

FREDRIC JAMESON (IN BRAZIL)

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To Fredric Jameson, *In Memoriam* (with gratitude and admiration)

For the dialectician, what matters is having the wind of world history in one's sails. For him, thinking means setting the sails. What is important is how they are set. Words are for him merely the sails. The way they are set turns them into concepts.

Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*

In this homage to Fredric Jameson, I considered talking about his relationship with Brazil, where I am from – though I'm currently based in Germany. Jameson, as in many other parts of the world, had considerable influence in Brazil, not only in literary criticism but also in various fields of Marxism. He has visited the country several times, where he has many former students and disciples, and has established roots in Brazilian academia. Roughly a third of his work has been translated into Portuguese; *Marxism and Form* was the first, followed by *Postmodernism* in the 1990s, and over the next decade, seven more of his books were published, including studies on Theodor W. Adorno and Bertolt Brecht. The same year his first book was translated, Jameson's work also began to be published by *Novos Estudos CEBRAP*, a journal edited by Roberto Schwarz. He was also part of the international board of *Crítica Marxista* – a journal that emerged in the 90s to reestablish a Marxist debate in Brazilian academia, political parties, and social movements – where his work was published right in the first (and subsequent editions). In fact, the publication of Jameson's work was part of a movement to renew Brazilian Marxism after the military dictatorship – a peripheral Western Marxism, less orthodox than that of the Communist parties and more connected to the university, with Antonio Candido and Roberto Schwarz as ones of its leading key figures.

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I find it quite curious that the spearhead of this Marxist renewal took place in literary criticism, and that's what I will talk about today - comparing Jameson's work with what he himself called the "Brazilian Dialectic." I'll discuss a debate Jameson participated in back in 1992. He came to Brazil to launch the translation of *The Political Unconscious* at the Brazilian Comparative Literature Association's conference and ended up joining another conversation with literary critic Maria Elisa Cevasco, professor of philosophy Paulo Arantes, and, of course, Roberto Schwarz. The debate was partially published by one of the largest newspapers in the country, *Folha de São Paulo*, back when debates of relevance still appeared in the press, and literary criticism wasn't confined to academic journals read only by specialists (it would be great if we could translate it someday). The debate appeared in a column authored by Schwarz himself (1992).

Maria Elisa Cevasco, who worked with Jameson in the United States and to whom one of his books is dedicated, shared an anecdote: a friend of Jameson entered his office and asked for a poster like the one of Marx that Jameson had on his wall. Jameson replied, "The merchants are holding on to that commodity because it will be worth a lot in no time" (Jameson apud Schwarz 1992: 6) - a joke underscoring the rehabilitation of Marxism, in which he was a leading figure. She used this anecdote to ask about his reasons for becoming a Marxist. Jameson, as discreet as ever, sidestepped the biographical question and chose to speak about the social and political context in which he was shaped. I like this debate account because it is rare to read an interview where Jameson discusses such matters.

Jameson described himself as an intellectual of the 1950s rather than the 1960s, of the Eisenhower and McCarthy era, which silenced leftist discourse in the United States. He pointed out that the American left of the 1960s was detached from the Communist Party tradition of the 1930s and 1940s, having developed into something entirely different and presented himself as someone caught between these two moments - as a Marxist formed during a political interlude (or, as Neil Larsen rightfully suggested after my talk, Jameson's project might be understood as an attempt to bring these two branches of Marxism together). Jameson described those years as a period of consolidation and rediscovery of modernism, of the consecration of works by Ezra Pound, André Gide, Thomas Mann, and so forth - and he said that in the United States, modernist aesthetics, unlike in Europe, served as a kind of protest against the corporate and managerial society of the *Trente Glorieuses*, a mode of rejecting that society - no wonder he was drawn to Adorno, with

his modernist marxism and his critique of administered society later on. That modernism, which Americans thought was apolitical, stated Jameson, was actually profoundly anti-bourgeois because it questioned the transformation of the self and the world. Oswald de Andrade, a Brazilian modernist from the 1920s who became a communist in the 1930s, once remarked that for that modernism of the “good old days,” the opposite of the bourgeois wasn't the proletarian but the bohemian” (2022: 15). Something of this resonates with Jameson's statement – in a sense, he followed the same path as Oswald de Andrade: from modernism to communism. He said, “When I was a modernist, I could develop in a political direction.” Later, the Cuban Revolution, according to Jameson, showed that socialism was very close to the United States, which ended up being more significant for his interest in Marxism than any biographical fact –a form of socialism, he said, quite different from that of the Eastern Bloc. Thus, in this Cold War context, he remarks political revolution and formal revolution converged in his interest in Marxism and dialectics. That, per se, explains a lot of why the renovation of Marxism in the U.S. occurred within the field of literature.

