Marxist literary criticism

It would be more accurate to refer to Marxist literary criticisms (note the plural), since this particular school of thought includes a wide range of critical approaches and theoretical frameworks. They do, of course, share some core beliefs; for instance, they are all (obviously) built on the foundational work of Karl Marx, the first critic of capitalism, and they all believe that culture is not separate from history and the economy, but is in fact intimately related to both. That means that a Marxist criticism is not just a literary stance, but necessarily a political one.

Marx describes one of his central notions—the concept of Base and Superstructure—in the ‘Preface’ to *A Contribution to the 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.

A simplified version of Marx’s theory is that any given society is made up of a Base and a Superstructure. The Base is the “raw materials” of the economy (the “real foundation”). Think of how money is made, and by whom, in a given society. It is also made up of the relations of production—the total relationships that people must enter into in order to survive and produce. The Superstructure is the culture of a society, including its laws, its politics, and its art. The Superstructure is “built” upon the foundation of this economic Base, and thus ‘social consciousness’ is shaped by economics.

The relationship between Base and Superstructure is not a simplistic one. The Superstructure reflects the Base—that is to say, culture reflects economic realities—so it replicates dominant ideas; at the same time, cultural artefacts can potentially challenge these dominant ideas. However, whether any given cultural artefact replicates or challenges dominant ideas, it remains restricted by the economic realities (the Base) of the society in which it is generated. So, when a Marxist critic looks at a piece of literature, she looks to uncover the complex ways in which the work reflects the economic realities of its historical moment.

**Typical Questions**

- What role does class play in the work; what is the author’s representation or analysis of class relations?

---


Contributed by: Brad Congdon, Dalhousie Writing Centre
• How do characters from different classes interact or conflict?
• How do characters overcome oppression?
• What does the work say about oppression; or are social conflicts ignored or blamed elsewhere?
• What social forces and institutions are represented in the work? How are these forces portrayed? What is the author’s attitude toward them?
• What political elements appear in the work? How important are they in determining or influencing the lives of the characters?
• What economic issues appear in the course of the work? How important are economic facts in influencing the motivation and behaviour of the characters?
• Does the work agree with or serve as propaganda for the status quo, or does it try to undermine it?
• Does the work propose some form of utopian vision as a solution to the problems encountered in the work?

For a more advanced understanding of this critical approach, see some of the following sources:

• Karl Marx - (with Friedrich Engels) The Communist Manifesto, 1848; Das Kapital, 1867; "Consciousness Derived from Material Conditions" from The German Ideology, 1932; "On Greek Art in Its Time" from A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, 1859
• Leon Trotsky - "Literature and Revolution," 1923
  o http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/
• Georg Lukács - "The Ideology of Modernism," 1956
  o http://courseweb.stthomas.edu/ajscheiber/engl%20380/Georg%20Lukacs.pdf
• Walter Benjamin - "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 1936
  o http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm
• Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer – “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” 1944
  o http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1944/culture-industry.htm
• Louis Althusser - Reading Capital, 1965
• Terry Eagleton - Marxism and Literary Criticism, 1976
  o https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dal reader.action?docID=180837

Contributed by: Brad Congdon, Dalhousie Writing Centre
• Frederic Jameson - *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1991
  

Additional resources:

• Michael Delahoyde - *Marxism*
  
  - [http://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/marxist.crit.html](http://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/marxist.crit.html)