

## STRESSING THE WEAKNESSES OF POSTMODERNISM\*

It is hard not to read Eagleton's selection of theories as a mirror of his own development over the last two decades. Eagleton has produced a book that is symptomatic of the state of Marxist literary theory in the 1990s. He has shifted attention away from the economic materialism of Marx's original writings, and has "dematerialized" the whole study of literature. This book echoes Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) in its negative view of the present as a time beset by the inconsistencies of *fin de siècle* decadence. But Eagleton attacks po-mo with an animosity that undermines the persuasiveness of his arguments. While Jameson takes "the postmodern" very seriously, Eagleton usually identifies it with the ideological pipedream marketed most recently under the definition "the end of history". In fact, in *On Ideology* (1991), Eagleton makes "postmodernism" a prop of what Peter Sloterdijk has called "cynical reason".

Postmodernism has many sources: Modernism, postindustrialism, the emergence of new political forces, the cultural avant garde, the commodification of all cultural life, and, most important, the exhaustion of certain classical bourgeois ideologies. Eagleton warns that this last development prevents our age from being a "historical" one. Any period that refuses to accept a coherent philosophy, he argues, is an ahistorical one. He goes on to say that po-mo critics make a virtue out of necessity by singing the praises of the diffuse, decentered, mutable, open-ended, schizoid human subject: "This way of seeing, so some would claim, has real material conditions: it springs from an historic shift in the West to a new form of capitalism—to the ephemeral, decentralized world of technology, consumerism and the culture industry, in which the service, finance and information industries triumph over traditional manufacture, and classical class politics yield ground to a diffuse range of 'identity politics'." He views Postmodernism less as a reaction to the defeat of Communism (which in any case it long preceded), than as a response to the "success" of capitalism. Just as structuralism scandalized the liberal humanism whose aim was to avoid the reductions structuralism enforced, so Postmodernism turned into what Eagleton perceives as a politically ambivalent cultural force, with both radical and a conservative tendencies.

Eagleton divides his problems with Postmodernism into several areas, one for each chapter: "Beginnings", "Ambivalence", "Histories", "Subjects", "Fallacies", and "Contradictions". All of these chapters espouse Eagleton's peculiar view of history, and are perfectly geared to raise considerable controversy among both the detractors and the defenders of Postmodernism.

María Eugenia Díaz

**Nota**

- \* Eagleton, Terry. *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996. 147 pages.