

Introduction to Literary Theory
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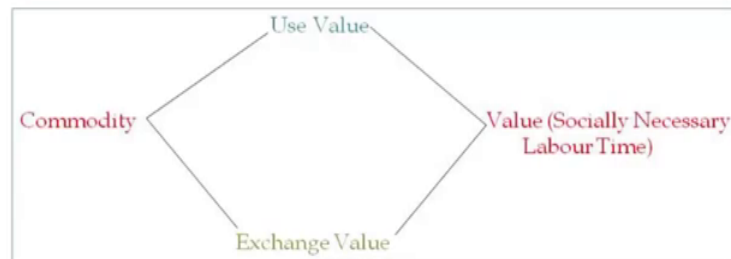
Lecture - 22
Marxist Literary Theory (II): Althusser and Gramsci

Hello and welcome. We are today going to follow up our introductory lecture on Marxist Literary Theory, with our discussion on how Marxist insights were utilized by 2 very prominent theoreticians of the 20th century namely, Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci. However, as with our previous lecture, we will also start this lecture by looking at Marxist writings first and then we will gradually build upon it. So, let us begin by going back to the equation that we had extracted in our previous lecture from studying Marxist dialectical inquiry into commodity.

So, as you can see commodity gives way to 2 things, it has 2 aspects rather; one is the aspect of use value, the other is the aspect of exchange value, and then we have seen how Marx dissolves the contradiction between use value and exchange value to formulate his theory of value, which he defines as socially necessary labour time. Now, in our previous lecture we had started moving towards this idea of value, by primarily focusing on the idea of exchange value. And, we had then subsequently weaved into the equation the notion of use value at the last moment.

Today, we will focus on use value, we will take that as a starting point, because ultimately the use value is of more fundamental importance than exchange value, because irrespective of how much labour you invest into 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 of the term, but in a broader sense. Though for instance a piece of painting let us say might not have any immediate utility, it still has use value, because it addresses our aesthetic means just like food or clothing addresses our bodily needs.

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You need a 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. Indeed use value has precedence over exchange value, in the sense that exchange value is only one aspect of a particular form of economic system, namely capitalism. Whereas, use value is one of the basic aspects of human life as such, which transcends any individual economic system that we can think of.

So, in other words use values are needed to be produced even in societies, which not centered on market or commodity exchange feudal societies for instance or tribal societies. Where things like food and painting will still be required and be of value though there is no concept of exchange value.

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Marx observes, 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”.

(Volume 1, *Capital*)

Thus, as Marx observes in volume one of capital, labour expended to produce use value is useful labour which “is and I quote 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 labouring man extracting use value by engaging with nature and I quote from capital volume one again.

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“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.”

(*Capital*, volume I)

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In these lines that have just quoted observe, how Marx simultaneously sets up an opposition and then dissolves it. So, the opposition that he sets up is of course, between nature on the one hand and man on another, but the labour which mediates between the 2 also fuses them together. So, the labour for instance that man uses to quote unquote oppose himself to nature is achieved by setting in motion again I quote, the natural forces of his body.

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So the labour that man uses to "oppose himself to nature" is achieved by the setting in motion "the natural forces of his body".

(Capital, volume I)

On the other hand the way the man acts upon the external nature not only changes that, but also changes his own nature.

Now, since this dialectical relation between man and nature which is mediated through labour is crucial to our understanding of Marxist literary theory or in fact, Marxist theory in general. Let us go over it slowly. Now, the way a labouring man changes the external nature by acting upon it is easy to understand. If for instance I chopped down the trees of a whole forest to produce use values in the form of fuel for instance or in the form of construction material building material and in the form of paper pulp. I would be radically changing the ecosystem of that entire area.

But, what does Marx mean when he says that a labouring man's action on nature at the same time changes his own nature. To understand this, we will have to first understand the labouring activity through which the human community as a whole produces use values from nature, and how they are 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 for instance or like capitalism.

Now, what Marx is saying is that my location within a particular mode of production, which guides my labouring activity also shapes my own nature. Let us take the example of the capitalist mode of production, which all of us are more or less familiar.. The way in which labouring 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. Let us say or say the location of a sharecropper who earns his living by farming someone else's land.

