Theories and Methodologies

The Slogan and the Map

JONATHAN FLATLEY

I wish at the outset to state my opposition to the MLA Executive Council's refusal to let the Delegate Assembly vote on a Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions resolution (as of February 2024).[1] If higher education and the intellectual life it has made possible are to survive, academic organizations must serve as organs of collective representation.

Indeed, it is not difficult to see that the formation of collectives capable of fighting back against the forces oppressing us is an urgent task of the present moment. In the summer of 2020, while marching in the streets along with thousands of others in Detroit and seeing hundreds of thousands marching in cities around the world, it felt like such a collective might be emerging. *Finally*, everybody seemed to see the fundamentally white supremacist character not only of the police but of the state itself. The abolitionist work of scholar-activists like Angela Davis (*Are Prisons* and *Freedom*), Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Mariame Kaba had shifted a general common sense about the police and raised the real possibility of police and prison abolition as a goal (see also Kushner). But then what happened? In Detroit, we marched every day all summer, and there were many small victories. Yet, even in that relatively local situation, agreeing on a coherent set of demands proved challenging. In part, this was because we had neither a shared ideological orientation nor a common map of the social and political space. What, in fact, needed to be transformed in order to stop racist police violence? Would body cameras and mental health professionals make the difference? Or did we need to dismantle the police or, indeed, abolish capitalism itself? We knew what we wanted, but we didn't know how to go about getting it. The movement might have developed differently with leadership from a national organization with its own map of the overall situation and a clear set of demands—an

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organization capable of bringing the hundreds of thousands of marching people into a coherent collective.

Without a map, without a plan, without a durable organization, the collective from 2020 faded away. To be sure, the events of that summer shifted the situation and fed the revolutionary tradition in ways that may not be visible. But now the country is suffering through a reactionary, white supremacist backlash. In part, this is because already-dominant institutions captured the movement and turned it to their advantage, as Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò lucidly demonstrates in his book *Elite Capture*. This kind of capture is what Vladimir Lenin warned of when he insisted in *What Is to Be Done?* on the importance of a revolutionary party with institutional durability. These problems of collective formation and sustenance were also an ongoing concern of the Black Leninist tradition, from W. E. B. Du Bois to the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, itself a key focus of Fredric Jameson's essay in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988), the focus of this essay.

As I reread the essays in that volume, based on papers delivered at a conference in 1983, I found it heartening to see that they too were asking questions about revolutionary collective formation and the role of representation therein. They were responding to the Thatcher-Reagan backlash and trying to figure out what happened and how to resist. But this rereading was also a little bracing, since it indicated how little left intellectuals have moved forward on these questions since the 1980s and how we, having lived through another forty years of defeats, assaults on any kind of public anything, and the reemergence of fascism, are maybe even more discouraged than the 1983 conference participants were. As a profession, academics have clearly not absorbed important lessons from this volume, since we have failed to assemble as a collective to resist sustained and effective attacks on higher education, even if there are now efforts, especially in the unions, to create such a force.[2] In this situation, the question of the project of the Marxist intellectual is as pressing as ever.

For me, as for many others, Jameson was a model of the Marxist intellectual—not least, in my case, because Fred was my mentor and friend. Thus, thinking about *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (which I purchased as a graduate student in the 1990s) and Fred's essay "Cognitive Mapping" in it is inevitably also an effort to console myself after his death and a melancholic effort to hold onto an image of him. "Cognitive Mapping" has been helpful in this work of mourning, not only because its arguments elegantly encapsulate Jameson's project more broadly (arguments long since incorporated into my own thinking) but also because it presents a vivid instance of the Jamesonian style. I observe here two related elements of this style before turning to the question of the role of representation in the creation of revolutionary collectives.

The first element is Jameson's willingness to "posit a few basic principles" or "restate what seem to me to be a few self-evident truths" ("Fredric Jameson"; "Cognitive Mapping" 347).[3] Jameson does this frequently, often in an affirmation of his Marxism, as when he writes, "But let us be serious: anyone who believes that the profit motive and the logic of capital accumulation are not the fundamental laws of this world, who believes that these do not set absolute barriers and limits to social changes and transformations undertaken in it—such a person is living in an alternative universe" (354). This move has several salutary effects. First, amid complex arguments, such statements are easy-to-grasp handholds. Second, they are ways of making clear that a certain *political* position is the starting place for Jameson's thinking, and it might be for you too. There is no disavowal of political position, no pretense to excellence or innovative scholarship. Nor do we see here the usual agonistic academic effort to show how one is smarter than somebody else. These are statements of solidarity: Jameson is going to do his best to think through a set of problems, in comradely fashion, in solidarity with everybody else engaged in this project. These are invitations to decide which side you are on, as the old union song has it. Are you living in that "alternative universe," or are you here in this one, with us?

