

# Clinging To The Wreckage

## A Conversation

The events of 1989 have shaken the marxist grand narrative of history. **Stuart Hall** and **Fredric Jameson** pick up the pieces of the post-modern epoch



**Fredric Jameson** is William A Lane Professor of Comparative Literature and director of the Graduate Program in Literature at Duke University, North Carolina. Internationally recognised as America's most notable marxist intellectual and a leading writer in the area of literary criticism, his works include *The Political Unconscious*, *The Prison House Of Language* and *Marxism And Form*. He also established a prominent position in discussions of postmodernism with his now classic essay, 'Postmodernism, Or The Cultural Logic Of Late Capitalism'. His book *Late Marxism*, in which he argues for the relevance of Adorno's work to the contemporary situation, is published in September by Verso.

**Hall** In 'The Cultural Logic Of Capital' (*New Left Review*, 146, July/Aug 1984), where you characterise what is now called post-modern culture, you assume a direct correspondence between capitalism and culture: 'Bourgeois culture corresponded to the era of organised capitalism - what Lenin called "imperialism".' You suggest that we are now moving into a new epoch, in which 'late capitalism' finds its correspondence in what people have designated as 'post-modern culture'. Is that still your position?  
**Jameson** The problem with talking about 'bourgeois culture' is that one of the things one wants to posit about this epochal change is that the culture of the bourgeoisie has itself been destroyed by it. What we have now is a relatively anonymous systemic culture, in which it becomes as problematic to talk about ruling classes in the old way as it does about some of the other questions. It might still be useful to talk about those

things, but one has to address all of the objections first.

When talking about postmodernism, it's more important to ask, what exactly were 'classical modernism' and 'high modernism'? I've found it useful to explore the idea that modernism was a response to a modernisation in the West from, say, the mid- to late-19th century until the second world war. It was a response to a modernisation which was incomplete, and in which the modernised enclaves and forces themselves were still working against a background of older class situations, older forms of agriculture and, in some parts of Europe, even older aristocratic strata, which the second world war finally disposed of.

So the real difference between postmodernism and modernism is that postmodernism is a situation of tendentially complete modernisation in which those older remnants have been



removed.

**Hall** Is one sign of what you call 'tententially complete modernisation' the penetration of many of the elements previously associated with a rather exclusive 'high modernism' into everyday life, into popular culture, into consumption?

**Jameson** Absolutely. I would call it the plebianisation of culture: the way in which much larger sections of the public now consume culture on a regular basis and live within culture in ways that they didn't have the occasion to do before. That's a crucial part of postmodernism, which underscores its ambiguity. One cannot object to the democratisation of culture, but one must object to other features of it. Those mixed feelings have to be preserved in any analysis of the postmodern.

**Hall** You have talked about post-modernism as being more systemic. Can we still speak of this as a 'class culture' in

the old sense?

**Jameson** It is really only a class culture in the older sense when one is looking at it from the outside, from the perspective of the non-West. Then I think the terms we used to use, like 'cultural imperialism', are absolutely relevant, and indeed postmodernism would be a synonym for that. It is essentially a North American culture which is exported and implanted by way of media technology and so forth. If you're looking at it from this other perspective then it's very clearly a matter of domination at least, if not an immediate matter of class.

But from the inside that domination wouldn't be so visible, partly because what's systemic about it is not due to anybody's agency. We don't have a dominant class sitting up there and conspiring and doing it to us any more. It's being done to them too. And obviously there's a certain way in which, for a lot of people, it's not unpleasant to have postmodern-

ism done to you. It's a very elegant thing. One cannot think of it in terms of ideological control in those older ways.

**Hall** You've talked about modernism as a response to a particular restructuring, a reshaping of capital in the period of imperialism up to the second world war. But it's hard to see postmodernism as a response, because that suggests critical distance, the ability to reflect back on and challenge. Modernism contested. It shocked, it scandalised, it challenged the taste of the Victorian and Edwardian bourgeoisie. Now postmodernism isn't doing that. It doesn't have that reflexive, critical distance from what is going on in the economic and political system. It seems fully integrated into the system, part and parcel of it. Is that the case?

**Jameson** That's absolutely true. Modernism with its claims for the autonomy of art and its ideology of the genius and so forth still reflected a situation in which there were certain entrepreneurial possibilities. Certain oppositional or critical cultural forms emerge only when the economy is not yet too standardised and there's still room for both individual entrepreneurs and the same kinds of agents on the level of culture.