Since, the material conditions in which all of these people that I have just mentioned engage with the external world through their labour is vastly different, their nature, their worldview, their expectation from life, their expectation from society. Indeed their whole consciousness will be different because of the vast difference in the ways in which they are located within a particular mode of production.

So, from this Marxist point of view there is no eternal human nature that is present in all of us uniformly. Rather everything that constitutes human nature is according to Marx shaped by how that particular person engages within the framework of a particular mode of production.

Now, this argument gives rise to a very popular theory among Marxist scholars, which may be referred to as the theory of base and superstructure. To explain this base and superstructure model to you let us first consider these lines from Marxist a critique of political economy and I read from Marx.

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“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.”

(A Critique of Political Economy, Marx)

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What Marxist 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 that person’s consciousness. In other words the economic structure forms a sort of basis or infrastructure over which gets erected the superstructure of human consciousness. In Marxism this consciousness or worldview is referred to as ideology and this is a very important term will have to come back to it again later on in this lecture.

So, here we have an outline of what is known as a base and superstructure model in Marxism, where economy provides the base that upholds superstructure which is

constituted of all other aspects of human life including the social, the political, the cultural, intellectual and so on and so forth.

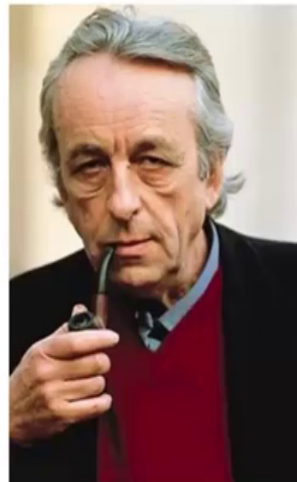
So, within the base and superstructure model literature would; obviously, be a part of the superstructure. And, a one form of Marxist literary criticism therefore, approaches literature as a diver would approach the deep sea of and I see this because that particular kind of Marxist literary criticism, involves delving down through the ideological content of a particular literature to arrive at the economic base, which is supposedly guiding the forms of consciousness that that particular piece of literary text articulates.

So, this introduction to the base and superstructure model of Marxism. Now, sets the stage very nicely for our discussion of Louis Althusser. Whose major contribution was to critique as well as to transform this model this base and superstructure model into a more sophisticated tool of analysis.

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Louis Althusser
(1918 - 1990)

- *Reading Capital*
- *For Marx*



Source: Wikipedia

So, Louis Althusser was born in 1918 in Algeria, but he did most of his education in mainland France. And, his academic career as a youth was interrupted by the Second World War which he joined as a soldier. And, this involvement in the war brought about a major transformation in his life by his own admission, because as he would later go on to say that, it was his experiences as a prisoner of war that kindled in him a lifelong interest in communism.

Interestingly Althusser as a young man was not only interested in communism and in Marxist philosophy, but he 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 lifelong association with Paris's higher education institute that I have already referred to in my previous lecture. And, the name of that institute is Ecole Normale Supérieure which Althusser first joined as a student and then in 1948 as a teacher.

It is there that Althusser taught young intellectuals like Michel Foucault and this is how you know about Ecole Normale Supérieure from this lecture series we have referred to Foucault's association with ENS, but also he had as his students Pierre Bourdieu for instance and Alain Badiou and they are all very important names in the history of 20th century history of ideas.

Also, it was a while in ENS Ecole Normale Supérieure that Althusser developed his position as one of the foremost Marxist pedagogues known for his extensive works on how to read Marx. And, his attempts in this direction led to the production of seminal texts like *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*. Unfortunately Althusser's last years were marked by a tragic mental illness and he died in a psychiatric hospital in 1990, but coming back to the base and superstructure model.

One of the ways in which Althusser revolutionized this idea was by approaching it through 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 and that is to say the aspect of society dealing with its mode of production, acts as what Derrida would identify as 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 for instance an author would occupy vis à vis a text in the popular understanding of the author-text relationship.

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 that 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 prioritized, and cannot be made to act as the sole meaning generating basis of the society or the societal structure as a whole. This structuralist approach to Marxism that Althusser adopts has 2 very important consequences.

The first consequence is that the relationship between the base and the superstructure. Now, is understood as a 2 way dynamics. In other words it is not only the economic aspect which is seem to influence and impart meaning to other aspects of human life, but the superstructure 2 is seen as something that influences the economic basis. So, it is a 2 way dynamics.

