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MARXIST AND CHRISTIAN HERMENEUTICS: A STUDY OF JAMESON'S *THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS**

Clarence Walhout

Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* attempts a comprehensive theory of hermeneutics based on Marxist principles. Through a three-stage process of interpretation, which moves from text to society to philosophy of history, Jameson investigates a paradigmatic model for textual analysis which will avoid relativistic ideological interpretations. The present article attempts to delineate the similarities and the critical differences between Jameson's model and a Christian model for hermeneutics. The discussion focuses on concepts of contradiction, finitude, and "discovery" as well as on Jamesonian views of utopia, mode of production, ethics, and "the political unconscious."

Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*¹ aims not simply to offer a hermeneutical theory which will compete with others and, if successful, assign them to "the ashcan of history" (10). It aims, rather, for a "totalizing" or comprehensive theory which will stand above and judge other theories, using what it can, rejecting what is misconceived. What is needed, Jameson says, is a "master code" which can sort out and subsume critical operations which are "apparently antagonistic and incommensurable." For him Marxism is that master code: Marxist hermeneutics deals with other critical methods "not so much by repudiating their findings as by arguing its ultimate philosophical and methodological priority over more specialized interpretive codes..." (21).

Before assessing Jameson's project, it will be useful to examine some of the ways in which he refines the Marxist perspective, beginning with his revival of the concept of allegory as a critical category. In his "Preface" Jameson writes: "Interpretation is here construed as an essentially allegorical act, which consists in rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code" (10). Any interpretation of a text which goes beyond a descriptive analysis of its internal operations is by definition an allegorical reading; allegorical interpretations are those which construe the text in the light of a "master code," which constitutes the "untranscendable horizon" of the text. For Jameson, thus, allegorical reading is not secondary, relative, or "personal" but is the primary goal of

*This study was prepared during my tenure as Fellow of the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship, 1982-1983.



interpretation.

In reviving the term *allegory* Jameson both distances himself from formalism and relates Marxist theory to the pre-Cartesian tradition of allegorical interpretation, namely, the medieval tradition of the four hermeneutical levels. Jameson sees the medieval system as the construction of a “totalizing” system or “master narrative” (albeit an erroneously theological one) which preserves the “literality of the original texts,” i.e., the *littera*, what the text intended, but also places the literal meaning in the framework of a larger hermeneutical system. In this system the Old Testament is understood in its literal-historical sense and also is “rewritten” at a properly allegorical level as the expression of Christian meanings (truths). Such an interpretive method avoids the charge of historicism on the one hand, since it recognizes both the particularity of the literal-historical meaning and the universality of the allegorical significance, and the charge of subjectivism on the other hand, since it places the work of the individual exegete within the conceptual framework of a theory of history. That is to say, only those Old Testament interpretations which are compatible with the Christian story (the story of Christ) can claim one’s attention. Although in Jameson’s view the Christian story is invested with ideological meanings which must be understood in the light of a deeper story (the Marxist one), the allegorical method as such is fundamental for a comprehensive hermeneutical theory.

Jameson summarizes his own conception of the hermeneutical task as follows:

...in particular we will suggest that...semantic enrichment and enlargement of the inert givens and materials of a particular text must take place within three concentric frameworks, which mark a widening out of the sense of the social ground of a text through the notions, first, of political history, in the narrow sense of punctual event and a chronicle-like sequence of happenings in time; then of society, in the now already less diachronic and timebound sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes; and, ultimately, of history now conceived in its vastest sense of the sequence of modes of production and the succession and destiny of the various human social formations, from pre-historic life to whatever far future history has in store for us. (75)

These three “frameworks” for literary understanding are interdependent and sequential. At the first level, when the interpreter analyzes the internal structures of a text, he sees that formal patterns are “a symbolic enactment of the social within the formal and the aesthetic” (77); that is to say, when an author invents or creates a formal structure, he does so in order to find solutions to “unresolvable social contradictions” (79). The first level of analysis reveals, therefore, that a text involves “the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological subtext” (81); its particular textual form or structure is part of a “political history.”

Thus, in its rewriting of the historical situation or *subtext*, the text is constituted as a “symbolic act.”

It is important at this first level of textual analysis to emphasize the importance of actual history or “reality” as the *subtext*. History or “reality” does not appear as such in the text, for history *per se* is “non-narrative and nonrepresentational” and “is inaccessible to us except in textual form” (82); insofar as we can know it, history is reconstructed “after the fact.” Nevertheless, the subtext (actual history or “reality”) exists as the material out of which the symbolic or formal structures are created. For Jameson the formalist or structuralist restriction of the reference of a text to its own immanent context fails to account for the real situation to which the text is a reaction or response. In his view the issues in the text originate in the contradictions of society even though the text rewrites or restructures the contradictions in terms of its own formal system.

Because of this relationship of text to its subtext, the second level of analysis takes us outside the text to the social reality itself. Here the immediate social context of a work can be apprehended in terms of class relationships or class struggle. We need at this point only to note Jameson’s strong emphasis on contradiction, or dichotomy, or antagonism, as the essential property of the class relationship. The principle of contradiction accounts for the processes of history and hence for the subsequent rise of texts. In the historical world “the dialogue of class struggle is one in which two opposing discourses fight it out within the general unity of a shared code” (84); in a text the structural patterns must be understood as a reaction to and transformation of prior social contradictions (class struggles). Thus, the dialectic of contradictions observable within the text must be grasped at the second level of analysis as a symbolic rewriting of contradictions outside the text. As Jameson puts it: “the individual text retains its formal structure as a symbolic act: yet the value and character of such symbolic action are now significantly modified and enlarged. On this rewriting, the individual utterance or text is grasped as a symbolic move in an essentially polemic and strategic ideological confrontation between the classes...” (85).

