

A Brief Response

FREDRIC JAMESON

I can understand many of Aijaz Ahmad's reactions to my essay without, finally, losing the feeling that it was worth doing and that these things were worth saying. The essay was intended as an intervention into a "first-world" literary and critical situation, in which it seemed important to me to stress the loss of certain literary functions and intellectual commitments in the contemporary American scene. It seemed useful to dramatize that loss by showing the constitutive presence of those things—what I called narrative allegory (namely the coincidence of the personal story and the "tale of the tribe," as still in Spenser) and also the political role of the cultural intellectual—in other parts of the world. To be sure, one then returns to show that US literature also includes its own "third-world" cultures (which escape the categories in which one describes hegemonic culture); and equally clearly, the classical cultures of the East (for example) are no more to be thought of as third-world cultures than the English Renaissance is to be thought of as a first-world one.

As for such categories, they are meant to stimulate the perception of difference by imposing comparisons and comparative operations that do not always suggest themselves automatically in our present academic division of labor, where Lu Xun belongs to Chinese departments and Ousmane (if to anything) to French departments. I believe that we have every interest in developing a kind of comparative cultural study (on the model, say, of Barrington Moore's comparative sociology) in which such disparate texts are juxtaposed, not to turn both into "the same thing," but rather with a view towards establishing radical *situational* difference in cultural production and meanings.

The methodological problem is that such differences can only be established within some larger preestablished identity: if there is nothing in common between two cultural situations, then clearly the establishment of difference is both pointless and given in advance. What this means is that if Identity and Difference are fixed and eternal opposites, we have either a ceaseless alternation, or a set of intolerable choices: presumably there would be no great advantage gained by junking the category of "third world" if the result is that North America then becomes "the same" as the subcontinent, say. But nothing is to be done with sheer random difference either, which either leaves us back in Boasian anthropology or in the empiricist history of "one damned thing after another." The claim of the dialectic as a distinct mode of thought is to set categories like those of Identity and Difference in motion, so that the

inevitable starting point is ultimately transformed beyond recognition; whether this claim can be honored cannot, of course, be decided in advance.

A great many other important issues are raised in this paper, which I can scarcely touch on now, let alone answer. The concept of "national allegory," for example, was not meant as an endorsement of nationalism, although I believe that a certain nationalism does not always play an exclusively negative and harmful role in some socialist revolutions.

As for the term "first world," I hope it is not necessary to say that the priority it implies is not a social one (the burden of my paper was to argue virtually the opposite position), nor is it an intellectual one (particularly given our Roman eclecticism—currently expanding, I'm happy to say, to include a keen interest in contemporary Indian theory), nor is it even, God knows, a matter of production: it is based, far more even than military power, on the fact that American bankers hold the levels of the world system. As for one's feeling that this system, late capitalism, is the supreme unifying force of contemporary history, such a belief—which has been characterized as "monotheism" by some—confirms the descriptions of the *Grundrisse* and does seem to me to correspond to a fact of life. I don't, however, see how my argument can be taken for an endorsement of this gravitational force, which it would be well, however, to take into account if one plans to try to resist it.

I think I can detect some final implication here that "theory" is, in the very nature of the beast, repressive and an exercise of power—although I can't be sure whether Aijaz Ahmad would endorse the full "theoretical" form of this particular position about theory. My own feeling is that such anxiety is particularly misplaced in a situation in which the "role" of the intellectual (and the very category itself) has never been less influential and in which anti-intellectualism is deeply ingrained in the very spirit of the culture. It seems to me much more productive to insist, as he also does, on the way in which we are all *situated* and determined socially and ideologically by our multiple class positions—something I hope I never seemed to deny. But even speaking from that position (as I could not but do), I still think my intervention was a positive and progressive one, whose implications (on any number of levels) include: the necessity for teaching third-world literatures; the recognition of the challenge they pose to even the most advanced contemporary theory; the need for a *relational* way of thinking global culture (such that we cannot henceforth think "first-world" literature in isolation from that of other global spaces); the proposal for a comparative study of cultural situations (which I have been clearer about here, perhaps, but for which my code word, in the essay in question, was the slogan, "mode of production"); and finally, the suggestion (which Ahmad seems to endorse) that when we get done with all that we may want to entertain the possibility that we also need a (new) theory of second-world culture as well.