

Fredric
JAMESON
The
IDEOLOGIES
of
THEORY

ESSAYS $\frac{1971}{1986}$

Volume 2
Syntax of History

The Ideologies of Theory
Essays 1971-1986

*Volume 2: The Syntax of
History*

Fredric Jameson

Theory and History of Literature, Volume 49

University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis

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Published by the University of Minnesota Press
2037 University Avenue Southeast, Minneapolis, MN 55414.
Published simultaneously in Canada
by Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, Markham.
Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jameson, Fredric.

The ideologies of theory : essays, 1971-1986 / Fredric Jameson.

p. cm. -- (Theory and history of literature ; v. 49)

Includes bibliographies and indexes.

Contents: -- v. 2. Syntax of history.

ISBN 0-8166-1575-6 (v. 2) ISBN 0-8166-1576-4 (pbk. : v. 2)

ISBN 0-8166-1577-2 (set) ISBN 0-8166-1578-0 (pbk. : set)

1. Criticism. 2. Marxist criticism. 3. Hermeneutics. I. Title.

II. Series.

PN81.J285 1988

801'.95--dc19

88-4813

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An die Nachgeborenen:
Cassie, Stacy, Cade, Charlotte

...so wird durch ebendenselben dialektischen Prozess jedes Kategorienproblem wieder in ein geschichtliches Problem verwandelt. Allerdings: in ein Problem der Universalgeschichte, die damit... gleichzeitig als methodisches Problem und als Problem der Erkenntnis der Gegenwart erscheint.

...by the same dialectical process every problem of categories becomes transformed into a historical problem. But (it should be noted): into a problem of universal history which now appears... simultaneously as a problem of method and a problem of our knowledge of the present.

Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*

Introductory Note

This second volume of my collected theoretical essays marks a general—but not strictly chronological—shift from problems of textual interpretation to the rather different issues raised by cultural and historical analysis: the question of possible new forms of *spatial* analysis, the politics of historiography (including the writing of the history of our own period), and some first approaches to “postmodernism.” The requirement for a certain kind of narrative analysis here obviously returns with a vengeance; but it is also worth suggesting the transmigration of the earlier concept of “meta-commentary,” which was a reflexive operation proposed for staging the struggle within an individual literary and cultural text of various interpretations that are themselves so many “methods” or philosophies or ideological worldviews. When the polemic leaves the ground of an individual text (as it currently seems to have a tendency to do, not always with the happiest results), it seems to me increasingly desirable to stage such conflicts in terms of a rather different framework, which I will call *transcoding*.

This is, in my opinion, the most fruitful way in which theoretical polemics can be conducted in a situation characterized by the proliferation of theoretical codes of all kinds (a situation sometimes loosely characterized as “poststructuralism”). These codes (sometimes also more loosely called “methods”) are henceforth a fact of life of our intellectual space, which determines a new kind of intellectual formation for our students that may be closer to the learning and practice of foreign languages than to any traditional philosophical formation oriented around “truth” or system. It will, in other words, today be less a question of finding a single system of truth to convert

to, than it will of speaking the various theoretical codes experimentally, with a kind of Whorf-Sapir view toward determining what can and what cannot be said in each of those theoretical "private languages." What is blurred, left out, what does not compute or is "inexpressible," in this or that theoretical language may then be a more damaging indictment of the "theory" in question than traditional ontological or metaphysical critiques. This view has the additional merit of opening the door to the languages of the other disciplines, most notably the social sciences (the absence of Max Weber from our conventional humanistic formation strikes me as particularly deplorable, as the first essay in this volume may suggest). It also implies that whatever its own (very considerable) truth claims, Marxism must also take its chances on this polemic level and—even though it is neither a contemporary *theory*, in the historically specific sense of this word, nor a traditional *philosophy* (but rather, like Freud, that particular thing sometimes called a unity-of-theory-and-practice)—measure its range, by way of the transcoding operation, against its various methodological rivals or alternatives. What has sometimes in my own work been thought to be either eclectic or, still worse, synthesizing and "Hegelian," will generally be found to involve transcoding of this type, rather than random, but all-inclusionary system building.