But this second level of (social) analysis shows the need for a third level. Just as the codes which structure texts must be set in the larger framework of social struggles, so the codes which structure the class struggles of particular societies must be set in the larger framework of history. Just as we needed a “social” method for understanding the diversity of texts, so we now need a historical method for understanding the diversity of societies. Ultimately what is called for, Jameson says, is a philosophy of history.

Jameson’s strategy for discovering the historical patterns of social development is to show that the synchronic or formal structures of social life and the diachronic or temporal processes of social change are always mutually interdependent and interactive and that neither can fully explain the other. Social conflict arises

because several structures exist within a given society, and these structures exist because the changes that take place at the various levels of social activity proceed at varying tempos. Structural analysis can reveal the existence of differences (conflicting codes) in a society, but when we search for a deeper principle in terms of which we can understand social unity, we discover that the structures of a given society are formed out of the unresolved contradictions of its earlier stages and the new contradictions which arise in its later stages. Thus, the interpenetration of structure and process reveals that a deeper principle for understanding historical reality is needed.

This principle is in Jameson's view "what the Marxian tradition designates as a *mode of production*" (89). For Jameson this concept is not the older Marxist concept of the economic infrastructure of a society; rather, it is a structural concept by which we can understand social change at all levels of social life: there are political, legal, artistic, and cultural modes of production as well as economic ones. Through the concept of *mode of production* we can interpret both the interrelationship of social actions within a society and the various forms of class conflict which appear in separate societies. *Mode of production*, in short, is a principle which enables us to interpret changing social patterns wherever they occur in the process of history. Social changes seen at the level of global history can be understood as cultural revolutions and can be distinguished from local revolutions within particular societies. Thus, the third level of hermeneutics places a text in the larger context of cultural revolution and historical change as these are understood in the light of the concept of *mode of production*.

In treating *mode of production* in this way, Jameson broadens the traditional Marxist understanding of this concept as an exclusively economic one. Following structuralist Marxists like Althusser, Jameson blunts the charges of economic determinism and economic reductionism by asserting that while political, juridical, aesthetic, and other levels of social life may be influenced by economic forces, they also develop their own histories and internal dynamics. While economic modes of production are fundamental in the structures and ideologies of a society, they are not determinative in a simple causal sense. The forms of social life are mutually interactive in complex networks of causal relations. Thus, Jameson uses the term *mode of production* to account for these social and historical complexities while at the same time he does not altogether undermine its traditional associations with the concept of an economic infrastructure.

Jameson's third hermeneutical level requires a theory of historical change; however, it also is the place at which such a theory must be developed. This is so because we must construct a philosophy of history from within history itself. At the first level the formal structure of a text is interpreted in the light of social contradictions, and at the second level the formal structure of a society is interpreted in the light of historical contradictions, but what can provide the basis

for interpreting the formal structure of historical contradictions? Only history itself, and thus Jameson writes that “with this final horizon...we emerge into a space in which History itself becomes the ultimate ground as well as the untranscendable limit of our understanding in general and our textual interpretations in particular” (100).

For Jameson the final principle which enables us to understand history itself as the ultimate ground and the limit of our understanding is the *political unconscious*. The modes of production which structure historical societies and bring about social change through a dialectic of contradiction are manifestations or instantiations of the *political unconscious*, the principle which gives structural form to history *per se*. It is important to understand that the political unconscious is a formal principle and does not exist as a social reality. But it is also the case that the political unconscious can be grasped and defined as a formal-structural principle only on the basis of its “effects” in actual history; that is to say, our understanding of history requires a universal structural principle, but that principle can only be arrived at or projected on the basis of the analysis of history itself.

Here a key problem arises. The moment of historical understanding is “also the moment in which the whole problem of interpretive priorities returns with a vengeance, and in which the practitioners of alternate or rival interpretive codes...will again assert ‘History’ as simply one more code among others, with no particularly privileged status” (100). Can we regard the political unconscious as anything more than one concept among many for our understanding of the nature of history? In addressing the problem Jameson refuses the ploy, common in our day, “of opposing one reified theme--History--by another--language--in a polemic debate as to the ultimate priority of one over the other” (100). Instead, he offers some reflections on historiography as indicative of how it is possible to conceive of History as an ultimate “ground and as an absent cause.”

Historians, he observes, come to differing interpretations of historical data, but all of them conceive of their interpretations as restructurations of the raw data of history, of the “inert material” which is the way things happened. Historical interpretations, he suggests, aim to understand why what happened had to happen the way it did. This observation suggests that history is perceived under the form of Necessity. The fact that historians interpret historical events or historical causation in various ways indicates not that the idea of Necessity is in question but rather that causal explanations are both difficult to pin down and inadequate for the understanding of historical change. Though causal explanations represent a significant method of historiography, Jameson argues, we need as well a method of structural analysis and finally a philosophy of history. At this final level “the most powerful realizations of a Marxist historiography...remain visions of historical Necessity...in the form of the inexorable logic in the determinate failure of all the revolutions that have taken place in human history...” (101-02).

History, then, "is the experience of Necessity" as the inexorable *form* of events" (102). History must be conceived as the working out of the political unconscious as it gives structural coherence, through the social modes of production, to an "inevitable" process of dialectical contradiction and cultural revolution leading to the ultimate goal of history. This goal is the resolution of contradictions in the classless and non-ideological society; the aim is "to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity" (19). Through the contradictions of social life we move in the processes of history toward that integration of life demanded by the political unconscious as the unifying principle of all human existence. At such a point of integration, human freedom becomes one with historical necessity.

