Frederic Jameson poses a provocative thesis in *Valences of the Dialectic*, namely, that the dialectic, rather than being a vestigial intellectual organ, has been secretly operating behind the scenes of contemporary theory. Jameson argues that those thinkers who would disavow the dialectic (such as Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault) are some of its most interesting practitioners. Such a gesture has been a feature of Jameson’s thought since at least *The Political Unconscious*, with its translation of other theoretical codes into the language of Marxist dialectics. And, indeed, many of the essays in this volume have appeared elsewhere, and others may seem quite familiar fare. But something new happens in this particular constellation of texts: in naming the dialectic the hidden hand of contemporary theory, Jameson shifts the very project of the dialectic. For the haunting of the dialectic, its uncanny inhabitation of contemporary theory, is also its own haunting, its possession, and its reinvention.

The central displacement that the dialectic undergoes in *Valences of the Dialectic* is its translation from a temporal mode to a spatial mode. Jameson’s interest in spatiality has always been the obverse side of his investigation of postmodernity, for as he has argued, the emergence of late capitalism has involved the eclipse of history (“the waning of our historical sense”) by the omnipresence of spatiality in the closure of an “eternal present.” Jameson’s response to this situation has up until now been the dialectical one of conceiving of the historicity of our situation as defined precisely by the singular impossibility of imagining it as history. *Valences of the Dialectic* should be seen as a break with this
response and the emergence of a new period in Jameson’s work, one characterized less by the diagnosis of history’s repression than the registering of its return. It is perhaps too soon to pronounce the death of postmodernism—and certainly late capitalism is alive, if not well—but beginning with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and accelerating with the birth of a new socialist bloc in South America, the rise of capitalist China, and the 2008 financial crisis (to name only a few symptoms), the glacial closure of the present has begun to thaw, a fact signaling not a solution for thought but rather the introduction of new problems. We might call this new period of Jameson’s thought “post-postmodern,” until a better term emerges, so as to mark this new sense of historical eventfulness.²

Valences attempts to provide us with the conceptual organs to grasp this new situation. Brechtian thinker that he is, Jameson begins by estranging our typical perceptions of theoretical thought, mapping the intellectual scene as so many returns of the repressed dialectic. As the title of one section suggests—“Hegel Without Aufhebung”—Jameson argues the existence of a dialectic whose emphasis is not reconciliation but contradiction and whose _modus operandi_ is not homogeneous mediation but the productive clash of incommensurable codes. Jameson’s analysis of the disavowal of the dialectic reaches its most condensed and spectacular form in the third chapter, “Hegel’s Contemporary Critics,” in which he takes up the explicitly counter- or non-dialectical thought of Derrida, Deleuze, and Foucault to show how the very critique of the dialectic becomes part and parcel of the dialectic: “What we took to be a devastating analysis was not Derrida’s deconstruction of Hegel, but rather Hegel’s own deconstruction. . . . Are we to conclude that the dialectic is already deconstruction, _avant la lettre_?” (105). Jameson does not exactly answer in the positive—deconstruction is neither the dialectic nor vice versa—but he does leave us with the idea that deconstruction is dialectical. Similarly, Jameson understands Deleuze’s condemnation of dialectical negativity to already be inscribed in the Hegelian dialectic’s oscillation between Identity and Difference in the face of contradiction. And of Foucault: “But what if the categories of the _Logic_ were already just this neutral thought of the outside for which Foucault calls?” (122–23). It is not that the dialectic has always already exhausted thought but that, on the contrary,
thought, since the dialectic’s spectral arrival, has consisted of inventive procedures for unfolding the intricacies of a dialectic to come.

All this is not to say that each instance of the dialectic is the same. There are distinctions to be made, and Jameson makes them with great subtlety in the opening chapter of the work, “The Three Names of the Dialectic.” There, Jameson distinguishes between “the dialectic,” “many dialectics,” and the “dialectical,” between, that is, the dialectic as all-encompassing system of truth; as “multiple dialectics, of whatever dimensions or significance” (15) bound to specific situations, each intersecting with the other in alternating movements of translation and contradiction; and, finally, as “the shock of its effects on reader or listener” (51). While the movement from the dialectic through many dialectics to the indefinite dialectical effect might seem to bespeak a capitulation to a standardized postmodern ethos valorizing difference and multiplicity as such, what actually emerges is the inverse. The assertion of a plurality of dialectics is, in fact, the mode of appearance of a singular dialectic to come, as indicated by the title of the final section of the chapter, “Towards a Spatial Dialectic”: the multiplication of dialectical forms, the incessant negation of one thought after another, is but the prelude to a great dialectic to come, a utopian dialectic capable not only of measuring up to the expanses of a globalized world but also of glimpsing worlds beyond it. In other words, Jameson has not given up the totalizing thrust of his earlier thought but has expanded it. Complexity, or the multiplication of differences, is the first step in the renewal of the dialectic, but the next step, the negation of the negation, requires a collective process marshaling the many dialectics into a universal force. In this move, Jameson joins such thinkers as Alain Badiou, Judith Butler, and Slavoj Žižek in their interest in a form of thought that would be at once universal and contingent, or at once global and situational.

