

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture - 21
Marxist Literary (I): Marx and Brecht

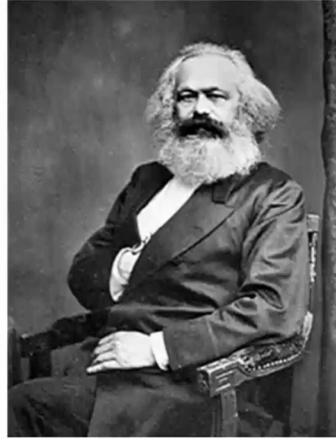
Hello and welcome back again. We will start discussing today Marxist Literary Theory and we will continue with our discussion on Marxist literary theory over the course of three lectures. So, this will be the introductory lecture on Marxist theory. Marxist literary criticism has represented for quite 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 and 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 relationship to literary studies as such. The second problem is that Marxist literary theorists whom we will study in our course borrows different things from different works of Marx, now since Marx's work constitutes a hugely elaborate set of ideas it becomes difficult to give you a brief gist of all 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 in our course will be something like this we will first start with a brief sampling of Marx's ideas and then we will move on to study in more details the works of individual Marxist literary theorists, whose works have a direct impact on how literature is read and understood and in today's lecture the Marxist literary theorists that we will be discussing particularly is Bertolt Brest, but before we start discussing Brest let us dwell upon the writings of Karl Marx.

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Karl Marx
(1818 - 1883)



Source: Wikipedia

Now, Karl Marx's dates are 1818 to 1883 and he was born in the German city of Trier indeed Trier celebrated in a very big way at the 200 birth anniversary of its most famous son Karl Marx. Now interestingly though Marx is today known primarily for his contribution to political economic and also of course, for his communist ideology which he in turn based on his findings as a political economist, he actually started off as a student of law and later he switched to philosophy and he.

In fact, did his PhD thesis on the work of two Ancient Greek philosophers Democritus and Epicurus indeed it was not till 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 of Friedrich Engels and as you will know the communist manifesto was published in 1848, but it was not directly an analysis of the economic situation or communist manifesto is not known for its contribution to political economy as such.

Now, Marx of course, had worked on his economic theories for a prolonged period before the publication of contribution to a critique of political economy and indeed he also wrote a number of elaborate works much before 1859, but none of these works were published during his lifetime and some of these texts like.

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•*The Economic and Political Manuscripts*

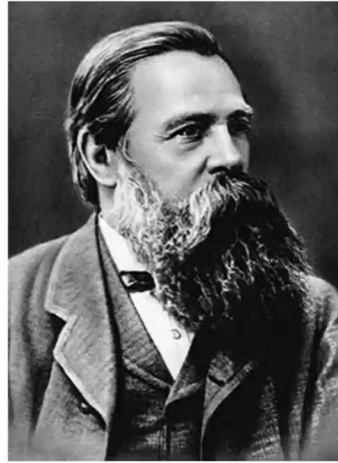
•*The German Ideology*

The Economic and Political Manuscripts or the German ideology, which were later published posthumously are today considered as important preparatory exercises done by Marx for his magnum opus titled Das kapital which translates in English simply as Capital.

Now, let us come to capital Marx originally planned this work as a multi volume commentary on the various aspects of capitalist economy on how the capitalist economy functions, but unfortunately he was only able to bring out the first volume of capital, capital volume one during his lifetime and this volume was published in 1867 after his death two more volumes of capital, capital volume 2 and capital volume 3 were published by his friend and collaborator.

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Friedrich Engels
(1820 - 1895)



Source: www.britannica.com

Friedrich Engels who compiled and edited the notes left by Marx to come up with these volumes, but even then these three volumes do not represent the entire work as was originally planned by Marx.

Now, to give you a brief sample of Marx's work I would like to briefly explore the first chapter of capital volume one and this will of course, not give us any comprehensive understanding of Marx's work or his elaborate set of ideas nor will it help us understand literature better, but even then I want to do it because it will definitely help us get a glimpse of some of the key features, that characterizes how Marx intervenes as a theorist into whatever field that he intervenes in and some of these key features that characterize Marx's critical approach to something would later inform much of Marxist literary theory.

