

# Literary Theory: A Historical Survey

## Part 2: Foundations

### Lecture 5: Marxism

#### 1) Basic Co-ordinates

#### 2) Marxism in Literary Studies

#### 3) Later Developments in France and GB/US

#### 4) Problems

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#### 1) Basic Co-ordinates

- philosophy of history (cf. Comte's Positivism)
  - dialectics:
    - thesis ↔ antithesis → synthesis
    - (‘aufgehoben’: raised, preserved and cancelled)
- Georg Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831):
  - idealistic philosophy of history
  - Man's mind as the highest expression of the Absolute realizing itself in the historical process
- Karl Marx (1818-1883):
  - materialistic philosophy of history (‘philosophy must become reality’)
  - history as an objective process mirrored in human consciousness
  - objective truth emerges from practice, it is however dependent on the stage of development a society has reached

## Historical Materialism:

In the social production that men carry on, they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material forces of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and intellectual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men which determines their existence; it is on the contrary the social existence which determines their consciousness.

(Karl Marx, Preface to *Contributions to the Critique of Political Economy* 1859)

- human existence dependent on relationship with nature (metabolism)
- history as process of optimization
- determinism: material mode of production → social structure/consciousness
- economic structure:
  - a) material forces of production (means of production + labour)
  - b) relations of production (social and political arrangements of production and distribution)
- distribution of labour leads to inequality of classes in terms of access to means of production and positioning in relations of production (power/exploitation/conflict; the state as regulator)  
→ class societies are antagonistic (class struggle)
- the development of objective conditions will create a revolutionary situation
- history as a natural process which can be influenced by Man once its laws have been understood
- stages of human history:  
(natural society) → slaveowner society → feudalism → capitalism/communism  
→ (socialism)
- the economic foundations of capitalist societies: capital ↔ labour → production
  - the bourgeoisie ↔ the proletariat
  - means of production ↔ human labour
  - surplus value (profit/investment) ↔ wages
- alienation from activity, product and own species on the part of the workers
- tension between social production and private ownership
- crisis leads to objectively revolutionary situation (proletarian class consciousness)  
→ antagonistic society (realm of necessity) can be superseded by the beginning of the actual history of mankind (realm of freedom)
- Marxism as a guideline for social action

## 2) Marxism in Literary Studies

- basis of society (economic structure) vs. superstructure (ideas and institutions mediating between existence and consciousness/‘Sein und Bewußtsein’)
- ideology: necessarily wrong or limited consciousness which explains parts of reality convincingly (‘die herrschenden Gedanken’)
- the ideological character of literature in a class society

### **Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels (1820-1895):**

- art as the practice of appropriating reality/the world based on the ingrained human sense of beauty
- division of labour leads to a crippling of creativity
- artistic and material production (aesthetic beauty and historical content) are to a certain extent independent of each other); high levels of aesthetic achievement are possible at early stages of social development (e.g. classical art, Shakespeare)
- rejection of tendentious literature and direct artistic agitation
- realism: ‘typical characters under typical circumstances’, capturing the essential in concrete examples

### **Franz Mehring (1846-1919):**

- founder of materialist literary studies
- rejection of naturalism as pessimistic and symptomatic of bourgeois decadence as opposed to the optimistic attitude of the proletariat
- lack of proletarian art due to preoccupation with class struggle (‘Unter Waffen schweigen die Musen’) has to be compensated by appropriation of classical bourgeois literature for the masses (cf. GDR-claims of being the true inheritor of German humanist culture)
- rejection of an unpolitical understanding of art

### **Lenin (1870-1924)**

- the party as necessary vanguard of a proletarian cultural revolution which demands the subordination of artistic freedom
- political expedience as the most important criterion for judging art

### **Trozkij (1879-1940)**

- art has its own laws and cannot be revolutionized by decree
- the party shall protect and support artistic activities, direct regulation should be avoided
- as culture is necessarily class culture, proletarian culture is an impossibility: after the revolution there will be a truly human culture
- art should be approached in terms of its mediation of form, content and social context

### **'Expressionismusdebatte' (1937/38):**

- 'Widerspiegelung': knowledge as a reflection or mirroring of reality
- active social practice with effects in/on society
- art and literature as special forms of 'Widerspiegelung'
- adequacy as epistemological criterion

### **Georg Lukàcs (1885-1977):**

- symbolization of the essential in types
- 'correct' political attitude, or, in the past, artistic 'honesty' as criteria for good art  
(→ classical realism+, naturalism-, modernism as an aberration which sticks to surfaces instead of capturing the essence of things)

[vs.]

