

GUEST COLUMN

Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*— Forty Years On

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Fredric Jameson transformed literary criticism in 1981 with the publication of *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Soon after, however, this book moved beyond literary studies to change conversations about interpretive methods in most disciplines in the humanities, many social sciences, some physical sciences, and fields like architecture and legal studies. Translated into Chinese, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, and Turkish, among many other languages, this book has never gone out of print just as its title phrase, “the political unconscious,” has never ceased to be uttered—repeated or adapted in countless articles and monographs to this day.

Deftly combining critical theory and rich textual analysis (especially of works by Honoré de Balzac, George Gissing, and Joseph Conrad), Jameson established in *The Political Unconscious* a properly Marxist approach to reading literature that included revised versions of the formalisms and historicisms then in vogue. The hermeneutic outlined in this book would not only oppose the putatively anti-interpretive theories associated with poststructuralism or deconstruction but also propose a model by which texts can be read in their historical contexts, as well as in our own. As Jameson shows, the very possibility of interpretation, as well as the sociality of the interpretive act itself, is the real focus of *The Political Unconscious*.

Yet Jameson had been working up to this book in the decade or so prior to 1981. *The Political Unconscious* was the culmination of a period in which he had endeavored to bring Marxist theory into the mainstream of literary studies, going as far back as the contentious 1968 MLA convention, at which Jameson and a number of his students formed the Marxist Literary Group, which remains active

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PMLA 137.3 (2022), doi:10.1632/S0030812922000347

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today. His *Marxism and Form* (1971) introduced many anglophone readers to continental theory, from Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse to Georg Lukács, Ernst Bloch, and Jean-Paul Sartre, in particular Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Jameson's 1971 *PMLA* article, "Metacommentary," which won the William Riley Parker Prize for an outstanding article published in that journal, further laid the groundwork for dialectical criticism, and his *The Prison-House of Language* (1972) supplied a Marxist response to the linguistic turn in nascent cultural studies, offering a critical introduction to Russian formalism and French structuralism. Since the 1970s, Jameson has helped establish connections between more traditional forms of literary criticism, such as philology and genre theory, and the seemingly novel European theories associated with poststructuralism. In such key essays as "The Vanishing Mediator," "The Ideology of the Text," "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan," and "Marxism and Historicism," he demonstrates that a politically oriented criticism need not abandon its attention to literariness. In these essays, along with *The Political Unconscious*, which closely engages with Northrop Frye, Max Weber, and others, Jameson shows how seemingly old-fashioned or esoteric approaches could maintain their vibrancy in a new context.

As editors of this installment of *Theories and Methodologies*, we invited a range of specialists working on different archives to examine the legacy, controversies, and continued relevance of *The Political Unconscious* forty years after its publication.

Some of these essays were first delivered at the MLA convention in January 2021 at a roundtable on Jameson's book hosted by the MLA forum on literary criticism, of which we, the session's organizers, were members. Responding to the very large turnout for this event, we sought to broaden the disciplinary engagement with Jameson's book, moving the roundtable to the pages of *PMLA* and involving yet more scholars of various national literatures and languages. Among the presenters in 2021, and the authors now in 2022, is Jameson himself, reflecting on the writing of his book some forty years ago, exploring a number of the themes presented in these papers, and proposing what he hopes *The Political Unconscious* might achieve today and for that matter tomorrow.

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