

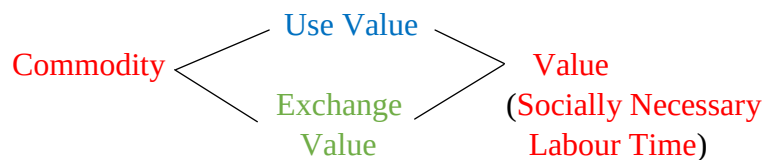
Lecture 22

Marxist Literary Theory II: Althusser and Gramsci

Hello and welcome back again. Today we will follow up our introductory lecture on Marxist literary theory with a discussion on how Marx's insights were utilized by two very prominent theoreticians of the twentieth century: Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci. However, as with our previous lecture, we will also start this lecture by looking at Marx's writings and then gradually build upon it.

Base and Superstructure

So let's begin by going back to the equation that we had extracted in our previous lecture from studying Marx's dialectical enquiry into commodity:



Now in our previous lecture we had started moving towards the idea of value by primarily focusing on the idea of exchange value. We had then subsequently weaved into the equation the notion of use value at the last moment. Today we will focus on use value because ultimately the use value is of more fundamental importance than exchange value. Irrespective of how much labour you invest in producing something, if it does not have a use value it does not have any value at all. And here of course I am thinking of use value not in a narrow utilitarian sense but in a broader sense. So, though a piece of painting might not have much of immediate utility it still has use value because it addresses our aesthetic needs just like food addresses our bodily needs.

Indeed, use value has precedence over exchange value in the sense that exchange value is only an aspect of one particular form of economic system, namely capitalism, whereas use value is one of the basic aspects of human life which transcends any individual form of economic system. In other words, use values are needed to be produced even in societies which are or which were not centred on market and commodity exchange – feudal societies for instance, or tribal society where things like food and painting will still be required and be of value even though there is no concept of exchange value. Thus, as Marx observes in volume 1 of *Capital*, labour expended to produce use value is useful labour which “is a necessary condition, independent of all forms of society, for the existence of the human race; it is an eternal nature-imposed necessity, without which there can be no material exchanges between man and Nature, and therefore no life”. So at the heart of all of Marx’s theorization is this idea of a laboring man extracting use value by engaging with nature. Again I quote from *Capital* volume I:

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature’s productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature.

In these lines that I have just quoted, observe how Marx simultaneously sets up an opposition and then dissolves it. The opposition that he sets up is of course between Nature on one side and man on another, but the labour which mediates between the two also fuses them together. So the labour that man uses to “oppose himself to nature” is achieved by the setting in motion “the natural forces of his body”. On the other hand, the way he acts upon the external Nature not only

changes it but also changes his own nature. Since this dialectical relation between man and nature which is mediated through labour is crucial to our understanding of Marxist theory let us go over it slowly.

Now the way a laboring man changes the external nature by acting upon it is easy to understand. If for instance I chop down the trees of a whole forest to produce use values in the form of fuel, construction material and paper pulp then I would be radically changing the ecosystem of that area. But what does Marx mean when he says that a laboring man's action on nature "at the same time changes his own nature"? To understand this, we will have to first understand that the laboring activity through which the human community as a whole produces use value from nature is differently organized in different societies and at different points in history. Indeed, it is these differences in how the mode of production is organized that gives rise to different economic systems like feudalism, capitalism etc. Now what Marx is saying is that my location within a particular mode of production which guides my laboring activity shapes my own nature. Let us take the example of the capitalist mode of production with which all of us are more or less familiar. The way in which laboring individuals are organized within this particular mode of production makes the location of an investment banker very different from say the location of a daily-wage worker working in a construction site or say the location of a share cropper who earns his living by farming lands that belong to someone else. Since the material conditions in which they engage with the external world through their labour is vastly different, their nature, their worldview, their expectation from life and society and indeed their whole consciousness will be very different. From this Marxist point of view, there is no eternal human nature that is universal and unchanging. Everything is shaped by the mode of production.