So, we start with the first section of capital, which interestingly is not on capital itself it is on commodity, but commodity is an interesting starting point because it is 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 this means that we are basically surrounded by commodities and everything that we buy be it from a brick and mortar store around the corner or be it online through various web portals and be the things that satisfy our physical needs like food for instance or clothing or our intellectual or aesthetic needs like a book or a painting all of these things are

commodities, I do not know whether you have noticed it or not, but while making this attempt to define commodity for you I was actually repeatedly harping on two different aspects that characterize a commodity.

The first aspect is that a commodity can satisfy a need be it a physical need, be it an intellectual need, be it an aesthetic need and this first aspect is characterized or is labeled by Marx as the use value of a commodity, every commodity should have a use. On the other hand the commodity by the virtue of being something that can be bought and sold in a market has another aspect to it, which we will call after Marx the exchange value.

So, every commodity should be exchangeable and therefore, exchange value basically refers to the quality of a commodity to be exchanged in the marketplace with any other commodity, let us say that I manufacture shirts for instance and I need a pair of trousers and therefore, I can go to the market and let us say the exchange rate is 3 shirts to get 1 pair of trousers. So, I can exchange the three shirts that I have manufactured and I can buy one pair of trousers with it now do not get confused here by thinking that we cannot usually directly exchange three pairs of shirt for a pair of trousers in a marketplace rather what we get when we sell our shirts is some amount of money, which we can then go and exchange for a pair of trousers.

But please remember that the money here is actually just a mediating agent that facilitates the exchange between shirts and trousers and it does nothing more than that. So, in effect irrespective of whether I am using money or doing a barter I am exchanging 3 shirts for 1 pair of trousers. Now a commodity not only has these two aspects use value and exchange value, but also these two aspects are 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 use value of the car. Now let us assume that your parents have it in their mind to sell the car in future if they ever require a large sum of money, which means that though they use the car they are also focused on the cars future exchange value right, now in this situation there will arise an obvious contradiction you might want to drive the car more and more to it 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 want to limit the amount of time that you get to drive the car thereby restricting its use value. So, as you can see there is a contradiction between exchange value of a car and use value of a car.

Now, this internal contradiction that underlines the existence of a commodity is important and we will have to write 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 that commodity is the question that Marx asks is. What determines this value?

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Two aspects of commodity are:

- “use value”
- “exchange value”.

Now, as we have seen Marx identifies a commodity through its two aspects its usability use value and its exchangeability exchange value and Marx argues that the value of a commodity derives from combining together these two contradictory things use value and exchange value, to show this he starts by looking at the exchange value and he argues that if a commodity can in principle be exchangeable with any other commodity then it has to have a common factor, which will make it exchangeable with any other commodity. So, if all the commodities do not share a common factor of course, you

cannot know how much of this particular commodity you would need to have in order to exchange it for a particular amount of another commodity right.

So, in other words there has to be something in common for me to reach the equation if you go back to our previous example to reach the equation that 3 shirts will equal 1 pair of trousers. Now this common factor cannot be the material constitution of the commodity because while discussing about shirts and pants one might assume that because they are both made of cotton.

So, we will just look at the amount of cotton that goes into 3 shirts and then compare it with the amount of cotton that goes into taking a pair of trousers, but that will give us a wrong idea because you will remember that any commodity can be exchanged with any other commodity and therefore, the constituent material of a shirt for instance would be very different from the constituent materials of a car yet in principle it is possible to exchange a particular number of shirts for a particular number of cars.

So, what is the common factor that gives a commodity its exchange value. According to Marx it is labour time all commodities become commodities through the expenditure of 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 and this labor time of course, is common feature both in case of the shirt as well as in case of the car, the only thing that is different is you need more of labour time to make a car than you need to make a shirt and this will mean that a car will be more valuable than a shirt and you will need quite a number of shirts indeed to be able to exchange them for one car.

