

## Brief Notes

### Marxist Theory

Marxist literary theory is predicated on the idea that literature is a product of social forces and ideology. However, Terry Eagleton insists that “The literary text is not the ‘expression’ of ideology, nor is ideology the ‘expression’ of social class. The text, rather, is a certain production of ideology, for which the analogy of a dramatic production is in some ways appropriate. . . . The relation between text and production is a relation of labour”. Marxism is a form of DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM; it holds that all social realities are fundamentally material, that they have their origin and being in specific forms of labor and production, and that the history of society is the history of dialectical transformations in the relationship between labor and production. For Marx, there were two social classes, the capitalist and the proletariat. The antagonism he discerned between these classes was part of a long history of social development. Western civilization began with agrarian societies structured along tribal lines, which ultimately evolved into the feudal organizations of medieval Europe. Slowly, as indentured serfs secured their freedom from feudal lords, they established themselves as artisans and craftsmen in towns. Guilds and other professional organizations, along with the apprentice system, followed and, by the eighteenth century, the rudiments of an industrialized society and capitalist economy. “With the advent of manufacture the relationship between worker and employer changed. In the guilds the patriarchal relationship between journeyman and master continued to exist; in manufacture its place was taken by the monetary relation between worker and capitalist – a relationship which in the countryside and in small towns retained a patriarchal tinge, but in the larger, the real manufacturing towns, quite early lost almost all patriarchal complexion” (German Ideology 74). The division of labor in capitalist societies led to the creation of private property and the contradictions that arise because of its uneven distribution. The class struggle at the

heart of capitalist society is the logical outcome of a historical process, which would come to its conclusion after the working classes seized the modes of production and created the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” a classless, communist society. Classical Marxism was thus a form of HISTORICAL DETERMINISM, which means that the analysis of history could conceivably proceed along scientific lines. In fact, Louis Althusser called Marxism “a new science: the science of history” (19). While contemporary Marxists still regard these materialist and deterministic theses to be important for social and cultural analysis, they have devised complex theories of DETERMINATION that rely less on the mechanistic aspect of the modes of production than on superstructural phenomena.

A chief concern of classical “economistic” Marxism is the concept of the COMMODITY (that which is produced out of the materials of nature) and the values that are given to that commodity. “A commodity is . . . a mysterious thing,” Marx muses in *Capital*, “simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour” (Marx–Engels 320). The process Marx describes here is also known as REIFICATION. At issue here is a distinction between form and content. The form of the commodity corresponds with its exchange value while the content corresponds with its use value. Exchange values have to do with specific systems of economic exchange in which a commodity’s value may rise or fall depending on its desirability. Use values, which are derived from the labor expended in creating the commodity, are constant and may bear no logical or intrinsic relation to the exchange value. Surplus value is what accrues to the capitalist who owns the modes of production; it is the difference between wages paid and the actual work done by workers. In a capitalist society, workers are, in principle, underpaid; the value of labor expended in a day’s work exceeds the wages paid for that work. Money functions in this system of values as another form of value,

one that is determined within the economic system in which it is used as an equivalent value for a specific commodity. The excess in value between the cost of producing a commodity and the price paid for it constitutes capital. Money in the form of capital is always subject to fluctuations of the market, boom periods and crises which cause the value of money to rise or fall depending on whether or not capital is in high demand. The commodity form is essential to understanding Marx's vision of the social TOTALITY.

Marxist social theory begins with a base/superstructure paradigm. The BASE (or infrastructure) refers to the modes of production as well as to the class formations and class relationships generated by them; the SUPERSTRUCTURE refers to the social and cultural institutions and traditions that promulgate and sustain the specific ideologies of the ruling class. The term IDEOLOGY refers to ideas and beliefs that guide and organize the social and cultural elements of the superstructure. Ideology is typically associated with the ideas and beliefs of the ruling class, which controls the means of production; this is the sense in which Marx himself used the term. Since Marx, the term has undergone a number of refinements and complications, with the relationship between ideology and the modes of production receiving special attention. For example, Georg Lukács argues, in *History of Class Consciousness* (1923), that materialist analysis must concern itself with "the relation to society as a whole," by which he meant "society as a concrete totality, the system of production at a given point in history and the resulting division of society into classes." Only when this relation to a social totality is established "does the consciousness of their existence that men have at any given time emerge in all its essential characteristics" (50). Ideology, for Lukács, is a form of false consciousness that arises whenever the subjective consciousness of a specific class (typically, the ruling class) is taken to be the objective consciousness of society at large. It is not merely a question of good or bad judgment, but rather of ignoring the fundamentally dialectical process of historical development. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci refined Lukács view of ideology and argued for a two-tier model of

the superstructure: “civil society” (“private”) would correspond to “the function of HEGEMONY which the dominant group exercises throughout society,” while “political society” (the State) would correspond to “ ‘direct’ DOMINATION or command exercised through the State and ‘juridical’ government. The functions in question are precisely organisational and connective” (Selections 12). Hegemony works through institutional modes of consensus and consent (e.g., universities, political parties, state bureaucracies, corporations). The goal for the dominant social group is to achieve hegemony by extending its ideology – its values, beliefs, and ideals – to every level of society. Gramsci and his successors put forward the idea of articulation to describe the myriad links between social institutions and individuals, points of ideological consensus and consent that create a tightly woven social and cultural fabric.

