

M.A. English Semester II CC8 Modern and Contemporary Theory

Marxist theorists

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Gyorgy Lukacs

- Played an important part in the early development of Marxist Lit/ Cultural theory
- Participation in the 30's debate on representation in Literature with Theodore Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht
- Opposed the experimental aesthetics of high modernism and argued that fragmentation and obscurity were symptomatic and equivalent to alienation.
- Supported realism as a corrective to the disorienting conditions of modernism
Realism: expansive picture of society with historical forces shaping it
Reflectionism: assumes that a text will reflect the society that produces it, how characters and their relationships typify and reveal class conflict; the socio-economic system or the politics of time and place.
Provide a truer insight into reality
- Out of the perception of fragmentation and Alienation under capitalism, emerged the concept of **Reification**: sense of objectification experienced by individuals that are subordinated by the rationalizing process of commodity production and thus reduced to objects.

Brecht

- Experimentation sought to contrast dramatic theatre, a part of western tradition of realism with his version of Epic Theatre
- Theatre was not a spectacle but a social instrument for encouraging a debate.
- To arouse the audience's capacity for action rather than being passive spectators
- Instead of undergoing catharsis, they must intellectually participate in the action and take action
- This is the Alienation Effect: Brecht's protagonists are ordinary, tough and unscrupulous
Use of mimicry instead of mimesis or total identification: use of gestures to indicate rather than reveal; use of placards to inform of action to take place, the use of incongruous music: for instance lively music in tragic situations
- Breaking down of the 4th Wall, the space between the actors and the audience.

The Frankfurt School

- First Generation: Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Walter Benjamin

Second Generation: Habermas: Public Sphere and Communicative Action

- Third Generation: Alex Honneth: the paradoxes of capitalist modernisation and the ambiguity of progress.

- Offers a critique of modern capitalist culture
- Mass culture as regimented and reduced to commercial dimension
- Art embodying a critical distance from a lived social and political world
- Walter Benjamin: The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction – Modern technology has transformed works of art depriving them of the ‘AURA’ of uniqueness that they possessed earlier; they are effectively copies for mass consumption without the original form
- While Marx predicted that capitalism has been on the decline, Adorno stated it had become more entrenched
- While Marx focused on economics, Adorno emphasized the role of culture in maintaining status quo
- Popular culture was the reason for people’s passive satisfaction and lack of interest in overthrowing the capitalist system
- The culture industry churned out debased mass of unsophisticated sentimental products which have replaced the more challenging art forms which may lead people to question social lives
- False Needs are created by the culture industry. These can be satisfied by the capitalist system. True needs such as freedom, full expression of creative potential and genuine happiness are replaced. In a consumerist society, natural needs or desires have been replaced by needs stimulated by cultural representations. It encodes by creating images we desire so that we understand the world through these images. Capitalist productions create demands through marketing strategies, then produce the products to meet the demand. They are no longer natural needs, but culturally produced.
- Commodity Fetishism: promoted by marketing, advertising and media industries means that social relations and cultural experiences are valorized in terms of money. We appreciate a commodity in terms of its monetary value.
- Products of the culture industry may be emotional or apparently moving but Adorno sees it as cathartic: a short cry followed by a feeling of restoration. Television prevents people from meaningful conversation, questioning the inequities of their lives. Instead lives revolve around TV in a patterned quotidian schedule.

- Antonio Gramsci : Hegemony, Common Sense

Gramsci understands the state as a combination of:

- a) Political Society: Army, Police, Legal System (institutions that are a part of the controlling mechanism of the state)
- b) Civil Society : Family, Education System, Trade Unions (this in the non-state private sphere)

The Capitalist state rules through a combination of Force and Consent; Force that is instrumentally exerted by the Political Society and Consent that is manufactured for the Civil Society.

The role of democratic civil society is necessary for counter-hegemony.

- Louis Althusser : Ideology, ISA and RSA, Interpellation

Fredric Jameson: 'Postmodernism or Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism'

- Cultures formed through the mass media
- The mass culture shapes our ideologies and brings us under the influence of media culture: this is a process that Jameson calls Hegemony.
- In this postmodern world, the culture industry (media+capitalism) colonise people's thoughts thus shaping their worldview.
 - Post modernism is not a difficult, avant garde form but a dominant cultural form in the late 20th Century
 - Art is not a continuance of modernism but an attempt to recreate it by a generation for whom newness was impossible. Yet this newness has been commodified by a culture that turns everything including art into profit.
 - Therefore aesthetic production= commodity production
 - He reads the Bonaventure Hotel in California not as a design statement but a mutation of space creating an entire world within, alienating individuals from the outside world recreating hyperreal global structures of late capitalism.

Stuart Sim; Post-Marxism: An Intellectual History(2000)

- defines Post-Marxism as a theoretical approach that has rescued Marxism from its decline as a global force after the collapse of the USSR and the communist regimes.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouff

- Adapt Marxism to the frameworks of poststructuralism, feminism and postmodernism
- While early Marxist positions were in an uneasy relationship with poststructuralism, feminism and postmodernism, Post- Marxism has a flexibility that makes for greater relevance in the contemporary world.
- The economic processes are not necessarily privileged but one of the numerous aspects of a complex cultural matrix.
- Because of the decline of the working class and trade unions the contemporary underclass are not workers but the mass unemployed
- Division of the disadvantaged: divided by identities race, gender, religion caste, class, disability, ageism and nationality
- Class mobility indicates that economic power is not necessarily related to social influence.

Pierre Bourdieu

- Develops Post -Marxist thinking beyond the centrality of economic power
- In Cultural reproduction and Social Reproduction, he introduced the idea of Cultural Capital : all elements other than financial wealth that confers social mobility: education, intelligence, knowledge of art forms, dress, speech, physical appearance
- Social advantage is therefore not merely a question of money but modes of behaviour and knowledge. Difference between old money (inherited) and new money (earned) hence the term nouveau riche.
- Social Capital: influence of networks and associations that gives access to sources of power. The idea of property is transformed from something exchanged through monetary means to cultural exchange through knowledge and influence.