So, for instance one might argue that the socio political transformation of the French revolution was brought about by the transformation in the economic basis of the French society, but at the same time this structuralist Marxism will point out that the socio political transformations acted upon the economic base and resulted in its transformation. So, it is a 2 way process.

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 2 way dynamics. The second important consequence that Althusser structuralism has on our understanding of the base and superstructure model is that each aspect of human social life is now understood as over determined.

Now, this over determined this is a term that Althusser borrows from the field of psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud we will later come to much more elaborate description of Sigmund Freud and his ideas in our future lectures, but now I would just like to point out that 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.

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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.

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 over determined, because a number of other aspects work upon it and influence it.

So, it is not just one aspect, not just the economic aspect, but a number of other aspects also work upon every other aspect. So, it is basically like we have lectures on structuralism, where every constituent parts influence all other constituent parts in the meaning making process.

Now, 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 for instance your religious affiliation, your educational background, your own 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; traces of various other elements and not just only of 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 rather 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 William Shakespeare, gets manifested in the utterances and actions of the characters in the play. 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 over determined. 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; the aspect of religion for instance or the contemporary legalities, surrounding the division of property.

Now, if you are interested to know more about this Althusserian approach to literature and how you can use it, I would suggest you explore the works of Pierre Macherey, who was a student and collaborator of Althusser.

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Pierre Macherey
(born 1938)



Source: www.bookogs.com

And, who worked towards converting Althusser's concepts into practical tools of literary criticism. So, that might be worth looking into and I would also recommend Terry Eagleton's book *Myths of Power*, where Eagleton's analysis 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.

I would now like to move on to another very important concept proposed by Althusser and which has had a special resonance in the field of literary studies. And, the concept that I want to focus on is known as the ideological state apparatus. Now, ideology as I have already explained to you can be simply understood as worldview.

Now, it is therefore, 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 that mode of production.

Now, what Althusser proposes in his 1970 essay titled *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* is that ideology has a political angle to it; why because, it acts as an adhesive that relates one a particular individual to a particular state a particular political state. So, 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 for that individual, which would make his or her 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. Now, though the worker sells his labour at a rate that is less than the value that he produces for the industrialist and we know that because that is what gets converted into the profit of the industrialist.

Yet the worker might think of this unfair exchange as quite legitimate, why? Because the state through it is various institutions like family for instance like school, like religious, establishments, like media publication houses and all of these things the state succeeds in developing in the factory worker, an ideological consciousness which allows him to regard his subject position as an exploited labourer to be natural, to be usual, to be something that is eternal that is only to be expected.

Now, these various institutions through which the ideology is developed in an individual that allows him or her to smoothly fit into the state and it is underlying mode of economic production is what is referred to by Althusser as the ideological state apparatus. This ideological state apparatus, he contrasts with the repressive state apparatus and what is repressive state apparatus well repressive state apparatus, according to Althusser is constituted of things like the police for instance the law court, the prison and things like that. Things, by which the state controls it is subject through the exercise of violence, through the exercise of coercive force.

So, of course, in contrast to this the ideological state apparatus is used by the state to interpolate or create for individuals, specific subject positions, by molding their consciousnesses of their selves, but according to Althusser, this ideological state apparatus and the way in which it interpolates or it creates subject positions for individuals. Is also a mode of control, which is more settle and at the same time more pervasive and even more persuasive than the brute violence exercised by the repressive state apparatus.

To further understand the politics of how ideology works within the society. Let us move from Althusser to the other Marxist theorist that I had referred to at the beginning of this lecture who is Antonio Gramsci and the specific idea that we are going to focus on

particularly is Gramsci's idea of hegemony, but before we take up for discussion hegemony, let me first give you a few biographical details about Gramsci.

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Antonio Gramsci
(1891 - 1937)



Source: Wikipedia

Gramsci was born in 1891 in Sardinia if you know your world map well you will know the Sardinia is a Island located off the coast of mainland Italy and Gramsci was born there, but he is primarily known for his association with the northern Italian industrial city of Turin. Where he initially went to study, but subsequently emerged as one of the more important trade union leaders.

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 also Lenin's revisionary readings of Marx. So, Gramsci was really reading Lenin very keenly and was majorly influenced by Lenin's works. In 1926 the fascist government of Mussolini arrested Gramsci.