Jameson locates the possibility of this utopian dialectic in emergent forms of emancipatory social subjects. In Valences, chapters on Rousseau, Lenin, Sartre, and Lukács, and others on globalization and the post-Soviet state of Marxism, act as so many experiments in inventing a theory of subjectivity that reckons with the critique of the subject produced by deconstruction and, at the same time, harnesses the new historical possibilities of a tentatively post-postmodern age. Jameson renews the old Marxist project of educating the revolutionary subject,
insisting that the effectiveness of any political agency depends upon the ability to grasp theoretically the complex and shifting spatial and temporal scales of globalized capitalism. This cognitive stance tends to instrumentalize the theoretical particularities of thinkers in the name of collective action, yet it is to Jameson’s credit that the act itself, the moment of praxis, remains an absent cause, rather than a pregiven ground, so that thought is never too tightly bound to any dogmatic position. One might say that the only dogmatism that remains from an older orthodox Marxism is the crucial one, namely, that a revolutionary subject is possible, if not necessary, and that this possibility is immanent to capitalism, its proverbial gravedigger.

Throughout Valences, Jameson uses the term “valences” to indicate dialectical thought’s interest in historical reversal, especially as it pertains to social agency. Jameson says early on, “We can also speak of such reversals as a changing of the valences on a given phenomenon, where the transformation of value and function in an altered context or system may be said to constitute a changing of its valences, from negative to positive, or the other way around, as the case may be” (48). Perhaps the most interesting, and perverse, demonstration of this changing of valences occurs in the chapter “Utopia as Replication,” where Jameson discusses the utopian quality of Wal-Mart in order to formulate a utopian methodology adequate to a globalized capitalism. Engaging with what he calls the politics of the multitude, that is, the works of Paolo Virno, Antonio Negri, and others emerging from the post-Autonomist Italian Marxist scene, Jameson argues that the formulation of new forms of social life must be coupled with an understanding of the ambivalence of social spaces, the ways in which such dismal places as Wal-Mart, with its complex modes of social organization, hold the seeds of a transfigured society. This chapter suggests an interesting rapprochement between dialectical thought and the (explicitly antidialectical) politics of the multitude. Jameson suggests that the thinkers of the multitude would benefit from a (re)-encounter with Lenin, or, more specifically, with the question of the institutionalization of revolution. Indeed, the negation of negation, the dialectic to come, that Jameson anticipates throughout Valences can be characterized as a dialectic that would function as the general intellect of the multitude, supplementing the affective powers of the
multitude with the conceptual coordination of what Jameson elsewhere calls cognitive mapping.  

Jameson’s desire to reinvent the subject aligns him with such contemporaries as Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri, and Slavoj Žižek, yet he distinguishes himself in his overwhelming concern for historical self-consciousness. Jameson has not abandoned the dictum to “Always historicize!” but he has complicated it. In the final section of Valences, “The Valences of History,” Jameson, through readings of Marx, Braudel, and Ricoeur (among others), articulates the dialectic as a procedure for reading time and history in space. He generates a narrative theory of history that revolves around the convertibility of defeat into victory, and vice versa. The significance of Jameson’s interest in the reversibility of victory and defeat lies in the way that it illuminates our present historical situation, which might be characterized as the omnipresence of political defeat, despite genuine flickers of hope. Yet the dialectical point here involves recognizing the unity of opposites: if defeat is everywhere, and hope scarce, history has nonetheless begun to thaw; in the very conditions of defeat, one finds the potentiality of victory.

In Valences, it is Theory—which is to say, for Jameson, the spirit of the dialectic, whether it takes the form of deconstruction or Marx’s critique of political economy—that enables us to grasp the potential for historical reversal. Jameson attacks the reaction against Theory that has spread throughout much of the humanities, asserting theoretical thought not only as a necessary component for any rigorous intellectual engagement with the world but also as a political imperative. Against an aestheticizing or ethical universalism, on the one hand, and naive empiricism, on the other, Jameson insists on Theory as a mode of thought that demystifies ideological givens without erecting its own fixed standard of truth; a mode of thought that self-consciously questions itself in relation to the situation from which it emerges and the consequences it produces (59). Jameson’s understanding of theory, traversing as it does so many diverse and disparate forms of thought, runs the risk of being so general as to lack any specificity, yet what saves it from falling into the night in which all cows turn black is the way that Jameson incessantly connects it to situationally specific “unities of theory and practice,” such as the contemporary state of Marxism and the restructuring of late capitalism. Neither an example
of the dialectic nor a definition of Theory, *Valences* is a strategic intervention, a defense of Theory not merely for its intellectual utility but for the way it bears witness to the utopian impulse, with all of the political and historical possibilities such an impulse sustains: it is in Theory, or, more precisely, in the movement between theory and practice, that “we are reminded that Utopia exists and that other systems, other spaces, are still possible” (612). There are certainly those who will object to Jameson’s yoking together of disparate theoretical tendencies under the name of the dialectic, as well as those who will object to the contamination, or perhaps instrumentalization, of the humanities by theoretical engagements, but in response to such objections, one might ask: Are we willing to give up the thought of systemic change, the thought of other worlds? *Valences of the Dialectic* acts as a convincing reason for rejecting such capitulations.4

Notes

1. See, especially, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and *The Seeds of Time*.
4. It should be noted that *Valences of the Dialectic* is in fact an incomplete document. Originally, it consisted of two additional sections, one on the first volume of Marx’s *Capital*, and one on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Those two sections are being released by Verso as separate books (the first of which, *The Hegel Variations*, has already been slated for publication), yet they should be understood as extensions of this project. If in *Valences* the task is to demonstrate that the dialectic persists, in mutated form, as Theory, then in these additional parts on Marx and Hegel, we can look forward to seeing how the “old” dialectic still holds fresh problems for thought.

Works Cited

