

## **Frederic Jameson's Ideology of New Left: An Analysis of Marxism And Form**

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### **Abstract**

Frederic Jameson is a prominent American leftist critic who made a valuable contribution in the domain of Marxist thought. He rejected the traditional ideas of Marxism and gave a new impetus to the Marxian ideology seeking inspiration from many radical intellectuals of Europe who fled to America after World War II. Jameson is a prolific writer as he wrote wide range of works analyzing and investigating the contemporary Marxian thoughts and developing his own New Left Marxism. Jameson developed his own unique position by reviewing the major concepts of Marxism applying the idealistic theories of Hegel and Feuerbach. He took the historical and cultural view and explored the contemporary relevance of Marxian philosophy in the context of changes sociological and political environment of America. When the ideas of Marxism are investigated through the lens of Frederic Jameson the period of 1930s comes in the mind. It was a period the main burning issues were; anti-Nazism; the relationship between literature and the labor movement; the conflict between Stalin and Trotsky; Marxism and Anarchism. He was greatly impacted by Feuerbach when he wrote *Sartre: The Origins of a style* (1961). Jean Paul Sartre visited America in 1950s and he was given a warm welcome. Sartre argued that Marxism is an authentic ideology and can be followed for the welfare of the people. Jameson was inspired by Sartre and led him to intensive exploration of Marxist Literary Theory. No wonder, Jameson himself acknowledged the contribution of Sartre and his deep interest in the philosophy of Karl Marx. Jameson gives an analysis of the dialectical theory of Sartre who got enlightenment about Marxism through Sartre.

**Key Words:** Marxism, Prolific, Idealistic, Sociological, Dialectical, Enlightenment, Authentic, Ideology, Contemporary.

### **Paper**

This research paper explores the impact of Jean Paul Sartre on Frederic Jameson and his formulation of New Left Marxism keeping in view the capitalistic system of America. Many intellectuals sought refuge in America after the Second World War and they got fascinated by the theories of Karl Marx. Theodor Adorno was a prominent Marxist thinker in the late 1950s and 1960s. Jameson came under the influence of the Marxist scholars of the Frankfurt School. The writings of Kenneth Burke, Gyorgy Lukacs, Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Louis Althusser and Sartre brought new changes in the Marxian thoughts of Jameson. Materialism was considered as an integral part of Marxian ideology. Jameson wrote more than twenty books; and many research articles and delivered scores of lectures on

Marxian Theory. He rejected the orthodox and narrow views of historical materialism. Jameson founded the Marxist Literary Group with as many young graduates of the University of California joined this group. The traditional Marxist thinkers believed that the cultural superstructure is determined by the economic base but the Western Marxists investigated culture as a historical and social force along with the economic production and distribution. Jameson and his followers firmly held that the right approach to study culture would be to follow the Hegelian concept of immanent critique.

## Methodology

In this research paper the main theories of Frederic Jameson are explored in the context of American capitalism. The research paper is based on the reinterpretation of Marxism and Form of Frederic Jameson from new perspective. Jameson himself confesses that he got enlightenment about Marxism through Sartre: "I came to Marxism through Sartre and not against him" (Jameson 122). Jameson restructured Marxism and considered seriously the role of human freedom, agency and subjectivity shifting from the modes of production ideology of Marx. In this paper it is highlighted how Jameson scrapped the old and orthodox ideas of Karl Marx and attempted to combine a Marxist critique of capitalism with a theory of freedom, agency, creativity, choice and responsibility.

## The Textual Analysis of Marxism and Form: Frederic Jameson and New Marxism

In 1950s and in early 1960s, the formative political experiences of Jameson started as the era led to the evolution of New Left in America. Paul Buhle (1991) published his book *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Lefts* in which he traced the evolution of the New Left. This new movement was born at a time when The Third Wave of Feminism, Black consciousness and Civil Rights Movement were bringing cultural transformation in America. Buhle argues that the New Left broke from the orthodox tradition of economic Marxism. Jameson was a voracious reader and he read all the major works of Balzac, Flaubert, Conrad, and Joyce to formulate his New Marxism. Buhle further states thus:

In the year 1965, the wave of feminism and American radicalism was very powerful that shook America. However, what was very obviously lacking were the two historical conditions ascribed as central to mass radicalism by orthodox Marxism that is to say an economic crisis and working class-militancy.(Buhle 222).

