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## The Unconscious Criticality of Wright's Native Son to Capitalism

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### Abstract

Fredric Jameson, in *Political Unconscious*, opines that revolution is repressed in history and there is always the return of the repressed. Moreover, a text has unconsciousness and what has been repressed in history is archived in the political unconscious of novel. Mediation is always needed to open the threshold of novel's unconsciousness to history. This paper opts for addressing a novel which critiques capitalism; in other words, the unconscious of the text is the warehouse of repressed desires of history, hence the unconscious critical of novel to capitalism. Richard Wright's *Native Son* is unconsciously critical of capitalist structure of America. Bigger Thomas, the black protagonist who is incarcerated for unintentionally killing a white girl, is treated not as a black but as a human whose social rights are provided like the white. The political unconscious of the novel places communism in prison because never does a real communism occur between them.

**Keywords:** Criticality, History, Native Son, Political Unconscious, Prison

Fredric Jameson (1934- ) has been labeled by many thinkers as the leading exponent of neo-Marxism. He is reputed for two fields of research namely Marxism and postmodernism. The matter of form is of pivotal note and significance in Jameson's Marxist career. This is evident and traceable in his own writing which is intentionally perplexing and abstruse. In *Marxism and Form*, Jameson addresses the difficult style utilized by Theodor Adorno. In Jameson's language, if writing is not hurting, it is not working. This kind of difficulty in Adorno and Jameson stands for resistance since there is always pleasure in resistance--resistance to ideology. His masterpiece in his Marxist phase is *Political Unconscious* which is influenced by, *inter alia*, Freud, Lacan, and Althusser.

The synthesis of two hugely influential theories, Marxism and Freudianism, had occupied many twentieth century thinkers most important of whom are the Frankfurt thinkers, nevertheless Jameson was incontrovertibly the first to try the synthesis. Jameson's fertile synthesis, however, has a strong inclination toward Marxism and believes that Marxian criticism supersedes the other theories. *The Political Unconscious* comprises other non-Marxist thinkers such as Northrop Frye and Greimas; nonetheless, Marxism is the "untranscendable horizon" that in the last moment rescinds them. Jameson historicizes everything which is completely Marxian, as is evident in the first sentence of *Political Unconscious*: "Always historicize! This slogan—the one absolute and we may even say "transhistorical" imperative of all

dialectical thought— will unsurprisingly turn out to be the moral of The Political Unconscious as well” (*Political Unconscious* 3). Therefrom, three terms including Narrative, Mediation, and History bridge the theoretical gap between Marxism and Freudian model. In Robert’s words, “the surface narration usefully mediates the unconscious reality of the text’s relationship with history” (*Fredric Jameson* 76).

Hegelian ‘totality’ haunts the first generation of Marxist thinkers. This concept was decentered by Althusser. Hegel in *Philosophy of History* mentions that: “But in the history of the World, the *Individuals* we have to do with are *Peoples*; Totalities that are States” (27). Hegel liked the concept of totality and he believed that we should conceive history not as the chronological concession of one period after another, but as totality. He preferred to think of total structures; for example, ‘state’ rather than individuals. Hegel attributes totality to history, to spirit, to state and the things pertinent to his philosophy. He opines that history is moving toward the universal spirit and totality. He argues that:

We have already discussed the final aim of this progression. The principles of the successive phases of Spirit that animate the Nations in a necessitated gradation, are themselves only steps in the development of the one universal Spirit, which through them elevates and completes itself to a self-comprehending *totality*. (*Philosophy of History* 95-6)

Vulgar Marxists like Georg Lukacs believed that the economic base determined

superstructure hence creating a totality the separation of which was impossible. On the other hand, Luis Althusser contended that Marxism must be emptied of Hegelianism and his notion of totality. Totality as such, he argued, led to totalitarian regimes like Stalinism. In his 1965 book *For Marx*, Althusser goes back to a pure Marxism purged of Hegelian perilous totalism and states that if one pays attention he can notice Marx’s break from Hegel in his later works. Althusser remarks

When Capital Volume One appeared (1867), traces of the Hegelian influence still remained. Only later did they disappear completely: the Critique of the Gotha Program (1875) as well as the Marginal Notes on Wagner’s ‘Lehrbuch der politischen Okonomie’ (1882) are totally and definitely exempt from any trace of Hegelian influence. (*Lenin and Philosophy* 94)

