

Marx: A Very Brief Overview of His Aims and His Influence on Literature Studies

The basic thrust of Marx's work was towards an analysis of the social and economic history of humankind. He was concerned to expose the continued historical oppression of the working classes – be they the emerging slave class of tribal societies, the serf class of feudal society, or the proletariat of the capitalist age. Marx's theory of history owes a great deal to Hegel's dialectic method; crucially, though, Marx attempted to cast off Hegel's idealism, offering instead a materialist philosophy.¹ Here, “materialist” does not mean “materialistic,” a pejorative term for many of us today. By “materialist,” Marxists mean theories that focus on material, concrete, physical conditions, rather than abstract, ideal, or “spiritual” concerns.

The inexorable march of history, Marx conjectured, was towards communism. Each epochal shift – from tribal to primitive communal, to feudal, to capitalist – was brought about by irreconcilable class conflict (Marx 1983 [GI], 173-80). The only logical movement, once capitalism's class tensions proved unresolvable, was towards the “**dictatorship of the proletariat**” (a phrase coined by J. A. Weydemeyer in 1852): simply (crudely) put, *rule of the people for and by the people*.

Theoretical Marxism and political communism, then, are not the same thing. Marx offers an interpretation or theory of what communism *should* be. While Marx envisioned the coming of a communist utopia he would hardly have recognized any of the twentieth-century manifestations of political communism. Marx's project was indeed a humane one; in a letter to Weydemeyer, Marx described his own contribution to the theories of social class and class struggle as follows:

1. to show that the *existence of classes* is merely bound up with *certain historical phases in the development of production*; 2. that the class struggle necessarily leads to the **dictatorship of the proletariat**; 3. that this dictatorship itself constitutes no more than a transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*. (Marx to Weydemeyer, 5 March 1852; emboldening added)

By its very nature, then, communism proper would not be, for Marx, the replacing of one under-class with another, achieved by installation of totalitarian regimes. *True* communism would see the dissolution of class altogether. And because the history of humankind was, at its root, the history of economic organization and class struggle, the advent of communism would also mark the end of history (at least in the political-economic sense).

Along with Freud and Nietzsche, Marx is, arguably, one of the three most influential of modern philosophers.² Theoretical Marxism has certainly had a profound impact on literature study; indeed, there is no area of the arts and humanities that has not been significantly shaped by Marxist criticism. There is no denying, though, that academia – like so many other aspects of cultural life – is susceptible to trends and the lure of “The New.” By now, Marxism cannot claim to be a new critical approach or vantage point, and programmatic or dogmatic Marxist criticism is, today, a little unfashionable. But such intellectual fashions are probably best ignored; it is reasonable to suggest that one must have at least a cursory understanding of Marxism – even if one does not “speak” Marx-ese fluently – in order to negotiate the

1 For clarification on Hegel's influence on Marx, see Singer's books on both Marx (2000) and Hegel (2001).

2 In 2005, Marx was voted the Greatest Philosopher, by listeners of the BBC Radio 4 show *In Our Time*. The show is archived online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p003k9jg>.

labyrinth that is literary theory: the works of such prominent thinkers as Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Marshall Berman, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer – to name but a few – are all heavily indebted to Marx; indeed, without Marx these thinkers' works could not have been thought in the ways that they were (see Works Cited). What follows is by no means a complete survey of Marx and Marxist literary theory; it is merely an introduction to a few salient aspects.

Base and Superstructure

The relationship in Marxism between a society's economic base and its (broadly) cultural superstructure is important, yet more complicated than it might at first seem. Understanding what is meant by “base” and “superstructure,” and what the relationship between the two is, is important, for as Raymond Williams suggests, the idea “of the determining base and the determined superstructure has been commonly held to be the key to Marxist cultural analysis” (Williams 1973, 31). As far as Marxist literary theory goes, the concepts of base and superstructure might be applied to the social dynamics dramatized in a text, or to a consideration of literature's social-cultural role or function.

The base is the economic organization of a society: it is the industries, the work-forces, the technologies; the organization of workers, their relationships to one another and to their bosses; it is the sum total of the *basic* economic conditions by which people make their livings, and by which a society functions.

The superstructure is the ideological network (made of political, legal, juridical systems, for example) that is made possible by the organization of the base, and which shapes the kind of society we (think we) are. The superstructure shapes consciousness, but it is only possible because of the organization of the economic base. As Marx put it, “[t]he mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general” (Marx 1983 [CPE], 160).

This is a fairly serviceable definition of base and superstructure, but, as with so much in theory and philosophy, things are not quite so clear-cut as they, at first, might seem.

To begin with, while it might be reasonable to suppose that superstructural conditions are enabled *only* by the particular organization of the economic base, we must surely consider, also, the extent to which the superstructure exerts a limiting or controlling force on the base. For Marx, revolution in any epoch (be it feudal or capitalist) was inevitable; it was simply a matter, as mentioned above, of the different needs of the different classes (whose activities would, logically, be part of either base and superstructural activities) coming into irreconcilable conflict with one another (Marx 1983 [GI], 173-80).

That said, the fact that the working classes of any epoch are oppressed for as long as they are suggests that superstructural forces do affect the base to some extent. Williams is perhaps right, then, to suggest that the relationship of the base and superstructure is not simply one of, as he puts it, a “determining base and a determined superstructure” (Williams 1973, 31); rather, base and superstructure are part of a social feedback loop, the one influencing the other at all times. Engels, Marx's long-time collaborator, seems to suggest as much when he writes that “[t]here is an interaction of all these elements” of the base and superstructure, the sum total of which produces the final economic “movement” or development (Engels 1890).