The *political unconscious*, thus, is for Jameson that universal principle which is necessary if we are to conceive of the unity of history and thereby understand the formal preconditions for social life. Just as *grammar* establishes the "necessary" preconditions for language even though the concept *grammar* does not predetermine the shape or reality of any particular language, so the *political unconscious* establishes the "necessary" precondition for social realities though the concept *political unconscious* does not predetermine the shape or reality of any particular society. Just as the concept *grammar* is necessary for our understanding of the grammatical systems or codes which give order to our discourse, so the concept *political unconscious* is necessary for our understanding of *modes of production* as the systematizing code which orders social life. And just as a grammatical paradigm or code is necessary for our analysis of the particular syntactic relationships in an actual language, so *mode of production* as a social paradigm or code is necessary for our analysis of particular forms of social life. We discover, thus, a conceptual necessity—a set of interrelated conceptual principles—as we formulate the concepts which enable us to interpret social realities. The necessity which characterizes our conceptual understanding of history does not entail actual historical or social determinism, but it does enable us to construct a paradigmatic "master code" which establishes the necessary preconditions for interpretation.

We may now draw to a conclusion this exposition of Jameson's theory by noting two ideas which will be discussed at greater length in the following sections. First, Jameson insists that moral categories be understood as ideological and not as absolute norms for understanding and interpretation. The political unconscious is itself neither good nor evil—it is "beyond good and evil"; good and evil are concepts which arise in the processes of history and are defined in the dialectic of social conflict. Secondly, the Marxist conception of Utopia plays an important part in Jameson's theory because for Jameson, as for all Marxist theorists, the concept of Utopia functions as the theoretical end-point of history and helps to explain the teleological structure of social change.

II

In this section we will examine certain parallels which can be found in Marxist and Christian hermeneutics. Christian literary critics from Eliot to Tate to C. S. Lewis have been enticed by twentieth-century formalism, and it is somewhat ironic that a Marxist reminds Christian theorists of their own long-standing traditions. But it is not primarily Jameson's recognition of medieval hermeneutics that reveals certain affinities between Marxist and Christian theorizing; it is rather the recovery of history as a fundamental category in textual study. Jameson's critique of structuralism sounds a sympathetic note in Christian ears, for the Christian theorist also sees history as the arena in which the human prospect is to be understood. Neither Marxism nor Christianity rejects formal or synchronic analysis, but they both reject the tendency of formalism to reduce meanings to the structures of language and the forms of discourse. Christian theorists may be walking in opposite directions from Jameson, as well as from Derrida and others, but they are walking on the same side of the fence.

Another similarity between Christian and Marxist theories can be seen in the parallel between the Marxist concept of Utopia and the Christian concept of the Eschaton. Although the description of what the eschatological society comes to—the classless society or the city of God—may reveal profound differences, both theories emphasize teleology. If a philosophy of history is what is needed as the final level of hermeneutical understanding, then the concern with direction, purpose, ends, is as necessary as the concern with origins, causes, and the dynamics of change. Because of his own historical and social concerns Jameson can see keenly the importance of the fourth (anagogical) level in the medieval-Christian hermeneutic.

A third similarity can be seen through Jameson's definition of what constitutes allegorical readings of texts. If allegory is not just a genre but a method, then clearly the Christian tradition of allegorized readings is simply a recognition that any hermeneutical theory necessarily interprets texts in the light of a prior theory of textuality. Since interpretation involves more than formal analysis of textual material, complete interpretations are by definition allegorical as well as descriptive. Jameson's clarification of this point helps to rescue the medieval-Christian method from its contemporary status as a hopelessly outdated prejudice. Not even the Christian theorist wants to go back to medieval hermeneutical practices, however. The point is simply that in clarifying the inner logic of the medieval system Jameson helps to clarify both Marxist and Christian hermeneutical theory.

A fourth similarity is brought out in Jameson's response to the view that Marxism represents another religion. He writes, "...I have throughout the present work implied what I have suggested explicitly elsewhere, that any comparison of Marxism with religion is a two-way street, in which the former is not necessarily

discredited by its association with the latter" (258). Although Jameson considers Christian teachings to be ideological, his recognition of the analogy between Marxist theory and the conceptual framework of religious thought helps to clear the air for rational debate. Because religion is so often suspect in contemporary academic discussions, Christian theorizing is sometimes thought to be either impossible or misguided in *a priori* ways. Such is the plight of Marxism, too, in many places (in America at least); but the recognition of the "totalizing" demands of religion should not by definition be suspect, for they are the demands of any comprehensive theory.

In this context it is appropriate to examine what Jameson sees as the "reductionist tendencies" of Christian theory. Any Christian theorist will admit that in the history of his tradition can be found methods and practices which are reductionistic (just as Jameson acknowledges local ideologies within the history of Marxist theorizing), but the issue of Christian reductionism is not that simple. Any comprehensive or "totalizing" theory of interpretation will see other theories as limited and therefore reductionistic. Thus, from his point of view Jameson is correct in considering Christian theory (or any theory but the Marxist one) as reductionistic. But a Christian theory (insofar as it is purged of its local misconceptions) also claims comprehensiveness and will view Marxist and other theories as reductionistic. There is, then, this additional similarity between Jameson's theory and a Christian theory, namely that both see the need for a comprehensive philosophy as the ultimate level of interpretive theory and thus view others as reductionistic. Whether it is Christianity that is reductionistic or Marxism that is reductionistic is a matter for debate.

Other points of similarity could no doubt be discerned, but these will suffice to suggest that the methodological aims of Marxist and Christian theorizing are remarkably (and surprisingly) similar. Such recognition may pave the way for more fruitful debate of the substantive differences.

III

In the following sections we will offer a critique of Jameson's theory, beginning with his privileging of the concept of contradiction. Since the scope of the essay will not allow for full analysis, the aim will be to raise questions that will once again problematize certain of Jameson's theses. If nothing more, the discussion will help to sharpen the issues which divide Marxist and Christian theories.

I want to suggest that the key to Jameson's theory is the principle of contradiction and that other concepts such as the concept of Utopia, the ideological nature of ethics, and the political unconscious itself become problematic if the principle of contradiction is made to waver. Jameson himself asserts the centrality of *contradiction* to his theory:

We have implied that in order to be consequent, the will to read literacy or cultural texts as symbolic acts must necessarily grasp them as resolutions of determinate contradictions; and it is clear that the notion of contradiction is central to any Marxist cultural analysis, just as it will remain central in our two subsequent horizons, although it will there take rather different forms. (80)

The discovery of contradiction at both textual and social levels is the mark of the completeness of an analysis:

Here again, then, at the level of social analysis the requirement to prolong interpretation to the point at which this ultimate contradiction begins to appear offers a criterion for the completeness or insufficiency of the analysis.