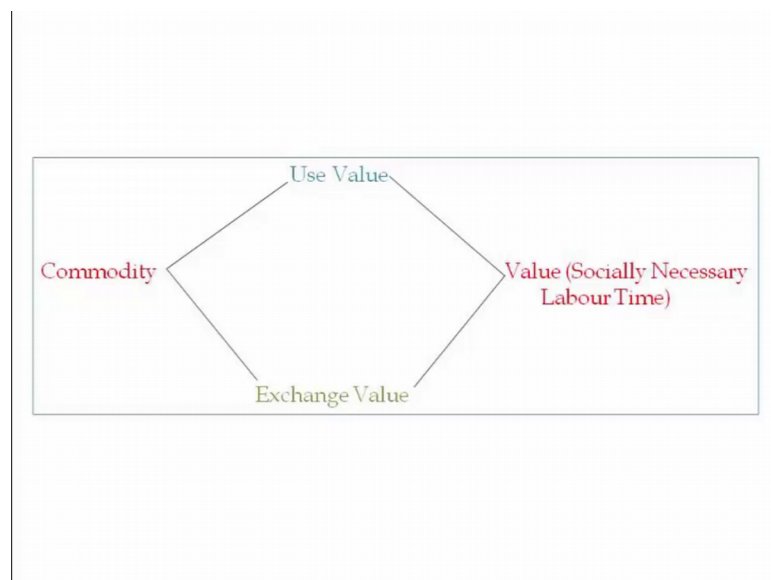
So, the theory of labour time explains why commodities are exchangeable, but how does it incorporate the concept of use value because as I have said Marx shows that the value of a commodity is ultimately dependent on a combination of use value and exchange value to understand this let us look at the concept of labour time again.

Now, let us say you spend an enormous amount of labour to construct a car which has only one slot for a wheel and which makes it impossible to drive it, now will it be of any value this particular car that you have designed with only one slot for a wheel will it have any value when you take it to a market well the answer is of course, not and the reason why it will not have any value in spite of you having spent so much of labour time

making it is that that car that you have made does not have any usability it does not have any use value.

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 also as we have seen usability. So, value is therefore, a combination of what we otherwise saw as a contradiction use value and exchange value and if we simplify our discussion on commodity in the form of an equation it will take a form that will look something like this.

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A commodity splits into use value and exchange value and then they combine together to form value which is defined as socially necessary labour time.

So, what are the key takeaways from this discussion on commodity and its value well, there are two important points that are being made here and I want you to focus on them the first thing that I want you to focus on is Marx's characteristic dialectical approach. So, as I said that what this brief sample of Marx's work will provide us with is it will show us how Marx critically approaches something and now we can see that this is a peculiar kind of a critical approach which has a name it is called the dialectical method.

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The dialectic method of enquiry proceeds by identifying the internal contradiction underlying something and then exploring how this contradiction is resolved.

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".

And this dialectical method is an enquiry, which proceeds by identifying the internal contradiction underlying something and then explores 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. Now in the language of the dialectical method one of these terms would be labeled as thesis and the other would be labeled as antithesis, we then follow how this contradiction is subsumed and dissolved in a third concept which in our example is the concept of value as socially necessary labour time and in the language of the dialectical method this third term would be called synthesis. So, thesis and antithesis leading to a synthesis where they both dissolve in each other.

In Marx; however, each synthesis is again found giving way to a new set of internal contradictions. In fact, that is how capital is structured. So, each synthesis opens up a new thesis and a new antithesis which are then subsumed within a new synthesis and that again breaks down and so the chain continues.

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David Harvey
(born 1935)

• *Seventeen Contradictions and
the End of Capitalism*



Source: fi.wikipedia.org

Indeed the Marxist scholar David Harvey has extensively argued how the whole of capital can be read as a series contradictory terms producing synthesis and then again breaking down into further contradictions and as Harvey points out in several of his books each of these contradictions represent crucial conflicts within the process of capitalist economics and consequently within the social political and cultural order that is informed by capitalism.

This identification of contradiction is very crucial because the dialectical method through which Marx unravels these contradictions and then engages with them goes on finally, to play a very important role in the work of later Marxist literary theorists that we will study. So, this was the first take away, but there is also a second take away that I would like to focus on which is Marx's treatment of the mundane reality as an appearance or as a façade.