Buhle noted that the ideas of the traditional Marxism were unfit to solve the problems of the new middle class of America exploited and oppressed by the capitalists. It was a time to reconsider and re-interpret the theories of Marxism appropriate to handle the new challenges faced in industry, coal fields and mines. The new generation of radicals was ignorant of the struggles of the past and the need to evolve new Marxian philosophy was widely felt. American intellectuals turned to European for new ideas and inspiration and Frederic Jameson turned to Sartre for inspiration and later The Frankfurt School. Jameson expresses his indebtedness to Sartre thus:

For a whole generation of French intellectuals, but also for other Europeans, most notably by the younger British left, as well as for Americans like myself. Sartre represented the model of the political intellectual, one of the few role models we had, but a sufficient one. (Jameson 122)

The critics observe that it was not an easy task for Jameson to give a fresh interpretation to the ideology of Max. The texts of Sartre paved the way for his interest in Marxism since he got the problem to be solved. However in his "choice contained certain dilemmas that remained unresolved"(Bulhe 127). Jameson himself discussed this dilemma using the phrase "the crisis in Marxist theory" in his book *The Ideology of Theory, Volume II: The Syntax of History* (1988). The history of evolution of New Left of Jameson is very interesting and illuminating. France saw a war of positions take place within the Marxian the Marxist theory.

A battle started between Marxist and poststructuralists; the major writers such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Kristeva and Baudrillard had been Marxists. Kellner observes thus: "The early Sartre was received in the 1950s in the U.S. and elsewhere as a figure of the individualist radical intellectual as the rebel against all sorts" (Kellner 8). When Jameson adopted Sartre as his role model he presented himself as radical non-conformist. Sartre became his model of "intellectual engage" and in the course of time Jameson became a radical individualistic. Perry Anderson remarks that when he made Sartre as his role model Jameson like Sartre became pessimist and nihilist. The textual analysis of his second famous book *Marxism and Form* depicts Jameson's pessimism and nihilism which he borrowed from Sartre. He admitted the challenges thus: "It would be idealistic to suppose the deficiencies in the abstract idea social class, and in particular in the Marxian conception of class struggle, can have been responsible for the emergence of what seem to be new-non class force" (Jameson 121). Frederic Jameson took the challenge to study the nature of the class struggle in society; investigated the forces of history that change life, thoughts and culture of human beings; examined the operation of means of production and their role in determining the class consciousness in his *Marxism and Form*. Jameson developed his own Left Marxism by bringing his Marxist critique taking into considerations the time and culture of postmodernism in his works. He emerged as the second Karl Marx of America whose early works are critical engagements with Hegel, Feuerbach who wrote *Capital* to launch crusade against Adam Smith and Ricardo. The reactive quality of Jameson brought about the technique of inter-textuality in modern thought. Jameson says: "Marxism is a critical rather than a systematic philosophy." Jameson argued that Marxism presents a "correction of other positions rather than a doctrine of a positivistic variety existing in its own right" (121). Jameson's *Marxism and Form* is quite energetic and valuable critical treatise on Marxism criticism written to understand the veracity and fundamental truth hidden in *Das Capital*. Terry Eagleton eulogized him as "America's leading Marxist critic," and Adam Robert echoes this sentiment in writing that "Jameson remains the world's most famous American Marxist thinker."

## **Left Marxism and Soviet Marxism: Historical Perspective**

Western leftist and social and political thinkers exposed the contradictions in socialism and Marxism. There were many debates on the issue of relevance of Marxism and many radicals wanted to overthrow Marxian ideology found unsuitable to solve the problems of society, Frederic Jameson found Althusser attacking Marxian historicism in his *Reading Capital* (1968). Michel Foucault wrote *The Order of Things* (1966) and *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969) and in both the books he virulently attacked Marx's philosophy of history in a systematic way. Derrida, Barthes and Baudrillard were other intellectuals who expressed their dissatisfaction with the theories of Karl Marx. They wanted to overhaul the Marxian analytical framework completely. The new Marxists took up the project to purge out Marxism from contradictions as they rejected Marxian concept of totality. The Western radicals rejected historicism and universality of Marx. They argued that Marxism is no longer a transcendental theory. The revision of Marxism is required with the growth of new culture after the World War II. The collapse of the Marxian ideology in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union further led to the Marxian crisis. There were trends of the rise of Western globalization and American society was also growing global and capitalistic. Laclau give his theory of hegemony and Jameson propounded his dialectical criticism. A confrontation between Marxism and post-structuralism started. Frederic Jameson published *The Seed of Time* (1994) and argued that the time has come to review the idea and the philosophy of Karl Marx. The "crisis of Marxism" was a serious concern for the Marxian thinkers and many books were published during these years. Perry Anderson wrote *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (1983), Gregory Elliot wrote *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (1987) in which he discussed the pessimism of Althusser who had expressed his discontentment about the relevance of