Also on display here is a talent for slogans. These are pointed one-liners, memeable capsule arguments. Jameson's titles often aspire to this status, as with *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. In *Archaeologies of the Future* Jameson

proposes "the slogan of anti-anti-Utopianism" (xvi). And of course, from *The Political Unconscious*, "Always historicize!" (9). Remember, too, sentences like "Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" ("Future City" 76)[4] or, at the end of "Cognitive Mapping," "Conspiracy, one is tempted to say, is the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age" (356). Jameson also frequently considers other slogans ("the personal is political," "the resistance to theory," "the society of the spectacle," "the return to history," "winner loses") for their relative usefulness, actuality, or outdatedness, indicating his attention to the practical-political side of being an intellectual. Slogans are indispensable vehicles for the circulation of ideas.

But they are also more than that. Inasmuch as slogans articulate a collective desire and name a collective project, they are forms of collective self-representation, a way for a collective to recognize itself: we are a *we* because we all want this thing. The composer of slogans must, therefore, have a capacity for reading collective desire, and this capacity is akin to the talents of the psychoanalyst who, as Jameson noted in his essay on Lenin, can scan "the rhythms of enunciation in order to hear the desire at work in its pulsations," which can then be "crystallized in political manifestoes and 'slogans'" ("Lenin" 71). To the extent that a collective mood and its desires are generated by a specific historical situation, a good slogan—one that moves a group toward the right goal—is also necessarily of its moment. Lenin emphasizes this in his short text "On Slogans," published as a pamphlet on the verge of the October Revolution. For a slogan to work, Lenin argues, it "must be deduced from the totality of the specific features of a definite political situation" (185).[5] Indeed, in this sense a slogan relies on the cognitive map, which is an effort to represent the location of a collective actor within a social system.

Like statements of principles, slogans must be brief and memorable, but unlike statements of principles, slogans are indications, in dialectical fashion, of what is missing. "Black lives matter," "Workers of all countries unite!" or "Power to the people!" name things that are absent. So too with "the slogan of cognitive mapping," a subject, Jameson writes, "about which I know nothing whatsoever except that it doesn't exist" ("Cognitive Mapping" 353, 347).

In order to explain our collective lack of a cognitive map, Jameson returns to one of his "basic principles": the spaces that correspond to the three stages of capitalism. Classical or market capitalism reorganized "some older sacred and heterogeneous space into geometrical and Cartesian homogeneity," which is almost infinitely expandable but is also representable (349). Then, with what Lenin identified as the imperialist stage, one begins to see "a growing contradiction between lived experience and structure, or between a phenomenological description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the conditions of existence of that experience." If in precapitalist societies and early capitalism "the immediate and limited experience of individuals is still able to encompass and coincide with the true economic and social form that governs that experience," with the imperialist stage, the truth of "experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place." There is now a spatial disjuncture between metropole and colony. Thus, for instance, the truth of experience in "London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong." Because it presented a new representational problem, this spatial distortion was productive for aesthetic form; it motivated the effort to invent "forms that inscribe a new sense of the absent global colonial system on the very syntax of poetic language itself" (349), an effort that at "its most intense will involve the invention of remarkable new languages and forms" (350). The resulting forms have their own "play of figuration," which, if they cannot directly represent the forms that govern life, can allegorically indicate them as an "absent cause." Accordingly, "one of our basic tasks as critics of literature is to track down and make conceptually available the ultimate realities and experiences designated by those figures."

Jameson then proposes, in an early iteration of his argument about postmodernism, that late or global capitalism is "a moment in which not merely the older city but even the nation-state itself has ceased to play a central functional and formal role" (350). The order

that governs our lives has reached a level of complexity that prevents it from finding its way into figuration, even in some distorted way, as absent cause. This is not just an aesthetic crisis but also an acutely political one: How can one hope to transform a system that one cannot even represent? How can one know what forces one is up against, where the dead ends lie, and where one must push in order to move ahead? More specifically, this new situation makes "coordinating local and grassroots or neighborhood political actions with national or international ones" nearly impossible (351). This problem is represented in Jameson's essay by the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (the subject of Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin's then-recent book *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*), formed out of a number of factory-based Revolutionary Union Movements, including the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), which had been remarkably successful in organizing factory workers in the late 1960s and early 1970s but which could not expand beyond Detroit, despite real efforts in this direction.

