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马克思主义与形式

——弗雷德里克·杰姆逊教授访谈录

杨建刚 王 弦 [美国]弗雷德里克·杰姆逊

摘 要: 马克思主义者往往忽视形式研究的重要性,而杰姆逊教授却认为形式问题对于马克思主义尤为重要,并且用“马克思主义与形式”来概括他的学术研究。因此,笔者以此为主题,围绕他学术研究中的一些问题,对杰姆逊教授进行了访谈,以期对中国马克思主义文学理论和美学研究有所借鉴和启发。

关键词: 弗雷德里克·杰姆逊 马克思主义 形式

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Marxism and Form: An Interview with Prof. Fredric Jameson

Yang Jiangan Wang Xian Fredric Jameson

[The interview was conducted on December 28, 2009 at Prof. Fredric Jameson's office in Duke University. At the time of the interview, Mr. Yang Jiangan (hereafter as Yang) was a PhD candidate in a joint program between Nanjing University and Duke University, and now a lecturer in Shandong University, China, while Ms. Wang Xian (as Wang) was a master student in Duke University and now a PhD student in the University of Oregon.]Email: yangjiangan978@163.com.

Yang: As one of the most famous Marxist's theorist, your thought, theory and method of academic study have an important influence in the field of theory, especially in the field of literature, aesthetics and philosophy. This is very prominent in China. More and more young scholars and students come to admire your books, and I am one of them. I learn by reading your books that you are very interested in the question of form. Form is a main line in your research from *Marxism and Form* in the 1970s to *The Modernist Papers* in 2007. In your interview with He Weihua and Zhu Guohua last year at Duke, you summarized your academic research in the term "Marxism and Form". As a Marxist's theorist, why are you so interested in form? How important of form is for Marxism?

Jameson: That's because most of the traditional Marxist criticism has concentrated on content and ideological analysis, but always in terms of content: what are the thoughts? what are the ideologies and so on and so forth. But very little...I think Lukacs was doing some of these, but not in a very complicated way, very little had to do with the nature of narration, the available narrative forms and the form that ideology takes and so on and so forth. This is especially a problem posed by modernism. But since many of the traditional modernists like Lukacs rejected modernism, they didn't have to ask themselves these questions. So for me, it seems appropriate to look on the formal side of all these things. And I think the emphasis on the narrative is at least partly that.

Yang: It is well known that you had a very good command of German and French early in middle school years. The two most im-

portant books in your early academic life are *Marxism and Form* and *The Prison House of Language*, which are on German Marxist's philosophy and French theory respectively. How important these two books are in your later research? Could I say that your concern for form is based on the research of Russian Formalism and French Structuralism in your early days? Or, is it the result of the influence of that research?

Jameson: No, they were originally parts of the same manuscript, but it was too long, so Princeton suggested moving the formalist stuff into another book and they printed two books. So originally that was all together. But the French stuff and Russian stuff went into another book. The whole structuralism was the moment of revival of the narrative analysis and the question of form in ideology and so on and so forth, so that is all part of the same project, but a lot of the formalist stuff gets done in *The Prison House of Language*. They were not meant to be separate. As for the Russians, I was never much interested in the debates about formalism, but certainly people like Shklovsky who was my favorite, innovated in narrative analysis, I thought something people should know about it, because none of this stuff was known in United States. Little bit of structuralism was known. But I think I wrote first stuff on Bloch; I think I wrote some of the first things on Benjamin. It's a critique nobody has written about it yet. Lukacs, people knew about, but not very well. French and Russian stuff wasn't even translated then. So a lot of these were introductions for American public. On the one hand, the academic public to Marxism; on the other hand, the Marxists were very primitive in the United States too, this formal development, which Europeans knew but what the Americans didn't know.

Yang: As we know, classical Marxist's theory borrows Hegel's theoretical model but pays more attention to content, not to form. The vulgar Marxism of Soviet Union pushed this conception to extremity. They valued Hegel but turned their back to Kant. Russian Formalism is the heritor of Kant. For the Marxism in the Soviet Union, the content of arts finally turns to be a tool of the revolutionary propaganda, and the study of form is seen as the art for art entirely and is criticized as the heritage of bourgeois aesthetics. It's just like Trotsky and Lunacharski's criticism to Russian Formalists. We could say that, to some extent, Marxist's criticism to Russian Formalism turns out to be the needs of politics rather than be an academic discussion. What's your opinion on this debate?