Picking up from this, Schwarz offered an intriguing suggestion I'd like to explore here. He said European modernism was a force that “de-provincialized” the American theoretical context and even Marxism itself. This is an interesting idea: a de-provincialization from the center, almost from top to bottom (from Europe to the U.S.), but whose outcome wasn't merely to restore the canon but to transform it. A remark that goes in the same direction as what Adorno (1965: 249) once wrote: modernism could be read as a form of obsolescence of the modern and not as its positive expression.

This explains – despite academic choices – Jameson's engagement with art, literature, and culture – as this was the field where, in a way, the most advanced critique of capitalism was being done. In this conversation, the other debater, Paulo Arantes, suggested that there is a difference between Brazilian Marxism and the Marxism of the group of the New Left in the U.K. and Jameson's project since the first two were collective renewal projects of Marxism, while the latter had fought this battle more or less alone in the United States. Arantes was not entirely sympathetic to Jameson's project and accused him of treating Marxism as a mere component of what Jameson called “Theory” – alluding to *Postmodernism* – and of reducing Marxism to cultural criticism. Although Arantes doesn't consider the importance of the Marxist Reading Group, a group Jameson founded, or Jameson's relation-

ship with figures like Stanley Aronowitz (one of Jameson's best friends), he is right in pointing to the singularity of Jameson's project - also the loneliness of it. But there is more to explore here. While Brazilian dialectics (from Caio Prado Junior to Schwarz himself) deprovincialized Marxism recurring to the internal element (the peripheral development of capitalism), Jameson - coming from a very central but provincial country - went the other way around and drawn from what came from Europe and the peripheries of capitalism to deprovincialize Marxism. I remember that in his classes, he would comment on how strange it was to discover himself as American (an experience you only get abroad, he argued) and how this is a challenging experience for a Marxist, a man who wants to ally himself with the oppressed without it being by mere condescension (a condescension that often permeates some decolonial theories). Jameson was the product of a former colony that became an empire. Like his country, it seems to me that he occupied an intermediate position, similar to what he discusses in his controversial and widely-discussed essay "Modernism and Imperialism," which he said is necessary to think through the nexus between North and South, center and periphery (2017: 169). In this sense, it could be said that he de-provincialized Marxism in two ways - from above and from below. Despite the criticism on national allegory and so on - which I think is a welcomed debate - I believe Jameson's project remains very relevant nowadays with the shrinking of our political horizons and the growth of a dangerous form of right-wing internationalized provincialism.

In that sense, Jameson was a "one-man army" (as he usually referred to Pierre Bourdieu), and his engagement with multiple themes, confronting postmodernism, French post-structuralism, Russian formalism, existentialism, Third World culturalist theories, different Marxist currents, and so forth made his work an institution - at the cost of seeming too eclectic. But this is just an appearance. Jameson discussed Chinese and Polish modernism, Italian detective novels, Norwegian autofiction, American culture industry, soviet literature, and so on and so forth. He once asked me for a version of Chico Buarque's "Ópera do Malandro" because he wanted to compare it with Bertolt Brecht. His language skills were absurd, and if he could be considered a privileged man, this privilege was undoubtedly not wasted away; rather it was put in service of capitalism criticism. Jameson transformed this Marxism, born in such unique conditions and such a singular mind, not just a part of Theory but a model for what could be a globalized literary criticism, world literary criticism. In this sense, his work seems like a literary map com-

prising many continents of the planet. I think this was the source of the strength his work held in capitalism's peripheries – because it became a driving force for de-provincializing literary criticism and Marxism in general. No one has come closer to a project like this than he has. If Perry Anderson said that Roberto Schwarz was “the finest dialectical critic after Adorno,” then Jameson indeed joins Schwarz in striving for a critical theory embedded in the world system, considering its uneven and combined dynamics. For Schwarz himself, “Adorno, Benjamin and sometimes Fredric Jameson are almost the only authors able to explain, in a considerable scale, the liaison between modern art and reality’s state of affairs.” (2024: 87)

To conclude, I’d like to share an anecdote. Jameson hosted me when I spent a year at Duke as a visiting scholar during my PhD. That year, Dilma Rousseff, then president of Brazil, was ousted in a coup, and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was imprisoned. That year, I took advantage of Jameson’s office hours to chat about my dissertation and whatever else he’d discuss – Jameson could read Portuguese and was familiar with various Brazilian references. When Lula was imprisoned, Jameson, who closely followed world politics, told me it was a tragedy. That what the Workers’ Party had done in Latin America was something incredible, incomparable. That to rebuild something like that would take a generation. He looked to Latin America as a place from which something could still emerge regarding socialist construction. That year, Donald Trump would soon be elected president. In a debate a few years later, Jameson suggested that his country was divided into (progressive and reactionary) zones just as in *Roadside Picnic*, the novel by Boris and Arkady Strugatsky, with no hope of reunification.

Now, with Trump back in power and a very provincial internationalized right-wing movement, Latin America is once again threatened – once again, the connections between center and periphery are visible. It’s a terrible political moment for the world but an excellent occasion to put Jameson’s project into practice.

Our society tends to honor the dead by lowering its flags in mourning. Jameson's death calls for a different gesture. Let the sails be raised.

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