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The Ideologies of Theory
Volume 2

Chapter 1

The Vanishing Mediator; or, Max Weber as Storyteller

The sociological treatises of Max Weber form a corpus of narratives peculiarly suited for analytical techniques developed in the study of myths and other types of imaginative literature. Such an approach requires a distance from Weber's work and an attitude toward it quite different from that of official sociology; for the latter naturally enough wishes first to inquire into the accuracy of Weber's descriptions and the validity of the hypotheses he proposes to account for them. In the present study, however, we must from the outset suspend such judgments, which bear on the "referent" of these texts, in order the more clearly to disengage the latter's internal structure.

Surely, in the case of a theoretically sophisticated scholar who in his own writings explicitly discusses the use and functions of models or, as he calls them, "ideal types" in the practice of historiography, there can be no room for the reactions of a scandalized positivism to an approach that, like our own, seems to assimilate sociology and discursive prose to the various other forms of overt or disguised fantasy or storytelling. Still, one can admit the paradox inherent in a search for personal or unconscious, somehow "psychological," structures in the work of a man who aimed at the establishment of sociology as a "value-free" discipline and who struggled to provide a methodological foundation for a genuinely objective and scientific analysis of social institutions. But a growing literature reevaluating Weber from a radical point of view¹ has made it plain that Weber's *Wertfreiheit* was itself a passionate value judgment that has nothing in common with that positivistic and academic type of objectivity to which it has so often been assimilated by Weber's American interpreters. We must therefore initially determine the

meaning of this concept, before proceeding to an analysis of the practical work that Weber executed in its name.

I

It cannot be doubted that Weber first evolved the doctrine of *Wertfreiheit* as a weapon in his polemic struggle against politically oriented teaching not so much on the Left as on the far Right and that he had in mind the stridently nationalistic and anti-Semitic lectures of Treitschke in particular. Yet, a notion like that of value-free and objective research cannot but be influenced by the element in which it originates and by the use to which it is put. It is not a matter of indifference for us, therefore, that it is not the product of some neutral atmosphere of scientific research but amounts to the affirmation of one value over others.

It is scarcely surprising, then, that such an arm, such an ideologically strategic concept, could later be trained so effectively against the Left as well; and this is perhaps the moment at which to point out that Weber's anti-Marxism has frequently been misconceived and that much of the material generally supposed to amount to a repudiation of Marxism as a whole (for example, *The Protestant Ethic*) is in fact explicitly directed against vulgar Marxism and against that economism of the Second International to which Engels had himself objected.² I will return to Weber's view of vulgar Marxism in a later section. Here I want to point out that his work on the influence of religious factors on economic development, far from discrediting historical materialism as a theory, can just as adequately be considered a contribution to it.

In reality, Weber's most influential legacy to the anti-Marxist arsenal lay not in some idealistic reaction against a materialism he himself clearly shared with Marx but rather in the strategic substitution, in his own research and theorization, of the political for the economic realm as the principal object of study, and thus, implicitly, as the ultimately determining reality of history. Thus, Weber made of political and social history—the growth of bureaucracies, the influence of the charismatic individual and his function in political institutions—an autonomous field of study that can be examined in relative isolation from questions of economic development. Such a displacement takes the form, in our own time, of the classic strategy by which analyses of capitalism are parried by discussions of political freedom, and concepts of economic alienation and of the commodity system replaced by attacks on party bureaucracy, the “new class,” and the like.

As a statesman and a political theorist, it is certain that Weber was indeed profoundly antisocialist, and his (well-founded) doubts of the capacity of the Social Democratic leadership to govern the nation were only the external and practical reinforcements of a far more deeply held position with which I will

try to come to terms in what follows. In this sense Weber is a classic manifestation of all the ambiguity of liberalism in its traditional nineteenth-century sense: hostile to the Junkers and to Wilhelm II, to nationalistic apologetics of the Treitschke variety, yet himself affirming the ultimate value-giving category of the nation in the face of the class-oriented internationalism of Marxian socialism. Called both the "German Machiavelli" (Meinecke) and the "greatest German of our age" (Jaspers), Weber is a somber and enigmatic figure, whose death at the very outset of the Weimar Republic leaves his historical significance in the transition from the Wilhelminian era to that of Hitler forever in doubt.