That's much less the case now. This is a period in which there is a genuine collectivisation of people's lives at either end of the economic and social spectrum: the great multinational corporations on the one hand and the collectivisation of all the oppositional groups on the other. So, for example, you no longer have that great North American notion of the 'lonely rebel' who challenges society. There aren't any lonely rebels any more because they're all organised in some way or another. They have mailing lists, they have their societies of lonely rebels. That itself makes a difference to the way cultural production is felt and to the relative anonymity and systematic quality of this way of being secreted by the economic rather than being produced in opposition to it.

**Hall** I think there may be an American/non-American difference of emphasis here. You talk about these visible forms of collectivisation and incorporation - the corporate character of post-modern culture. Whereas in Britain, perhaps because we're on the periphery of it, the transition feels slightly different. Of course, one can't ignore the fact that the whole economic and cultural system is much more organised, much more managed, much more regulated, much more rationalised. Everybody is plugged in, at some level, to those forms which only the corporate culture of late capitalism can produce.

But, paradoxically, this seems to have produced a new form of individualism. In terms of style, for instance, it seems that for the first time the ordinary 'entrepreneurial individual' can make a difference. The corporations have to watch him/her very carefully indeed, because in a sense they are too large and cumbersome to catch the fluent rhythms of modern consumption styles. They have to respond quickly to what's

**Jameson:**  
'1989 was the result of the passage of the eastern countries into a new world system that has become visible in the last 10-15 years'



going down on the streets.

**Jameson** You're talking about music...

**Hall** Music and style and dress. Exactly where ordinary people, without necessarily knowing the name, live the postmodern. Maybe they don't have much sense of what it is in the system that is creating these openings, or how constrained they are. Undoubtedly what is experienced, and ideologically constructed, as freedom, may not necessarily be freedom at all. But it does lead to a sense of difference. It's as if the era of mass production and mass culture has now yielded, not standardisation, but a proliferation of difference, of otherness. Corporations don't advertise to a mass public any more. It's now niche advertising - addressing the subtle differentiation between one consumer public and another, exploiting cultural fragmentation.

Obviously, you need to get to a certain level of massification before this is possible. This is difference after massification, rather than the old style of 19th-century individualism. But it is as much this return of individualism and difference which strikes people here about postmodernism as its collectivisation, anonymity and systemic quality. **Jameson** This is absolutely part of the change-over. But we must remember that massification, 'Fordism' and the standardised products also went along with the individual rebel. That is what allowed revolt, as well as all of the other ideologies, such as authenticity and so forth, that we associate in a positive sense with the modern. What you describe is the way in which the economic system itself, in a post-Fordist way, has now become a machine for differentiation. In a way, North America was the place for this new moment at its purest, because there were fewer forces of tradition and resistance and less of a past to destroy. I imagine that after 1992 you'll be drawn into that.

There's a linguistic problem with this concept of difference. The conceptualisation of difference would not have been possible in situations of real difference. In an imperial system, where colonised peoples are really radically different from their metropolitan overlords, there's no great political merit in affirming those differences. The political, cultural concept of difference is paradoxically based on a conquest of a certain equality and identity among the social subgroups. It would not have been possible until the moment where there was less difference.

**Hall** Do you mean that the language of difference becomes much more common when we're all operating on the same plane, even if we only do so very unevenly and unequally? The balance of forces is not the same in the so-called Third World as it is in London or Paris or Bonn or New York. But these are no longer - if they ever were - separate worlds. They belong within the same increasingly 'global culture'.

**Jameson** Yes, although it's useful to separate the question of global difference from that of what goes on within a political entity like a nation-state, just for the purpose of keeping things clearer. I've found it very interesting that, in cultural life and in the university, postmodernism emerged virtually simultaneously with a whole new interest in what we used to call Third-World literatures, post-colonial literatures.

There really is a fit between those things, which have to do with a certain kind of global standardisation. Standardisation, again, is both a good and a bad thing. And it makes me wonder how many illusions are present in the appeal to difference when, even if the logic of the system is differentiation, by producing difference it is producing a new form of standardisation. Indeed, the whole logic of postmodernism is that: a new way of seeing identity as difference, which we wouldn't have been able to think or express very well in an older period.

**Hall** You said earlier that the cultural democratisation which we associate with postmodernism is both positive and negative. Now you say the same thing about global standardisation. But isn't this exactly the problem with 'a post-modern politics': trying to guess whether its negatives out-weigh its positives? You've got to take a wager on whether what is going on in the post-modern is simply a dominant system producing marked differentiation as part of its own logic of domination: or whether there really has been a shift, representing the power of the marginalised or subordinated cultures and people to make what you called, earlier, a real difference. If the system is producing this differentiation as part of its own logic, then the 'logic of history' in a classical marxist sense is still operating, while going through one of its many epochal changes. On the other hand, many people - as you know - read these changes as representing the suspension of the 'logic of history' - as the end of the meta-narrative of classical marxism. Are we still in the same kind of game?