Jameson: In so far, it pushes people to invent some new solutions. I think Bakhtin invented some new solutions. A lot of the texts were just political texts. Trotsky, some of these were useful and important in literature revolution. They weren't all hostile. After Stalin, there was a turn away from this kind of thing. Shklovsky survived. The rest of them did and started to write, they were very influenced by Eisenstein. What we did know was Eisenstein over here, because there have been lots of translations here; of course he has his contacts in United States and Mexico, but there was an interaction between Eisenstein and the formalists. And there are a lot of connections between film and modernism which related to some of those theories. I think in France, literary structuralism, it got deeply involved in film criticism. I mean a lot of works were done through film and the Russians are great pioneers.

Yang: In fact, after this debate, the dialogue between Marxism and Formalism has become the necessity in academic development. We could affirm that the relationship between Marxism and Formalism has developed in the course of conflict to dialogue, from Soviet Union to the West. Bakhtin was the representative of this dialogue in Soviet Union. The Frankfurt School in Europe and the late Marxists in British and US, such as Althusser, Macherey, Eagleton and you, all pay great attention to the question of form and proceed to the job of dialogue with Formalism. From your point of view, what is the significance of this dialogue? Could we say that without the absorbability and reference to Formalism, Western Marxism couldn't have made such great achievements?

Jameson: Marx is a kind of formalist himself, capitalist, structuralist analysis and some sense, I mean *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* is a very complex formal analysis. Marx's ideas on ideology were by no means as simple-minded as us, some traditional Marxists later on. But you have to remember that Marxism is essentially in a German tradition, and after all, that tradition continued through the Frankfurt School despite the fact that they all have to leave or flee. I think the Russians had some very innovative things to add, but probably with Stalinism those things were less possible within the party. So, but I mean ideological analysis, Althusser doesn't come from structuralism or formalism, psychoanalysis perhaps, that's the other thing you don't find in Russia, I think they translated Freud very early, just as they translated *Capital*, all Freud was translated in Russia at the early 20th, but there was not really much use of Freud. Whereas the Freudian tradition was also a complicated one and the connections between Freud and Marx were there practically from the beginnings. So I think Marxism had something to give to structuralism, Levi Strauss says that he rereads *The Eighteenth Brumaire* every few years to see the model of one kind of realistic

historic analysis in it. So I think without the Marx's questions, we wouldn't have had the structuralist answers. But there is a move back and forth.

Yang: So I think, just like Roland Barthes, when he was young, he was a Marxist, and influenced by Sartre, but then, he changed his mind and became a structuralist.

Jameson: I think he more or less withdrew from politics. And I think lots of people were disturbed by the students' revolts. I think after May 1968, these intellectuals thought that it was a failure and they moved into more private areas. Foucault is also communist, I mean not just Marxist but communist, and you can see that, but then he denounces communism all the time. But on the other hand, I think it really moved away from political and into the aesthetic much more decisively. But I think that's a personal thing.

Yang: My doctoral dissertation is about the history of the dialogue between Marxism and Formalism. How do they communicate is the focus of my research. In my research, you are a very important theorist in this dialogue. I am very interested in your term "transcoding." Thomas Kuhn thinks that the change of the paradigm of academic research depends on the new theory and new term. However, when I read your books, I find that you see "transcoding" as a kind of new method for the theoretical innovation. From changing the connotation and extension of a term from other academic schools to giving it some new contents, we could make the term become a new one. In this way we make a theoretical innovation. Just as structuralists' "text" and Freud's "unconscious" in your theory. Could you please make some further interpretation of this term?

Jameson: I think it's the idea that all of the things that people have considered to be truths before, were really languages, and now today, we have a multiplicity of these languages. Marxists' traditional idea is that it is the language we have true thoughts and so on so forth, but I think today, after Wittgenstein, Nietzsche and all the rest of them, even Marx himself, to certain degree, we understand that what we have is a code of language. So what we have to do even to get the debate going is to trans-code (translate) from one of these languages to another. So it's a lesson to Marxists again, a lot of the fights with other philosophies have not been productive because the Marxists thought they were arguing about the ultimate truth, whereas they were arguing about languages. And a language is also ideology, so you can say that there is a struggle of ideologies, but you have to understand those are also in terms of codes, linguistic codes, so I think there is a method there, and it's not just in the struggles between these philosophies that we have to think in terms of trans-coding. Each of these codes sees something. It's like lens in your glasses, it sees something very clearly, and the rest of those things are blurred, so moving from one code to another means moving from one set of glasses to another, maybe in distance, maybe simply in the focus. You have to understand what the moment of truth in each of these codes is before you decide. The same is true of languages, real and natural languages, I mean. One code may see something very clearly, and not be able to focus another thing which another code does, so that's a whole preliminary work, I think, in terms of ideological debates and philosophical debates. The idea that the world has a history, that an idea has a history, that comes into being, that's a fairly recent idea. I mean people think ideas are true like objects, I don't think so; they are ultimately ideological commitments. But those are in the unconscious, I think. I don't think there are things that you can reason with people about. But you can certainly show what the different codes are able to do in terms of analysis, literary or otherwise.