Marxism. In France, The Communist Party of France became very active as it recruited half a million members and supporters of Marxian ideology. The PCF supported the Rulers of the Soviet Union with a view to fight with the forces of Fascism. Mark Poster in his book *Existential Marxism in Post-war France* (1975) discusses in detail the role the PCF and how the people of Europe invested the Soviet Union with “dreams of emancipated humanity” (Poster 38). Poster observes that during these years Marxism became very popular among the intellectuals as they found a lot of scope in Marxism. Stalin and his thoughts also greatly influenced the western intellectuals. The officials of PCF took inspiration from Stalin and used the Marxian strategies to fight the nightmarish experiences of fascism. Poster argues that during the regime of Stalin, the character of Marxist philosophy “became closed, orthodox, rigid dogmatic and reductionist” (Poster 39). The officials of Marxism in France assumed the role of orthodox philosophers and became rigid in their approach. But in 1945, the situation turned explosive as many radicals started reacting against the rigid and dogmatic policies of French Marxism. Poster further observes that “the intellectuals, humanists, moralists, Calvinists and the existentialists deviated from the main stream of Marxism and made innovations challenging the conventions of Marxism. A kind of “mass enthusiasm over Marxism” (Poster 50) was underway in France. The French intellectuals realized that Marxism was a spent and outdated philosophy and couldn’t help to solve the contemporary problems because of its dogmatic approach. Europe was growing capitalistic but the intellectuals and the radicals were helpless in containing the forces of capitalism. It was found that the “Soviet Marxism was guilty of economic reductionism” (Poster 52). The error of economic reductionism was considered as a major flaw in the Marxian system. Marx himself had “reduced human value and human experience to economic value and work experience” (Poster 64). They restructured Marxism and considered seriously the role of human freedom, agency and subjectivity shifting from the modes of production ideology of Marx. The humanist philosophers scrapped the old and orthodox ideas of Karl Marx and attempted to combine a Marxist critique of capitalism with a theory of freedom, agency, creativity, choice and responsibility. In the words of Mark Poster, the somewhat “on again off again project of existential Marxism, as an example of such humanist Marxism, was nonetheless, persistent in its substantial intellectual and, to a degree, popular purchase up to the end of the 1960s” (Poster vii). Jean Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau Ponty made serious efforts to combine existentialism and Marxism. Poster remarks that this was a new trend in France revolting against the dogmatic tenets of Marxism of Stalin.

The Western Marxists greatly influenced the existentialist Marxist and prominent among them was Georg Lukacs who was introduced to the French philosophers. He took up the concept of alienation which is central to Marxian ideology. The Soviet Marxists held the dogmatic view of the concept of alienation; it was considered anti-scientific residual of Marx’s early ideas. But the French Marxist took the existential and humanistic view of alienation. They discussed the concept of alienation from the perspective of history, culture and freedom of the individuals and took up the existential approach. Poster observes that during these years “two Marxists” (Poster 58) appeared; one the traditional and the dogmatic following the dictates of Stalin and the other humanist and the existential following new ideas and philosophy based on humanism and existentialism. The Party workers of PCF resisted all these changes. Sartre who attempted to “synthesize philosophy” blending existential freedom with Marxist politics was condemned as “nihilist and individualistic” (Poster 78). He was distorting the original tenets of Marxism and was thus a rebel. But Sartre argued that Marxism and existentialism converge in a significant way. Sartre argued that “Marxism lacked a theory of revolutionary subjectivity and existentialism could supplement it in this regard” (Poster 126). Laclau laid emphasis on the social change and took consideration of history, facticity and freedom of the individuals.