**Jameson** Some of the problems that I'm having in talking about this may come from the notion of stages, which I'm anxious to keep. But I think the problems also have something to do with what we call the dialectic, and they were present in the way Marx described capital from the very beginning in *The Communist Manifesto*. It is both absolutely positive and absolutely negative and to understand it we ought to be able to think those two things together, or somehow speak them together in a single sentence. But we can't, so we keep waffling back and forth between describing the positive things and then remembering the negative ones. The politically positive aspect about what you've been describing is the fact that subgroups have been able to attain a certain collective existence that they didn't really have

**Hall:**  
**'There no  
longer seems  
to be any  
one enemy,  
any one  
source of  
power'**



before. That clearly fits into a kind of cultural commodification on the part of the industries that now have a new sub-market and produce new things for it. But the crucial thing would not be those badges of cultural difference, it would be the fact of collectivity.

**Hall** But don't those two things - cultural difference and social solidarity - play against one another? Look at feminism, which came forward in the name of some collective category - women - and of their collective experience of marginality and secondariness. But the women's movement has very rapidly been cross-cut by differences between one feminine experience and another, one category of women and another.

Exactly the same thing has happened in relation to the diasporas. At one period in Britain, the term 'black' unified them across their cultural differences. But now the cultural differences begin to re-emerge and that makes black politics very complex. Our sense of agency on the left has always depended on a sense of coming together: solidarity - not just the lonely rebel individual. But it's exactly that sense of totality, of collective action and solidarity, which has been undermined by the new logic of 'difference' which dominates the era of the postmodern.

**Jameson** My feeling about politics, which may be an old-fashioned one, is that nothing finally happens without the reconstruction of a certain basic unity among groups. My own sense of this may be too pessimistic, but from the perspective of a politics of solidarity, culture would not be a substitute for politics. It would rather interfere with it. If the various sub-groups invent powerful cultural symbols of their separateness, then it's much harder for them to get back together. I am more pessimistic about a purely cultural politics than I would obviously like to be.

**Hall** But isn't there a problem nowadays about identifying the common programme around which those solidarities could be organised? What we've been describing is a space where a lot of active politics in society is going on; but there's a discrepancy or gap between the old political parties and their programmes, which are lodged in an earlier political and cultural space. Those programmes don't reflect the life-experience, the cultures and the points of antagonism of the emerging social forces. And the social forces themselves are so divided and subdivided around different projects that it's not possible to see any single overarching programme that could unite them. This is the problem of hegemony in the age of the postmodern. There's also a real suspicion, among these new social subjects, of submerging the things that mobilise and activate them by lodging them inside some grander programme, that will probably eventually submerge and forget all about them.

**Jameson** Nobody could begin by inventing a whole programme, but the

first step in any solidarity between groups is the sense that, however different they are and however differently they are victimised, they all face a common situation dictated by what used to be called the ruling class. It's better not to call it the state any more, I would say 'the corporate' would be a good word for it, in the multinational and business sense, for one way or another the corporate is not a ruling class of the older type because of what's happened to individual agency. That's how one begins to create an alliance of groups.

**Hall** The disappearance of a unified agency, like 'the ruling class' or 'the state', as the instrumentality of oppression presents its own difficulties. It requires us to produce a much richer picture of how that 'corporate' force operates. There seems to have been a randomisation of what it is that makes people victims, a collapse of any one enemy or any one source of power, a multiplication of the centres of power. The dispersal of what used to be called 'the enemy' into a whole system leads to the difficulty of putting together any kind of common oppositional politics.

**Jameson** The other great stumbling block is the fact that the corporate is now at one with culture, so that to identify this agent that doesn't seem to be there would really require passing through the mediation of culture itself. That for me really dramatises what's at stake in this whole question of postmodernism and its critical analysis. Identifying the postmodern as a unitary logic is part of the process of trying to locate this agency, which seems invisible and fragmented somewhere within 'the corporate'. A politics that wanted to take on the corporate would, therefore, have to take on postmodernism itself and its corporate culture. That's a very complicated thing to do and it's something which often strikes people as being puritanical or oversimplified because you then seem to be repudiating all of the postmodern as a form of decadence and ruling-class culture, when it's a much more ambivalent thing, with a whole lot of new things being created within it.

**Hall** I want to put all this in the context of what's happening in eastern Europe. You may say that 1992 is a fulfilment of the system you're trying to describe. And presumably 1989 opens the way for everybody to be netted in that system. The Second World will be netted, the Third World is already netted; post-modern culture will be everywhere. There will be a new phase of the cultural globalisation of capital.

