Fredric Jameson: Live Theory
Ian Buchanan
New York: Continuum, 2006; 140 pages.

Ian Buchanan’s *Fredric Jameson: Live Theory* is one of the latest publications in Continuum’s Live Theory series, which to date has featured, among others, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Slavoj Žižek, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler. This volume is divided into five central chapters, each exploring a key concept in Jameson’s critical repertoire, and a final chapter consisting of an original interview with Jameson focusing on the issues Buchanan has raised in the preceding sections. What might at first look like any other book whose purpose is to “introduce” a theorist, Buchanan’s book proves to be much more. Indeed, Buchanan seems to have taken the series title seriously and set himself to bring Jameson’s work to life, producing a volume of living theory that at various points takes on the task—one accomplished quite well in my view—of resuscitating aspects of Jameson’s thought that may seem dated to some.

Buchanan’s primary focus, what proves to be the animating pulse of Jameson’s contributions to critical thought for half a century, is dialectical criticism, an idea first introduced in *Marxism and Form* (1971). Jameson’s particular brand of dialectical criticism is the title and focus of the first chapter, though it structures most of Buchanan’s book and continually returns either implicitly or explicitly. Dialectical criticism is criticism with a “twofold aim and purpose…which is to demystify the present, on the one hand, by revealing the ways in which a particular state of affairs is secretly organized so as to advantage one class fraction or another in a particular local struggle, and on the other hand to open up a space for thoughts of the future.” (1–2) Dialectical criticism is thus not some attempt at showing things as they are, but at showing things in their specific context, even though this context is never homogeneous nor easily apprehended.

Dialectical criticism creates a place from which to view things historically, allowing us to decipher a History which, on the one hand, has class conflict as its “ultimate reality” (2), and on the other, is always set on effacing itself. “Handled properly,” Buchanan writes, “dialectical criticism should shock us;” it should “viscerally remind us of our role as participant observers in the world-historical situation we call everyday...
life.” (1) As Jameson points out, shock is “constitutive of the dialectic as such: without this transformational moment, without this initial conscious transcendence of an older, more naïve position, there can be no question of any genuinely dialectical coming to consciousness.” (1) There is no doubt that parts of this proposition will set off critical alarm bells; “ naïve,” “transcendence,” “coming to consciousness,” are words that do not fare well in critical vocabulary today. Yet, part of Buchanan’s project is to recover a position which has “passed through the gates of the dialectic” (1), a position from which we can think through Jameson’s work and situate it in a wider critical tradition.

Interestingly, the first chapter on dialectical criticism almost seems to fall short; one is left without feeling the shock that Buchanan insists is the moment of recognition. But, this would be to miss the point of the book: that dialectical criticism is the structuring principle of each chapter and the book as a whole. What seems unfinished in this first chapter is, in fact, merely the first step in a dialectical project that engages a living body of theory. In the same way as Jameson’s Political Unconscious sought to reconstruct the way in which diverse texts themselves offer us a vision of humanity as a single collective struggle, Buchanan creates a single story out of Jameson vast and seemingly disparate body of work. This is one of the most interesting aspects of Buchanan’s project: his search for a unity in Jameson’s critical concerns and contributions. Part of this entails reviewing Jameson’s own influences, particularly Sartre, Adorno, Brecht and Barthes. Buchanan spends a whole chapter examining in fairly succinct details the lessons that Jameson has found in each of these thinkers. This attention to individual thinkers shows precisely the ground Buchanan is treading in his dialectical historicising process, ground which is at once biographical and critical. The combination of the two places us in a position to engage the “conditions of possibility” of Jameson’s work and the different paths it has taken over the years.

Many of these paths have aroused controversy. Indeed, Buchanan recognises that he is not only writing about an ongoing body of work, but one that has given rise to its fair share of criticism and polemics. Crucial terms such as totality, national literature, allegory, and utopia are some of the major concepts that Buchanan not only presents, but also defends. National allegory, for instance, is discussed not in its more well-known and notorious manifestation in “Third-World Literature in...
the Era of Multinational Capitalism” (1986), but in its original appearance in Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist (1979). Buchanan quickly points out that “There is no more misunderstood term in all of Jameson’s many conceptual coinages” than this one. (22) He demonstrates how this concept presents “not merely a formal solution to a sheerly formal problem, it is also an attempt to use history homeopathically, that is to say it is an attempt to use history to solve the existential crises and dilemmas history itself throws us.” (23) The problems referred to here are, of course, those for which “the nation-state system is the objective precondition.” (23) In paying close attention to criticisms, Buchanan’s book proves less a cataloguing of Jameson’s ideas and eras than a patient engagement with the problems Jameson presents for theory—problems, we might add, that have not disappeared.

In historicising Jameson, Buchanan also connects each of his major concepts, showing how they can and must be read off of each other despite the time, polemics, and critical fads that separate them. Each major issue and term receives a genealogical analysis that ultimately connects it to everything else. Indeed, despite the conventional separation in chapters, problems and themes constantly return with new life, taking their place in the dialectic of Jameson’s thought. For example, Buchanan frames his approach to cognitive mapping as follows: “We might start by asking, then, what was cognitive mapping before it was cognitive mapping? ... If the concept really does span Jameson’s career, as I have asserted, then it must have had a life before it had a name, and if it continued to be significant even after its name stopped being used then it must have had several different names. Both of these answers are correct.” (107)

Cognitive mapping is thus best understood as part of the totality from which it arises, that is, as part of a nexus of problems which arise from others and in turn gives rise to new problems. We might say this of all Jameson’s critical categories: that they have all had a life before they had a name. Buchanan’s point—and it is one worth making—is that the problems facing critical thought do not go away. They remain even when their name changes, but they might also demand that we take up new concept and modify our approach—one might hear the Deleuze and Guattari of What is Philosophy?, who pointed out that concepts themselves are meant to change and remain continually open to modification. Jameson is the supreme example of this principle: the tools we have
might change and our particular approach may transform the issues themselves, but we are still working through the same basic problems, in Jameson’s case, for example, the basic separation of the realm of Freedom from the realm of Necessity.

The final chapter of this volume consists of an interview with Jameson. Here things unfold along the same lines as the rest of the book: Buchanan’s questions reflect his concerns and his overall methodological approach. At the same time, in his answers, Jameson makes the important point of both historicising himself and our own critical present. Jameson holds a unique perspective: he was a young scholar before “theory” had infiltrated the North American academy, and at the same time being the most important figures in ushering theory into this context. Jameson thus outlines theory’s present by way of his own formative role in importing its ideas and problems onto the North American scene.

The only thing that is perhaps left wanting of both the final interview and the volume as a whole is Buchanan’s lack of attention to Jameson’s most current work in globalisation—work, we might point out, that has been carried on for some time now. This omission is understandable, however, not only because this work is still ongoing, but also because its unfolding follows a certain exigency of the times and hasn’t contributed to the interpretive polemics or theory wars of the ’70s and ’80s, which are now fading. In any event, we might interpret this lack of an adequate critical narrative about globalization as merely Buchanan’s final dialectical move, illustrating that “There is no one—or final—form of the dialectic” (12), that it is still with us as we interrogate the present and construct the future.

Kiel Hume, University of Western Ontario

_In Defense of Lost Causes_
Slavoj Žižek

_In Defense of Lost Causes_ may strike those familiar with Slavoj Žižek’s _oeuvre_ as a somewhat cursory treatment of problems he has explored elsewhere in much greater depth. Nonetheless, it is Žižek’s most lengthy