REVIEWs

The Origins of Postmodernity
Perry Anderson
London: Verso, 1998

The Jamesonian Unconscious:
The Aesthetics of Marxist Theory
Clint Burnham

The Success and Failure of Fredric Jameson:
Writing, the Sublime, and the Dialectic of Critique
Steven Helmling

Fredric Jameson: Marxism, Hermeneutics, Postmodernism
Sean Homer

Fredric Jameson
Adam Roberts
London: Routledge, 2000

The Marxian Hermeneutics of Fredric Jameson
Christopher Wise
New York: Peter Lang, 1995

Reviewed by Ian Buchanan

Reading Jameson Dogmatically

From the title, it might be thought that this review is going to complain that the books surveyed here are not sufficiently critical, that they are somehow too dogmatic – meaning ‘slavish’ – in their approach. But, in fact, my complaint is going to be the very opposite: in my view, these six commentaries on Fredric Jameson’s work are not sufficiently dogmatic in attitude. The critical and the dogmatic are not the structural opposites they may seem to be; indeed, properly speaking, these terms
are incommensurable, belonging as they do to unrelated paradigms of reading. For instance, it makes no sense to speak of a critical reading of the Bible, it can only be read dogmatically, because the only thing that counts is the truth; likewise, it makes no sense to speak of a dogmatic reading of a newspaper, it can only be read critically because it does not pretend to offer truth, rather it claims to furnish facts. Things are not always so black and white, the proper approach to be taken is not always so obviously signalled as it is in the two examples given. Theoretical works such as Jameson’s offer an admixture of facts and truths which perhaps suggests that one’s style of reading should be similarly heterogeneous, a little dogmatic and a little critical, or perhaps a little dogmatic and a lot critical, or whatever other permutation one might come up with. But, of course, such an option is not available: that they are mutually exclusive means one has to decide between reading dogmatically or critically.

Today, however, the active need to make this choice has been all but forgotten, so redundant has it become. The practical effect of the current hegemony of critical theory is that the decision to read critically has the quality of a ‘forced choice’ (to use Zizek’s useful term). One is free to choose to read either dogmatically or critically, but only insofar as it is understood that the dogmatic is the proscribed negative of the critical and not an affirmative option in its own right. Yet, as anyone with even a passing fluency in Hegel would see, the very constancy implicit in this singular choice is, in its own way, dogmatic. Hence the necessity of Adorno’s attempt to create a kind of negative dialectics capable of the self-examination needed to interrogate the inner dogma the critical approach more or less helplessly produces insofar as it intransigently refuses all other options. Ironically, without this self-reflection, it is critical theory that winds up being dogmatic in the ‘bad’ sense it attributes to the term, because it is blind to its own doctrine. But what is at stake here is not so much the heroic rescue of some long-lost or repressed alternative way of reading as the recognition that it never in fact disappeared. This leaves us free to ‘negate the negation’ that the dogmatic has long endured and explore its newly perceived positive dimension.

The difference between these two modes of reading, as Zizek has explained with respect to Marx and Freud (and Lacan), is this: whereas the critical reading permits one to falsify the master discourse, the dogmatic reading does not. Since

Marx and Freud opened up a new theoretical field which sets the very criteria of veracity, their words cannot be put to the test the same way one is allowed to question the statements of their followers; if there is something to be refuted in their texts, this [sic] are simple statements which precede the ‘epistemological break’, i.e., which do not belong under