Jameson reconciled Marx and Hegel once more by reviving totality. He argued in favor of Althusser reaffirming that superstructure “in the last instance” was determined by base or infrastructure. He did this by utilizing psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan and attributing it to the notion of totality. Jameson argues that every socio-economic matter is determined by an underlying totality. This totality, which is History, is the Lacanian Real. The Real is inaccessible to us; as Lacan points out: “Concerning which may be said what I have gradually accustomed you to understand: that a God is something one encounters in the Real, inaccessible. It is indicated by what doesn’t deceive--anxiety” (Introduction

to the Name-of-the-father Seminar 90). In Jameson's thought the Real is anxiety because it signifies revolution which encompasses phobia. Jameson bridges the gap between Althusser and Hegel by synthesizing them through Lacan and Freud. Totality can be found in history, but it resists symbolization since it is Real. "History," Jameson says, "is not a text...but history is inaccessible to us except in textual form" (*Political Unconscious* 82). To reinstate Freud, through analyzing the surface of the text, one can dig into the latent which is the unconscious reality of history and, by extension the totality. In other words, the unconscious reality of the text is what Jameson calls Political Unconscious. Jameson argues that literature and non-Marxian literary criticism are ideological.

Literature as one among many ideological State Apparatuses uses "strategies of containment" to represses History because History as such contains intolerable, underlying contradictions that the bourgeoisie can't stand--contradictions that have their source in History. William C. Dowling argues that:

The notion of strategies of containment applies likewise to works of literature and art, both in the way they incorporate ideology into themselves and in the way the formal unity displayed by works of art represents structural limitation and ideological closure on the aesthetic level, the attempt of art as such to shut out or deny the intolerable reality of History. (54)

What literature represses in history is the revolution. This repressed desire is stored in the political unconscious of the narrative (novel). Obviously, narrative is the mediatory factor that links the unconscious of the text to history. Jameson believes that mediation is dialectical because it fluctuates between history and political unconscious. Mediation makes totality; a totality between narrative which displays the social reality and history as an "absent cause" that underlies it. Jameson says that the socio-economic realities of life that Althusser dubs "seemingly disparate phenomena of life" are not disparate because they are expressions of an underlying totality:

Such momentary reunification would remain purely symbolic . . . were it not understood that social life is in its fundamental reality one and indivisible, a seamless web, a single inconceivable and transindividual process, in which there is no need to invent ways of linking language events and social upheavals or economic contradictions because on that level they were never separate from one another. (*Political Unconscious*40)

The Unconsciousness of narrative is full of repressed desires. The text illuminates them by bringing them to surface as symptoms. As a matter of fact, this revival is fundamentally critical of capitalism since it is capitalism that represses such desires. *Ergo*, the type of interpretation Jameson proposes in *The Political Unconscious*, Buchanan contends, may be grasped as "the rewriting of the literary text in such a way the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or reconstruction of a priori historical or



ideological subtext, it being always understood that “subtext” is not immediately present as such but must be reconstructed after the fact” (qtd. in Ian Buchanan’s *Fredric Jameson Live Theory*, 57). Jameson calls this type of interpretation “Semantic Reconstruction” which brings him close to Foucault and Nietzsche’s genealogy. They all believe in reviving the things “unsaid”. Dowling states:

Here too is the justification of Jameson’s method of “semantic reconstruction,” in its affinities with Foucauldian or Nietzschean “genealogy,” through which he will elicit from the structure of a cultural text that unexpressed subtext or *hors texte* it cannot acknowledge. For collective repression only gives us, once again, what did not happen, the “not-revolution” whose presence is revealed in the traces of an impinging pressure from beneath on the ideological structures of a society. (118)

The repression and suppression of History via strategies of containment by literature leads to the emergence of the “unsaid” as such. The task of the literary critic is to reconstruct the History which is hidden in the text. William Dowling argues that:

For Jameson’s ultimate point is that such strategies of containment are inevitably inscribed in cultural texts and our ways of thinking about them—into, even, the texts of Marx himself, who in this sense denied History even as he was instructing the world in the consequences of such denial. (93)

Denial and repression of history are means of survival. Being entangled with revolution, History portends nightmarish dread and anxiety at which not only the master but also the slave feels afraid. To imagine a story is to imagine a society within which it is told. A text is never exempt from its historical context. Contra Derrida who sees nothing outside the text, Jameson situates History in such an outside. In partial agreement with Derrida, Jameson regards History to be accessible only via text. This is a paradox of the concept of political unconscious that must be resolved. “Jameson resolves this paradox”, argues Buchanan, “of a history that is simultaneously ground and cause in two ways: First, he argues that all texts embody history in their form; second; he argues that texts in themselves historical events, albeit events that take place on a symbolic or unconscious plane” (59).