Like Fanon after him, Gramsci was interested in the role of the intellectual, especially those who are engaged, passively or actively, in supporting the dominant class and its ideology. “The intellectuals are the dominant group’s ‘deputies’ exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government”. Gramsci describes two distinct groups: traditional intellectuals (the clergy, professors, writers, artists, and others), who enjoy relative AUTONOMY, and organic intellectuals, the “specialists” that “every new class creates alongside itself ”. Both work within and sustain existing social conditions. Organic intellectuals in capitalist societies are mostly ineffective and “standardized,” willing promoters of the dominant ideology. Traditional intellectuals belong to professions and guilds, they are “ecclesiasts” or “medical men” and “put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group”. Gramsci suggests that the only alternative to this all-pervasive social net is to create forms of COUNTER-HEGEMONY especially among working-class activists and intellectuals. The need for the development of an organic intellectual tradition in the working classes led Gramsci to a radical reconception of “intellectual activity”: “Each man, finally, outside his professional activity, carries on some

form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a 'philosopher', an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought".

Raymond Williams understood early on the significance of Gramsci's rethinking of ideology. For him, ideology is a complex and multivalent phenomenon. He notes that ideology can refer not only to "a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group" but also to "a system of illusory beliefs" (Lukács called this "false consciousness") in contrast with "true or scientific reality," the discovery of which is the function of MATERIALIST criticism. The second definition can be combined with the first if one holds, as some Marxists do, that all class-based beliefs are at some level illusory. To further complicate matters, Williams adds a third possibility: ideology is "the general process of the production of meanings and ideas" (55). Williams concludes that despite the difficulties in forming a singular definition, it is necessary to arrive at a general term "to describe not only the products but the processes of signification, including the signification of values." Following V. N. Volosinov, he advocates using the terms "ideological" and "ideology" to refer to the production of signs and "the dimension of social experience in which meanings and values are produced" (70). Theoretical speculation on the concept of ideology, especially after the Second World War, is a good indicator of the tremendous importance that has been attached to the superstructural aspects of society.

Williams also drew on Gramsci in his discussion of overlapping epochs of social and cultural formations, in which different functions of ideology operate simultaneously. At any given historical moment, one can locate not only a dominant ideology but also residual and emergent ideologies that represent, respectively, the cultural formations of an earlier time and those of new social groups on the margins of the dominant group. This model not only accounts for the complexities and contradictions of late capitalism, it also acknowledges the

presence of counter-hegemonic potentialities within the social totality. This “Gramscian turn” in Williams’s work is evident in many Marxist thinkers of the 1970s. Of special note is Louis Althusser, who drew on Poststructuralism, linguistics, and psychoanalysis in his highly influential rereading of Marx. Althusser is most famous for his elaborations on Gramsci’s theory of ideology and the specific mechanisms of ideological hegemony that create the social subject. Following Jacques Lacan, he argues that false consciousness is an IMAGINARY construction: “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (109). Althusser here refers to the Lacanian Imaginary, which corresponds to the pre-Oedipal phase of development when the individual has not yet experienced differentiation from the mother, a space of fantasy formations, of resistance to mimesis, reason, rationality, the entire order of the SYMBOLIC. According to Althusser, the “ideological formations that govern paternity, maternity, conjugality and childhood” (211) produce a double distortion of reality: they substitute for the REAL we cannot know and they disguise the real nature of social relations (i.e., the Symbolic order). The Real also represents a potential for critique of and intervention into the Symbolic order of ideology. As Ernesto Laclau puts it, “the Real becomes a name for the very failure of the Symbolic in achieving its own fullness. The Real would be, in that sense, a retroactive effect of the failure of the Symbolic” (Butler et al. 68). In the fantasia of ideology, JOUISSANCE is put to work sustaining what Althusser calls “ideological state apparatuses,” into which “individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects.” Ideology “ ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘trans-forms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’ ” (174). This “imaginary misrecognition of the ‘ego’ ” (219) is the first and foremost ideological function of the capitalist state.

By the mid-1980s, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe could “state quite plainly that we are now situated in a post-Marxist terrain” (4). For Fredric Jameson, as for other post-Marxists, the analysis of class struggle and the problems of commodity production, which was well suited to the era of industry capitalism and the initial formation of modern classes, did not adequately account for the way that ideology was increasingly being used to organize classes and social relations. Jameson, one of the first major Marxist critics in the US, employs another important Althusserian concept, “structural causality,” which helps account for a non mechanistic mode of historical determination. What matters is not a direct economic or material relation between modes of production and the social and political spheres but rather the structure of relations between these modes and spheres and across the spectrum of social and cultural institutions. In many cases, this structure of relations is not easily perceivable. For Jameson, as for other post-Marxists, HISTORICAL DETERMINISM remains a vital concept, though it is no longer regarded in mechanistic terms. History is driven by necessity, but it is not the iron necessity of classical Marxism. It is instead the necessity of structure, of structural relations and of the subject’s own saturation by these relations. The turn to ideology and hegemony reflects the importance of relations of social power at the level of the superstructure; it has captured totally new social formations and relations of power, totally new forms of ideological hegemony and social totality. At the turn of the twenty first century, one could discern a turn to postfoundationalism, which seeks to reinstate the idea of UNIVERSALITY on a provisional or contingent basis in order to provide theory with the grounds for making statements about new political needs and new social relations. In part, this is a response to the politics of Postmodernism, in which difference, PERFORMATIVITY, pragmatics, game theory, and SIMULATION deconstruct any demonstrable and material social totality about which one can theorize. But it is also a response to the reality of a globalized, universalized marketplace and the dizzying pace of

technological transformation. It is on this shifting, globalized field that contemporary post-Marxism crafts new strategies for combating ideological hegemony.

(Source: *Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory* by Gregory Castle)