And, during his trial the prosecutor famously said that for 20 years we must stop this brain from functioning. Ironically then it was while in prison that Gramsci's intellectual activities actually flourished. And, he produced elaborate notes on various aspects of Marxism and not only of Marxism, but also of world history of various aspects of the Italian society. And, these notes filled more than 30 copies, 30 notebooks and spread over 3000 pages or more. And, they were later published under the title Quaderni del carcere

which in English translates into prison notebooks, and this today forms the basis of our understanding of Gramsci and his concepts like hegemony.

Now, you will have to remember one thing that what are compiled in prison notebooks are only notes which Gramsci made for himself. So, that he could later elaborate on them and transform them into publishable pieces, but this plan never really came to fruition, because Gramsci's frail body gave up in the April of 1937.

So, what we have is not the final thing not the final polished publishable text that Gramsci would have liked to bring out. And, as a consequence we have to understand his major ideas like hegemony for instance, but there are other ideas like the subaltern war of position war of manoeuvre etcetera, by trying to piece together these ideas from his unfinished notes.

However, as far as the idea of hegemony is concerned it is basic understanding is clear enough though, the idea is catered throughout the prison notebooks and a complete understanding of hegemony requires our going through his entire notes and piecing them together, but the basic understanding is clear.

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Hegemony has Greek roots and originally meant the dominance of one Greek polis over a cluster of other Greek states.

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The term hegemony has Greek roots and originally meant and 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. This is the basic most simple meaning in which Gramsci uses the term hegemony dominance with consent.

What Gramsci argues here is that the 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. And, 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 in 2 different ways broadly speaking. The first way is that I can force you to do something that I want by threatening you with physical force. So, I can put a gun on your forehead and I can ask you to do something I can force you to do something.

But, there is another way in which I can make you do my bidding, which is if I can convince you that whatever I am telling you to do is not only in my interest, but we will also equally serve your interest. This will enable me to lead you or to exercise dominance over you by your own consent. And, this latter kind of dominance is precisely, how hegemony functions.

The dominant class within a state again as I said that the dominance can be exercised in 2 different ways, the dominant class within a particular society also exercises their dominance in 2 different ways. The first way is through civil society, which is the domain of hegemony building and the second is through political society, which is the domain of coercive force.

Now, the civil society that is how Gramsci refers to it actually constitutes pretty much what Althusser identifies as the ideological state apparatus. So, that will mean educational institutions for instance religious, institutions, publication, industry, media etcetera. And, in this domain of hegemony building the intellectuals of the dominant class convinces the rest of the society, that the dominant class serves not just its own interest, but also the interest of all other classes. This helps the dominant class gain consent of the rest of the society and exercise control over them through hegemony, through consent.

The political society on the other hand constitutes what Althusser would refer to as a repressive state apparatus. And, this repressive state apparatus or the constituent aspects of the political society, comes to the forefront with all it is coercive force only when

hegemony fails, that is when the dominant class fails to convince others that their interest is also 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 and abide by 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 throughout this lecture series. How does Althusser's idea of the 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 of gaining hegemony, by promoting the worldview of a particular class, then our understanding of literature as well as our critical approach to it will change radically. Why, take for instance the emergence of the modern English novel as a literary genre. And, this emergence can be convincingly connected with the rise of the bourgeoisie as the dominant social class in Britain.

Now, following this connection we can read the English novels like *Pamela* for instance or *Clarissa* early novels written by Samuel Richardson as propagating the bourgeois worldview and offering it as natural as something that is eternal and something that is universal. In other words we can read these novels as instances or as turf tools through which the bourgeois class extended its hegemonic hold over the British society at that point in time.

Similarly, we can read the English literary texts which were taught to Indian students in establishments like Kolkata's Hindu college. During the heydays of British colonialism, as tools of extending the hegemony of the colonizing class over the colonized population, but since we have limited time in our hand I will not be able to elaborate the potential of literature to spread hegemonic control of a particular class with reference to the readings of specific literary texts, but if you are interested to know more about it then I would recommend you a couple of books.

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- Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City*
- Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest*.

The first book that I want to recommend is Raymond Williams is the country and the city. And, the second book that you can read is Gauri Vishwanathan's Masks of Conquest. So, 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.