Buchanan in another part of his *Live Theory* states that texts never simply represent history, but they intervene in history. “They can do this”, he says, “because history itself is not a fixed and changeless entity, but a dynamic and rhizomatic (to use Deleuze and Guattari’s vivid concept) connecting the myriad present to myriad past” (65).

### **Bridging the Gap in Jameson’s Thought: Criticality**

This section sheds more illuminating light on Fredric Jameson’s idea concerning political unconscious in terms of ‘criticality’. Criticality of narrative is something that remains unmentioned in *The Political Unconscious*; therefore, the present researcher seeks to comingle the concept of criticality with political unconscious. Novel

is a bourgeois genre and emerged alongside the rise of capitalism which itself came into being on the account of the increasing number of middle class. Novel is there reflects the social as well as economic logic of its period. As Adam Roberts points out: “The class struggles and economic evolution of society that saw the rise of the bourgeoisie in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, a rise which is directly embodied in the ‘bourgeoisie’ form of literature, the novel” (*Fredric Jameson* 7). Novel is essential to the structure of life as such.

In a capitalist society there appear socialist and communist movements; inequality between the classes escalates; and, people think of starting and leading a revolution. This revolution that breaks down capitalism is always oppressed by Repressive Ideological Apparatuses and Ideological State Apparatuses. History is the warehouse of desires which are suppressed by capitalism. These repressed desires are piled up in the political unconscious of the text. On this basis, it is appropriate to refer to Freud who argues that there is always “the return of the repressed”. These desires are revealed both in form and content of novel as ‘symptoms’. They return in disguise and show themselves in facades of a desire. Moreover, never can novel be detached from

*“After the revolution it will be  
ours...There will be no white and no  
black; there will be no rich and no poor”  
(Native Son 69)*

**Political Unconscious and the Criticality of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* to Capitalism**

History since it contains the seeds of a repressed revolution.

Dissociation of text from History is impossible. They are naturally interdependent. Moreover, they fuel each other dialectically. The aura of the political unconscious encircles this dialectical relationship. Revolution which is repressed returns in novel, not in actual form, but in a disguised shape because it brings about pain and fear; therefore novel reveals this in its manifest in a critical and ironic manner. The political unconscious of all novels holds repressed desires of History, hence their critique of capitalism in different ways. ‘Criticality’ changes from one period to another. Sometimes ‘criticality’ expresses itself through form like Modernist novels. In this way, we can get to the political unconscious by form. “Genre,” Jameson states, “is essentially a socio-symbolic message, or in other terms... form is immanently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right” (*PU*, 141). Criticality is essential to and inherent in all forms of novel. Dose and degree of criticality vary in regard to the aesthetics of the period in which the novel has been written. I will give an in-depth exploration of this concept in the next section about Richard Wright’s *Native Son*

Richard Wright, the black American novelist, essayist and poet, remains one of the greatest African American writers of the twentieth century. He achieved an established position in American literature with the publication of his masterpiece *Native Son* (1940). Wright lived in an era during which segregation and suppression of



black people, hence spending a life of fear, isolation and inequality. Such critical motifs haunt his literary and non-literary corpus, particularly *Native Son* which provides a fertile ground for a neo-Marxist investigation among others. His early life is depicted, without excluding any obscene moments, in his memoir, i.e. *Black Boy*. Wright described those early years as dark and lonely as death. Such bleak and dark depictions of life framed his early books: *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), *Native Son* (1940), and *Black Boy* (1945). The first one is a collection of short stories addressing the lynching of black people in the south; the second one is about Bigger Thomas being the representative of every black boy in America whose life dominated by fear and violence; and the last one, being a memoir, renders the early years of his life. Shortly after writing *Black Boy*, Wright and his wife moved to Paris intended not to return to America for life. He wrote novels in Paris, *inter alia*: *The Outsider*, *Savage Holidays* and *The Long Dream*. These books never achieved as much readership as his early novels did.