That may be to come in eastern Europe. But what is the explosion in eastern Europe itself about? It has its own local, historical specificity and, within that history, there's something paradoxical about the fact that it is 'democratisation' which seems to have given it its most powerful impetus to change: an idea of democracy almost lost in the West. Democracy has been so assimilated to liberal democracy and liberal

capitalism in the West that we find it hard to get very excited about it. It seems to keep things in place rather than change them very much. But in the East, they really got excited about democracy.

For the moment, the only way to describe the revolutions of 1989 is in terms of the democratisation of civil society or some such terminology. So, both in postmodernism and in the explosions in eastern Europe, some underlying tendency towards the 'democratisation of society' seems to be emerging. Have you had any thoughts about that in relation to the explosions of 1989?

**Jameson** I hesitate to use the word 'democratisation' because it implies a conquest that has not yet happened. It hasn't happened in the West either. Democracy must involve more than political consultation. There must be forms of economic democracy and popular control in other ways, some of them are very problematic, like workers' management. That has not been achieved, so it's important to separate the democratisation of culture from the achievement of real popular control. There are some permanent political dilemmas that don't vanish with the surface changes. Now in the East, I think it's very plausible to compare this to the revolution of 1848 in that it was not so much the economic that was at stake, but the national.

My other sense is that 1989 was really the result of the passage of the eastern countries into a whole new world system that has been becoming visible and organised in the last 10 to 15 years. It is wrong to say that socialism was a failure. It was a success in those countries. They wouldn't have this situation without near completion of the modernisation process that was always the final motive of leninism. One can have very different views as to whether that leninist moment of modernisation is the same as marxism in general. But a new stage wouldn't be taking place unless socialism had been successful.

In those circumstances, where a group of countries is essentially cushioned against the world financial market against trade and so forth, questions about efficiency are most often political questions. But the minute that global capitalism sheds the older skin and organises itself in a far more powerful and systemic global way, suddenly, these countries and their national plan and their modes of life, which function fairly well in the old system, are radically modified. If they want to be part of the world market suddenly their factories and their currency are worthless. The dialectic of this is that suddenly they were swept away partly because of their own success and partly because they're now a component in a much vaster system with which those relatively old-fashioned forms of socialism or communism are just no match.

**Hall** The analysis that you offer, both of what's happening in the West, in late-capitalism as you define it, and of the contradictory developments in ea-

stern Europe, is very challenging, putting together many puzzling elements in a new way. You respond to the post-modern in a very flexible, complex way. Yet underneath that is an absolutely unquestioned faith in the logic of classical marxism. How do you keep these two things going simultaneously? Confidence in that particular grand narrative of history has undoubtedly been weakened, by everything that we have been describing. The fact that so many things have turned out differently from how that logic was projected at some time in the past has led many people to say, we just can't hold on to it any longer.

How do you manage to go on thinking new situations in a fruitful and novel way, while the underlying logic of your argument remains grounded in exactly the texts that were used to tell such a different story - the revolutionary nature of capitalism, its dialectical quality in producing its own negation, the proletariat, in *The Communist Manifesto* and the *Grundrisse*?

**Jameson** That's a question that's obviously hard to answer on the basis of individual belief or conviction because it could just be an aberrant personal religion of some sort. But the components of it have to do with the absolute conviction that this is still capitalism in the classic sense. Postmodernism has this odd double standard where you're convinced that capitalism has triumphed: there's the market on the one hand and everybody's better off and everybody plays their different music, but on the other hand we're also equally convinced that there's incredible misery in these societies, they're getting worse rather than better, people are not getting more prosperous. And we know both things are true and also that they are incompatible.

**Hall** The social fabric has disintegrated.

**Jameson** Exactly, and the new global wealth and the new global immiseration are true simultaneously, but somehow we can't put them together. As a grand narrative, marxism compensates for the fact that, as biological individuals, our own lifespans don't correspond to historical rhythms. Vaster historical movements are always astounding and unexpected, and yet from some larger systemic perspective after the fact, seem plausible again from what we know about the way the history of capitalism works.

I'm convinced that this new post-modern global form of capitalism will now have a new class logic about it, but it has not yet completely emerged because labour has not yet reconstituted itself on a global scale, and so there is a crisis in what classes and class consciousness are. It's very clear that agency on the Left is not there in those older forms but the marxist narrative assures us that some form of agency will reconstitute itself and that is the sense in which I still find myself committed to the marxist logic.O

**Jameson:**  
**'It is wrong to say that socialism was a failure. A new stage wouldn't be taking place if it hadn't been successful'**

