

Lecture 21

Marxist Literary Theory I: Marx and Brecht

Hello and welcome everyone to another lecture on literary theory. Today we are going to start with Marxism and its influence on reading and understanding literature. Marxist criticism has represented for quite some time now one of the major strands of theory within the field of English literary studies, yet ironically, Karl Marx himself did not produce any coherent theoretical approach to literature. What this means is that the whole of Marxist literary theory is a derivative discourse. Dealing with this derivative discourse mainly poses two different kinds of problems. The first problem is that all Marxist literary theory refers back to the original theories of Marx which are primarily on political economy. And as a consequence of this, studying Marxist literary theory often means learning aspects of Marxist economics which otherwise do not have any direct relevance to literary studies as such. The second problem is that individual Marxist literary theorists, whom we will study in this course, borrowed different things from different works of Marx. Now since the latter constitutes a hugely elaborate set of ideas, it becomes difficult to give you a brief gist of all of the relevant ideas of Marx that you will find useful in your studies of the various Marxist literary theorists. Therefore, the strategy that we will follow is something like this: we will first start with a brief sampling of Marx's ideas and then move on to study in more details the works of individual Marxist literary theorists whose works have had a direct impact on how literature is read and understood. And in today's lecture the theorist that we will be discussing in particular is Bertolt Brecht. But before starting our discussion on Brecht, let us dwell upon the writings of Karl Marx.

Karl Marx

Karl Marx's dates are 1818 to 1883. He was born in the German city of Trier and in fact this year the city celebrated the 200th birth anniversary of Karl Marx. Now, interestingly, though Marx is today known primarily for his contribution to political economy and for basing his communist ideology on this economic foundation, he actually started off as a student of law. Later he switched to philosophy and produced a PhD thesis on the works of two ancient Greek philosophers, Democritus and Epicurus. Indeed, it was not until 1859 that his first major work on economy was published under the title *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*. That means 11 years after he had published *The Communist Manifesto* along with his friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels in 1848. Marx had however worked on his economic theories for a prolonged period before the publication of *Contribution to a Critique of political Economy* and had also in fact written a number of elaborate works before 1859. But they remained unpublished in his life time. Some of these texts like *The Economic and Political Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology* are today considered as important preparatory exercises for his magnum opus opus titled *Das Kapital* which translates in English as *Capital*.

Marx originally planned *Capital* as a work running into a number of volumes and dealing with all the major aspects of how the capitalist form of economy functions. But he was able to bring out only the first volume of *Capital* during his lifetime and it was published in 1867. Two more volumes of *Capital* were published after his death from his notes edited by Friedrich Engels.

Now to give you a brief sample of Marx's work I would like to briefly explore the first chapter of *Capital* Volume I. This will of course not give us any comprehensive understanding of Marx nor will it help us understand literature better. But it will definitely help us get a glimpse of some

of the key features that characterized Marx's work on which much of the later Marxist literary theory is founded.

Commodity

So, interestingly, Marx begins his book *Capital* not with a discussion of capital itself but with a discussion of commodity which is really one of the most widespread manifestations of the capitalist economy. So what is a commodity? Well a commodity is anything that we use and that we buy from the market. That means we are basically surrounded by commodities and everything that we buy from a brick-and-mortar shop or online to satisfy our physical needs like food for instance or our intellectual or aesthetic needs like a book or a painting for instance belong to the class of commodities. So within a capitalist economy none of us might be able to survive very long without buying and using commodities. Now I don't know whether you have noticed it or not but while defining commodity I have been repeatedly stressing on two different aspects that characterize it. The first aspect is that it can satisfy a need and therefore it has a use or, as Marx puts it, a "use value". On the other hand, a commodity by the virtue of being something that can be bought and sold in a market has another aspect which we shall call after Marx the "exchange value". So exchange value basically refers to the quality of a commodity to be exchanged in the market place with any other commodity. Let us say that I manufacture shirts and I need a pair of trousers then I can go to the market and let us say in exchange of 3 shirts I can buy one pair of trousers. Now don't get confused here by thinking that we cannot usually directly exchange three shirts for a pair of trousers in a market place. Rather, what we get when we sell our shirts is money and then we get to use that money to buy a pair of trousers. But please remember that money here is merely a mediating agent that facilitates the exchange and

does nothing more. So in effect irrespective of whether I am using money or doing barter I am exchanging three shirts for one pair of trousers.

Now a commodity not only has these two aspects – use value and exchange value – but these two aspects are also in contradiction to each other. Let us take the example of a car that your parents might have bought. Now a car is obviously a commodity and like any other commodity it should have two aspects. So let us say that you are a car enthusiast and you tend to drive your parents' car quite a lot. This means that you are primarily focused on the car's use value. Now let us assume that your parents have it in mind to sell the car in future if they ever require a large amount of money: Which means that though they use the car, they are also focused on the car's future exchange value. Now in this situation there will arise an obvious contradiction. You might want to drive the car more and more to extract as much use value from it as possible but that will reduce the future exchange value of the car through excessive wear and tear. On the other hand, if your parents want to preserve the car in as intact a condition as possible to protect its future exchange value, they might limit the amount of time that you get to drive the car, thereby restricting its use value.

