**Marxist Criticism – General Introduction**

Marxist thinking has been influential in cultural theory, anthropology, history and literary criticism. It is one of the most political forms of cultural theory because (i) it links art with actual conditions within a particular culture and (ii) it sees forms of art not as some special realm but intimately linked to the existing power relations within a particular culture. Marxist criticism, therefore, explores power relations embedded and concealed in cultural texts.

From a Marxist perspective, differences in socioeconomic class divide people in ways that are much more significant than differences in religion, race, ethnicity, or gender. For the real battle lines are drawn, to put the matter simply, between the “haves” and the “have‐nots,” between the *bourgeoisie*—those who control the world’s natural, economic, and human resources—and the *proletariat,* the majority of the global population who live in substandard conditions and who have always performed the manual labor—the mining, the factory work, the ditch digging, the railroad building—that fills the coffers of the rich.

**The Class Struggle**

By the nineteenth century, nations such as England had become industrialized societies. Marx and Engels undertook detailed studies of the condition of culture, paying particular attention to questions of political power and economic conditions. Noting that in industrialized societies, political power rested with individuals or groups of individuals who controlled the factory or the industry, Marx and Engels noted that ‘class’ was the key element in such societies. Developing this theme, they argued that such societies exhibit a battle of the classes where the upper classes (feudal landlords, factory owners, capitalists) sought to keep the working classes (serfs, factory workers, proletariat) under their control. This process of domination—or *hegemony*—within the society becomes the central feature of Marxist thought.

Thus, we have two main classes here: the owner or the capitalist class and the working or the labour class. These two classes are always in conflict because the upper classes, or what Marx and Engels called the *bourgeoisie*, owned the means of production and the working classes owned nothing except their labouring bodies. Marxist thought terms this conflictual relation between classes as the ‘social relations of production’. These social relations are conflictual because they are exploitative: The dominant classes seek to control the working classes because their profits depend on an efficient management of the working class. Marxism argues that this relation between classes is the one that structures a society itself. What is clear is that, for Marxism, the economic realm (the means of production, the classes, the ownership of the means of the production) is the most important realm in any society, and class is the basic unit of a society.

**Commodity Fetishism and Alienation of Labour**

Because factory workers produced such large quantities of products, none of which bore their names or any other mark of their individual contributions, Marx observed that they became disassociated not only from the products they produced but from their own labor as well, and he noted the debilitating effects of what he called *alienated labor* on the laborer and on the society as a whole.

Similarly, Marx’s concern over the rise of a capitalist economy was a concern for the effects of capitalism on human values. In a capitalist economic system, an object’s value becomes impersonal. Its value is translated into a monetary “equivalent”—the word *capital* means money—and determined solely in terms of its relationship to a monetary market.

Of course, many Marxist insights into human behavior involve the damaging effects of capitalism on human psychology, and those damaging effects often appear in our relationship to the *commodity.* For Marxism, a commodity’s value lies not in what it can do (*use value*) but in the money or other commodities for which it can be traded (*exchange value*) or in the social status it confers on its owner (*sign-exchange value*). An object becomes a commodity only when it has exchange value or sign‐exchange value, and both forms of value are determined by the society in which the object is exchanged.

*Commodifica- tion* is the act of relating to objects or persons in terms of their exchange value or sign‐exchange value. I commodify a work of art when I buy it as a financial investment, that is, with the intention of selling it for more money, or when I buy it to impress other people with my refined tastes.

I commodify human beings when I structure my relations with them to promote my own advancement financially or socially. Most of us know what it means to treat a person like an object. An object becomes a commodity, however, only when it has exchange value or sign‐ exchange value.

**MARXISM AND CULTURE**

Marxism provides a sociological context and interpretation of cultural forms, whether it is a film or a novel. It locates, as noted already, all cultural forms within social and economic conditions existing in a particular society. Thus, it believes that cultural forms *reflect* social conditions, and the novel or film often reveals the truth about classes, class conflict and power relations within a society.

What a Marxist view of culture does, therefore, is to seek a ‘social referent’ (a term favoured by John Hall in his work on the sociology of literature, 1979). A ‘social referent’ describes the themes and representations within a work of art that somehow refers to the actual existing social conditions, contexts, conflicts.

Any work of imagination, in other words, also offers us a view of the tensions, problems, exploitation, within a society. A work of art—the product of the imagination—helps us understand our ‘real’ world.