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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 in if you are buying your things from a supermarket for instance usually you do not even see any human presence behind that not even that of a shopkeeper, but as our discussion of Marx has revealed these commodities are ultimately different in value because they are all products of human labour and it is precisely this human labour time which gives these commodities their value.

However this underlying reality of labour relations goes unnoticed when we encounter a commodity as such, so, much. So, that we develop a habit of looking at a commodity as an independent thing, which is almost fallen from the sky as it were. So, let us say when we consume a packet of rice that we have bought from the supermarket we are not usually aware of the chain of labour processes and labouring individuals who have 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 underlying social reality to this underlying chain of social relationships.

The appearance of this social relationship, which manifests itself in the commodity form gets accepted not as appearance or facade of the true reality, but indeed as reality itself

both Marx and Marxist literary theorists would be deeply concerned about this distinction between the surface appearance what gets accepted as reality and the actual underlying reality of all the commodities that surround us and the world that it creates around us and just like the post structuralist that we have discussed in our previous lectures.

Marxist literary critics too would 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. So, what they reveal is that they are only conventional and this point actually becomes very clear, when we look at Bertolt Brecht and the kind of intervention that he made.

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Bertolt Brecht
(1898 - 1956)



Source: Wikipedia

Now, Brecht was born in 1898 in the southern German province of Bavaria and belonged to that generation which passed through the First World War as young men and women. Now as you will know from our discussion on the topic of new criticism we had said that the world war presented for Europe not only a political, but also moral crisis of value and the very basis of the bourgeois civilization that had been built in the west over the past 4 centuries appeared to be crumbling appeared to be falling apart. So, between 1920 and 1930 when Brecht made his appearance as a dramatist he started by expressing this collective disillusionment of his generation with the realities of the bourgeois civilization

and he did that by developing a strikingly new form of drama which he called epic theater.

This epic theater would go on to become one of the strongest form of Marxist aesthetic manifestation in the 20th century and we will take this up for discussion in this lecture, but let us continue with Bertolt Brecht's biography for a moment. So, in 1933 with the rise of Nazism Brecht like so many other intellectuals left Germany and again like, so many of them finally, found refuge in America where he stayed till 1947 it was in these years of exile part of which he of course, spent in the Scandinavian countries, but most of which is spent in America.

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- Mother Courage and Her Children*
- The Life of Galileo*
- The Good Woman of Setzuan*
- The Caucasian Chalk Circle*

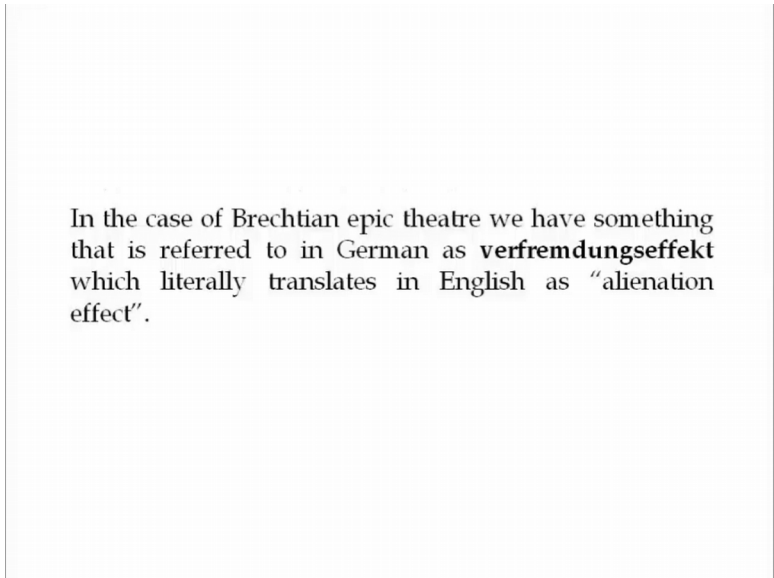
Brecht produced some of his most well known plays and they include *Mother Courage and her children* the *life of Galileo* the *good woman of Setzuan* and of course, the *Caucasian chalk circle* Brecht; however, became one of the victims of the communists beating that gained prominence in America during the mid 20th century and as a consequence he had to leave America in 1947 after he left America he moved to east Germany, which was at that point of time a satellite state of the soviet union and it was there that he died in 1956. So, now, that we know a little about Brechts life let us take up for discussion Brecht's innovation of epic theatre.