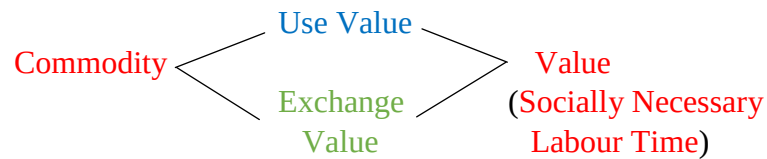
This internal contradiction that underlines the existence of a commodity is important and we will have to return to it later. But for now let us focus on the question of value that Marx poses to a commodity. The question is simple. When we encounter a commodity say on the rack of a supermarket we see a price tag attached to it which is an indication of how valuable the commodity is. The question that Marx asks is what determines this value?

Now as we have seen, Marx identifies a commodity through its two aspects, its usability and its exchangeability. Marx argues that the value of a commodity derives from combining together these two contradictory values. To show this, he starts by looking at the exchange value and

argues that if a commodity can in principle be exchangeable with any other commodity then it has to have a common factor that makes this exchangeability possible. In other words, there has to be something in common for me to reach the equation that three shirts equal one trouser. This common factor cannot be the material constitution of the commodity because, for instance, the constituent material of a shirt and a car are completely different for them to bring together on a common plane of exchangeability. So what is this common factor that gives a commodity its exchange value? According to Marx it is labour time. All commodities become commodities through the expenditure of a certain amount of labour which is measurable by time. So let us say for instance that a car takes more labour time to be made than a shirt. This will mean that a car will be more valuable than a shirt and you will need quite a number of shirts to be able to exchange them for one car. So the theory of labour time explains why commodities are exchangeable but how does it incorporate the concept of use value because, as I have said, Marx shows that the value of a commodity is ultimately dependent on a combination of use value and exchange value. To understand this, let us look at the concept of labour time again.

Now let us say that you spend an enormous amount of labour to construct a car which has only one slot for wheel and which makes it an impossible vehicle to drive. Will it be of any value when you take it to the market? Of course not and the reason why it will not have value in spite of you spending so much labour is that it does not have any usability. So when we say that the measure of value is labour time we need to qualify the statement by saying that it should be labour time dedicated to manufacture things that are needed within the society. In other words, value is seen to be predicated on socially necessary labour time which combines in itself both the notion of exchangeability and usability.

So if we simplify our discussion on commodity in the form of an equation it will look something like this:



Dialectical Method

So what are the key takeaways from this discussion on commodity and its value? Well there are two things of importance. The first thing that I would like you to notice is Marx's characteristic dialectical approach. This dialectic method of enquiry proceeds by identifying the internal contradiction underlying something and then exploring how this contradiction is resolved. So as in the case of Marx's analysis of commodity we are presented with two constituent concepts – use value and exchange value—which are in contradiction to each other. In the language of the dialectical method one of these terms would be labeled as “thesis” and the other as its “antithesis”. We then follow how this contradiction is subsumed and dissolved in a third concept which is that of value as socially necessary labour time. In the language of the dialectical method this third term would be called synthesis. In Marx, however, each synthesis is again found giving way to a new set of internal contradiction, a new thesis and antithesis, which are then subsumed within a new synthesis and so this chain continues. Indeed, the Marxist scholar David Harvey have extensively argued how the whole of *Capital* can be read as a series of contradictory terms producing syntheses and then again breaking down into further contradictory terms. As Harvey points out in his book titled *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* each of these contradictions represent crucial conflicts within the processes of capitalist economics and consequently within the social, political and cultural order that is informed by capitalism. This

identification of contradiction is crucial because the dialectical method through which Marx unravels and then engages with this contradiction would play a very important role in the work of later Marxist theorists that we will study.

Appearance vs. Reality

The second key takeaway that I would like you to focus on is Marx's treatment of the mundane reality as an appearance or a façade. For instance, when we go to purchase commodities from the market we are only confronted with price tags of different denominations. Indeed, if you are buying your things from a supermarket you don't even see any human presence behind it, not even that of a shopkeeper. But as our discussion of Marx has revealed, these commodities are ultimately all products of human labour which is precisely what gives them value. But this underlying reality of labour relations goes unnoticed when we encounter a commodity, so much so that we develop a habit of looking at a commodity as an independent thing which has almost fallen from the sky. When we consume say a packet of rice bought from the super market we are not usually aware of the chain of labour processes and laboring individuals that has produced the rice. This means that whereas the packet of rice is now made consumable for us because we live within a human society and because as a consumer I am in a social relationship with other human beings who are producers – the capitalist economy centered on commodity makes us impervious to this social reality. The appearance of this social relationship which manifests itself in the commodity form gets accepted not as appearance or façade of the true reality but indeed as reality itself. Both Marx and Marxist literary critics would be deeply concerned about this distinction between the surface appearance and the underlying reality of all that surrounds us. And just like the poststructuralists, Marxist literary critics too remain interested in problematizing our mundane perception of reality and in revealing their conventional nature even

though we often take them to be eternal and universal. And this point will become clearer as we discuss the work of Bertolt Brecht.