Now this particular argument gave rise to a popular theory among some Marxist scholars which may be referred to as the theory of base and superstructure. To explain it, let us first consider these lines from Marx's *A Critique of Political Economy*:

In the social production of their life, men 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 productive forces. 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 of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

What Marx is saying here is that the organization of human labour within particular modes of production constitutes the economic structure of the society. And it is how someone is located socially within this economic structure which determines his consciousness. In other words, the economic structure forms a sort of basis or infrastructure over which gets erected a superstructure of human consciousness. In Marxism, this consciousness or worldview is referred to as ideology. So here we have the outline of what is known as the base and superstructure model in Marxism where the economy provides the base that upholds a superstructure constituted of all other aspects of human life including the social, political, and intellectual. So, within this base and superstructure model, literature would obviously be a part of the superstructure. And one form of Marxist literary criticism therefore approaches literature as a diver would approach the deep sea—it involves delving down through the ideological content of literature to arrive at the economic base which is supposedly guiding the forms of consciousness

that it articulates. This introduction to the base and superstructure model of Marxism sets the stage for our discussion on Louis Althusser whose major contribution was to critique as well as transform this model into a more sophisticated tool of analysis.

Louis Althusser and structuralist Marxism

Althusser was born in 1918 in Algeria but did most of his education in mainland France. His academic career as a youth was interrupted by the second world war which he joined as a soldier. This brought about a major transformation in his life as he would later go on to attribute his interest in communism to his experiences as a prisoner of war. Interestingly, Althusser as a young man was not only interested in communism and in Marxist philosophy but was also deeply steeped in Catholicism. Indeed, the early part of his career was marked by an effort to synthesize his Christian beliefs with the tenets of Marxism. In 1945 Althusser began his long association with Paris's higher education institute, École normale supérieure, which he first joined as a student and then in 1948 as a teacher. It is there that Althusser taught young intellectuals like Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Badiou. Also it was while in ENS that Althusser developed his position as one of the foremost Marxist pedagogues known for his extensive works on how to read Marx. His attempts in this direction led to his production of seminal texts like *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*. Unfortunately, Althusser's last years were marked by tragic mental illness and he died in a psychiatric hospital in 1990.

Coming back to the base and superstructure model, one of the ways in which Althusser revolutionized this idea was by approaching it via the lens of structuralism. So what does it mean to say that Althusser was a structuralist interpreter of Marxism? Well if you go back to our discussion on the base and superstructure model you will see that within it the economic aspect

of a society, that is to say the aspect of society dealing with its mode of production, acts as what Derrida would call a transcendental signified. In other words, all aspects of the society are understood as deriving their final meaning and relevance from the economic aspect which stands beyond all other dimensions of human life be it legal, cultural, intellectual or political as the immutable basis. In this way of understanding, the economic mode of production occupies the same role vis-à-vis human society as an author occupies vis-à-vis a text. But we know from our previous discussions that structuralism does not allow for such transcendental signified. As far as structuralism is concerned, the meaning-making process in any structure is restricted to the play of relationships within the constituent parts of the structure. So if society as a whole is to be considered as a structure, which the base and superstructure model actually does, then from the perspective of structuralism any one aspect, like the economic aspect for instance, cannot be prioritised and made to act as the sole meaning generating basis of society.

This structuralist approach to Marxism that Althusser adopts has two very important consequences. The first consequence is that the relationship between the base and superstructure now comes to be understood as a two way dynamics. In other words, it is not only the economic aspect which is seen to influence and impart meaning to other aspects of human life, the superstructure too is seen as influencing the economic base. So for instance one might argue that the socio-political transformation of the French revolution was brought about the transformation in the economic basis of the French society, but at the same time these socio-political transformations acted upon the economic base and resulted in its transformation. Therefore, to repeat the point, the first important consequence that Althusser's structuralist approach has is to result in an understanding of the base and superstructure model in terms of a two way dynamics. The second important consequence that Althusser's structuralism has on our understanding of the