It is only here, in relation to the problems created by its absence, that Jameson introduces the concept of cognitive mapping as such. He borrows the term from the urban planner Kevin Lynch, who used it to describe how residents internalize maps of their cities. Some cities (like Boston), he argued, lend themselves more easily to cognitive mapping than others (like Jersey City). One's capacity to move around the city in everyday life is directly dependent on that internalized map. Jameson proposes that "the mental map of city space explored by Lynch can be extrapolated to that mental map of the social and global totality we all carry around in our heads in various garbled forms" (353). In this sense, the cognitive map is a "spatial analogue" for Louis Althusser's classic formulation of ideology as the representation of "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (163). We all need to "span, or coordinate, to map, by means of conscious and unconscious representations," the fundamental gap between subjective experience and an overall environment, to make sense of and move through the social spaces that structure our everyday lives. The problem is that while the totality of Boston is quite representable, the "totality of class relations" on a global scale, in this current stage of capitalism, is not (Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping" 353). And without such a representation, effective political action is impossible: "the incapacity to map socially is as crippling to political experience as the analogous incapacity to map spatially is for urban experience. It follows that an aesthetic of cognitive mapping in this sense is an integral part of any socialist political project" (353). Jameson proposes that it was just such an incapacity to map beyond the "city form itself" that prevented the League from extending and expanding the model developed in Detroit (352).

As far as it goes, I think this analysis is correct, but I also think there is another dynamic at work here, which becomes apparent when one considers the role of representation in the initial formation of DRUM. For any collective to form, even to be aware of itself as a group, to speak and act as a *we*, it needs a way to represent itself to itself.

This was a principle well understood and practiced by a Black Leninist tradition that includes the founders of DRUM. General Baker; Chuck Wooten; John Watson; Luke Tripp; Kenneth Cockrel, Sr.; and Mike Hamlin had seen during the insurrection in the summer of 1967 that a potentially revolutionary collective existed in Detroit. Their first move upon making this realization, one inspired by a reading of Lenin, was to start a newspaper: *Inner-City Voice*. The work of putting together this weekly newspaper gave the group a way of acting, thinking, and being together and allowed them to articulate a political position and publicize the availability of a collective politically and organizationally committed to that position. Thus, when an opportunity for the organization of workers and political action arose, as it did after a wildcat strike at the Dodge Main Factory (where Baker and Wooten worked) on 2 May 1968, they were ready to seize it. They quickly organized the factory with the aid of the weekly shop floor newspaper, *Drum*, creating a model that was then adopted in other factories, whose Revolutionary Union Movements then came together to form the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.[6] So the basic model was already a transportable one, borrowed partially from a Leninist revolutionary tradition and partially from Black nationalist movements, and one that

moved well from factory to factory around Detroit. But then, difficulties arose not only in the effort to accede to "a larger spatial plane," as Jameson put it ("Cognitive Mapping" 352), but also in the task of continuing the work of representing the group back to itself, one complicated by a set of unfolding problems including, as the League member Ernie Allen later observed, "declining mass revolutionary sentiment [and] tactical maneuvers by management" (78).

In her essay in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's consideration of the role of representation in collective formation helps in understanding the nature of this difficulty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" emphasizes the distinction between two senses of *representation* that may be easily conflated—"representation as 'speaking for,' as in politics, and representation as 're-presentation,' as in art or philosophy" (275). Where English has one word, German has two: *vertreten* ("to represent," in the first, political sense of a proxy or *representative*) and *darstellen* (to "re-present," in the second, aesthetic or tropological sense). Spivak argues that an examination of the complex interaction between these distinct senses of representation is of direct relevance to the question of political organization and revolution, of how a class-in-itself can become a class-for-itself. Spivak returns to the classic formulation of the problem in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, where Karl Marx laments that while a class (in this case the smallholding peasantry) may be formed by groups of persons who live in similar conditions, who share a set of economic interests (interests opposed to those of other groups, from whom they are isolated), these persons may nonetheless have no way of communicating among themselves and representing (in the *vertreten* sense) themselves in the political process. In such cases, as Marx famously asserts, "[t]hey cannot represent themselves, they must be represented" (123–24).

Spivak draws attention to the ways that the two different senses of *represent*, while distinct, tend toward an intertwining "double session" (279). It may thus, for instance, be *because* the peasants have no way to represent themselves to themselves, in the *darstellen* sense—they do not have a picture of themselves as a group—that they cannot come together to speak for themselves in the political arena. In such a situation, they may be, as Marx explains, especially susceptible to manipulation (allowing themselves to be spoken for) by a political figure who can provide a narrative or image of their interests and promise to provide for them. ("I see and understand your problems, and I alone can fix them.") On the one hand, Spivak, following Marx, draws attention to this dangerous moment where the hero or leader may step into this gap between the class-in-itself and the class-for-itself as a representative of the class. She is particularly attentive to the way that "speaking for" somebody else can effectively silence them. But, on the other hand, Spivak also cautions us not to treat "the oppressed" as if they somehow have an innate capacity to "speak for themselves" outside the thickets of representation (278).[7] Lenin proposes to address this problem with the revolutionary party, which would represent (in the *darstellen* sense, in a party newspaper, first of all) the working class to itself in a way that brings the class into the activities of representation (in the *vertreten* sense), allowing it to recognize itself as a class, with its own capacity for representing itself and acting in the political sphere. The leader then is not a *representative* so much as an amplifying *medium*, a point Lenin emphasizes with his metaphor of "the people's tribune" ("What" 746).