Bertolt Brecht

Brecht was born in 1898 in the southern German province of Bavaria and belonged to the generation which passed through the First World War. Now as you will know from our discussion on the topic of New Criticism, the World War presented for Europe not only a political but also a moral crisis of values and the very basis of the bourgeois Western civilization that had been built over the past four centuries seemed as if it was falling apart. Between the 1920s and early 1930s, when Brecht made his appearance as a dramatist, he started by expressing this collective disillusionment of his generation with the realities of bourgeois civilization by developing a strikingly new form of drama which he referred to as epic theatre. This epic theatre became one of the strongest forms of Marxist aesthetic manifestation in the twentieth century and we will have to return to it later but let us continue with his biography for a moment. In 1933, with the rise of Nazism, Brecht like so many other intellectuals had to leave Germany, and again like so many of them he too subsequently ended up in America where he stayed till 1947. It was in these years of exile that Brecht produced some of his most well-known plays like *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Life of Galileo*, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Brecht however became one of the victims of the communist baiting that gained prominence in America during the mid-twentieth century and as a consequence had to leave America in 1947. He subsequently moved to East Germany where he died in 1956.

So now that we know a little about Brecht's life, let us discuss Brecht's innovation of epic theatre. In coining his particular kind of experiment with drama as epic theatre, Brecht was

actually drawing from the distinction between epic and tragedy that one can find in Aristotle's *Poetics*. As you will know from our discussion of Aristotle, the key effect which tragedy is supposed to produce as far as the *Poetics* is concerned is catharsis. Now to achieve catharsis, irrespective of whether you understand it as purgation of the audience's emotions or as education of the audience's emotion, there is a need for the audience to identify with the characters and their actions on the stage. And this kind of identification is often felt to be at the core of the pleasure that we derive from art. We often like a theatre or a movie for instance because we identify ourselves with the fate of the hero or the heroine and feel happy when something good happens to the character and feel devastated when the character comes to harm. What Brecht sought to achieve through his epic theatre was to break this sense of identification between the audience and the characters and actions depicted in his play. Thus, whereas in the case of tragedy we have identification, in the case of Brechtian epic theatre we have something that is referred to in German as **verfremdungseffekt** which literally translates in English as "alienation effect".

Now in talking about the alienation effect, we will focus on two questions. The first question is how is alienation effect applied as a dramatic strategy? And the second question is how does it change the functioning of a drama? Well, alienation effect as a dramatic strategy is applied in various different ways. For instance, in Brechtian plays you might see that rather than speaking out the dialogues, which is what you will expect in a usual play, the characters carry placards with writings on them. Or else, you might see an actor stepping out of his character role and directly delivering a lecture to the audience. Also sometimes they might come out of their role to summarise what they have said as a character in the play or may be even sing a song. The stage craft might also be used as part of alienating strategy where lights, ropes and other things of stage craft, which are usually hidden, will be exposed to the audience. In all of this the effort is

basically to break the sense of reality that a drama conveys and thereby to impede audience's identification with that reality. In other words, all of this exposes the sense of reality that a drama usually tries to project as an appearance, a façade, an illusion and consequently makes the projected reality foreign or alien.

But then what exactly is achieved through this alienation. Well Brecht's argument is that a drama by asking the audience to identify with its version of reality naturalises a particular kind of world order. So for instance, a drama within a bourgeois society presents the bourgeois worldview as the most usual and the most eternal form of reality. When the audience identifies with this reality then it loses the power to critique it and to conceptualise alternative forms of social reality. By jerking the audience out of this complacent identification with any one projected reality, what Brecht's alienation effect does is transform the audience into critics. The social, economic, political and cultural relations depicted through the epic theatre lose their aura of naturalness which in turn opens them up to criticism and to the possibility of change. It is however important to remember here that because the alienation effect involves jerking the audience out of complacency, there can be no single way of achieving the alienation effect. This is because if the same strategy is tried repeatedly, then it becomes a convention in itself and stops disturbing the audience out of its complacency. This is why, though we can talk about the alienation effect in general, we cannot pinpoint one particular way in which this effect might be created.

So with this discussion on Brecht we end today's lecture on Marxist literary theory. In the next lecture we will move to the discussion of another major Marxist critic, Louis Althusser. Thank you.