

Self-limitation and Self-affirmation in (Anti-)totalising Thought

Feng Zhu (King's College London)

In 'The meaning of new times', Hall characteristically sticks within an intellectual and political model in which critics are the ones that identify whole shifts in civilisation, which, momentous as they may be, might nevertheless elude conceptualisation by others. The 'new times', as he describes them, refers to social, economic, political and cultural changes of a *deeper* kind than merely the ascendancy of the new right in the Thatcher Revolution. He bemoans the lack of 'intellectual boldness' on the left and avers that the contradictory forces that are associated with the new times are under the tutelage and mastery of the right.¹ The way in which he sets this out presupposes not only that there is a complex configurations of forces and processes that conspire towards particular ends, even if there cannot be said to a singular unilinear logic of the ascendancy of capital, but that such a diagnosis – the mastery of such forces by the right – can be coherently offered by the astute critic. The critic must divine, as it were, the changes that lie at a deeper level than the ascendancy of the new right as a symptom. In this way, they speak on behalf of those who do not have the time (and economic support) to reflect upon the 'totality'.

Positing a 'totality', however cautiously, is an enterprise fraught with perils. Hall complicates his claims by going on to state that in the 'permanently Transitional Age' which we now inhabit, 'we must expect unevenness, contradictory outcomes, disjunctures, delays, contingencies, uncompleted project overlapping emergent ones'.² No longer is a 'stand-and-deliver way of assessing things', one that was the product of an earlier totalising logic that is being superseded, possible. Thus, the critic diagnoses that we – critic included – inhabit an age in which one's perspicacity is limited by the pervasiveness, unevenness, and rate of change, and in which, paradoxically, the critic does *not* have a clear line of sight to, or vision of, the underlying totality. This is a self-limitation even as it amounts to an exercise of the critical faculties as a self-affirmative exercise through its very existence – one essentially makes a claim only to then undermine the basis on which one can make that claim. Further, it is telling that there is a lamentation over a previous age of intellectual boldness followed by the need to self-limit; this fact is germane to the critical activity itself. Let me return to this point later.

In such a Transitional Age, the critical project must be a more humble one: the question for Hall becomes where is the 'leading edge' and in what direction is it pointing. Various implications follow from this commitment: that there are a menagerie of different

¹ (Hall, 2017 [1989], p. 257). In a similar vein, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005, p. xi) have advocated for the awareness of concepts which are too "large", too 'bulky' to be immediately observable and describable via the observation of specific situations'; they lament the disappearance of *ambitious* references to 'capitalism' in sociology. And Peter Dews (2007, p. xiii) has opined that: 'a wilful self-restriction of analysis to the fragmentary and the perspectival renders impossible any coherent understanding of our own historical and cultural situation'.

² (Hall, 2017 [1989], p. 259)

subjectivities in a given society (given that it is riven by various temporalities), and that these subjectivities need either different critical voices – ones attuned to each of them respectively – to speak on their behalf, or a singular critical voice that is able to encompass them all within its totalising comprehension of such social fragmentation. That is to say, with the latter, that the pieces of different temporalities can still be understood together as a whole. This whole is evidently not that of a 'totalising logic', which Hall had already declared had been superseded, but which consists of complex kinds of determinacy albeit without reductionism to a simple unity, *pace* Althusser's essay 'On Contradiction and Over-determination'.³

In an earlier text, Hall had already clarified that we have to characterise Althusser's contribution 'not in terms of his insistence on "difference" alone – the rallying cry of Derridean deconstruction – but on the necessity of thinking unity and difference; difference in complex unity, without this becoming a hostage to the privileging of difference as such'.⁴ Thus, what must be eschewed are the extremities of 'unity' and 'difference'. It is notable, however, that Hall's decrial is directed most vehemently against the insistence on 'difference alone'. If the most general issue of totality as a concept against which the social, cultural and economic are thought is one that is about the adducing of what may broadly be referred to as homogeneity as against heterogeneity, or as the discerning of coherent patterns as against unanalysable singularities, then it goes without saying that Hall cleaves towards the emphasis on holistic as opposed to atomistic thinking in a way that is characteristic of the dialectical thinking of Western Marxism.