A Marxist approach to culture focuses on both the production and consumption of the cultural artifact. That is, it focuses on the artist—author as well as audience—reader. By focusing on the elements and processes of production, Marxism seeks a material basis for abstract things like aesthetics or truth. It suggests that concepts and representations of beauty or ideals in literature and art are in some ways connected to (either directly and accurately, or indirectly and altering) material realities of economics, class relations, power and suffering. Marxism thus asks us to locate a *material* basis for culture.

**CULTURE, IDEOLOGY AND HEGEMONY**

Marxist criticism suggests that all cultural forms seek to ensure that the dominant classes in a society remain dominant. In order to do so, it must convince the working classes and the oppressed not to rebel or revolt. The dominant classes usually achieve this by suggesting to the working classes that the present social condition is ‘natural’, benevolent and ultimately beneficial to them. One needs only to think of the factory owners in Dickens’ fiction and the way a character like Stephen Blackpool (*Hard Times*) is convinced (at least partly) of the ‘naturalness’ of the industrial system. In order to achieve this convincing argument about the ‘just’ and ‘natural’ order of things, the dominant classes need to control the kinds of art and cultural products that circulate.

This ‘twist’ of reality—the real economic conditions in any society—is what Marxist criticism calls *ideology*, and is the first key concept in Marxist theory.

Marx and Engels argued that the capitalist mode of production justified and naturalized itself through certain patterns of thought or ideas ... With social structures such as education, culture and religion the oppressed classes believed that the order of inequality in society is ‘natural’ or ‘preordained’, and do not recognize that they are oppressed. This system of thought or representation that helps naturalize economic inequality and oppression is termed *ideology.*

Ideology is the writings, speeches, beliefs and opinions—cultural practices —that assert the ‘naturalness’ and necessity of economic practices. The ideology is, therefore, an instrument of power because it helps prop up the dominant classes by naturalizing an exploitative relationship and convincing the working classes that this is how things are. Ideology prevents the recognition of oppression by the oppressed. Thus, it is a blind, a veil that prevents the oppressed from proper understanding. Hence, Marx termed it *false consciousness.*

Ideology is about power because it legitimizes the power of the dominant classes or sections of a society. From the examples above we have seen how the capitalist class tries to naturalize conditions of exploitation. Ideology is what enables the capitalist class to naturalize these conditions because ideology provides a system of beliefs and ideas that the working classes absorb. In John Thompson's definition ‘to study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination’ (1984: 4). The task of Marxist criticism is to locate the ideologies implicit in any cultural text.

The domination and reinforcement of power relations is termed *hegemony*, a term popularized by the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci. Hegemony is akin to ideology, but is more than that. It includes ideology because, as we shall see, hegemony works most effectively when the dominated accept their domination.

**Hegemony** refers to the processes—including ideology—through which the dominant classes maintain power through the consent of the people.

Ideology works, according to Terry Eagleton through six different strategies:

1. Bypromotingbeliefsandvaluescongenialtoit;
2. Naturalizingthesebeliefstorenderthemself-evident;
3. Universalizingthesebeliefs;
4. Devaluingideasthatmightchallengeit;
5. Rejectingalternativeorrivalformsofthought;
6. Obscuringsocialreality.

For hegemony to be effective it has to become invisible, and this is where ideology comes in. The ‘civil society’ with its structure of courts, the bureaucracy, religious and educational systems spread ideology through the law, textbooks, religious rituals and norms so that the people imbibe them unaware of the ideology.

**Interpellation**

This construction of subjects through ideology is what **Louis** **Althusser** termed *‘interpellation’*.

Interpellation is the process of consenting to ideology, accepting it and not being aware of it. It makes the subject believe that s/he is an independent being and not a subject at all controlled by outside forces. In other words, ideology interpellates the individual as a subject but makes her/him believe s/he is a free agent.

Interpellation consists of two stages:

* Ideology precedes the individual and an individual is inserted into the ideological scheme.
* There is a pre-determined set of roles out of which the individual ‘automatically’ chooses a few, all the while assuming that s/he has freely chosen them.

**BASE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE**

Perhaps the most common concept and set of terms associated with Marxist thought would be ‘base and superstructure’. We know that in Marxism the social and cultural aspects of life are believed to be dependent upon the economic ones. This is essentially the base–superstructure model. The economic conditions in a society constitute the ‘base’ because they determine the nature and character of the social and cultural forms. The cultural aspects constitute the ‘superstructure’.

