Chapter 6

Conclusion

Jameson’s critique of postmodernism, we have seen, analyses the nature of the latest stage of capitalism in its entirety and exposes the debilitating effects of its penetration into the as yet unconquered realms, geographical as well as human. The new colonization of the Third World and the Unconscious, of agriculture and culture---this acquisition of the rural and the aesthetic into the realm of the market and their consequent impoverishment are what Jameson lays bare as the political unconscious of the postmodern. His historical analysis liberates the whole discourse of postmodernism from the limited confines to which it was restricted until his intervention in the postmodern debate and extends it epistemologically into the spheres of history, economics, social, cultural and political theory. Inspired mainly by Ernest Mandel’s and Giovanni Arrighi’s accounts of the history of the development of capitalism, Jameson’s critique designates the postmodern as a historical rather than as an aesthetic category. The cultural artefacts of this latest stage of capitalism are informed by the ideology of the market. Jameson’s critique points out that culture which was once an autonomous realm performing its critical and negative function and holding on to its fort in the triumphant march of capitalism has lost both its autonomy and negative edge in the postmodern times because of this integration. The commodification of culture has also erased the distinctions between an elite high culture and a low mass culture. In a world where the implosion of
the boundaries of the hitherto distinct realms of the political, the economic and the aesthetic has created a confusion of categories and everything has become cultural, this integration of culture into the capitalist system has transformed it into a means of domination and repression thus converting it into a space where most political battles are fought. This is the most threatening aspect of the new stage of the dialectical expansion of capital. Now that this once autonomous realm is subsumed into the marketplace of capital the aesthetic has to function on the logic of the dynamics of capital. This is why Jameson’s characterization of postmodernism as “the cultural logic of late capitalism” becomes the most succinct description that can comprehensively explain this new historical period and its dominant paradigm.

Until almost the end of the nineteen seventies most of the writers who wrote about postmodernism chose to consider it as a paradigm shift in the aesthetic realm and hence described the formal features of this new “trend,” especially in literature. The postmodern turn, they declared, signals the end of high modernism and thus the era of the great individual styles of writers like Marcel Proust, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce is posted to the archives. The new sensibility inaugurated by postmodernism crosses all forms of borders and challenges the institutionalization of bourgeois culture which had acquired a hegemonic status. The new art is an art of surfaces without any claim to truth as against the negative aesthetics of modernism. Art does not have the obligation, and, it is not the vocation of the artist to represent truth. Truth itself is a construct. The postmodern artist is a parodist who imitates the role of an author. Many of these critics celebrate the hybridity of populism and elitism in the postmodern culture and its pluralism and eclecticism that, they say, cater to different “taste cultures.” Among the critics as varied
as Charles Olson, Irving Howe, Harry Levin, Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan, Susan Sontag and Charles Jencks none, we have seen, speaks much about the historical conditions which make the new paradigm of postmodernism possible. And, it is a historical irony that the first theorists who attempted to explain the theoretical foundations of this predominantly American phenomenon and thus to extend it to the realm of social theory were Europeans. There is no denying that it was the theoretical contributions of Lyotard, Baudrillard and Habermas that opened out the discourse on postmodernism to wider terrains of the intellectual life the world over.

Lyotard’s and Baudrillard’s theories, as we have already seen, can be classified in Habermas’s terminology as neoconservative. Jameson, no doubt, makes use of the insights of these two theorists. But it is the radical political potential of Jameson’s analysis of the postmodern that singles it out from the others’. Lyotard and Baudrillard celebrate postmodernism and do not offer any help in the construction of a meaningful resistance against the powers of capitalist reification rampant in late capitalism. Neither do they think that postmodernism is something whose ideology is to be resisted. They happen to be the ideologues of postmodernism. Lyotard, fully in favour of the agonistics of little narratives and the incommensurable language games within the system, prefers the pragmatics of performativity and delegitimation and regards all efforts at consensus and all systemic considerations, irrespective of their definitive purposes, terroristic. He is out to wage war on the terrorism of consensus and of systemic thoughts. To Baudrillard, we have seen, the postmodern is a historical stage---the era of simulations, of signs and images which have obliterated all kinds of existing distinctions between categories. Human beings are transformed into mere communication terminals in a world of
hyperreality where they have nothing to offer but inertia, apathy and indifference which makes it impossible even to imagine any form of political action. The confusion of categories consequent upon the implosion of the traditional boundaries renders all attempts to construct a meaningful reality ineffective. So, Baudrillard's theory suggests, what we see in the postmodern is the end not only of history but of the social and the political as well. The best form of resistance that Baudrillard advocates in such a situation is hyperconformity, a resigned non participation in the social and the political which, he claims, is a fatal strategy. What is obvious in the theories of both Lyotard and Baudrillard is their failure to discuss politics and the changes in the socioeconomic life of the postmodern world. Because of this failure to discuss the material conditions their theories also apparently suggest that Habermas's characterization of postmodernism as the antimodernist construct of neoconservatives is not far off the mark.