At the third level of analysis, too, *contradiction* is the key:

Furthermore, just as in our discussion of the first two we have stressed the centrality of the category of contradiction for any Marxist analysis...so too here we can effectively validate the horizon of the mode of production by showing the form contradiction takes on this level, and the relationship of the cultural object to it. (94)

The importance of contradiction for Marxist theory is that without it there would be no way of accounting for social change; without it there would be no history.

Let us examine this concept first as a methodological strategy of formal analysis and secondly as a principle of social dialectic.

The former can be treated briefly with the help of T. K. Seung's *Structuralism and Hermeneutics*.² Seung demonstrates that methodological confusion can arise from a failure to distinguish between binary opposition and binary distinction, or, in logical discourse, between "contrariety" and "contradiction," or, in Kantian terms, between real and logical oppositions:

Although these two principles look alike, they are quite different. Binary distinction is the simplest logical device for discrimination, namely, between having a quality or attribute and not having it, or between belonging to a class or not belonging to it. It underlies every assertion or denial. There can be no more pervasive logical principle than this one. But the principle of binary opposition does not have the same universal scope as the principle of binary distinction...(10-11).

Binary distinction can be expressed by using two symbols: a positive term and the negation sign, e.g., A and -A. Binary opposition, however, requires three symbols: two positive and their relation...Binary distinc-

tion requires no relational term, because the relation between a positive term and its negation is established by the negation itself. Even when one of the two terms in a bipolar opposition stands for the privation of what is represented by the other term (e.g., light and darkness), both terms function as positive terms (i.e., darkness is not defined as non-light), insofar as this opposition is accepted as binary. (11-12)

Seung shows that structural analysis of texts makes use of the category of binary opposition and not of binary distinction and that a failure to keep this distinction clear can result in the confusion of logical and historical methods. Insofar as we are concerned with interpreting texts as historical documents, the distinction between *contradiction* as a logical category and *opposition* as a historical category is crucial for the nature and validity of the analysis. Since structural analysis of texts, however, is concerned with binary opposition (not logical contradiction), Seung's book serves here as a reminder that in such analysis we always need a third term or category to indicate or "explain" the relation of the two terms of the binary opposition.

If there is reason to be cautious concerning the principle of contradiction as a tool in formal or synchronic analysis of texts, there is even more reason to be cautious at the level of historical or diachronic interpretation, for if one treats historical conflicts as if they were logical contradictions, he is likely to claim for a historical theory greater validity than it merits. The relations between temporal events can only be understood by empirical analysis or by a theory which is grounded in empirical analysis. Once a theory is formed, of course, it is subject to logical testing and development, but a historical theory (i.e., a theory about historical events) can never escape its empirical roots.

The significance of this observation for Jameson's theory can be seen when we examine the ground for his view that *contradiction* is the key principle at all three levels of hermeneutical analysis. In the case of the first level we can argue diachronically that textual "contradictions" arise because of prior social "contradictions" which are subsequently transformed by the symbolic action of the text. And we can argue that at the second level social conflicts arise because of the interactions of the various levels of social life. But how do we explain at the third level the existence of contradictions as a condition of the historical process itself? If historical contradictions, i.e., actual conflicts in the course of history, arise, what is the diachronic, causal explanations of such contradictions? There can be no direct evidence in answer to this question because we cannot get beyond the contradictions of history to some prior, non-historical state of affairs. Yet the theory that history must be explained by the principle of contradiction has no independent logical status either. We can "explain" the existence of contradiction at the third level of analysis only by an appeal to our experience

of and reflection on history itself; a philosophy of history must arise from within history. This, unfortunately, is the case with all historical theories: all are formulated on the basis of empirical evidence and are subject to empirical testing; none has privileged status on the basis of formal logic alone.

That the principle of contradiction as Jameson uses the term could not be the principle of *logical* contradiction is evident from the fact that logical contradiction is concerned with the formal relation of propositions within a given structural framework and requires a prior definition of the appropriate framework. This requirement cannot be met in the case of a philosophy of history since there is no standpoint outside of history from which history can be defined. It is clear, therefore, (as it would be also from an analysis of Jameson's usage of the word) that for Jameson the term *contradiction* has reference to the actual processes of history and is derived from the observation and theorizing about historical experience. Now if the term *contradiction* does not function in Jameson as it does in the context of a purely formal logic, then we can better understand what Jameson is speaking of at his third level by replacing contradiction with the term *opposition* in the sense that Seung indicates above. Historical "contradictions" are really historical "oppositions".

If *contradiction* is glossed as *opposition*, then, as Seung shows, a third term is needed to understand the opposing terms of the opposition. And when we translate this requirement from a formal-synchronic analysis into a historical-diachronic analysis we see that a temporal *unity* must be prior to a temporal *opposition*. Just as in synchronic analysis we need a conceptual unity in terms of which to identify and "explain" structural oppositions, so in diachronic analysis we need an actual social unity to identify and account for actual historical oppositions; the two terms of the social opposition must be seen as the division of a prior unity.

We are now able to see that Jameson's philosophy of history includes an ontology of history. Since the concept of *contradiction* arises out of the experience and reflection on history and is a principle that is instantiated in the processes of history, it constitutes an account of how history works, a description of how and why historical events occur. *Contradiction* is, thus, for Jameson a property of historical reality and not a purely formal or logical category. To put it in another way, if Jameson's philosophy of history is to have semantic and hermeneutical force and not merely logical or formal cogency, it must say something about history and not just about the formal relations of logical categories. But in that case it attributes meanings to history, meanings which are inherent in historical experience. As a theory of the meaning of history and as a hermeneutical theory for the interpretation of historical meaning, Jameson's philosophy of history is also an ontology of history, i.e., a theory about the nature and reality of history.

