A Primer in Marxist Aesthetics

Macdonald Daly

Zoilus Press
in association with the School of Critical Theory, University of Nottingham
London
1999

A Primer in Marxist Aesthetics
Macdonald Daly

First published in Great Britain by Zoilus Press, in association with the School of Critical Theory, University of Nottingham, 1999

ISBN 0 9522028 1 6

First edition

Printed by Antony Rowe Ltd., Chippenham, Wiltshire

Contents

Preface

This book differs from other books on Marxism and art in a number of respects.

In the first place, there are very few “introductory” texts on Marxist aesthetics. The best books in the field often deploy a language which the uninitiated find difficult, and implicitly or explicitly assume a grounding in the philosophical or political or economic aspects of Marxism. This book is designed to be used by those with little or no prior knowledge of the field or its vocabulary.

Again, the existing literature tends to fall into three categories. Firstly, there are many anthologies which reproduce, often at considerable length, key historical texts in Marxist aesthetics. Secondly, there are discursive treatises, usually pitched at a fairly advanced level, which attempt to re-theorise this historical material. Thirdly, there are applications of Marxist theory in analyses of particular literary texts, dramatic productions, schools of painting, film, and so on. Students who are required to grasp the basics of all three approaches find themselves confronting an impossibly voluminous body of written material. As a compromise, the present book borrows elements from all three forms. It presents succinct extracts from some key texts; it offers a commentary on those texts, in what I hope is relatively clear language; and it tries to show how Marxist aesthetic theory has been or might be put to use in “practical” analysis of particular art forms (but I have been deliberately sparing in this regard because teachers and/or students will have different texts on their agendas from those that I or previous writers might have chosen).

Moreover, the book breaks with the tradition of presenting this material in the manner of a learned monologue. Its exposition is regularly punctuated with exercises and questions which invite the reader to reflect on and enquire into the material as it is being unfolded. This is done primarily with classroom situations in mind, but readers working in self-study mode are also encouraged to engage with these activities. My hope is that they will encourage students to see Marxist aesthetics as an area of contention to be explored rather than simply a pool of knowledge to be absorbed.

Lastly, this book is deliberately brief. This is true not only of its overall extent, but of its individual chapters, which attempt to build an understanding of the subject in a concise, step-by-step manner.

Needless to say, the book is not intended to be a surrogate for other less elementary treatments. It is necessarily (and desirably) restricted in scope. Aesthetics is not a central issue in the work of Marx (whether we conceive of that work as the elaboration of a philosophical, political or economic theory, or all three), but his scattered remarks on art are clearly related to, and an aesthetic theory can arguably be extrapolated from, his other concerns. His collaborator, Engels, was the one who began the process of extrapolation, and his aesthetic pronouncements have also become part of that body of work here called "classic Marxism". However, while deliberately attempting to keep classic Marxism at the forefront of attention (an imperative which few texts on Marxism and art follow), I touch on its primarily non-aesthetic concerns with only a very light brush in the pages to come. In this I have been guided by several years’ experience in introducing Marxist aesthetics to arts undergraduates. Strictly speaking, it is impossible fully to appreciate what a Marxist aesthetics might be without eventually understanding its relations to the philosophical, political and economic issues with which Marx was preoccupied. But where are readers whose initial interest or training is not in those areas to begin? Should they postpone all consideration of Marxist aesthetics until they have come to grips with the highways and byways of *Capital* or the *Grundrisse,* and scholarly commentaries thereon?

Oddly enough, history provides us with many examples of individuals who came to Marxism through their interest in aesthetics. My hope is that this book will help others to do so too. For good pedagogic reasons it gives very restricted attention to certain crucial aspects of Marxism, but in making this choice I would not wish to give the impression that these aspects can ultimately be neglected. Marxism itself tells us that art is only to be understood in its relation to social, political and economic history. The footnotes to the present volume, as well as its bibliography, cite texts to which readers should turn to extend their knowledge once they have grasped the basics it tries to elucidate.

Macdonald Daly
1 January 1999

1 Social Being Determines Consciousness

Let us begin with one of the fundamental propositions of Marxism: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." This sentence is found in Marx's "Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), in which he sums up the discoveries he has made hitherto. It comes in the midst of the following passage, in which Marx is attempting to describe how human consciousness — people's thought processes, the ideas they use to interpret and describe the world — are related to the ways in which they collectively produce things, such as food, clothing and shelter, to keep them physically (or "materially") alive:

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. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or — what is but a legal expression for the same thing — with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic — in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production.