None of the above is surprising; the heart of the matter surely lies in ascertaining precisely where critical activity places itself on a spectrum of 'unity' as against 'difference'. The activity has an implicitly or explicitly defined domain of operation as well as its limits; the parameters of this activity bear on for whom the critic can speak, for which issues, and with what kind of justification. But the matter also lies on the level of how such critical activity conceives of and justifies its own self-placement on this spectrum.

It is widely acknowledged that the poststructuralists were the reason for the stagnation of Marxism, followed by its complete disappearance from the French scene in the 1970s. Here, I find the work of Peter Dews and Fredric Jameson to be the most telling in probing the limits of totalising thought even as they seek to counter aspects of poststructuralism that they find excessive. Oddly, a trenchant defence of 'totality' perhaps ends up sharpening the untenability of such a stance, whilst an insistence on fragmentation, discontinuity, and accident – in the

³ (Althusser, 1969 [1965])

⁴ (Hall, 1985, p. 93). Hall is clear in his disavowal of the post-structuralist celebration of difference: 'Now, as is by now *de rigueur* in advanced post-structuralist theorizing, in the retreat from "necessary correspondence" there has been the usual unstoppable philosophical slide all the way over to the opposite side...the declaration that there is "necessarily no correspondence"...I do not accept that simple inversion. I think what we have discovered is that there is no necessary correspondence, which is different' (Hall, 1985, p.94).

work of Michel Foucault, for example – conversely fixes our attention on overarching causal principles. Contentiously, where these two positions end up may not be so entirely dissimilar after all.

For Dews, it is not that 'difference alone' occupies one extreme that must be counterbalanced, but that difference and heterogeneity are an *effect* of the totalising tendency of capitalism, a tendency that becomes obscured by poststructuralist fragmentation.⁵ Poststructuralism, can thus be understood as the point at which the 'logic of disintegration' penetrates into the thought which attempts to comprehend it, and it exceeds itself when it fails to perceive that its immersion in fragmentation is not the escape from totality but a consequence or effect of it. The conditions of possibility required for the heterogeneous disintegration propounded by poststructuralist thought *are* the various forms of fragmentation brought about by late capitalism. Similarly, the logic of capitalism, Fredric Jameson writes, is that of a force which 'operates uniformly over everything and makes heterogeneity a homogenous and standardizing power'.⁶ In this sense, the binary opposition between the structural and the fragmentary has been supplanted by the task of how to understand the complexity of this logic, which is a *heterogenising* homogeneity. In other words, it would be gravely mistaken to construe the heterogeneity as unbounded or unmoored.

Jameson's notion of totality is notably more fully articulated than Hall's, but is also marred by greater self-contradiction. Briefly, Jameson's attempt to work out a sophisticated concept of totality was one that sought to incorporate contradictions, capturing nonsynchronicity and uneven development. Defined as the 'mode of production', it includes a variety of counterforces and new tendencies within itself, of 'residual' as well as 'emergent' forces⁷ – a different take on Hall's 'Transitional Age'. It has been identified with the Althusserian conception of History as an absent cause such that it 'is not available for representation, any more than it is accessible in the form of some ultimate truth (or moment of Absolute Spirit)'.⁸ Essentially, Jameson had attempted to accommodate the post-structuralist critique of totality by playing down the positive aspects of the concept, with its Hegelian emphasis on the concrete, and stressing the concept's negative function as an unrealisable ideal against which our partial representations of the world can be judged.⁹

It is beyond the scope of this essay to rehearse the various objections that have been levelled at the concept of 'totality' that Jameson worked so determinedly to articulate. Crucially, Jameson had ceded enough ground as to explicitly disavow that one can actually grasp the

⁵ (Dews, 2007)

⁶ (Jameson, 1988b, p. 52)

⁷ (Jameson, 1991, p. 406)