## **De-Stalinization and Frederic Jameson**

It is important to understand the social and political events of Europe that dismantled the Marxism. In 1960, in his historical speech in The Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Union, Khrushchev, Stalin's successor surprised the world giving references to the atrocities committed by the supporters of Stalin. He announced De-Stalinization of the Soviet Union and thus "the crisis of Marxism deepened" (Poster 67). In 1956, The Soviet Union invaded Hungary and this event gave a setback to the Marxist thinkers of France who had pinned high hopes on Marxism to fight against Fascism. Sartre rejected the PCF completely but he continued his belief in Marxism. Merleau-Ponty also "abandoned the Party and Marxism both" (Poster 145). The popularity of the PCF declined significantly as many intellectuals expressed their resentment in leaving the party and breaking from Marxism. Roland Barthes and Edgar Morin published new journal *Argument* in 1956 and recruited many radicals who had left the party but were "unwilling to retreat from radicalism" (Poster 212). Mao Tse Tung condemned de-Stalinization of the Soviet Union as a betrayal of a scientific revolutionary political will and his ideas led to the split of Communism into The Chinese Communism and Russian Communism in 1960.

Frederic Jameson emerged as a Leftist Marxist of America in the time of "crisis of Marxism." He investigated all ideas and the thoughts of Karl Marx in detail; he explored the relevance of existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre and the possibility of juxtaposition of Marxism and existentialism. He studied many of the reformulations of Marxist thought of the West "who focused on the subjects of history of non class type" (Jameson 181). He found that the traditional theory of Marxism based on social class and class struggle had exhausted and the time had come to explore new radical social theory. Jameson argues that that there are several political and economic circumstances which over determine this perception. In America "de-Stalinization and McCarthyism were responsible in bringing the death of the American Communist Party" (Jameson 182). The disappearance of the American Communist Party in America brought about disintegration of the feminist movement and of the labor classes who were fighting against the oppression of the capitalists. Jameson argues thus: "The absence of the Communist Party of America "consolidated the new anti-political social contract between American business and the American labor unions" (Jameson 182).

Frederic Jameson *Marxism and Form* (1971) depicted the contemporary social and political situation of America breaking from the dogmatic theories of Marxism. He observed that the blacks; women and other minorities were helpless as they were not represented and hence they were forced to "find new modes of social and political expression" (Jameson 182). Jameson followed the new philosophy of Georg Lukacs who wrote *History of Class Consciousness*. Jameson like Lukacs believed in the theory of that commodification. Workers sell their labor to the capitalists and generate wealth for him. Jameson explores the main cause of discontentment and an expression of domination of the capitalists. Jameson explored the historical fact that the relation between things and prices is the major historical process governing norms, values and movements. Jameson confronted the problems of history, class struggle and dehumanization of capitalism in his book *Marxism and Form*. He wanted to evolve a philosophical idealism which can ignore difference, flux and dissemination. His *Marxism and Form* is a brilliant attempt of Jameson to restructure Marxism for the benefit of humanity, freedom and democracy. Frederic Jameson begins his quest by examining the major European Marxist thinkers. The first chapter of the book *Marxism and Form* is devoted to the study of the works of Adorno. His dialectical perspective exposed the bankruptcy of modern Anglo-American thought. In his Preface to *Marxism and Form* Jameson observes thus:

Less obvious, perhaps, is the degree to which anyone presenting German and French dialectical literature is forced; either implicitly or explicitly to take yet a third national tradition into account, I mean our own that mixture of political liberalism, empiricism, and

logical positivism which we know as Anglo-American philosophy and which is hostile at all points to the types of thinking outlined here. (Frederic, Jameson *Marxism and Form* x)

Jameson made intensive study of Marxian theory in the 1960s. His *Marxism and Form* introduced a tradition of dialectical neo-Marxist literary theory in America. Jameson published *The Ideologies of Theory* (1988), a collection of essays. In his "Introduction" to the essays, Jameson discussed his project of the critiques of Marxian theory. In his *Marxism and Form*, Frederic Jameson introduced the dialectical tradition concentrating on the logic of form. The logic of form is an expression of dialectical law of form determining the main content of his work. Marx has given the key concepts such as allegory, utopia, reification and history. Jameson commented thus in connection with his logic of content:

The content of a work of art stands judged by its form and...It is the realized form of the work which offers the surest key to the vital possibilities of that determinate social moment from which it springs. (55)

Jameson's *Marxism and Form* contains the themes of political liberalism and logical positivism. These issues are the foundation of American culture and society. Jameson calls it the critique of this tradition "which makes up the tendentious part of my book, which is its political and philosophical cutting edge" (x). In *Marxism and Form*, Jameson discusses the currents and tendencies of Anglo-American philosophy. He expresses his deep concern for the ideological function of such discourses:

The method of such thinking, in its various forms and guises, consists in separating reality into airtight compartments, carefully distinguishing the political from the economic, the legal from the political, the sociological from the historical, so that the full implications of any given problem can never come into view, and in limiting all statements to the discrete and the immediately verifiable, in order to rule out any speculative and totalizing thought which might lead to a vision of social life as a whole. (368)

Jameson explored the idealistic and visionary ideas of Hegel who had faith on the "dialectical thought." Jameson explored the concept of totality through the dialectical method. No wonder, all his works is based on the root of totality. The conspicuous feature of *Marxism and Form* is dialectical thinking. Jameson argues that the dialectical method is "nothing more or less than the elaboration of dialectical sentences" (xii). He argued that his text is not the critique of the content but it is its form that is unique. The dialectical method has the unique power to comprehend the empirical and positivistic thought; it draws "unavoidable conclusions on the political level (xi). Jameson believes that a Marxian has to "come to terms with the shape of the individual sentences themselves, to give an account of the origin and formation" (xii). Terry Eagleton in his *Against the Grain: Essays 1975-1985* observed that Jameson has used "magisterial, busily metaphorical sentences in his *Marxism and Form* (66). The conspicuous feature of Jameson's style according to Eagleton is "polite silence or with a shyly admiring phrase" (66). Jameson employs the Hegelian technique of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis in *Marxism and Form*; the dialectical method is employed to resolve contradictions. Dialectical method has the inner logic to resolve contradictions through "a systematic internal experience of the gradual construction of a system according to its inner necessity" (xi). Precisely stated, dialectical thinking leads to a scientific thought and in this respect Hegel's book on *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a standard model.

Frederic Jameson's *Marxism and Form* begins with his investigation of the Marxian ideas of Theodor Adorno who presents a challenge for Jameson through his dialectical acrobatics embarking for the totality of thought. Adorno emerges as a negative hermeneutical thinker and a dialectical deconstructionist. Jameson's analysis of Adorno the dialectical system is very effective; it is a poetic object in its own right" (7). Jameson is much charmed by the style of Adorno:

What happens is...that for a fleeting instant we catch a glimpse of a unified world, of a universe in which discontinuous realities are nonetheless somehow implicated with each other and intertwined, no matter how remote they may at first have seemed. (8)

In the text of *Marxism and Form* Jameson holds the concept of “fleeting instant” and “unified world” presenting “fragmented reality.” In each sentence of “*Marxism and Form*, Jameson depicts the dialectical method of Hegel; he moves from disparate to the unified, from part to the whole. Jameson says: “convert the problem itself into the solution” (34). Jameson believes that Adorno’s text has the power to transmute contingency into necessity. His style has been described as a style “of enactment.” The basic story of the dialectic is its systematic and rational thought. The dialectical reversal is “that paradoxical turning around of a phenomenon into its opposite of which the transformation of quantity into quality is only one of the better known manifestations” (309). Jameson observes talks of limits: “of the reversal of limits, of the transformation from negative to positive, and is basically a diachronic process” (309). In order to explain the process in simple language he gives the example of French Revolution. The society was torn between two phases; terror and counterrevolution. Jameson praises the original approach of Herbert Marcuse who reinterpreted the philosophical ideas of Hegel, Marx, Freud and Schiller: in “the light of the utterly new socio-economic environment of postindustrial capitalism which began to emerge at the end of World War II” (107).

## Conclusion

To conclude, Jameson observes that life of Adorno was devoted to solve the economic problems and to resolve the contradictions of Marxism. Adorno was concerned about “the division of labor, the fragmentation of intellectual energies” (Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* 14). Jameson at the very out of his essay on Adorno talks about his life and achievements and his pessimism about the “crisis of Marxism” Jameson praised Adorno for his dialectical method borrowed from Hegel and Kant. He finds that there is a tension between form and content. Jameson continued his search for Marxism suitable for the modern American society by way of rereading Adorno. He attacked on the concept of “totality” In the last section of his *Marxism and Form*, Frederic Jameson investigates the theory of “reification of Lukacs and “class consciousness” the foundation of Marxian ideology. His book *Marxism and Form* is not much concerned about Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* but gives an insight into the ideas contained in *History and Class Consciousness*. Jameson believes that “Lukacs is not merely a theoretician of “Realism, but rather of totality and mediation (184). Marxism is often read as an ideology dealing with class struggle and means of production. But Jameson contends that “Marxism is a theory of collective class self interests” (184). He defines class consciousness as “a priori limits or advantages conferred by affiliation with the bourgeoisie or the proletariat upon the mind’s capacity to apprehend external reality” (182).

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