On the basis of what has been said so far, there is, of course, no need to

abandon the theory, since we are speaking only of the grounds of the theory and not the cogency of the theory itself. All theories of history are subject to the conditions we have been discussing, and Jameson's so far reveals no peculiar weakness. Our aim up to this point has been only to show first, that the term *contradiction* as Jameson uses it is a descriptive and diachronic concept rather than a purely formal and logical one and, second, that as a consequence his philosophy of history contains within it an ontological description of historical reality.

The Marxist ontology can be understood further when we seek to understand why Jameson considers the principle of contradiction crucial for the third level of analysis as well as for the first and second. Let us phrase the question this way: Why is the principle of contradiction a necessary and originary condition of historical change? The answer is that on Marxist grounds the principle of contradiction is necessary because social-historical reality is all that there is. If there is no reality but social (i.e., material) reality, then the principle of contradiction must be already inherent in social reality as its necessary condition for being historical. If change is brought about by contradiction, then contradiction is the precondition of history. Thus, the principle of contradiction is important because it functions also as an ontological description of the nature and boundary of what is real.

IV

The foregoing observations will help us to make further analyses of Marxist and Christian hermeneutical theories, for in spite of their methodological similarities Marxism and Christianity differ profoundly on ontological questions. A Christian ontology is obviously antithetical to the Marxist one, for Christianity posits the existence of a transcendent, transhistorical reality to which social-historical reality holds a fundamental relation of dependence. Ontologically Marxism and Christianity are worlds apart.

Let us examine some of the consequences of Marxist and Christian ontologies for a philosophy of history and for a theory of social change. First of all, in Christian theory the principle of contradiction is not primary but secondary, not necessary but contingent, not ontologically prior. Even if contradiction (opposition) were (and it probably is) a necessary category for the interpretation of actual social change, it, like history itself, is contingent upon the prior relation of the historical to the transhistorical. And Christianity asserts, of course, that a fundamental unity is prior to all contradiction (opposition).

Theologically this unity is asserted in the Christian doctrine of creation, which requires here a word of explanation. It might appear that the doctrine of creation itself presupposes contradiction because of the ontological gulf between the

Creator and the created. This, however, is only apparently the case, for the principle of contradiction requires that opposition occur at the same level of reality or within the same ontological category. For Jameson contradiction is primary because social reality is all that there is, but the Christian view of creation posits two orders of reality such that the principle of contradiction (opposition) need not occur. Difference is not equivalent to contradiction or structural opposition. While there are differences between Creator and created, the relation between them is not and need not be defined as contradiction. The Christian conception of this relation is better indicated by the term *finitude*, which means that created reality (the historical-social world) stands in the relation of the contingent to the necessary, of limitation to fullness, of the finite to the infinite. In the Christian view, it is *finitude* rather than *contradiction* that characterizes the historical-social world at the deepest ontological level.

The difference between Christian and Marxist thought on this point may also be seen in their respective concepts of the original unified society. For Marxists the notion of an original unified society is a hypothetical construct which we can recognize as the theoretical demand for a social unity which precedes social contradiction. When Marxist theorists speak of a "preclass society" (290) whose unity was necessarily destroyed by the material need to produce goods for survival, it seems apparent that such a society is based as much on theoretical grounds as on empirical ones. The concept of "primitive communism" is necessary in order to make the Marxist theory of social "contradiction" (opposition) a coherent one. But as we have seen, the concept of an original unitary society is dubious on theoretical grounds, for there is no basis *outside* of history itself for a concept of contradiction as the necessary principle which operates *within* history. Two dilemmas result. First, if social-material reality is all there is and the principle of contradiction is the mark of all societies, why should there be an exception? Second, if the principle of contradiction is a pre-condition for historical change, why would the original society change, or, more strongly, *could* it change if the principle of contradiction were not already contained within it? But in that case it would not be the unified society that is envisioned by most Marxists. Even if one conceives of this society as a theoretical or hypothetical one, the logical problems remain. Indeed, on Marxist grounds only if one could in fact demonstrate the actual existence of such a society could one strengthen the position, but that seems to be both theoretically and empirically dubious.³

Christian theory, too, posits the concept of a unified original "society" (even though in the narrative record of that society it consists of only two persons), and so the problem being discussed holds there, too. However, the Christian theory avoids the logical problems which occur when Marxists make the principle of contradiction the primary one. For Christian theory as well as for Marxist theory the contradictions (oppositions) in social life require (diachronically or

historically) a prior unified society, but in the Christian case the form of that society is explained by the principle of finitude rather than the principle of contradiction.

We may now examine a bit further some of the implications of the term *finitude*. In the Christian view the Creator embodies the fullness of being and meaning in a way that cannot be shared completely with the creation, hence the ontological difference between Creator and created. Yet man is made “in the image of God,” that is, the meaning which men desire and search for is what is embodied in its fullness in God. This is Christian doctrine, of course, but we should not ignore its intuitive attractiveness; that is to say, our intuitive sense that we can *search for* richer meanings than we already have suggests that we can also conceive of a meaning which is more than we have and to which we aspire. In any case, this is what is implied in the term *finitude*. Man’s existence is finite and dependent, but he stands in relation to a reality which transcends him as the fullness of being and meaning.

If *finitude* is a more basic category for social (i.e., human) existence than *contradiction*, then perhaps an alternate theory of social change could be suggested by the term *discovery*. I do not claim to have an adequate explanation of this term and propose it only as a way of revealing the problem of using *contradiction* as the key to understanding social change. Let us pursue this option by the use of a specific example. Suppose that I walk into a hotel and discover that the lobby walls are blue. Does that “discovery” depend on the principle of contradiction? What appears immediately is that the term *discovery* can be understood in two ways. First, to discover often means “to make a judgment about”: to discover that the walls are blue means to make the judgment that the walls are blue. Discovery in this sense is a cognitive activity. But, secondly, to discover may mean simply “to experience”: to discover that the walls are blue means simply to have the experience of “seeing blue.” Discovery in this sense is an observational or sensuous activity.