Wang: So do you regard trans-coding as one of your key concepts in your thinking?

Jameson: In a way, yes, and what you also should understand is there are a number of different Marxisms and those Marxisms are all codes, so there are fights with each other, there are also fights about languages. I haven't published my book on Marx yet, but from my perspective, what Marx discovered is, I would rather say, scientific than ideological. It's a scientific construction. I think the way people have used that, including Marx himself on its political, Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, those have been ideological constructions. So any "ism" is an ideology. But the fundamental discovery of Marx, according to Althusser, is really "a discovery of a new continent". There's the continent of the unconscious for him to discover; Marx's is the continent of historical materialism, the economic, that might be very crude about it. Those things and those places exist, you may not want to live there, but I mean, those continents exist, they were not really discovered before. But that's something different from ideology.

Yang: So, sometimes we don't need to create new words, new term, just need to change the meaning of words.

Jameson: That's very tricky. Look at Gramsci. Gramsci had to change all the words, invent new words, so the Italian fascist censor would not know what he is writing about. So he called Marxism the philosophy of praxis. He called ideology hegemony and so forth. Well, around the new words, suddenly a new kind of philosophy develops around it. And it may not fully be the old

thing any more or identified with it. It's a very delicate balance as towards extending a language over replacing it, and I don't think it's ever really possible to decide, there were people who want to replace Marx with Gramsci, there were people who see Gramsci as an augmentation of Marx. That's undecidable. Unless you use the language. The new words are sometimes very dangerous I think. I believe in the old words, but one has to then always re-explain them.

Wang: Do you think Zizek uses all kinds of new languages?

Jameson: Well, we don't know. Lacan invented new words and concepts, Lacan was one of the great and original thinkers of the 20th century, and that's a very rich thing which Zizek has exploited, but he also uses some of the old. He does move back and forth between psychoanalysis, Marxism and other philosophical traditions. What we are more in today is picking up these languages and using them when they work than substituting it with another. I mean, Zizek trans-coding throughout of his own work, now, does he invented a new language of his own? We would have to know Lacan better, because it's not only Lacan, there is Jacques-Alain Miller, the successor (of Lacan), Zizek studied with him, so it's hard to know...but certainly it brings to a creativity and likeness that people never had before.

Wang: But you said that it's dangerous to create some new languages, right?

Jameson: I don't think he (Zizek) does create a new language, I think he is trans-coding. Has anybody told us that what was specifically Zizek philosophy? I mean, it's in constant transformation, all I recall, I am not sure if we want to admit his philosophy, but some people do. Badiou, for example, I think has tried to invent a new philosophy, keep some of the old terms, add new ones and so on. I don't think it's always successful, but I have to say I haven't really studied Badiou, so I don't know. Somebody like Ranciere, on the other hand, tries to avoid traditional languages. That's also dangerous.

Yang: You had a very interesting viewpoint. I got this viewpoint from the interview you had with Zhang Xudong many years ago, which became the preface to the Chinese version of your book *Late Capitalism*. You said that history, politics (ideology) and form were a trinity. Marxist literary theory should pay attention to history, politics and ideology in literature. However, this criticism should use form as the mediation. Professor Zhao Xianzhang in Nanjing University also engages in the research of formal esthetics. He thinks that Marxist criticism "should not go to the subject (content) directly without paying any attention to the form", but "should interpret the significance by form". This relates to what you called "the ideology of form" and "the content of form". How do you interpret the content, significance and political unconscious of the text through the form of literature? What methods could we use? I noticed that you used many methods of structuralism, such as Greimas' "semantic rectangle".