Being the axis of the present paper, *Native Son* consists of three books namely *Fear*, *Flight*, and *Fate* respectively. Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of the novel, grows up in a penurious time with an exceedingly deprived family. His life as well as that of other black people in book I is characterized by fear. Bigger Thomas is hired as chauffeur of Dalton's family whose wealth and prosperity catch the eye of everybody. The family's gorgeous daughter, Mary, asks Bigger to give her and her communist boyfriend, Jan, a ride. At that time

communism was a deadly sin. Mary and Jan are too concerned about the equality between white and black; subsequently, they cast a black-as-white-and-humanist look on Bigger. They go to a black café where they move to extremes in drinking. Mary gets drunk. Late at night when Bigger Thomas takes Mary home, he understands that Mary cannot move; as a result, he has to carry her on his shoulders over the stairs when everybody is asleep. He puts her on her bed. Passionately looking into her eyes, Bigger deciphers that Mary's blind mother is coming up the stairs. A black boy touching a white girl's body was taboo, let alone his carrying her. Bigger Thomas places a pillow on Mary's face because he does not want her mother to notice her. Mrs. Dalton, Mary's mother, goes back and when Bigger Thomas removes the pillow he finds Mary dead. In an act of fear he cuts her body into pieces and puts them into the furnace to burn. Dalton's family thinks that she has run away or she has been kidnapped by the "reds". Later, they find her bones in the furnace and capture Bigger. Jan employs his friend who is a communist lawyer. Bigger is treated, for the first time in his life, in interaction with white people, as a human regardless of his skin color and race. Equally, Bigger Thomas comes to know the white not as a type but as individuals and as human beings. Ironically, a classless Marxist utopia takes place in prison. Finally, their endeavor to save Bigger Thomas from the death sentence is useless and he is finally executed.

From the vantage point of neo-Marxism which puts a great deal of emphasis on the amalgamation of Marxism and psychoanalysis, the research is given an

unconscious treatment. The History with capital H, or the ‘absent cause’ as labeled by Althusser, that is the Lacanian Real is situated beneath the surface of the novel. This history which signifies the class struggle and revolution is repressed by literature which is considered an ideology. As Freud stated the coming back of the repressed, this repressed revolution is stored in the political unconscious of the text. This event implements anxiety and pressure on the text, thus releasing it in form of symptoms. These symptoms show themselves in facades of the form or content. In case of *Native Son*, this is the content, formation of communism, which holds within itself the seeds of the repressed revolution. By locating the communism in prison, the novel unconsciously critiques capitalism. Moreover, this is the force of the political unconscious that speaks through the writer and thus making the text to be the repertoire of communism residuals.

Novel always unconsciously critiques capitalism because it is produced in a time when capitalism is impossible to deny. Capitalism is shaping force of history and this is class struggle and the matter of antagonism which brings about the existence of history. The focus of the analysis is on the second book whereby Bigger is incarcerated and the communism is formed. History is class struggle and a suppressed revolution is stored in the political unconscious of novel. The surface narrative, which has got a mediatory function, raises the awareness that Bigger Thomas was in a temporary classless society in jail. This mediation links the unconsciousness of the text with History. History is partially revealed through the text

and because it is the only way, according to Jameson, to grasp it. In America the communism between black and white was impossible: ergo, a black revolution which leads to communism is repressed and restored in the unconscious of the text. The unconscious shows itself as symptoms in the surface which the communism takes place. This act is exceedingly critical. The political unconscious indirectly tells us that only in a text is communism possible and nowhere else. This communism is the disguised form of a communism between white and black and which, symbolically, shows itself in the surface of the text. History is Real in the Lacanian sense and resists symbolization and as a result the only way to acquire it is through narrative and linguistic form. *Native Son* sheds light on the fact that the white and the black could never form a communism. The political unconscious which contains repression and denial of history within itself exposes us to a communism in order to harshly critique a capitalism which never lets it to be construed. Reading this novel in the light of political unconscious and criticality can pave the way for recognizing a History which underlies the *Native Son*: a History in which class struggle reaches its apex and blacks are oppressed and forced to be slave to the dominant class.

This section concentrates on the second book in which the mentioned communism is formed. In the prison, Bigger Thomas comes to know the white people as human being, and so does Max, the lawyer. However, before that, he couldn't help dubbing them as types who are no less than monsters. Jan and Marry are communists who treat him as a human being regardless of the color of his

skin, but he cannot take it as a natural phenomenon. When Jan, Marry, and Bigger, hang around the city, he cannot resist hating them: When they go out and talk to him as such, he feels uncomfortable and he:

Flushed with warm with anger. Goddamn her soul to hell! Was she laughing at him? Were they making fun of him? Why didn't they leave him alone? . . . His entire mind and body were painfully concentrated into a single sharp point of attention. He was trying desperately to understand. He felt foolish sitting behind the steering wheel like this and letting a white man hold his hand. He was very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that skin. (67)

No mutuality does exist at this point. He feels completely segregated and deserted: "It was a shadowy region, a No Man's Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon . . . . At that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate" (68). The moment that Bigger kills Marry the potentiality of the revolution of the black people can be seen clearly. This kind of killing, which unconsciously symbolizes the revolution, is the distorted and disguised revolution that is implemented by the political unconscious. Marx believed that if a revolution happens it must be bloody and intense, as is the case with Bigger's harsh murdering of Marry that chops her body into pieces: "The head hung limply on the newspapers, the curly black hair dragging

about in blood. He whacked harder, but the head would not come off. . . . He saw a hatchet. Yes! That would do it. . . ."