The Jamesonian texts on the postmodern, on the contrary, are specifically concerned with the new historical situation of the postmodern created by the global expansion of capital and the socioeconomic changes brought about by this new wave of capitalist penetration. They address the questions of exploitation and immiseration and hold the hegemonic powers of multinational capitalism responsible for this latest form of colonization. These socioeconomic and cultural powers fragment and reify all forms of subjectivity and demand new forms of revolutionary politics. Perhaps the most significant aspect of his analysis is that it explores the possibility of such a politics to construct meaningful resistance against these powers of repression. Jameson's theory, in contrast to those of Lyotard and Baudrillard, is, thus, revolutionary. His historical and systemic analysis fulfills the political imperative of laying out strategies for awakening historical
consciousness which is to say that its purpose is to awaken class consciousness. His critique thus meets the challenges of conservative poststructuralist theorists against his own claims of the untranscendability of the horizon of Marxism and its emancipatory potential.

Jameson's periodizing hypothesis of postmodernism also refers to the constitutive features of the aesthetic, cultural and theoretical products of the new historical moment. These features, Jameson says, are

a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary "theory" and in a new culture of the image or the simulacrum; a consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality, whose schizophrenic "structure" . . . will determine new types of syntax or syntagmatic relationships in the more temporal arts; a whole new type of emotional ground tone--- . . . "intensities"--- which can best be grasped by a return to older theories of the sublime. (1991a: 6)

All this, Jameson says, is constitutively related to "a whole new technology" of the new economic world system (1991a: 6).

It is this crystallization of the economic, the technological and the aesthetic that is characteristic of the postmodern. Many of the constitutive features of postmodernism that Jameson points out, we have seen, can be detected full blown in modernism as well. But what is distinctive about postmodernism is the social position and social functionality of the aesthetic products that make them culturally dominant. To Jameson there is no
massive and uniform cultural homogeneity in the artifacts produced during the postcontemporary times but he suggests that the residual and emergent features of postmodernism coexist with the dominant where it is the vocation of this last to subdue and incorporate the first two. No doubt, the crystallization referred to above has been instrumental in achieving this dominant status for culture in the postmodern times and in assimilating it into commodity production consequent on which it has lost its autonomy and negative critical edge. What Jameson underlines as significant in postmodernism is this loss of the subversive potential of the aesthetic and its transformation into a means of domination and repression. In other words, culture is made part of what Althusser designates as the ideological apparatus of repression.

In this new global system the geopolitical relationships have changed little in the sense that the former colonies still remain the subordinated Other. Territorial occupation for exploitation with the support of the military has been replaced by economic subordination and cultural imperialism. Culture has thus become the new space of social, economic and political tensions where the battle for supremacy is fought. So, in the restructured imperialist scenario the colonizer is invisible but the imperial subject’s Other is not only the former colonized but the internal Third World within the First World as well. What this means is that the space occupied and controlled by capital for domination and exploitation has only expanded and that it is not confined to the traditional Third World of the former colonies. Consequently, it becomes obvious that the postmodern, in Jamesonian terms, is not a condition where the capitalist dynamic is displaced but one in which there is continuity and a convulsive enlargement in the structure of capitalism. Being the Other, the Third World has the “advantage” that it experiences the genuine
realities of the effects of this new penetration of capital. The imperial subject has never been able to experience these realities of exploitation and repression---this experience of subalternity---because these have always been outside their structure of feeling. It is this weakness in the imperial subject's perspective that makes its representations very weak. That is why Jameson looks toward Third World representations and narratives for a better perspective from which to reinvent the Utopian vision. Jameson's exposition of these matters is in itself a political act whose aim it is to build resistance against the repressive forces of capitalism. And that is why his critique of postmodernism becomes a form of praxis.