base and superstructure model is that each aspect of human social life is now understood as “overdetermined”. Now this is a term that Althusser borrowed from the field of psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud, who inaugurated the field of psychoanalysis, believed that the images that we see in our dreams are determined by multiple aspects of our subconscious thoughts. So the term overdetermination is used in psychoanalysis to indicate this multiplicity of influence that a particular phenomenon might have. For Althusser, every aspect of human social life is overdetermined because a number of aspects work upon it and influence it. Take for instance your outlook towards gender discrimination in your society. This outlook will of course be determined by your economic position and your location within the mode of production that informs your society. But this economic influence will only play out indirectly and will in fact be mediated by several other aspects like your religious affiliation, your educational background, your sexual orientation and so on and so forth. In other words, each aspect of our social life is informed by the spectral presence of what Derrida would call “traces” of various other elements and not just the economic aspect.

So how does this understanding of Marxism change our strategy to read and understand literature? Well, as I mentioned earlier, if we follow the base and superstructure model where the economic base is believed to absolutely control all aspects of the superstructure, then we would try and read literature as an aesthetic expression of the economic aspect. So for instance a play like Shakespeare’s *King Lear* would be interpreted by finding out how the transition from feudal to capitalist economy which characterized the contemporary Britain of Shakespeare gets manifested in the utterances and actions of characters. If, however, we read the same play *King Lear* by using the Althusserian lens, then we will not be solely focused on the economic determination. Indeed, from this Althusserian perspective, the play will present itself as

something that is typically overdetermined. We would still continue to note how the utterances and actions of the play gets informed by the contemporary mode of production but we would also pay careful attention as to how this economic influence is interspersed with influences of other aspects like religion for instance or the contemporary legalities surrounding the division of property. If you are interested to know more about how this Althusserian approach to literature might work, I would suggest you explore the works of Pierre Macherey who was a student and collaborator of Althusser and who worked towards converting Althusser's concepts into tools of literary criticism. I would also recommend Terry Eagleton's book *Myths of Power* where the analyses of the novels produced by the famous Brontë siblings provide a wonderful illustration of how Althusser's understanding of Marx can be used to critique literature.

Ideological State Apparatus

I would now like to comment on another very concept proposed by Althusser which has had a special resonance in the field of literary studies. Here I am taking about the concept of the ideological state apparatus. Now ideology, as I have explained before, can be simply understood as worldview. It is my consciousness of myself as a social subject. Ideology is how I explain to myself my situatedness within a particular economic mode of production and the social structure that is associated with it. Now what Althusser proposes in his 1970 essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" is that ideology has a political angle to it and acts as an adhesive that relates one to a particular state. What does this mean? Well, let us say that a state is underlined by the capitalist mode of production. This means that in order to make someone a functioning subject of that state the state power needs to situate him or her within the capitalist mode of production. In other words, the state needs to create a role for that someone which would make his subjugation to the capitalist mode of production seem not only justified but also

eternal and natural. Take for instance the case of a factory worker within a capitalist state. Though the worker sells his labour at a rate that is less than the value that he produces for the industrialist which result in the latter's profit, the worker might think of this unfair exchange as quite legitimate. This is because the state through its various institutions like family, school, religious establishments, media, publication houses, succeeds in developing in the factory worker an ideological consciousness which allows him to regards his subject position as an exploited labourer to be "natural". These various institutions through which the ideology is developed in an individual that allows him to smoothly fit in to the state and it's underlying mode of economic production is referred to by Althusser as the Ideological State Apparatuses. This he contrasts with the repressive state apparatuses which include things like the police, the law court, the prison – things by which the state controls its subject through violence. In contrast, with the ideological state apparatuses, the state interpellates, or creates for individuals, specific subject positions by molding their consciousness of their selves. But according to Althusser, this too is a mode of control which is more subtle and at the same time more pervasive than the brute violence exercised by the repressive state apparatuses.