In the twentieth century, Williams – drawing on the work of Gramsci – sought to formulate a more dynamic base-superstructure model. Base and superstructure, he argued, needed to be understood as

areas of related and inter-related practices, not as imaginary “zones” of social-economic activity; not only are they engaged in a constant dialogue with one another, the practices that make up the base and the superstructure are themselves always shifting and changing (Williams 1973).

As well as the thinking critically about the dynamics of the base and superstructure, we must also ask: just what is the relevance of base and superstructure to literature studies? For while Marx and Engels were both acutely aware of and sensitive to the arts, the superstructure, as they write of it, tends to consist of political or institutional elements.³ So where does literature sit in all this?

It is possible to view literature as belonging to the superstructure. Take the novel. If one views the novel as emerging from certain eighteenth-century social and economic changes (which occur at the base) (see, for example, Watt 1957), then this seems reasonable. The novel, we might say, is a superstructural development, made possible by changes in the economic base.

But if one were to turn to a critic like Walter Benjamin (himself a formidable Marxist thinker), we might be persuaded that literary forms and their writers are better understood as operating at *base-level*. Precisely because types and forms of writing are affected and made possible by activity at the base, it is here that writing and writers *should* be operating. Moreover, it is technological change that will democratize writing, and inaugurate it as a mode of political activism (Benjamin 1934). The author, says Benjamin, should be thought of as a *producer*, and must rise to this role. Benjamin is writing in the 1930s, and so when he speaks of technologies of mass production he is thinking of mechanically reproduced forms such as the newspaper and photography (Benjamin 1934; Benjamin 1936). Such technologies and forms, he suggests, may signal the disappearance of depth and the uniqueness that once distinguished “great” art. But

as writing gains in breadth what it loses in depth, the conventional distinction between author and public, which is upheld by the bourgeois press, begins [...] to disappear. For the reader is at all times ready to become a writer. (Benjamin 1934, 225)

At a time when fascism posed a global threat, Benjamin saw the politicization of art as a crucial move against fascism's “aestheticization” (apologies for the unwieldy coinage [not mine]!) of politics. Benjamin's is one of the subtler arguments for the democratization of art and the “proletarianization” (again, apologies!) of writing. But other writers have shared his view of the the writer as worker, and writing as work – Dos Passos (1935) and Atwood (2002), to name but two separated by time and style.

Example: Chester Himes

Briefly, then, an example of a way in which base and superstructure might be factored into our literary criticisms.

Chester Himes was an African American writer, who had two literary careers: following Richard Wright, whose protest novel *Native Son* was both critically admired and popular (it knocked Steinbeck's

3 “The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure — political forms of the class struggle and its results, to wit: constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas — also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*.” (Engels 1890)

Grapes of Wrath from its bestseller spot), Himes had a difficult and, financially speaking, ultimately unsuccessful run as writer of realist protest fiction. After moving from America to Paris, as a number of American writers did in the inter- and post-War years, Himes was persuaded to write hard-boiled detective fiction (in the vein of Hammett, Chandler, Cain, and others). At this Himes proved incredibly successful – this began in the 1950s; in France, he remains to this day a poster boy for Gallimard publishers.

Himes's turn from “serious” to commercial genre fiction might be understood in terms of the base-superstructure nexus: he ended up writing, and making a living from, whatever it was that social and economic forces conspired to make possible. But of course, there are many of us who would wish to defend genre fiction from so dismissive an attitude. Were one to turn one's attention to Himes's work itself, interpretations a little more nuanced and sustained are possible.

Consider *The End of a Primitive*, the work that marks Himes's transition from a writer of “literary” to genre fiction. The novel is semi-autobiographical, and charts the difficulties – artistic, sexual, racial – of a young writer, Jesse, trying to make his way in New York. The novel ends in the death of Jesse's white lover, Kriss, whom Jesse has killed whilst blind-drunk. On seeing the body, Jesse knows that he must be the murderer, although he has no recollection of this, thanks to his intoxication.

Himes, in rather didactic fashion, makes it clear to his reader that we are to see the murder as indicative of the social pressures acting on African Americans, pressures that restrict aesthetic and romantic/sexual choice: Jesse is unable to publish his work, because the market, he is told, will not support his sort of writing; it does not fit with the public's conception of black literature and “The Black Writer.” The death of Jesse's lover also seems to be the natural, implosive conclusion for a relationship that society will not sanction.

The style Himes uses in *Primitive* is an interesting vehicle for all this: third-person perspective is used, but much, if not all, of the novel is focalized through Jesse. And throughout the text, the clipped, minor syntax of newspaper reports and headlines is used to articulate Jesse's thoughts and perceptions – it is as if the very form and style that, for Benjamin, promised to democratize art, is now the means through which Jesse realizes there is no place for him in society. The democratization of art leaves no room for the Artist (that Jesse so wishes to be), while the dynamics of base and superstructure leave no room for anything other than a prefabricated pop image of “The Black Artist,” an image to which Jesse can or will not conform. There seems, in Himes's novel, to be no place at all – at least in America – for the Jesses of African American artistic culture.

Such a reading might be framed by, or organized around, a conception of the base-superstructure dynamic, and the place of literature within it. After all, it was Himes's firm conviction that his public failings as a writer were as much, possibly more, to do with social and economic forces, than with the writing itself. One might be tempted to say there was at least a grain of truth to this; out of America, Himes did very well, commercially and critically.

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[Note: This novel was written in the 1950s, but underwent various revisions; this publication date indicates the Norton edition, not when the novel was written]

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