Marx is here attempting to describe a complex set of relationships, and the description requires careful scrutiny.

ACTIVITY 1 (Time: 15 minutes)

One useful method of sorting out what these relationships are would be to render them in a diagram. Try to do this now.

We shall return to your diagram later in this chapter. But let us focus first of all on the main thing Marx says here, and how he says it. While you were constructing your diagram, you may have noticed that Marx does not simply add thought upon thought. For much of the passage he is repeating and elaborating a small set of important ideas, perhaps hoping that readers who fail to grasp a point expressed in one way may understand it if it is rephrased. Thus certain of his formulations mean essentially the same thing. We can see this if we simplify some of the sentences and split them grammatically into subject, verb and object.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
SUBJECT	**The economic structure of society ("the real foundation")**	**The mode of production of material life**	**Social being**
VERB	**gives rise to**[1]	**conditions**	**determines**
OBJECT	**a legal and political superstructure.**	**the social, political, and process in general.**	**consciousness.**

Dividing Marx's sentences up like this allows us to see that certain of his terms, although not identical to one another, are at least synonymous. Thus, the subjects of these three sentences are related to one another: "economic structure of society", "mode of production of material life" and "social being" are all ways, for Marx, of saying roughly the same thing. Similarly, the objects of these three sentences all, in one way or another, refer to that area of social life to do with the production of ideas rather than material objects.

It is common in discussions of Marxism to find these two different aspects of social activity described in shorthand forms as "the base" (how a society is organised to produce things necessary to sustain human life) and "the superstructure" (the forms of thought and consciousness available to a society).

QUICK QUESTIONS

Where does "art" fit into this scheme of things? Does it belong to the base or to the superstructure? Explain your answer.

The answer to this, as far as Marx's categories seem to suggest one, is that art belongs to the superstructure. Its production is hardly necessary for maintaining "material life", as there have been human societies without art. Few would hesitate to classify it as part of that "intellectual life" which Marx clearly assigns to the superstructure. Marx explicitly states that the "aesthetic" field is an "ideological" form rather than a "material" one.

What, then, does Marx's passage imply about the relationship between the production of material life and the production of art? At a very commonsensical level, it is clear that art of any kind depends on material life for it to happen at all: a writer or painter or composer must have (or be) a body, and that body must not be in a state of constant physical want if there is to be time and energy for the writing or painting or composing to take place. Therefore the capacity to produce art is obviously dependent on some kind of economic system in which such needs are satisfied. (Much the same could be said of the capacity to consume art, without which its production would be thoroughly aimless.) But Marx is suggesting much more than simply that. He is also implying that, although artists must be free of immediate material need, what they produce ─ and the thought processes that go into this activity ─ are inevitably influenced by the economic context in which their activity is undertaken.

If this much is the clear, the questions that must immediately concern us are of the following kind.

[1] This slight change of wording is made merely for the sake of grammatical neatness. In the phrasing of the translated sentence referred to, the order of subject and object is actually the reverse of that indicated here.

- **What do we *mean*, precisely, by "influence" here?**
- ***How much* is art influenced by material life?**
- ***In what ways*, specifically, is art so influenced?**
- **Is there any way in which art can be said to be *free* of such influence?**
- **If so, can some arts, or some aesthetic texts, be said to be more or less free than others?**
- **If not, is art, in the final analysis, *reducible to* material life?**
- **Or is it possible that the influence might also work in reverse, art provoking changes in material life?**

These are typical questions which many writers on Marxism have asked and attempted to answer, both with reference to art and to other elements in the base/superstructure equation. You will encounter them as they reappear in various forms throughout this book. Note, however, that these questions are somewhat different from more traditional enquiries into the nature of art, which primarily involve considerations of aesthetic value and pleasure. We shall also have to consider what Marxism might have to say about such notions.

For the moment, let us scrutinise the verbs which Marx uses to describe the relationship between base and superstructure.

ACTIVITY 2 (Time: 5 minutes)

Examine again the following three sentences, paying particular attention to the capitalised verbs. Judging by the "strength" of the relationship which the verbs imply, how would you rank these sentence? Your first choice should contain the "weakest" verb(s), your last the "strongest".

1 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.

2 The mode of production of material life CONDITIONS the social, political and intellectual life process in general.

3 It is not the consciousness of men that DETERMINES their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that DETERMINES their consciousness.

Having ranked them, explain your reasoning in doing so.

One usual response to this task is to rank the sentences in the order in which they appear here. In other words, the first sentence arguably expresses a weaker influence than the second, which arguably expresses a weaker influence than the third. Many would agree that saying the superstructure "rises" on the base suggests a less dependent relationship than saying that it is "determined" by it. Marx's verbs, then, may not be as similar as his subjects and objects.