Antonio Gramsci

To further understand the politics of how ideology works within the society let us move from Althusser to another Marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci and his concept of hegemony. But first a few biographical details about Gramsci. He was born in 1891 in Sardinia which is an island located off the coast of mainland Italy. Gramsci is however primarily known for his association with the northern Italian industrial city of Turin where he initially went to study but then subsequently emerged as an important trade union leader. As part of the communist movement in Italy Gramsci sought to rethink various aspects of Marxism from within the local Italian context

and also with added inputs provided by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and Lenin's revisionary reading of Marx. In 1926 the Fascist government of Mussolini arrested Gramsci and during his trial the prosecutor famously said that "For twenty years we must stop this brain from functioning". Ironically enough, it was while in prison that Gramsci's intellectual activities flourished and he produced elaborate notes on various aspects of Marxism, of world history and of the Italian society. These notes which filled more than 30 copies and 3000 pages were later published under the name *Quaderni del carcere* or *Prison Notebooks*, and this today forms the basis of our understanding of Gramsci and his concepts like hegemony.

Now you will have to remember here that what are compiled in *Prison Notebooks* are only notes that Gramsci made for himself to be later elaborated and published. This plan to create properly polished books out of these rough notes however could not be fulfilled as Gramsci's frail body gave up in April 1937. As a consequence, we have to understand his major ideas like hegemony, subaltern, war of position, war of maneuver, etc by trying to piece them together from his unfinished notes. However, as far as the idea of hegemony is concerned its basic understanding is clear enough. The term has Greek roots and originally meant the dominance of one Greek polis over a cluster of other Greek states. However, in Gramsci the term hegemony is primarily used to mean *dominance with consent*. What Gramsci argues is that a dominant class within any given society enjoys their dominance chiefly through the exercise of hegemony which signifies an ideological dominance rather than a physical dominance. Let me explain this with the help of an example. Say for instance I want to dominate you. Now I can make you do my bidding broadly in two different ways. The first way is by forcing you to do something that I want by threatening you with physical force. I make you agree with me by putting a gun on your forehead. But there is another way in which I can make you do my bidding. I can convince you

that whatever I am telling you to do is not only in my interest but will also equally serve your interest. This will enable me to lead you or exercise dominance over you by your own consent. This latter kind of dominance is precisely how hegemony functions.

The dominant class within a state too exercises its leadership in two ways – through civil society, which is the domain of hegemony building, and through political society, which is the domain of coercive force. The civil society constitutes of pretty much what Althusser identifies as the Ideological State apparatus, that is of educational institutions, religious institutions, publication industry, media etc. In this domain the intellectuals of the dominant class convinces the rest of the society that the dominant class serves not just its own interest but the interest of all other classes as well. This helps the dominant class gain consent of the rest of the society and exercise control through hegemony. The political society which constitutes of what Althusser identifies as the Repressive State Apparatus however comes to the forefront with all its coercive force only when hegemony fails, that is when the dominant class fails to convince others that their interest is being taken care of. However, the political society with its governance structure and legal institutions cannot function for long if there is no hegemonic control that would make the society accept a particular government or a particular set of laws. So ultimately it is hegemony that is of paramount importance as far as dominance is concerned.

But then let us return to the question that we have been persistently asking in this lecture series. How does Althusser's idea of Ideological State Apparatus or Gramsci's idea of hegemony help us approach literature? Well if you consider literature as one of the key components of the ideological state apparatus or as a tool for gaining hegemony by promoting the world view of a particular class, then our understanding of literature as well as our critical approach to it changes radically. For instance, the emergence of the modern English novel as a literary genre can be

convincingly connected with the rise of the bourgeois as the dominant social class in Britain. Following this connection, we can read early English novels like *Pamela* or *Clarissa* written by Samuel Richardson as propagating the bourgeois world view and offering it as natural, eternal, and universal. In other words, we can read these novels as instances of tools through which the bourgeois class extended its hegemonic hold over the British society. Similarly, we can read the English literary texts which were taught to Indian students in an establishment like Kolkata's Hindu college in the heydays of British colonialism as tools of extending the hegemony of the colonizing class over the colonized population. Since we have limited time in our hand I will not be able to elaborate the potential of literature to spread the hegemonic control of a particular class with reference to specific texts. But if you are interested to know more about it then I would recommend you two books, one written by Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* and Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest*. With this we end our lecture today. In our next lecture we will take up for discussion one more side of Marxist literary theory. Thank you.