Wertfreiheit as a scientific value is surely intimately related, in some way yet to be determined, to those political positions; and it is just as surely related to Weber's troubled emotional life. For psychoanalysis, Weber has, indeed, all the fascination of the *grand malade*, the illustrious bearer of a neurosis in which intellectual productivity is closely related to the intermittent crippling effects of unconscious forces. The facts of his biography—unusual parental conflict, a four-year period of virtual intellectual paralysis at the very height of an active career, other grave symptoms more recently revealed in Arthur Mitzman's book *The Iron Cage*—all testify to the presence in Weber of the most serious Oedipal disturbances, arousing, in the words of H. Stuart Hughes, "the paradoxical suspicion that the most probing social theory of our time was the indirect sequel of an *unresolved* neurosis of a classic Freudian type."³

Yet, Weber's breakdown is no mere clinical curiosity but must itself be understood in the wider context of a European (and North American) moral crisis that has not yet found its historian. Nothing is indeed quite so striking as the simultaneous appearance, within the various national situations at the end of the nineteenth century, of comparable visions of the crippling of energies, of analogous expressions of a philosophical pessimism that is itself but the intellectual exposition of some more concrete lived experience. One thinks of Flaubert or of the Tennyson of *In Memoriam*; of Hardy or Huysmans; of the "ordeal" of Mark Twain; of the self-imposed dreariness of Tolstoy's later years; of Ibsen or of Mallarmé's "sterility."

These phenomena have all been the objects of intensive study, of course, but only within the various national frameworks, each of which has seemed to dictate its own characteristic mode of interpretation. Thus, in France, the loss of energy is seen as the result of what is essentially a political dilemma: the failure of the Revolution of 1848, and the increasing disillusionment, first with the regime of the Second Empire, and finally with that of the Third Republic itself. In England, on the other hand, it has been customarily thought of in religious or philosophical terms, as a slow withdrawal of the "sea of faith," as a result of the impact of Darwin and then of triumphant positivism and of the ravages made by the development of natural science in a

social milieu organized around the established Church. In Germany and in America, finally, this generalized cultural depression has most frequently been accounted for economically, by the sudden growth of a brash and uninhibited business civilization, of a "gilded age" in which the materialism and philistinism of the new industrialist find their monuments in the sprawling and unlovely cities of Chicago or Berlin, in which the opposition thus tends to take on the coloration of the aesthete, whether in Thomas Mann's artists or in the flight of American intellectuals to the older European cities. These modes of explanation are, of course, not mutually exclusive and have moreover often been accompanied by yet a fourth diagnosis, at least for the Protestant countries, namely, that of Victorianism in sexual matters, which gives the age its name and which expresses itself in the triple guise of the authoritarian patriarchal family, the taboo on sexual expression, and the obligatory frigidity of "respectable" women.

No doubt all these factors played their part, but it would seem essential, before evaluating any of them, to look more closely at the nature of the concrete experience they are invoked to explain, which is generally known under its contemporary designation as "spleen," or "ennui." To have a complete picture of what happened to Weber, in other words, we would need a thorough phenomenological description of this psychic condition, and to put it this way is to realize that ennui is itself a historical phenomenon, one that does not necessarily have any equivalent in other cultures or indeed at other stages of our own. We must, for instance, make a structural distinction between this late nineteenth-century condition and the Romantic despair of the early years of the century. In the latter, the sufferer withdraws completely from the world, to sit apart in a post of Byronic malediction or to return in the guise of the Satanic outcast and enemy of society. To such a state, the essential gesture of which is *refusal*, either heroic or dejected, the description as well as the diagnosis made by Freud for the condition he called "melancholia" might most fittingly apply: "The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment."⁴ For Freud, such symptoms result from the loss of an object in which the libido has been invested and which has been narcissistically associated with the self: "the testing of reality, having shown that the loved object no longer exists, requires forthwith that all the libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to this object. Against this demand a struggle of course arises—it may be universally observed that man never willingly abandons a libido-position, not even when a substitute is already beckoning to him. This struggle can be so intense that a turning away from reality ensues, the object being clung to through the medium of a hallucinatory wish-

psychosis."⁵ We may perhaps overhastily suggest that the object thus mourned by the Romantics was the aristocratic world itself, which even the Restoration was unable to bring back to life.