Now it appears to be the case that in order to make the *judgment* that the walls are blue I must have a prior awareness of the contradiction *blue:not-blue* and of distinctions between blue and other colors. *Judgments* about experience—in particular, judgments about new experiences in a changing world—appear to require an awareness of oppositions which is temporally as well as logically prior to the forming of the judgments. If I had no temporally prior conception of blue as distinguished from not-blue or as distinguished from other colors, I would not be able to form the judgment that the lobby walls are blue.

But do these requirements hold for discovery in the second sense, namely, in the sense of having an experience of the wall’s blueness? In order to *judge* or *know* that the hotel lobby is blue, I may have to think in categories that exhibit structural or logical opposition, but do I have to *know* the blueness of the lobby

in order to experience it? It seems unlikely. Suppose that I was brought up in isolation and had no language. If I were then suddenly placed in our hotel lobby, would I recognize the blueness of the walls? Surely I would not be able to describe them as blue, but it seems equally certain that I would have the experience of "seeing blue" even though I could not name the color or even think in terms of *color*. It seems that at the level of the senses I have experiences which are not dependent upon prior awareness of contradictions. Prior awareness of structural oppositions seems to be necessary if we are to make judgments, but what if I make no judgments and have no language to make them? Could it be that awareness of structural oppositions is a temporal precondition for our reflection on experience but not for our non-cognitive experience *per se*?

Furthermore, it would appear that my non-verbalized experience of the hotel lobby is not a simple experience of blueness as a discrete phenomenon. It would be inescapably intertwined with other sensations such as the intensity of the light, the density of the walls and floor, the presence of other objects in the room, the spatial properties of the lobby, etc. If sensations, in short, are not simple but complex experiences, then the structural oppositions must be equally complex, such that a structural analysis of the whole universe (or virtually all of it) must be a prior condition for the single judgment that the lobby walls are blue. But it seems counter-intuitive to say that these oppositions must be temporally prior in my consciousness in order for me to have the sensation of seeing the blueness of the lobby walls.

One could argue, however, that while cognitive awareness of numerous and complex structural oppositions is not temporally prior to the single experience of "seeing blue," yet our cognitive awareness of these oppositions is grounded in the actual existence of such oppositions in reality. Were it not for the existential or ontological reality of there being blue and other colors, there would be no analogous or parallel conceptual opposition; in short, if there were no blue and not-blue things, there would be no concepts *blue* and *not-blue*. Structural oppositions, it could be argued, are based on ontological oppositions. And if such is the case, then the existence of oppositions in reality make possible the experience of new things as things which are distinguishable from other things. Is contradiction or opposition, in short, the condition of experience as well as of cognition? If contradiction or opposition is a condition for there being blue and not-blue things as well as the condition for our awareness of blue and not-blue as conceptual categories, is not contradiction the fundamental principle underlying both experience and thought?

And if it is argued that structural or conceptual oppositions are counterparts of oppositions that exist in reality, then it could also be argued that ontological oppositions are prior to experience just as logical oppositions are prior to our judgments about experience. The principle of contradiction or opposition, it

would then appear, is both conceptually and ontologically prior to our experience of the world and our forming of judgments about our experience. In that case it would appear that contradiction is fundamental to diachronic as well as to synchronic analysis; contradiction would seem to be temporally (diachronically) prior in our experience of the world as well as logically (synchronically) prior in our thinking about the world.

But is there any reason to attribute the preconditions of thought (contradiction opposition) to reality *per se*? Is opposition an ontological principle as well as an epistemological principle? The logical (analytic) contradiction of blue:~blue and the structural (synthetic) opposition of blue *vs.* all other colors are conceptual constructs. But they are not *therefore* ontological realities. There is no opposition between blue and other colors in reality even though in our conceptual processes of identification, definition, and classification we do employ a logical structure based on contradiction and opposition. Blue things exist in reality alongside green and red things, but there is no opposition between them in the sense that there is a principle of opposition which functions in our conceptual distinctions between blue, green, and red. Differences among things ontologically is not equivalent to oppositions among things conceptually.

If they are not equivalent, then it does not appear that contradiction (opposition) serves as a principle of diachronic explanation in the same way it serves as a principle of synchronic analysis. Contradiction is not temporally prior in experience in the same sense that contradiction is logically prior in conceptualization. The matters we are touching on are complex—involving complicated questions in the psychology of sensation, the psychology of learning, a philosophy of knowing, a philosophy of pre-cognitive states, etc.—but it perhaps could be suggested here that one has reason to be sceptical that a theory of the primacy of contradiction could serve as the basis for a diachronic theory of historical experience. Synchronic theories founded on the principle of contradiction (or opposition) may be an integral part of reflection or diachronic analyses, but it appears that the sources and processes of actual experience cannot be subsumed by synchronic analysis or any theory which makes contradiction a primary category. For these reasons the term discovery—ill-defined as it is—may serve as a preferable reference point. Perhaps experiences are presented to consciousness in holistic ways prior to the discovery of contradictions or oppositions. If so, the concept of finitude could provide a theory as to why this is the case. Perhaps the finite self is motivated not only by a need to solve personal and social contradictions but also by a need to reach out toward that fullness of being which is already before him as the teleological goal of his existence. Perhaps man does not shape and define himself by means of the historical dialectic of contradiction; perhaps he strives to discover and fulfill a human nature which has already been defined and established as his proper goal.

