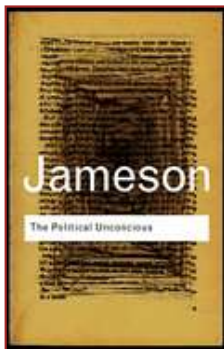


Political subjectivity and (Jameson's) political unconscious

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By Sadeq Rahimi

Sara from NY wrote last week to say that the idea of data and theory crossing paths intrigued her –which makes a lot of sense, and I hope this conversation develops in a way that I can bring in actual ‘data’ and discuss that convergence at some point soon. Daniel asked the very useful question of what I mean by political subjectivity to begin with. So I’m going to talk a bit about political subjectivity and my understanding of it.



One of the earlier discussions zooming in on the concept of political subjectivity would be Jameson’s text on the political unconscious [[The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act -1982, Cornell University Press](#)]. What Jameson develops in that book and other related texts where he engages the notion of a political unconscious is in many ways useful and relevant, though different from what I think when I speak of political subjectivity. It might be useful for us to consider Jameson’s political unconscious, however, as a relevant point of departure, but also because he develops a number of basic ideas in his work that offer a solid platform for discussing political subjectivity.

Jameson’s work addresses textual analysis and interpretation, rather than directly speaking of the human subject as such, though mind you the notions appear too tightly knit together throughout his text for any clear distinction to stand a chance. To put it in words simplified to the brink of crudeness, Jameson draws on and juxtaposes two basic theories of historicity, one personal/private (Freudian) and the other collective (Marxian/Hegelian), to conclude that the ‘text’ has an unconscious, in many ways as the human subject has been claimed to have an unconscious, and not so dissimilar to the Freudian conception of the way

that unconscious is produced, this textual unconscious is created through the progression of history and represents successive layers of political repression. So in this sense then it is only a Marxist conception of history as a 'continuous' story of struggle that can fairly depict and formulate that process and therefore provide the fullest possible interpretation of a given text (which would also amount to a revolutionary act of making 'conscious' those struggles and conflicts that have been rendered unconscious in the process of class struggles). Bear with me as I quote him directly in a bit of detail. He writes (pp. 19-20):

My position here is that only Marxism offers a philosophically coherent and ideologically compelling resolution to the dilemma of historicism evoked above [i.e. "respecting the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural past while disclosing the solidarity of its polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences and struggles, with those of the present day" (see p. 18)]. Only Marxism can give us an adequate account of the essential *mystery* of the cultural past... this mystery can be reenacted only if the human adventure is one; only thus –and not through the hobbies of antiquarianism or the projections of the modernists—can we glimpse the vital claims upon us of such long-dead issues as the seasonal alteration of the economy of a primitive tribe, the passionate disputes about the nature of the Trinity, the conflicting models of the *polis* or the universal Empire, or, apparently closer to us in time, the dusty parliamentary and journalistic polemics of the nineteenth century nation states. These matters can recover their original urgency for us only if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story; only if, in however disguised and symbolic a form, they are seen as sharing a single fundamental theme –for Marxism, the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity; only if they are grasped as vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot.

And then, apparently to add the ultimate touch to the argument, he quotes Marx who wrote:

the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles: freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman –in a word, oppressor and oppressed—stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each

time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes [Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," in K. Marx, *On Revolution*, ed. and trans. S. Padover (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), p. 81. Online text [available here](#)].

And so the final conclusion of this goes as follows: "the function and necessity" of "the doctrine of a political unconscious," says Jameson, lies in "detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative," and "restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history" (p. 20).

Now, as I suggested at the beginning of this post, my interest in political subjectivity is not exactly the same as Jameson's. One basic and significant difference concerns the issue of ideology. The notions of power and resistance are certainly fundamental to my understanding of political subjectivity, yet, since I am not invested in an ideological (Marxist or otherwise) reading of power and its dynamics, my hands are perhaps somewhat freer in formulating power and resistance beyond the dictates of means of production or class struggle.



Louis

Hjelmslev

On the other hand, one aspect of Jameson's work that is truly of interest to me is the idea that power struggles and their history are preserved within the systems of meaning. That is to say, the idea that the very 'structure' attributed to such systems is always already shaped and marked by political struggle. This is a far fetching notion with a wide range of implications, which I will be discussing in more detail in future posts. But suffice to say for now that this notion, or to borrow the expression from Hjelmslev, the concept of the "content of the form" is of great relevance to the question of political subjectivity.

I apologize if this post became a bit too abstract, I think we won't have a way around that, at least once in a while. But I hope those of you who are interested in the discussion but not necessarily in going too far into theory would find more useful content in coming posts.

Once again, your feedback and thoughts are strongly welcome and would really help me keep going with this. So if you feel this line of discussion is of any interest and relevance to you, please go ahead and make that concrete. Do not be shy to leave long comments (I am saying this because I just got an email from a reader who said they didn't want to 'burden me' with a detailed note). Your comments, as detailed and long as they may be, are not simply welcome, but absolutely helpful, and not just for me, but for anybody who is interested in the issues discussed here.

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