It is at this point that we need to remind ourselves that many of quotations from Marx's work in this book are actually translations from the German, and that the understanding of his ideas in the English-speaking world has always been open to controversy for this reason. Take, for example, the sentence translated above as, "The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general." In Marx's original this reads, "Die Produktionsweise des materiellen Lebens bedingt den sozialen, politischen und geistigen Lebenzsprozess überhaupt."[2] The verb

[2] Fritz J. Raddatz (ed.), *Marxismus und Literatur: Eine Dokumentation in drei Bänden* (Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1969), vol. 1, p. 152.

"bedingen" ranges widely in nuance, so that "bedingt" here could conceivably be translated as "presupposes" "causes", "necessitates", "conditions" or "determines", although Marx would probably have used a stronger verb had the last been his intended meaning. One critic, Peter Demetz, goes further than this, however, and is happy to have the sentence translated as, "The manner of production of material life determines altogether the social, political, and intellectual life-process."[3] Another commentator, Maynard Solomon, rightly points out that this reading is not given "in any responsible translation" and concludes, "Demetz's substitution of 'altogether' for 'in general' cannot be justified".[4] This seems to be a clear example of a writer massaging a translation to reinforce his view of the passage in question as a "dogmatic formulation".[5] But there are many other passages in Marx where the necessity of translation throws up extreme problems.

These seemingly local semantic debates are important because, depending on their conclusions, Marxism can be presented in one of the two following, diametrically opposed ways:

> **(a) as a strongly deterministic theory in which "ideological forms" such as art have no freedom whatsoever from the production of material life, but are wholly preordained by the economic context in which they appear, and in fact are virtually reducible to it, and thus of only minor importance to contemporary and historical social change; or**
>
> **(b) as a less deterministic theory in which, although ultimately dependent on and influenced by material life, "ideological forms" such as art have a limited freedom from the economic system within which they arise, to the extent that they cannot be reduced to it, and indeed may exercise an influence on it, for example by promoting ideas or emotions which encourage people to fight against the prevailing economic order (or, indeed, which encourage people to subscribe to the prevailing economic order).**

It should be obvious that in the Marxism of version (a) art is hardly worthy of study. In this view, those who find the art of considerable social importance are either wasting their time with it (they would be far better off studying a precise "natural science", which might tell them something valuable about the material world) or are in deliberate flight from social reality (taking refuge from the harsh material world in the comforting illusions of fiction, imagination and aesthetic hedonism). A serious proponent of this view might tell you that, should you wish to appreciate the social consequences of English conservatism's hostility towards French republicanism in the first half of the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) will only mislead you, with its distractingly melodramatic plot, invented characters, and general air of imaginary historical reconstruction. A serious analysis of the trading figures between the two countries during the period, on the other hand, might tell you something *real*.

Only in version (b) does art have any social importance. A Marxist study of art undertaken in these terms would not deny that artistic work is strongly connected to an economic system. But it would presumably seek to establish that this connection is a two-way relationship (even if not an equal one): aesthetic texts are what they are because of the economic context in which they are produced, and that structuring process needs to be explained. But they also have the potential to intervene in that economic context, for

---

[3] Peter Demetz, *Marx, Engels, and the Poets: Origins of Marxist Literary Criticism* (Chicago, 1967), p. 72. This book is based on Demetz's *Marx, Engels und die Dichter* (Stuttgart, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1969) and the actual translator was Jeffrey L. Sammons. However, Demetz (himself fluent in English) appears to have approved the translation.

[4] Maynard Solomon, "General Introduction: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels", *Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary*, ed. Maynard Solomon (1973; Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1979), p. 8.

[5] Demetz, p. 72. It should be said, in fairness to Demetz, that he sees the 1859 "Preface" as a "contrast to [Marx's] earlier expositions" of the same relationships (p. 72).

example, precisely by discoursing (metaphorically or otherwise) *about* it. Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* is not, after all, just a rattling good adventure story. It can also be seen as an attempt to persuade English readers to adopt a particular set of attitudes towards a major economic and political event (the French Revolution of 1789) whose repercussions were still being felt throughout Europe in Dickens's time, and the fact that it does so by means of narrative pleasure potentially serves to intensify its effectiveness. As a consequence, it has enjoyed a lot more readers than the trading figures. On that ground alone it might be more important.