‘Base and superstructure’ in Marxist thought refers to the relationship between the economic and social-cultural aspects of society where the economic base (which includes factors and relations of productions) determines, influences and forms the cultural superstructure (which includes arts, religion, the law, media, lifestyles).

What this means is that the nature of the base will be crucial in determining what kinds of cultural forms emerge in any society. This means, cultural forms have a *material* basis. Films and art forms will be connected to the kind of economy that exists in a particular society. American films reflect the capitalist nature of production where individuals are ‘alienated’ from their work as well as each other. Hence their films also often show a sense of fragmented society with a high degree of individualism.

Class conflict, exploitative capitalism, the domination of the bourgeois class will manifest as political power. Once capitalists (who are part of the ‘base’ because they constitute the factors of production) acquire political power then they seek to introduce measures (as in economic or legal policy) that will help them reinforce and expand their power. In other words, the base, which provides a superstructure, will in turn be strengthened by the superstructure.

**THE CULTURE INDUSTRY**

The term *culture industry* was coined by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, two German theorists, in their work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1995 [1944]). The term readily captures the Marxist assumption that cultural forms like paintings, soap operas or films are no different from cars, television sets or domestic appliances. It indicated the Marxist belief that ‘culture’ is not an abstract thing that is created by a solitary individual genius. Rather, ‘culture’ is a product of social and economic conditions in any society. Thus, art is not a ‘pure’ aesthetic realm but one which is produced and sold like any other consumer good.

The use of the term *culture industry* also proposes a more political function for culture. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the culture industry takes up the utility that consumers derive from any commodity (what in Marxist terms is called ‘use-value’) and makes it a product of the capitalist system.

The term *culture industry* is used mainly to describe mass cultural forms. It transforms the individual from a thinking and discerning individual into an unthinking consumer.

‘Culture industry’ refers to mass culture where entertainment and its forms convert individuals into passive consumers. Pleasure and fun are ‘standardized’ market ‘products’ and the individuals are obedient subjects who consume them. The ‘culture industry’, therefore, produces unthinking masses of people who accept commodified sentiments and entertainments as ‘natural’. The concept is indebted to Marxist views of the function of ideology.

However, we should not take the term ‘industry’ literally as ‘factory’. ‘Industry’ here refers to the standardization of the cultural product, its meaning and value. Thus, ‘prestige’ or social value becomes standardized as ‘brands’ in consumer culture.

**FREDRIC JAMESON AND POSTMODERNITY**

In his later work, Jameson turned to what he termed the *cultural logics* of various social-economic conditions. Linking capitalism with particular cultural forms, Jameson proposed that every ‘moment’ in capitalism has its expression or literary-cultural equivalent (cultural logic) in particular modes of writing/representation or aesthetic approach:

* market capitalism had realism
* imperialism had modernism
* multinational capitalism has postmodernism

In other words, realism, modernism and postmodernism are the cultural expressions and methods and aesthetic styles of a deeper socio-economic form of capitalism.

Jameson argued that postmodern cultural trends and practices were cultural expressions of the deeper economic structures of new forms of capitalism. As Jameson put it: ‘This whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world’ (1991: 5).

**Some questions Marxist critics ask about literary texts**

The following questions are offered to summarize Marxist approaches to literature.

1. Does the work reinforce (intentionally or not) capitalist, imperialist, or classist values? If so, then the work may be said to have a capitalist, impe‐ rialist, or classist agenda, and it is the critic’s job to expose and condemn this aspect of the work.
2. How might the work be seen as a critique of capitalism, imperialism, or classism? That is, in what ways does the text reveal, and invite us to con‐ demn, oppressive socioeconomic forces (including repressive ideologies)? If a work criticizes or invites us to criticize oppressive socioeconomic forces, then it may be said to have a Marxist agenda.
3. Does the work in some ways support a Marxist agenda but in other ways (perhaps unintentionally) support a capitalist, imperialist, or classist agenda? In other words, is the work ideologically conflicted?
4. How does the literary work reflect (intentionally or not) the socioeconomic conditions of the time in which it was written and/or the time in which it is set, and what do those conditions reveal about the history of class struggle?
5. How might the work be seen as a critique of organized religion? That is, how does religion function in the text to keep a character or characters from realizing and resisting socioeconomic oppression?

Sources:

* Contemporary Litrary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism by Pramod K. Nayar.
* Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide by Lois Tyson.