

FROM RHETORIC TO DECONSTRUCTION

Lecture Twenty: Marxism

Basic concepts

Founded on philosophical materialism: the world is the sum total of forms of matter. The role of **Karl Marx** and **Friedrich Engels**. Method of investigation: dialectics (from statement to the negation then to the reformulation of the original statement, but with a greatly enriched meaning←cf. **Hegel's thesis-antithesis-synthesis** formula). Three sources: (1) German idealist philosophy (Hegel, Feuerbach); (2) English political economy (Adam Smith, David Ricardo); (3) French socialism (Fourier, Saint-Simon, Proudhon). Method of inquiry: dialectical materialism (in ontology and epistemology), historical materialism (in the study of history). Central concern: the individual human being (subject) and the relations of human beings with other human beings as well as with the objective material world in securing their means of survival.

Knowledge = reflection, the world in the senses and in the consciousness; its earliest form: magic comprising the three basic—still indistinct—areas of consciousness: religion, science and art, which, over time, acquire autonomy (never complete). The need for art (the “aesthetic sense”) and art itself are the products of history.

Translating into materialist terms the Hegelian idealist notion of progress: history is kept in motion by the conflict between the forces of production (the means: tools, machinery, etc., also the people who work them) and the relations of production (the positions—owners or wage-labourers—that people occupy in relation to the means of production). Society comprises antagonistic classes→the class struggle as the motive force of history. The spiral ascent (Hegel/Marx) of progress: from primitive communism through slave-holding, feudal, capitalist and socialist forms of society to communism.

The economic foundation—the totality of the relations of production—sustains and determines the superstructure: the various forms of social consciousness—law, politics, art, religion, philosophy, etc. As the foundation changes, so does the superstructure. “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx).

Art is mimetic, that is, realistic (in the case of abstract forms: rhythm, proportion and symmetry, ornamentation, or lyric poetry, only indirectly). **György [Georg] Lukács**: the history of literature: realism versus anti-realism←two senses of realism: style (verisimilitude, fidelity to detail) and creative method/principle (the essential truth about the world). Lukács's norm: critical realism (Balzac, Tolstoy, Thomas Mann).

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Some history

Marxism as a philosophy with a practical agenda and as an aesthetic theory was first allied to the Social Democratic movement; a break after the collapse, in 1916, of the Second International (uniting the Social Democratic parties of Europe), thus it became almost the sole property of the revolutionary Communist parties. The dogma of art as a service to the Communist cause (party-spiritedness) was enforced in the Soviet Union by Andrei **Zhdanov**, chief ideologist under **Stalin**. Ideological strait-jacket imposed on art in the socialist bloc in the 1950s. The enforcement of socialist realism. Yet world-class literature created by artists of the socialist persuasion (Maxim Gorky, Mikhail Sholokhov, Martin Andersen Nexö, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Attila József, Louis Aragon, Bertolt Brecht).

In England: a re-evaluation of the national literature and the clarification of theoretical positions in the 1930s (Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry* [1937], *Studies in a Dying Culture* [1938]; Ralph Fox, *The Novel and the People* [1937]; Alick West, *Crisis and Criticism* [1937]). An orientation towards Cultural Studies after WWII (Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* [1958]). Impressive achievements in historiography (A. L. Morton, E. P. Thompson, Philip Hobsbawm). On the American side: militant, short-lived flirtations with Marxism (Malcolm Cowley, Lionel Trilling, Edmund Wilson); the role of the periodicals *The New Masses* and *Partisan Review* in '30s. Annette T. **Rubinstein**, *The Great Tradition in English Literature from Shakespeare to Shaw* (1953).

The domain of art in Lukács's *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen* (The specificity of the aesthetic [1963])

Key concept: the specific, the middle ground between the universal and individual, the universal appearing in the individual as its essence, turning it into a case of the specific and implying that it is impossible to grasp the individual as such; the individual exists as the stage through which experience takes us from the universal to the

specific; consider when dramatist (universal) and Shakespeare (individual) are combined into Shakespeare is a dramatist (specific). The aesthetic domain occupies this latter space of the specific; by presenting the universal in the individual, it creates types—typical characters in typical circumstances, and achieves intensive totality. Depending on the particular genre, the specificity of a work may be closer to the one than the other pole. Drama represents a higher level of generalization than does the novel.

Imperfect art moves too far from the middle ground of the specific either in the direction of the universal (allegory) or the individual (naturalism).

▪ Romantic antecedents of Lukács's theory highlighted by comparison with **Coleridge**'s idea of the symbol in *The Statesman's Manual*, where the symbol "is characterized by a translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general"; it "always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible" and is superior to allegory, which is "but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language" (emphasis added). The abstract categories (universal, individual, special) are almost identical with those of Lukács; the meanings they carry when filled with substance are of course a different matter.

Ideology and the "triumph of realism"

Ideology: definitions as (1) "false consciousness" (Marx); (2) "ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power" (Terry Eagleton's list in Ideology [1991]); (3) "the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relation to a social structure" (Eagleton's list).

Engels on the **Balzac** problem: B. a reactionary royalist, yet an honest chronicler, in *La Comédie humaine*, of the decades of the Bourbon restoration. "[T]hat I consider one of the greatest triumphs of Realism, and one of the grandest features in old Balzac" (Letter to Margaret Harkness [1888]).

▪ Possible reason for the reactionary ideology failing to impose itself on the representation? The power of the "reality principle"? Or—consider Transcendentalist/Romantic **Emerson** on sincerity: we live in a world of illusions (appearances); when "at home," an honest man will, however, be sincere and look reality in the face (1844); Balzac, metaphorically, "at home" in his novels where he could not deceive himself

NB. Engels's observation is one of the critical commonplaces of the period; he took it from Zola; it turns up in Henry James's essay on Balzac in 1902.

The "triumph of realism," endorsed by Lukács, too, is regarded by many as unresolved. Attempts to resolve it reflect positions Marxism has for a long time been caught in. Consider

T. W. Adorno ("Commitment" [1960]). A. rejects commitment that "shows." "The notion of a 'message' in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world"; "accommodation to the world" = an acceptance of the world as it is; in the service of a better world we need, instead of semblances, a showing, in perfect form, of how imperfect the actual world is, which means that "every commitment to the world must be abandoned to satisfy the ideal of the committed work of art," that is, the perfect work of art. Beckett and Kafka preferred to Brecht and Sartre. → Balzac was "committed" to his art.

Eagleton ("Towards a Science of the Text" [1976]). A pre-existent ideology is signification with history as its signified. Through being worked by the text (by its generic conventions, formal strategies, etc.), it is raised to the second power, and becomes the ideology of the text, not pre-existent but identical with the text itself. Every part of the text is determined but it also determines, in other words, it is never at one with itself, and meaning is produced by the interplay of "phenomenal" and "real" text. The "triumph of realism" is due to this transformative operation of the text.

Fredric Jameson. J. discusses the Balzac problem under the heading "Realism and Desire" (*The Political Unconscious* [1981]) partly in Lacanian terms (cf. desire). Balzac was a reactionary on the level of desire, which he was able to indulge only in daydreams. But "the production of a whole ideology as a precondition for the indulgence of a specific daydream implies [. . .] a reality principle or censorship within the latter" = because the Real resists desire, gratification of desire may take place at the Imaginary level only if possible objections to that gratification (so as to avoid disappointment) are taken into account.

Marxism today

The revolutionary perspective dimmed → accommodation with other current theories (Freud & Lacan to Postcolonial Theory). Activist orientation, social agenda lost, critical spirit sanitized. Armchair philosophy of the West.