptom of his own theory which sees space simply in terms of representation. By ignoring what Lefebvre called the perceived and the lived Jameson has eradicated from space its differential, conflictual and above all contradictory character. Characteristics that we once more need to restore if any meaningful spatial politics are to be conceived. A reductionism at the level of theory rather than at the level of the experiential.

Finally, therefore, I would suggest that what Jameson’s theory lacks is any real sense of a spatio-temporal dialectic. That is to say, that modernism cannot simply be conceived in terms of a thematics of temporality any more than postmodernism can be conceived as completely spatial. I will conclude by suggesting a few ways in which this spatio-temporal dialectic can be thought of and perhaps offers a more theoretical satisfying position than Jameson’s antinomies. In a recent article on modernity Peter Osborne has persuasively argued that what is unique about the temporality of modernity is its notion of contemporaneity. ⁵ That is to say, modernity designates what is new, and what is new must be distinguished from even its most recent

past, the modern will always be that which is new. In other words, “modernity is a qualitative and not a chronological category”. What interests me here is that the temporality of modernity can only be grasped as a dialectic of homogenisation (its contemporaneity) and differentiation (its distancing of itself from other historical epochs). Furthermore this dialectic can only be in relation to modernity’s spatial relations; that is the geopolitics of modernity, the history of colonialism. Osborne writes:

the concept of modernity was first universalized through the spatialization of its founding temporal difference, under colonialism; thereafter, the differential between itself and other “times” was reduced to a difference within a single temporal scale of “progress”, “modernisation” and “development”.

As Althusser reminded us, different modes of production project different temporalities, the universalisation of the capitalist system could only take place through the eradication of distinct temporalities, that is to say the colonisation of all sites of pre-capitalist production. Now this in itself does not discredit Jameson’s notion of postmodernism as the latest and purest form of capitalism. But it does begin to suggest a way of conceiving postmodernist temporality beyond the antinomy outlined above. Postmodernism does not represent a complete break with modernist temporality so much as an acceleration of this dialectic of homogenisation and differentiation, or what David Harvey has called “time-space compression”.⁶ According to Harvey, ‘the history of capitalism has been characterised by the speed-up in the pace of life’ whilst simultaneously overcoming spatial barriers. What has happened with regard to postmodernism argues Harvey is that this speed-up

has once more accelerated. That capitalism has embarked on one more fierce round 'in the process of the annihilation of space through time that has always lain at the centre of capitalism's dynamic'. But does not Harvey's assertion that postmodernism is marked by an increased annihilation of space through time seem to be at odds with Jameson's assertion that space is now the experiential dominant? On the contrary, if space is increasingly eradicated through temporal acceleration then what spaces that remain become ever more important, ever more significant. 'The superior command of space', writes Harvey, 'becomes an even more important weapon in class-struggle'.

If this is the case, then one can begin to think of the ways in which political struggles now take place, as struggles over space. The recent emergence of road protesters as well as animal rights protests over the transportation of live stock are both essentially spatial conflicts. Questions of Third World development, famine and debt are also spatial in the sense that they concern the particular utilisation and control of space. I am not suggesting that all traditional forms of struggle be replaced by joining road protesters but I am suggesting, contrary to Jameson, that it is possible to envisage forms of political action within the postmodern spatial paradigm. Some of us may wish to link up these protests with more traditional or orthodox forms of political activity but we disregard them at our peril. We would also need to conceive of a form of spatial politics in terms of the way our urban environments construct and constrain our subjectivity and different forms of social life. The development of shopping centres may provide safe, although that is now seriously questionable, and clean environments to shop but they

also privatise what may have previously been public space and our access to that space is now limited and policed. Furthermore, the steadily increasing privatisation of public means that there are fewer and fewer places to freely congregate in the centres of cities. In many cities, and Manchester does not appear to be one of them, the homeless in particular are being forced further and further out of sight and out of the commercial districts. I am not articulating a clearly thought out programme here, these are just a few of the areas though that I could conceive of a properly postmodern form of spatial politics emerging.

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3 Stuart Hall, unpublished paper delivered at the Raymond Williams Day conference Oxford, 1993. ???

4 Doreen Massey, 'Politics and Space/Time', in *New Left Review*, no. 196 (1992), pp. 65-84.

5 Peter Osborne, 'Modernity is a Qualitative, Not a Chronological Category', in *New Left Review*, no. 192 (1992), pp. 65 – 84.

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