In coining this particular kind of experimentation that he did with the dramatic form as epic theater, what Brecht was doing was he was actually drawing from the distinction

between epic and tragedy that we can find in Aristotle's poetics and as you will know from our discussion of Aristotle the key effect, which tragedy is supposed to produce as far as poetics is concerned is Catharsis. Now to achieve catharsis irrespective of whether you understand catharsis as approbation of the audiences emotion or as the education of the audiences emotion, there is a need for the audience to identify with the characters and their actions portrayed on the stage and this kind of identification is often actually felt to be at the core of the pleasure that we derive from art.

So, we often like a theater or a movie for instance because we identify ourselves with the fate of the hero or the heroine and we feel happy when something good happens to them and we feel devastated when they come to some harm, what Brecht sought to achieve through his epic theater was to break this sense of identification between the audience and the characters and their actions, which were being portrayed on the stage thus whereas, in the case of tragedy we have identification at the heart of the whole thing.

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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”.

In case of Brechtian epic theatre, we have something that is referred in German as *verfremdungseffekt* which in English literally translates into the alienation effect.

Now, in talking about the alienation effect we will focus on two questions the first question is. How is alienation effect practiced or applied as a dramatic strategy? And the second question that we will ask is. How does alienation effect change the way in which a drama functions? Well to start with the first question alienation effect as a dramatic

strategy is applied in various different ways so, for instance in some Brecht and play you might see that rather than speaking out their dialogues what is expected in a usual play the characters will come onstage carrying placards with things written on them. So, rather than listening to them we will have to read what they are carrying.

In other plays you might see for instance an actor suddenly stepping out of his character stepping out of the role that he is playing and directly delivering a lecture to the audience sometimes you might see some of them coming out of their role to summarize what they have said as when they were playing that particular role or maybe they will randomly start singing a song for instance. The stagecraft might also be used to produce this alienation effect where lights, ropes and other things of stagecraft which are usually hidden will be exposed to the audience.

Now, in all of this the effort is to break the sense of reality, that drama usually conveys because when we go and see a drama when we go and see a movie we take it as a slice of reality alienation effect through employing these various strategies that I just mentioned wants to break this sense of reality that a drama usually tries to project and it tries to expose this reality as an appearance as a facade and illusion and consequently makes the projected reality foreign or alien to us it no longer appears to us as reality that appearance becomes foreign becomes alien that is why it is called the alienation effect, what exactly is achieved by this alienation effect now we know how it is done, but why should one do it.

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Brecht's argument is that a drama by asking the audience to identify with its version of reality naturalizes a particular kind of world order.

Brecht's argument is that a drama by asking the audience to identify with its version of reality naturalizes a particular kind of world order. So, for instance a drama produced from within bourgeois society presents the bourgeois worldview as the most usual and the most eternal form of reality and when the audience identifies with this reality it loses the power to critique it and to conceptualize alternative forms of reality by jerking the audience out of this complaisant identification with anyone projected reality, what Brecht's alienation effect does.

Is it transforms the audience into a group of critics the social the economic, the political, the cultural relations depicted through the epic theater loses their aura of naturalness and in turn opens them up to criticism and also to the possibility of change because now in the form of epic theater these things do not appear to be usual they do not appear to be natural they appear as a facade as an illusion.

It is; however, important to remember here that because the alienation effect involves the jerking out of completion see the audience is jerked out of completion see there can be no single way of achieving the alienation effect this is because if for instance imagine the same strategy is applied in play after play, then it will become a convention in itself and it will stop disturbing the audience out of its complacency. That is why when we talk about alienation effect we can talk about it in a general way, but we cannot pinpoint one

particular way in, which this effect can be created because Brecht suggests that we will need to constantly change our strategies through which this alienation can be affected.

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

Thank you for listening.