⁸ (Jameson, 1981, p. 55)

⁹ (Homer, 1998, p. 158)

totality or empirically verify its existence.¹⁰ In the end, it amounts to a regulative ideal that buttresses the justification of critique: without a conception of the social totality (though it may be out of reach by definition), he alleges, no properly socialist politics is possible.¹¹

But what of the path taken by poststructuralism – the one that originates from an *anti*-totalising point of origin? Michel Foucault's thought arguably embodies the greatest challenge to the position that he had himself previously adopted – Western Marxism. It has consistently been to insist that the principle that explains history is a series of 'brute facts', 'accidents', and 'contingencies'; and that only 'something fragile and superficial will be built on top of this web of bodies, accidents, and passions'.¹² In his essay, 'What is Critique?', Foucault articulated his concept of 'eventialization' (*événementialisation*) as a means for us to foregrounds the contingency of history and the transience of that which might appear necessary and inevitable. Thus, possible futures are more open than we might suppose were we to privilege fundamental laws or causes that exert an inescapable gravitational pull on all possible relations. Eventialisation is opposed to finality and closure; there could be no so-called 'escape into pure form' that was entailed by historicophilosophical approaches, which try to reflect on the transcendental or the quasi-transcendental that fixes the legitimate destination of knowledge.¹³ In *Society Must be Defended*, Foucault characteristically attacks the historico-political discourse that makes war the basis of social relations, and by extension all such one-sided discourses. They are, he writes,

[I]nterested in the totality only to the extent that it can see it in one-sided terms, distort it and see it from its own point of view. The truth is, in other words, a truth that can be deployed only from its combat position, from the perspective of the sought-for victory and ultimately, so to speak, of the survival of the speaking subject himself.¹⁴

Does the abandonment of the transcendental and the quasi-transcendental (such as discourses on politics as the continuation of war by other means) lead merely to '[r]upture, discontinuity, singularity, pure description, immobile tableau, no explanation, no passage'?¹⁵ Eventialisation, is, after all, the deployment of a causal network that does 'not obey precisely the requirement of saturation by a profound, unitary, pyramidalizing, and necessitating principle'.¹⁶ As Timothy O'Leary puts it, the theoretico-political function of eventialisation is to undermine acceptance of established historical narratives and to contribute to the 'multiplication' of the kinds of historical explanation that are accepted; it aims to uncover

¹⁰ However, this is a reading that has been problematised by Steven Best. Best insists that totality cannot simply be a concept but must point to concretely existing structures (Best, 1989, p. 343).

¹¹ (Jameson, 1988a, p. 355)

¹² (Foucault, 2003, p. 54)

¹³ (Foucault, 1996, p. 398)

¹⁴ (Foucault, 2003, p. 52).

¹⁵ (Foucault, 1996, pp. 395-396)

¹⁶ (Foucault, 1996, p. 396)

'singularities', where one had only seen universals.¹⁷ But eventualisation is *not*, it also turns out, the outright rejection of causation or intelligibility – just that of closure or finality.

Foucault was less interested in delineating the exact lines and edges of eventualisation than in setting it up against total determination and unavoidable laws as a foil or negation. This 'negative' attitude, however, contrasts with his complex and ambivalence stance towards 'Truth' in the later works, and perhaps also with what he says elsewhere in the same essay. Indeed, his underscoring of the limits of what one can know has an obverse: that which is left after knowing what we *cannot* know is that which we *can* know. It was of course precisely this that had motivated Kant's three *Critiques*. After affirming that what Kant had described as *Aufklärung* is indeed what he had described as critique, as that critical attitude that appeared in the West following the great process of the 'governmentalization' of society, he went on to clarify that critique is that which says to knowledge:

Do you really know how far you can know? Reason as much as you like, but do you really know how far you can reason without danger? Critique will say, in sum, that our freedom rides less on what we undertake with more or less courage than in the idea we ourselves have of our knowledge and its limits and that, consequently, instead of allowing another to say "obey," it is at this moment, when one will have made for oneself a sound idea of one's own knowledge, that one will be able to discover the principle of autonomy, and one will no longer hear the "obey"; or rather the "obey" will be founded on autonomy itself.¹⁸