Jameson: That is a too best question that I can't begin to do that. I would say for the stuff I work on narrative analysis is the best way you look for or something. That is a narrative that is able to seize the event, crystallize it, that draws on idea of what event is, what history is and so on and so forth, telling a story implies a certain number of deeper ideological concepts, and I think that's the best way (interpret) to those concepts. So the content, I think the idea is that the opinions of the writers, that's not content, that's not interesting, I mean it's interesting biographically...but it's not our main business. The true ideology these people come out and therefore, in the form of narrative, that's what we should concentrate on. Now I don't say that content analysis is useless, maybe some day we know all these formal stuff so well, we will need to go back to the content and focus on that more, and readdress the balance, so to speak and focus on the nature of political of, even aesthetic ideologies and so on, but it's very hard to put these two things together. One has to try, but it's hard; but in any case, we want more complicated an analysis of these texts than simple content analysis. I would say the content always takes you back and forth, if you have a novel about a certain kind of experience, well, experiences is a historical. Where does that come from? Certain social possibilities and developments. Then we are back in history, so I think both form and content lead back in history, that's the direction one has to go in, but one can get to that in various ways. I have just felt that there was less people would not emphasize form enough, people who are doing a kind of left the criticism I was interested in had to insist on that. Maybe the lesson has learned, we can go back to something else, or invent new places to think about this.

Yang: So, we need to find the content or the meaning of a work from the form of a work. Just like what Russian Formalism and New Criticism do. They pay attention to the music effects of a poem or the structure of a novel. But Marxists pay more attention to the content, the meaning or significance of a work.

Jameson: Yes, but not too quickly. We are talking about conditions of possibility; form depends on historical conditions of possibility, so does content. Adorno thought that the opinions of these people, Flaubert who was notoriously reactionary in his later years, the opinions are also a part of the raw material of the book. They are not the meaning of the book, they are built into the

book, so there is a deeper form that includes those opinions, and maybe the opinions were necessary. I mean, various people have said that people had to believe certain things, in order to write, to be able to write what he wrote, or he would not have written those things, Tolstoy maybe. Flaubert, unless he believes those things. But the belief is just a precondition; it's not the meaning of the work, even though those people think there's a meaning. Tolstoy didn't believe in history, and was very anti-political. Well, in order to write *War and Peace*, he had to be that. That's part of a larger form, I think, of living history, I should say, and living life in a certain kind of society, it's also because he had this profound attraction to peasant's life, and he thought this, so in a way, it's anti-bourgeois, but being a bourgeois can take a variety of forms. I think analyzing people's political stances and ideologies is a perfectly proper thing to do. But maybe only indirectly connected to the form of the work, it's the form of the work that's more important. D. H. Lawrence said this in another way, "trust the tale, not the teller", that is to say, what the person or the artist thinks was not, that may just be things what he has to think in order to do what he is doing, but what he is doing is more concrete engagement with the social and ideological raw materials that he is living. So there's a level of concreteness that's more fundamental than political opinions, political positions and so forth. Although one should talk about those too, yes, I agree.

Yang: In a long time, Marxist's literary criticism has been discussing mainly on pure theories, such as the relationship between basement and superstructure, but in concrete literary criticism, these theories can not interpret as convincingly as Formalists, and it is difficult to use Marxism in concrete textual analysis just like the job of the "close reading" of new criticism. It might be related to the fact that Marxists ignore the form of literature and arts. It also might be one of the reasons why Marxism is losing its influence gradually in the field of literary criticism. How do you see this contemporary situation of Marxism? Could the dialogue with Formalism make Marxism rejuvenated?

Jameson: But I don't agree with that. I think Marxism has developed its own approach to form, and that is as successful as other kinds of post-formalist things. You could say the same thing about Deidianism. It has no way of dealing with the text, it just takes things apart. I think the problem is that most people associate Marxism with an ideological analysis that they always see as negative, as debunking, if you show someone the ideological approach, sort of reduce them, I don't believe so, and I try to do something else that I considered Marxism, so I don't really agree with those positions. And I wouldn't any longer separate Marxism from formalism. I think there has been a mutual assimilation. I mean that a lot of the critics today that you may want to call formalists, they are post-Marxists, they know about all these things, but they just feel that they don't need to take many considerations any more, that's the matter of historical situation, I think. When that happens, there are historical and social reasons why people like Brecht, for example, seemed to give up historical analysis. It's not that they don't believe it and practice it. They somehow don't think it's...they know it too well, that's the case of Foucault. They presuppose it. Or on the other hand they think that it has already passed and we don't have classes anymore.

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