GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Fredric Jameson and the Controversy over "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism"

By Robert T. Tally, Jr. | November 9, 2017

In 1986, the American literary critic and theorist Fredric Jameson published an essay in the journal *Social Text* titled "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," and the controversy it sparked became one the major intellectual events of the 1980s. Although Jameson does not speak of the "Global South" *per se*, his use of the conventional figure of the "third" world, which imagines the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc in Europe as the "second" and the United States, Canada, and Western Europe as the "first" worlds, Jameson's argument appeared to encompass the literatures and nations often associated with the Global South. The idea that the diverse cultures of Africa, South America, and Southern Asia could be represented as having a single "Third-World" cultural logic was a major point of contention in the controversy over Jameson's essay that ensued.

As the author of such books as *Marxism and Form* (1974), *The Prison-House of Language* (1972), and *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Jameson had distinguished himself as the leading Marxist critic of the time, and his recent *tour-de-force* article on postmodernism, "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1984), had established Jameson as the central authority on that famously decentered phenomenon. The "Third-World" essay was in some respects a follow-up to the "Postmodernism" piece, as it dealt with the situation of the writer and the text in the contemporary world system, but it was conspicuously absent from the book *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), which had included a number of his most influential articles from the 1980s. The widespread controversy over "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" might explain the omission, and Neil Lazarus has even suggested that Jameson "probably wished he hadn't" published the essay in the first place, for it "has brought him nothing but brickbats" (2011, 89).

In "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," Jameson revives the conception of national allegory, which he had discussed at some length in his *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, or, the Modernist as Fascist* (1979), in order to argue that "Third-World texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic — necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" (1986, 69; italics in original). This bold thesis understandably elicited criticism, particularly from representatives of so-called "Third World" countries, and many scholars working in postcolonial studies dismissed Jameson's argument out of hand. The idea that a white, male, privileged (e.g., Ivy League-educated), American critic would be making such categorical statements about the "Third World" was itself considered odious by some, and the details of Jameson's argument sometimes became lost in

the uproar.[1]

The most effective and influential response to Jameson's essay came from Aijaz Ahmad, who in "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'" objected to Jameson's argument on two principal grounds (Ahmad 1987). First, Ahmad disputed the universalism of Jameson's assertion, noting that any hypothesis which claims to encompass *all* "Third-World texts" necessarily overlooks the specificity of, for instance, an Indian-born poet writing in Urdu, whose work must be quite different from other writers in other languages and cultures. Second, Ahmad criticized the essentialism of Jameson's understanding of the "Third World," and, by extension, the essentialism of a cognizable "First World" as well. Since the idea of the "third" world is "a polemical one, with no theoretical status whatsoever," Ahmad asserts, "there is no such thing as a 'Third World Literature' which can be constructed as an internally coherent object of theoretical knowledge" (1992, 96–97). Such universalism and essentialism become a sort of renewed or revivified Orientalism, notwithstanding the otherwise good intentions of the critic. For Ahmad, as for others who took up his critique, Jameson's analysis is thus fundamentally flawed from the start.

Many postcolonial or other critics were outraged at the mere presumptuousness of a "first-world" Marxist intellectual pronouncing such a "sweeping hypothesis" (in Jameson's words) about literary or cultural texts from elsewhere. However, Ahmad did not necessarily agree with those who used his arguments against Jameson. Noting his own admiration for Jameson's work, Ahmad has expressed "irritation" that his critique has been used to attack Jameson's Marxism (1992, 10). Indeed, whatever its flaws, "Third-World Literature in an Era of Multinational Capitalism" demonstrated Jameson's continuing concern with the schism between subject and object, individual and social, private and public, lived experience and an inaccessible structural totality, ideas that permeate his entire body of work over six decades. As he pointed out in his response to Ahmad, the essay was primarily concerned with a peculiarly postmodern and "first-world" cultural phenomenon, which helps to situate its argument within the framework of Jameson's overall concerns with representation and class consciousness in postmodernity (Jameson 1987, 26–28). In his discussion of national allegory in Third-World literature, Jameson invokes also an aesthetic practice that, by 1986, had been given another label.

The conception of national allegory — along with Jameson's earlier consideration of narrative as a means by which individual experience and a broader social totality may be somehow represented and reconciled, if only through a kind of figuration — prefigures Jameson's well-known conception of *cognitive mapping*, which I take to represent the core of the entire Jamesonian project (see Tally 2014). Cognitive mapping accrues its notorious reputation only after being named as the political vocation of postmodern art in the essay "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," but the phrase also appears, after a fashion, in *The Political Unconscious*, where it is directly associated with realism, albeit only parenthetically. Jameson writes that realism has been "traditionally in one form or another the central model of Marxist aesthetics as a narrative discourse which unites the experience of daily life with a properly cognitive, mapping, or well-nigh 'scientific' perspective" (Jameson 1981, 104). Jameson's consideration of narrative realism and the crisis of representation anticipates his analysis in his writings on postmodernism of that spatial anxiety endemic to the postmodern condition. Here, in fact, the "cognitive, mapping, or well-nigh 'scientific'" aspects of realism

are productively contrasted with the more mythic or metaphysical cartographies associated with the genre, or generic mode, of romance.

If Marxism itself unfolds as a sort of romantic philosophical discourse, that does not mean that it sheds its more properly realistic mapping project. Rather, it indicates the degree to which any apparently "realistic" mapping project must partake of the figural projections normally associated with romance, such as that of the imaginary plenum of a distinct, perhaps inaccessible past — as in, for instance, Georg Lukács's idea of the integrated or closed civilization in the age of the epic — or that of an anticipatory illumination of some alternative space, which gives form to the utopian impulse. Whereas high realism seems to reproduce the iron cage of modern capitalism in a narrative form, the apparently outmoded form of romance offers a potentially utopian vision. Later, the stylistic experiments and free play of modernist and postmodernist art may be found to exhibit a similarly utopian impulse, while also necessarily maintaining their own ideological functions.

In a sense, then, the argument of "Third-World Literature in an Era of Multinational Capitalism" tied in directly to work Jameson had been engaged in for many years. Indeed, in his conceptions of national allegory and cognitive mapping, Jameson attempted to articulate a process for narrative figuration that he had elaborated in *The Political Unconscious*, but largely with respect to European literature. The *political unconscious* and *cognitive mapping* represent two distinct sides of the coin, which is perhaps most clearly understood when considering that the one refers mostly to reading or to the critic's activity, whereas the other refers to a program engaged in by the writer or producer of the aesthetic work itself. Ironically, perhaps, Jameson's sense that Third-World literature produces a national allegory out of the individual or private narrative is an attempt to illustrate the need for cognitive mapping on a global scale, in which the "worlds" are subsumed within a capitalist world system that would later come to be characterized in terms of globalization. In defense of Jameson's aims, Jonathan Arac has recently observed that "Jameson was trying out the Marxist idea that the collective investments of Third World literature offered an important alternative to the subjectivity structures of late capitalism" (2017, 335). This suggests that Jameson's intent, if not necessarily his outcome, was to grapple with the emergence of a Global South that could maintain itself as qualitatively different from the metropolitan powers of the age of imperialism in the context of an increasingly dominant system of globalization. The controversy over Jameson's intervention into Third-World literature thus becomes a key moment in the critical apprehension of the processes and effects of globalization with respect to literature, politics, and cultural studies more broadly.

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[1] For a good summary of the overall controversy as well as a qualified defense of Jameson’s position, see Lazarus 2011, 89–113.

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How to Cite

Tally, Jr., Robert T.. November 9, 2017. "Fredric Jameson and the Controversy over “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.