The difficulty of attending to this "double session" sometimes leads to the dissolution of a political collective, and I think this is partly what happened with the League. It often starts when the leaders (for all kinds of reasons) stop engaging in the essential work of representing the group back to itself in the *darstellen* sense; as a result, the group starts to have trouble recognizing itself as a group and the vital connection between the leadership-tribune and its members is lost. With the breakdown of the amplification system, the collective can no longer recognize itself as a *we*, people have trouble hearing each other, and the shared mood is lost. Misunderstandings, squabbles, resentment, bitterness, disappointment, and waning energy ensue. All of us who have been involved in collective political struggle are familiar with these breakdowns.

I want to insist, in conclusion, that along with a cognitive map, there also always needs to be some

way for the collective to represent itself to itself, and, in a sense, this activity is ontologically prior. The collective needs to come together before it can consciously locate itself within the systems that govern and oppress it and then develop a plan of action to change those systems. That one cannot develop such a plan without a picture of the social system is in some ways Jameson's main political point: "without a conception of the social totality (and the possibility of transforming a whole social system), no properly socialist politics is possible" ("Cognitive Mapping" 355).

If a good slogan requires an assessment of the totality of the political situation (as Lenin suggested), and if that is also what a cognitive map does, then the *slogan* of cognitive mapping might also be regarded as an effort to produce a cognitive map (of the space that makes cognitive mapping impossible). But this effort announces its own failure in advance and dramatizes that failure through the effort to make the thing we do not have, which is what makes it a good slogan: it tells us what is missing, what we want and need. In this way, "Cognitive Mapping" is also an effort to represent Marxist intellectuals to themselves as a collective, giving us a way to recognize ourselves in a shared project. We may not have a cognitive map, but we have each other, a fact that will only be politically consequential if we come together in solidarity. Jameson's wager was that trying (and failing) to produce cognitive maps was itself a way to make that solidarity.

Notes

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1. See Bérubé et al.; Seybold; and Colesworthy.

2. See, for instance, the work being done by Higher Education Labor United, a national organization formed in 2021 to unite workers throughout US higher education (higheredlaborunited.org). Also, the American Association of University Professors, under new leadership, is currently engaged in a campaign to "organize every campus" (www.aaup.org/programs/chapter-organizing/organize-every-campus).

3. In a recent lecture over *Zoom* at a conference in Italy, Jameson says, "[L]et's first posit a few basic principles: Our representative or parliamentary systems function on the basis of middle- and upper-class voters. The lower classes turn out for different kinds of parties, let's say, of the communist or fascist types. This is why, when socialism is no longer a political option, as seems to be the case today, momentarily perhaps, the alternative, we see in both our countries, is fascism" ("Fredric Jameson" 10:24–11:00).

4. An earlier version of this idea appears in the introduction to *Seeds of Time* (1994), where Jameson writes, "It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imagination" (xii). Fisher made the phrase famous when he wrote in *Capitalist Realism*, "Watching *Children of Men*, we are inevitably reminded of the phrase attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. That slogan captures precisely what I mean by 'capitalist realism': the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2). Žižek, for his part, has asserted that the phrase is indeed Jameson's.

5. See also Boynik, *Coiled Verbal Spring*, esp. the editor's introduction (Boynik, "Out of Synch") and the dossier edited by Mayakovsky, originally published in ЛЕФ (*LEF*) in 1924 (Mayakovsky et al.). I also learned a lot from Mieslowski; Kornbluh; and Lecercle.

6. For comments on the founding of *Inner-City Voice* after the Detroit insurrection and the importance of a reading of Lenin to that decision, see Watson. For historical accounts of the origins of DRUM and the League, see Geschwender; Georgakas and Surkin; Thompson; Allen; and Taylor. See also Flatley, "How a Revolutionary Counter-Mood" and "Refreshments," which I expand on here.

7. Spivak writes, "My point is that Marx is not working to create an undivided subject where desire and interest coincide. Class consciousness does not operate toward that goal. Both in the economic area (capitalist) and in the political (world-historical agent), Marx is obliged to construct models of a divided and dislocated subject whose parts are not continuous or coherent with each other" (276).

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