This extremely disturbing passage from the end of Book One describes Bigger's brutal removal of Mary's body after he accidentally smothers her to death. He tries to stuff the body in the furnace, but the head will not fit, so he is forced to behead Mary in order to fit her corpse into the fire. Marx argued that:

In depicting the most general phases of the development of the proletariat, we traced the more or less veiled civil war, raging within existing society, up to the point where that war breaks out into open *revolution*, and where the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat. (*Communist Manifesto* 20)

Bigger Thomas, as a representative of the black mob, runs a bloody revolution, therefore a communism is awaiting. Marx continues to the point that "The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win" (59). Now that the revolution took place, Bigger stitches together his lost identity. After killing Mary, Bigger does not feel guilty for his murder rather he feels as if he found his individuality and identity. In prison, before coming of Jan, the old fear comes back and feels the shiver down his spine when he sees

Jan. "he glanced up, hearing the doorknob turn. The door opened and Jan stood framed in it, hesitating. Bigger sprang to his feet, galvanized by fear" (266).

However, Jan's intensions are purely humanely communist. It is noticeably shown in his speech:

I know you're in trouble. But there is something I got to say. . . . you needn't talk to me unless you want to, Bigger. I think I know something of what you are feeling now. I'm not dumb, Bigger; I can understand that night. . . well you jarred me. . . . I see now. I was kind of blind. I\_\_I just wanted to come here and tell you that I am not angry. . . . I am not angry and I want you to let me help you. . . . And maybe in a certain sense, I'm the one who's really guilty. . . . Bigger I've never done anything against you and your people in my life. But I am a white man and it would be asking too much to ask you not to hate me, when every white man you see hates you. I\_\_I know my . . . .my face looks like theirs to you, even though I don't feel like they do. But I didn't know we were so far apart until that night . . . . I can understand now why you pulled that gun on me when I waited outside that house to talk to you. It was the only thing you could have done; but I didn't know my white face was making you feel guilty, condemning you. . . . (266-7)

The whole matter of criticality that concerns this chapter is summarized in 4 pages of the novel. This is the center upon which the unconscious criticality is at work. The

anxiety of the repressed desire of the revolution is compressed into this dialogue between Jan and Bigger. Jan, as a communist, contributes his part to the unconscious formation of the communism and he is successful in doing so. In this novel Jan and Max are the voices of Richard Wright himself who wanted a revolution and a communism to take place. Jan continues

Though this thing hurt me, I got something out of it . . . it made me see deeper into men. It made see things I knew, but had forgotten. I\_\_I lost something. But I got something, too . . . . It taught me that it is your right to hate me, Bigger. I see now that you couldn't do anything else but that; it was all you had. . . . Ever since I got out of jail I've been thinking this thing over and I felt that I'm the one who ought to be in jail for murder instead of you. But that can't be, Bigger. I can't make take upon myself the blame what one hundred million people have done. . . I' m not trying to make up to you, Bigger. I didn't come here to feel sorry for you. I do not suppose you're so much worse off than the rest of us who get tangled up in this world. I'm here because I'm trying to live up to this thing as I see it. And it isn't easy, bigger. (267)

These words stun Bigger to the point that he cannot move or react to what he said. "Jan's words were strange; he had never heard them before. The meaning of what Jan said was so new that he could not react to it. He simply sat, staring, wondering even afraid to look at Jan" (268).

At this point in the novel the communism in prison is going to take place since Bigger is going to do his part and make it mutual. “Bigger understood that Jan was not holding him guilty for what he had done. . . Jan had spoken a declaration of friendship that would make other white men hate him (268). Now the communism happens for the first time in American history and for the first time in the novel: “The word had become flesh. For the first time in his life a white man became a human being to him . . . he saw Jan as though someone had performed an operation upon his eyes, or as

though someone had snatched a deforming mask from Jan’s face” (268).

The communism here is shaped by the mutual understanding among Jan, Max, and Bigger. Before this interaction, white people were to Bigger as “a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one’s feet in the dark”( 109). But after that he labels them as individuals who want to help him, and for the first time we have Bigger’s turning point, thus the formation of the communism.

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