The most vehement criticism against the Jamesonian texts on postmodernism has been his commitment in them to this Utopian vision and to totalization. These attacks on totalization are, in fact, attacks on totalitarian ideology. Totalization has been erroneously equated with totalitarianism. To say that Jameson does not, anywhere in his writings, espouse totalitarianism will be to state the obvious. On the contrary, his totalization serves as a kind of complement to the concept of "modes of production" which he uses to analyse and represent the different stages in the development of capitalism and to substantiate his hypothesis of the postmodern. Totality is the ideological cognate of totalization and it is the philosophical form of the concept of mode of production. Totalizing, we have seen, is the process of unifying the twin human activities of perception and action. What we find in Jameson's texts is the dialectical accommodation of the pluralism and heterogeneity of postmodernism with a view to laying bare the ambivalent interrelationship of the disparate and heterogeneous elements. What happens in them is not a subsumption of the minor phenomena into the major ones but a mediation
of heterogeneous and isolated phenomena within a larger relational and social context. This, in other words, is a relational act whereby the systemic relationships of the relatively autonomous phenomena are emphasized. It is this unification of the human actions of perception and action, theory and practice, that is termed praxis.

Jameson’s commitment to totalization is also seen in his rejection of the molecular politics of the new social and micropolitical movements with their single point agendas in favour of the traditional class politics which project a socialist alternative to the prevalent capitalist system. Jameson is fully aware that this is a proposal which is easier said than done. Postmodernism’s anti-Utopian celebration of the end of ideology, the end of history, the end of the social and the political and the perceptual barrage of immediacy in its hyperspace which threatens to do away with all forms of mediations make matters worse for Utopian vision and radical politics. The problem is more spatial than anything else. That is why Jameson proposes the solution of systemic thinking and “cognitive mapping.” The systemic perspective that Jameson presents is in itself a form of resistance against the fragmentation and reification engineered by capitalism.

We have also seen that what those on the left can strategically do in the face of the current wave of deregulation, liberalization and globalization is to first fight the capitalist ideology and its market rhetoric of the freedom of consumerism at the discursive level and legitimize concepts like popular and participatory democracy, planning, welfare state government and socialism. History tells us that these concepts once inspired people all over the world and helped the formation of state-civil synergies that were instrumental in the processes of nation building--- in Europe immediately after World War II and in the rest of the world consequent on decolonization. This legitimation
project at the discursive level, Jameson suggests, is to be accompanied at the ground level by the reinvention of the collective project in which a decentered collective subject finds its moorings and enables itself to resist the fragmenting effects of the concentrated power of global capitalism. Such a political initiative of a creative social collective that represents the desires of the deprived majority will be the most effective form of resistance that can be imagined against the capitalist ideology in the present situation. It is this very creativity of the social collective that Jameson speaks of which finds its articulation in the People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning in Kerala. Theoretically, this social collective has the potential to grow into a decentered collective subject that can be an effective agent of social transformation and thus to be the author of its own destiny. No doubt, this collectivity also has to face the inexorable limits that History imposes on it. But the immense possibilities of collective decision-making and collective empowerment, self formation and the production of social capital that this project offers make it a radically political initiative with the potential of recovering, for the deprived, the capacity to change their destiny and to wrest the control over their collective history. What Jameson’s critique of postmodernism advocates is nothing but this very process of collective praxis. By itself a form of praxis, the Jamesonian text also performs the function of being a guide for radical politics in the postmodern times.

This critique of postmodernism has, thus, been “a discursive victory” won by Jameson “against all the political odds, in a period of neoliberal hegemony when every familiar landmark of the Left appeared to sink beneath the waves of a tidal reaction,” as Perry Anderson observes. Jameson’s cognitive mapping of the contemporary world cartographs the sociohistorical frames of late capitalism on a global scale and it catches at
once “lyrically and caustically” “the imaginative structures and lived experience of the time, and their boundary conditions,” Anderson adds (1999: 66). In fact, as Douglas Kellner says, “[s]uch cognitive mapping is precisely one of the functions of theory” and, as “a theoretical model,” Jameson’s critique of the postmodern can be taken as “cognitive maps of postmodern space.” They provide an orientation and sense of time and place, of history and space “through theoretical models of how society is structured combined with historical analysis of stages of development” (1989d: 34, 35). These sketches seek to “isolate the gaps between phenomenological perceptions and structural conditions” and “locate the individual and collective subject in relation to vast sets of structures and class realities” (Leitch 1992: 115). The realities which the cognitive map of Jameson exposes articulate forcefully the fact that history cannot be lost in the inexorable play of images to the prison-house of postmodern simulacra and that “History is what hurts” (1981a: 102). What Jameson’s historical analysis reveals is that history, though available only in textual form, cannot be reduced to textuality and the play of tropes and that only the political action of a social collective can wrest the realm of Freedom from the realm of Necessity. Jameson’s theory, thus, successfully meets the challenges to provide a comprehensive critique of contemporary society and culture and to present an alternative model of social theory that reasserts the emancipatory potential of the Marxist narrative. The system is named. Text is displaced into counterhegemonic social discourse.