It is worth observing that in Christian theory the concept of finitude allows for errors in judgment and for misunderstanding. If history is discovery and exploration, it does not preclude the possibility of error. This would be the case even in the Edenic society, for finitude implies that the fullness of meaning is not yet realized but must be discovered. And, hence, it allows, too, for differences in social structures and cultural practices: societies can discover different things or be in error in different ways. "Contradictions" in the sense of social differences and oppositions are a normal part of historical life, and they would be even, in the Christian sense, in the prelapsarian society.

What emerges from this discussion is that Jameson's theory equivocates on the term *contradiction* because he uses it to cover at least three distinct phenomena. First, it is used to designate the structural form of texts and societies. Secondly, the term is used to designate the structural form of history, but, as we have seen, the analysis leading to this conclusion is different from the analysis of structural oppositions at the first two levels since there is no larger frame of reference from which history can be seen. But in a third sense, the term *contradiction* is also used to refer to actual social conflicts (class struggles, oppression, etc.) which are real and not just formal. This third use is distinct from the previous two because it has a diachronic function rather than a synchronic one. It is the failure to distinguish clearly the diachronic uses of the term *contradiction* that leads to the problems discussed above.

V

The foregoing discussion will enable us, at the risk of oversimplifying, to touch on several other topics with the intent simply of highlighting significant differences in Marxist and Christian thoughts as they relate to Jameson's hermeneutical theories. The first of these is Jameson's discussion of ethics and the social categories of good and evil. Jameson's position is that good and evil are ideological concepts that have arisen historically and have been defined in various ways in the evolving processes of social dialectic:

In its narrowest sense, ethical thought projects as permanent features of human 'experience,' and thus as a kind of 'wisdom' about personal life and interpersonal relations, what are in reality the historical and institutional specifics of a determinate type of group solidarity or class cohesion. (59)

Or again Jameson writes: "...we have forgotten the thrust of Nietzsche's thought and lost everything scandalous and virulent about it if we cannot understand how it is ethics itself which is the ideological vehicle and the legitimation of concrete structures of power and domination" (114). The theoretical need for Jameson's

thesis about ethics is clear in the light of our previous discussion of the concept of *contradictions*. If a principle of unity (such as the political unconscious) is required for a philosophy of history, then all oppositions, conflicts, or contradictions are subsequent and historical, that is to say, ideological. And the opposition of good and evil must be taken as one of these ideological "contradictions." Jameson thus moves "beyond good and evil" to the non-ethical concept of the political unconscious.

But here a problem of language use arises. Terms like *class struggle*, *oppression*, *exploitation*, and the like are employed not only as social but also as moral categories. It is hard to imagine that Jameson would say that the oppression of a working class in a capitalist society is ethically neutral and that it is neither good nor bad whether, in the class struggle, one side wins or loses. But if it is true that Marxists' judgments about the oppressed classes are moral ones and not ethically neutral, then the ethical standard of judgment cannot be taken as merely historical or ideological, unless Marxists are willing to say that all of their own judgments are ideological ones. Clearly not only do Marxists not say this, but it would be incoherent to do so. To speak of class struggle, exploitation, and the like implies in the Marxist "language game" a standard of moral judgment which is not itself historically relative or ideological.⁴ Jameson's analysis has descriptive cogency insofar as it shows how moral categories have been variously understood and used in the history of social ethics, but insofar as he claims validity for the principles of Marxist social analysis, his judgments belie his claim to move theoretically beyond the categories of good and evil. It is hard to see how the concept of the political unconscious moves "beyond good and evil" if Marxist social ideals are accepted as the proper ideals of social life. Regardless of how good and evil are defined in Marxist social theory, the concrete goals of social life seem to imply normative ideals which are not wholly "beyond good and evil."

On this point Christian theory deals with the problem by identifying the necessary unifying principle for a philosophy of history with the good. What is beyond "good-and-evil," that is, what is beyond the social dialectic of good and evil, is the good. In the Christian view evil is contingent and is capable of being defined only in relationship to the ideal or normative good which is beyond actual or social "good-and-evil." Evil appears historically and socially as one of the possibilities opened up by the condition of finitude (good, i.e., historical good, is the other possibility opened up). Evil is made possible by (though not required by) the fact of human finitude understood as the relation of the created to the Creator. Just as there is the possibility of error in judgment (which can be morally neutral), so there is the possibility of "error" in moral and social action. But the dynamics of good and evil in the social world can be interpreted only by the standard of the "fullness of meaning," that is, the goodness of the

Creator. This does not establish, of course, the truth or correctness of the Christian theory, but it does present it as having a more internally coherent philosophy of history.

Another point of difference is related to the Marxist concept of Utopia. The Utopian vision as the end-point of history is conceived by Marxists as the teleological motive for social change. Jameson observes that "...a Marxist negative hermeneutic, a Marxist practice of ideological analysis proper, must in the practical work of reading and interpretation be exercised *simultaneously* with a Marxist positive hermeneutic, or a decipherment of the Utopian impulses of these same still ideological cultural texts" (192). Every cultural object or action has, Jameson says, both a negative and a positive function; each shows both the limitations of a particular ideology and the motive or impulse for a Utopian solution to social contradictions. This dual function is evident both empirically and theoretically, empirically as the dynamics of revolution and hope, theoretically as an explanation of the future direction of history.

If we examine the concept of Utopia in the light of the principle of contradiction, however, we may raise a theoretical question. If contradiction is the necessary explanatory principle of social change and the basis for the dual function of cultural actions as revolution and hope, then how in the utopian society which Marxism envisions can there be change, since there would be no contradiction? Does not the Marxist utopia turn out to be not only a classless society but a static society? It is questionable, given our sense of social experience, let alone Marxist social theory itself, that a static society can even be imagined except as a conceptual paradigm. What would a society be like if there were no change? It is possible that the Marxist utopia could be conceived as a teleological goal without its being realizable within the actual historical process. But in that case Marxism would doom humanity to an endless process of class struggle in which there might be amelioration but never an escape from ideological oppression, and that at least seems to be a dimmer prospect than Marxists generally envision. It would seem necessary, in a Marxist view as Jameson represents it, to reconcile the apparently antagonistic concepts of utopia and contradiction.