We may thus describe Romanticism as a coming to consciousness of some fundamental loss in shock and rage, a kind of furious rattling of the bars of the prison, a helpless attempt to recuperate lost being by posing and assuming one's fatality in "interesting" ways. But by mid-century this shock is old, and the very object of the loss has been forgotten; the sufferer can no longer remember a situation qualitatively different from his own and assumes, naturally enough, that all life is thus empty. Ennui is thus not so much a form of suffering as an absence of feeling in general, one in which, in a psychic atmosphere as windless and impassive as a Victorian interior, only the passage of time itself is registered, in the absence of any real activity. The fundamental gesture of ennui is not revolt but renunciation, as in the heroes of Henry James and of Fontane: it does not withdraw from the world but remains within it, gazing at its activities with all the narcotic indifference of Alice's Caterpillar, and finds characteristic expression in those lengthy catalogs of the objects of human enterprise through which Flaubert recites the litany of earthly vanities. (In this sense, the triumphant catalogs of a Whitman would be understood as a second-degree recuperation, as the attempt, not unlike that of Nietzsche, to repossess the dead world through an effort of the will, in a kind of manic joy.)

It is equally important, however, to distinguish ennui from that affect most characteristic of our own time, namely, *anxiety*, for the latter is an active principle, and the classic descriptions of Heidegger and Sartre make it clear that anxiety is intimately related to praxis itself and results from a sudden awareness of the self as the unjustified source of all values and of all action, an awareness that can arise only in the moment of choice and not in a situation of generalized inactivity. In this sense, we might schematically understand Romantic despair, ennui, and anxiety as three moments in the same historical process: in which the soul, having first registered its shock and distress at the new and barren world in which it finds itself, begins with a kind of paralyzed detachment to take an inventory of its surroundings, before at length coming to the conclusion that it is itself the very ground of the latter's bustling agitation and the source and foundation of the values on which, as in a void, those activities depend. Such a historical pathology would therefore illustrate the psychic adaptation of man to an increasingly humanized world.

Paradoxically, however, one of the classic descriptions of ennui is not a modern one at all, and Thomas Aquinas' characterization of what he called "acedia" as a "kind of sadness, whereby a man becomes sluggish in spiritual exercises because they weary the body"⁶ may illuminate another essential component of the experience in question. For Aquinas' terms suggest that ennui, or acedia, is not a primitive but rather a very sophisticated reaction, a

disease of clerics: “Acedia, according to Damascene, is ‘an oppressive sorrow,’ which, namely, so weighs upon man’s mind that he wants to do nothing (thus acid things [acidia] are also cold). Hence acedia implies a certain weariness of work, as appears from a gloss on Psalms 106, 18, *Their soul abhorred all manner of meat*, and from the definition of some who say that acedia is a sluggishness of the mind which neglects to begin good.”⁷ Acedia is thus something that happens to intellectuals, and its relationship to the monastic environment takes on renewed significance for us if we recall that, for Weber, monasticism is one of the early forms of rationalization itself. Not the panic of peasants in the face of a new technology, therefore, but rather the weariness of the intellectual specialist, who knows the *how* so well that he comes to doubt the *why*: such is the picture of ennui that emerges from these early accounts, and it may help us make the transition from a phenomenological description of the experience itself to the ways in which traditional philosophical thought has conceptualized it.

The principal form such conceptualization has taken seems to me to be the separation of means from ends, and if such a separation is thought to be a universal characteristic of human beings as plan-making animals, it suffices to relate it to the various forms of human society to realize that they have always been aware of it as such. In a tradition-oriented society, indeed, where tasks are assigned by birth or by ritual, the internal temporal dissociation within the act itself that characterizes the lag between an aim and its execution is not yet present. The techniques for achieving a given end are themselves sacred, are therefore performed for their own sake and in their own right. Such societies, therefore, lack the abstract concept of an “act” as such, a concept that subsumes under itself the most heterogeneous forms of human exertion; and the latter are felt to be as autonomous and as intrinsically meaningful as the various totemic animals or the various castes according to which their performers are organized.

It is worth noting that even when we reach the birth of philosophical abstraction in classical Greece, the elaborate Aristotelian system of the four causes (material, effective, formal, and final)⁸ implies a somewhat different orientation toward activity than our own stark opposition between means and ends. The Aristotelian concept reflects an artisanal culture and makes a greater place for the concrete situation itself, for the act of making and of handicraft, which, with its inherited techniques, may be seen as a kind of halfway house between tradition-oriented societies and our own technological one. Thus, for Aristotle, the clay (material cause) still demands to be formed into the pot; the *métier* still has a kind of inner logic, a voice of its own; and the preexisting forms and patterns do not yet have the stark independence of the modern notion of an “end.” Obviously, the modern notion is implicit in the Aristotelian scheme, but it does not yet function with the abstract and depersonalized force it has come to have in the modern secular market culture, in the world of desacralized technique.