The notion of having made for oneself a sound idea of one's own knowledge, through which one discovers a principle of autonomy, appears to be that which marks the movement through which the subject gives itself the right to question truth concerning its power effects and to question power about its discourses of truth. This reference to arriving at a certain 'moment' – one in which a principle of autonomy is discovered – cannot but have a ring of closure about it, regardless of what Foucault's intentions may have been. This is revealing in itself. Here, self-limitation has metamorphosed into a self-affirmation of the very activity in which one is engaged.

Jameson has remarked, on his project of reconciling the structural with the fragmentary, that we try to always resolve this tension, 'by philosophically confirming the aleatory nature of the experience, or subsuming the personal under a theoretical meaning'. However, the 'vitality of the engagement' depends on that tension being kept alive, being unresolved.¹⁹ This is a sentiment perhaps both profound and facile. On the one hand, it seems to succinctly distil

¹⁷ (O'Leary, 2002, p. 115)

¹⁸ (Foucault, 1996, p. 387)

¹⁹ (Jameson, 2007, p. ix)

much of his thought into a simple problematic. On the other, it appears to offer little by way of how exactly, taken by itself, to keep that tension alive. We could also bear in mind Kate Soper's statement that 'a post-poststructural programme' is a 'synthetic approach, one which combines alertness to the deficiencies and crudeness of much traditional value-discourse with alertness to the self-defeating quality of the attempt to avoid all principled positions in theory.'²⁰ Transcendental signifiers are submitted to the scrutiny of sceptical and relativist appraisals in order to acquire a sense of the minimal value-commitments essential to the critical power of social and cultural theory. Yet to articulate *exactly* how this is to be done is arguably to be totalising, to break the tension between self-limitation and self-affirmation. If, then, this problematic concerning critical activity amounts to a mirror-image between approaches with totalising and anti-totalising inclinations, then it may be appropriate to question why the problematic take the form of an inscrutable tension that necessarily resists articulation even as it calls for it, or that resists obfuscation even as it tries to negate determination. This enquiry would be a propaedeutic to the grounds of critique itself.

Bibliography

- Althusser, L. (1969 [1965]). Contradiction and overdetermination (B. Brewer, Trans.). In *For Marx*. London: Penguin.
- Best, S. (1989). Jameson, Totality, and the Poststructuralist Critique. In D. Kellner (Ed.), *Postmodernism, Jameson, Critique*. Washington: Mouton de Gruyter Press.
- Boltanski, L., & Chiapello, E. (2005). *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London and New York: Verso.
- Dews, P. (2007). *Logics of Disintegration: Post-structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory*. London and New York: Verso.
- Foucault, M. (1996). What is Critique? (K. P. Geiman, Trans.). In J. Schmidt (Ed.), *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (pp. 382-398). Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.
- Foucault, M. (2003). *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976* (D. Macey, Trans.). New York: Picador.
- Hall, S. (1985). Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 2(2), 91-114.
- Hall, S. (2017 [1989]). The meaning of new times. In S. Davison, D. Featherstone, M. Rustin, & B. Schwarz (Eds.), *Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays* (pp. 248-265). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Homer, S. (1998). *Fredric Jameson: Marxism, Hermeneutics, Postmodernism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jameson, F. (1981). *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London: Methuen.
- Jameson, F. (1988a). Cognitive Mapping. In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 347-360). Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Education Ltd.
- Jameson, F. (1988b). History and Class Consciousness as an "Unfinished Project". 1(1), 49-72.
- Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Jameson, F. (2007). *The Modernist Papers*. London and New York: Verso.
- O'Leary, T. (2002). *Foucault and the Art of Ethics*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Soper, K. (1991). Postmodernism, Subjectivity and the Question of Value. *New Left Review*, 1(186), 120-128.

²⁰ (Soper, 1991, p. 128)