The Christian concept of the Eschaton, too, has always been depicted as the future realization of an ideal or utopian society. This "heavenly" society is, of course, commonly described in religious terms, but nevertheless it also makes possible a theoretically more coherent philosophy of history than does the Marxist conceptions of Utopia because it is not posited on the principle of contradiction as a condition for social change. The Christian heaven is not a static society, because the concepts of finitude and discovery create the possibility of historical change even in a society freed from "contradiction," that is, from social conflict, oppression, and evil. Although the Christian heaven is often stereotyped as a place where the saints listen to the endless droning of harps, it is more honestly

conceived as a society in which the discovery and exploration of life's possibilities will be unending, a society in which the possibility of new discoveries will never cease because the finite creature will never exhaust the infinite possibilities of experience and the endless discovery of meaning. Such a concept of utopia not only provides the necessary teleological principle for a philosophy of history but also contributes to a coherent theory of social change.

Finally, we may examine Jameson's concept of the political unconscious itself. We will do so by way of some comments on the related concepts of Necessity and mode of production. Jameson speaks of history as "the experience of Necessity"; Necessity is the "logic" of history because events are governed by the dialectic of social contradiction: "Necessity is here represented in the form of the inexorable logic involved in the determinate failure of all the revolutions that have taken place in human history" (102). The principle of Necessity cannot be regarded as ideological, because it is the logic of ideology itself, the historical principle which enables us to understand the development of social ideologies. Conceived in this way, the concept of Necessity is not "a type of content" (in which case it would be ideological) but rather "the inexorable *form* of events" (102). Just as binary opposition is the form which governs the content of texts, and just as *mode of production* is the form which governs social action, so Necessity is the form which governs the content of history.

With this definition in mind we may ask how it is that we can specify *mode of production* as the decisive category for the analysis of social reality. It certainly is not a *necessary* category since at the empirical level particular modes of production are conceived as social realities, i.e., as content, and are therefore not required by the concept of Necessity as the "form of events." But Jameson also argues that *mode of production* is a conceptual category in structural or synchronic analyses and hence is a formal as well as a reified category. It is, as previously noted, the unifying structural category in terms of which all social structures and processes can be understood. Jameson's careful analysis of how the term *mode of production* is to be understood falls short, however, of demonstrating its necessity as a formal category. Whether *mode of production* is the best term for characterizing the manifestation of Necessity in the historical realities of social life is still an open question.

A sceptical argument concerning the adequacy of the term *mode of production* could go in two directions. First, one could suggest that on empirical grounds the term is too heavily freighted with economic and political overtones to account for the intricacies of social life and the exercise of freedom. Marxists, of course, would disagree, since they claim empirical support for their theories. Nevertheless, the argument at this level still turns on empirical interpretation.

A second line of argument is theoretical. If, as Jameson shows, the term *mode of production* becomes a category in the structural and synchronic analysis of

societies, it must be freed from its identification with the level of economic life which is part of social reality itself as its infrastructure. *Mode of production*, thus, is a formal category enabling the theorist to explain how the various levels of social activity are interrelated. But here a theoretical problem arises. If *mode of production* is a structural or formal category, it is neutral in its meaning until it receives semantic content from the empirical analysis of society. To illustrate by analogy, when we define the genre of epic in a certain way, our definition can function as a formal category which enables us to pick out and describe particular epics when we find them or when they are written. But the term *epic*, as a formal category or as the label of a genre is “empty” until it is defined, that is, given semantic content by means of the empirical study of certain kinds of texts. Similarly, the term *mode of production* is “empty” until it can be defined by means of empirical study. If this is the case, then we could for purposes of clarification suggest that the required unifying principle of structural analysis could be called the x-principle until we find a more appropriate term. What term we choose will depend on our empirical analysis and interpretation of social dynamics. And here one could conceivably argue that biological or ethical or linguistic or religious explanations are as cogent as economic or political ones. Hence, transporting the term *mode of production* from the empirical context of Marxist social analysis into the framework of Marxist structural analysis does not give the term additional theoretical cogency. Structural or formal categories are still subject to empirical testing and definition; they are not logically autonomous.

Now the same holds true for the concept of the political unconscious, perhaps even more so, for this concept is a *purely* formal or structural one since there is no “real” political unconscious as a part of social life. The political unconscious is in Jameson’s use of the term the necessary formal and theoretical category required to unify this theory. But the semantic force of the concept is, as for all such concepts, dependent on the definition given to it on the basis of the theory as a whole, including both the empirical evidence for it and its theoretical plausibility. In short, although Jameson asserts that Necessity is the formal logic of the events of history, there is nothing necessary about his particular selection of the political unconscious as the final explanatory principle. It is true, of course, that there is nothing necessary about any choice of a final explanatory principle, but such being the case, Jameson seems a bit hasty in declaring his belief “that only Marxism offers a philosophically coherent and ideologically compelling resolution to the dilemma of historicism...” (19).

NOTES

1. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Ithaca, N.Y. (Cornell University Press), 1981.

2. York (Columbia University Press), 1982.

3. Jameson himself does not deal at length with this topic, but he does say this much: "Even in preclass society (what is called tribal or segmentary society, or in the Marxian tradition, primitive communism), collective consciousness is...organized around the perception of what threatens the survival of the group..." (290). Thus even the "originary" society cannot be conceived without the concept of contradiction even though the contradiction is not internal but between society and nature. This view does not escape the issue we are discussing, namely, the necessary priority of unity over contradiction in a philosophy of history. The Christian view on this point is that an original unity exists also in man's relation to the natural world.

4. To argue that Marxism is an ideology, namely, the correct one, which arises at a certain stage of history, does not solve the problem because in this case we have not arrived "beyond good and evil"; rather, we have arrived at the point where Marxism is taken to be the right view and where the political unconscious becomes a code word for the good.