### **Ernst Bloch (1885-1977)**

- open for modern forms of art
- reality as a meaningful totality seems doubtful and ungraspable
- the anticipatory possibilities of consciousness/the potentiality of being
- art as anticipation ('Vor-Schein') of coming things and laboratory of possibilities (cf. Brecht: realism as an 'intention on reality')

[and]

### **Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969):**

- 20th century society: extreme alienation and objectification  
→ 20th century Man is completely subjugated by tradition and the industrialization of culture
- art as a final resort offering individual autonomy and happiness, but: art as a commodity vs. true/authentic art which resists commodification/objectification
- realism as a lie which creates the illusion of meaningful and graspable reality  
(→ breaking away from orthodox Marxism)
- not content, but mode of mediation (form) has to be revolutionized if art is to maintain its status as last resort of authenticity

### 3) Later Developments in France and GB/US

#### Marxism and Literary Studies in the 20th Century:

- of fundamental importance for introducing the possibility of a critical counter-narrative
- critical potential can be used independently from its framing in a particular philosophy of history and system of political ideology
- rejection of naive theories of reflection ('vulgar Marxism')

#### Later Developments in France:

##### Louis Althusser (1918-1990):

- combination of Marxism and structuralism
- artistic practice creates a degree of autonomy
- works of art are characterized by 'over-determination' which has to be addressed in its own terms
- art as the product of a network of determining factors: society as a complex formation, economy as a decisive but embedded influence
- focus of investigation: relational structures ('structuralist Marxism')
- "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1971): ideology 'interpellates' subjects into discourses

##### Pierre Macherey (\*1938):

- Marxist semiotics with poststructuralist tendencies focusing on how a text means instead of what it means, as well as on what a text *does not* say
- relations between texts and margins are meaningful but: Marxism as a science which produces objective explanations

#### More recent exponents: Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, Jacques Ranciere

#### Later Developments in Great Britain:

##### Terry Eagleton (\*1943):

- works of art are marked by ideological tensions and contradictions which are an effect of the emancipatory potential of human consciousness and of the multilayered complexity of literary discourse
- *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983)/*The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990)/*The Idea of Culture* (2000)

### Raymond Williams (1921-1988):

- pioneering the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies
- a critique of the developing capitalist social formation in terms of 'class', 'industry', 'democracy' and 'art'
- historicization and democratization of terms
- a dynamic picture of a contested culture of practices and formations with varies and variable affiliations
- 'structures of feeling' (*Culture and Society* 1983)

### Later Developments in the US:

#### Fredric Jameson (\*1934):

- attempt at synthesis of traditional and more recent forms of Marxism, formalism, structuralism, poststructuralism and psychoanalysis
- 'the political unconscious': texts cannot be interpreted immanently, interpretation is always governed by a master code or hidden master narrative and thus necessarily transcendent and allegorizing
  - 'narrative as a socially symbolic act'
  - "Always historicize!"
- periods of modern literature:
  - 1) mercantile capitalism → realism
  - 2) monopoly capitalism/imperialism → modernism
  - 3) multinational capitalism → postmodernism

> *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991)
- *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013)

## 4) Problems

- 'culture': 'class culture' vs. 'human culture'?
- art vs. reality?
- art vs. politics?
- truth vs. ideology?

### **What has Marxism contributed to literary criticism? (Szeman 2013, 49-56)**

> three primary forms of modes of intervention that Marxist criticism has taken:

- 1) Methodological criticisms and challenges to existing forms of criticism ('Always historicize!', 'Remember the centrality of the class struggle/the modes of production!' ...), pulling it away from idealist forms of historicism and formalism.
- 2) The received category of literature around which institutional practices such as professional associations and university departments are organized is scrutinized and placed into question.
- 3) Culture is an object of suspicion as a result of its structural function – not just because of its ideological function, but because it is also imagined as a space in which the crystallization of power can be interrupted or halted, and submission turned into autonomy and genuine self-expression.

### **Bibliography Lecture 5:**

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