With any luck you will already consider version (a) extremely simplistic. It would in all honesty be difficult to locate a Marxist thinker who seriously espouses such a view (a few candidates from Stalin's Soviet Union spring to mind, but such figures were arguably not Marxists, or thinkers, at all). If you are genuinely interested in art the likelihood is that you find version (b) more acceptable, although you are possibly already questioning it and finding potential problems with it. So let me reassure you that it too is sketched out with deliberate simplicity here. As you work through this book you will hopefully see how this very simple model of Marxist aesthetic theory can be elaborated and extended, and how it needs to be qualified and modified.

But before we conclude this chapter, let us try to resolve where Marx himself stands on the issue in the famous quotation we have been examining. If we wish to claim him as a proponent of theory (b), in which there is a two-way relationship between the base and the superstructure, we should be able to find terms in the passage which suggest mutual influence.

QUICK QUESTION

> Reconsider the diagram of the passage which you drew earlier. You will almost certainly have represented the influence of the base on the superstructure, but did you find any indication that the superstructure in turn affects the base?

Personally, I don't find any such terms. On my reading, the exclusive concern of the passage is with establishing a one-way influence of the base on the superstructure. All of the verbs we have examined describe effects of events at the base; none of them suggests that the elements of superstructure have any independent agency. In the next chapter we shall look at other passages in the work of Marx and Engels which question the strong determinism of this model. It may be worth pointing out, however, that a few commentators have valuably drawn attention to the fact that the use of the "base/superstructure" dichotomy, in the words of Raymond Williams, "is not primarily conceptual, in any precise way, but metaphorical".[6] Fredric Jameson, for example, argues that "we must initially separate the figuration of the terms base and superstructure … from the type of efficacity or causal law it is supposed to imply. *Uberbau* and *Basis*, for example, which so often suggest to people a house and its foundations, seem in fact to have been railroad terminology and to have designated the rolling stock and the rails respectively, something which suddenly jolts us into a rather different picture of ideology and its effects."[7] You may wish to consider whether or not you agree with Jameson's point about the importance of considering the metaphorical nature of Marx's model (which is, presumably, that the metaphor implies a kinetic rather than static relationship).

Let us finish this chapter, however, by looking at some quotations from earlier and later works of Marx which demonstrate that this model of base/superstructure relations remained at the forefront of his thinking for a long period.

[6] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 77.
[7] Fredric Jameson, *Late Capitalism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London, Verso, 1990), p. 46.

The charges against Communism made from a religious, a philosophical, and, generally, from an ideological standpoint, are not deserving of serious examination.

Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man's ideas, views and conceptions, in one word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life?

What else does the history of ideas prove, than that intellectual production changes its character in proportion as material production is changed? The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.

When people speak of ideas that revolutionise society, they do but express the fact, that within the old society, the elements of a new one have been created, and that the dissolution of the old ideas keeps even pace with the dissolution of the old conditions of existence.

When the ancient world was in its last throes, the ancient religions were overcome by Christianity. When Christian ideas succumbed in the 18th century to rationalist ideas, feudal society fought its death battle with the then revolutionary bourgeoisie. The ideas of religious liberty and freedom of conscience merely gave expression to the sway of free competition within the domain of knowledge.

"Undoubtedly," it will be said, "religious, moral, philosophical and juridical ideas have been modified in the course of historical development. But religion, morality, philosophy, political science, and law, constantly survived this change."

"There are, besides, eternal truths, such as Freedom, Justice, etc., that are common to all states of society. But Communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis; it therefore acts in contradiction to all past historical experience."

What does this accusation reduce itself to? The history of all past society has consisted in the development of class antagonisms, antagonisms that assumed different forms at different epochs.

But whatever form they may have taken, one fact is common to all past ages, *viz.,* the exploitation of one part of society by the other. No wonder, then, that the social consciousness of past ages, despite all the multiplicity and variety it displays, moves within certain common forms, or general ideas, which cannot completely vanish except with the total disappearance of class antagonisms.

***Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848).**

Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought, and views of life. The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundations and out of the corresponding social relations. The single individual, who derives them through tradition and upbringing, may imagine that they form the real motives and the starting point of his activity. While each faction, Orleanists and Legitimists, sought to make itself and the other believe that it was loyalty to the two royal houses which separated them, facts later proved that it was rather their divided interests which forbade the uniting of the two royal houses. And as in private life one differentiates between what a man thinks and says of himself and what he really is and does, so in historical struggles one must distinguish still more the phrases and fancies of parties from their real organism and their real interests, their conception of themselves from their reality.

***The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852).**

I seize this opportunity of shortly answering an objection taken by a German paper in America, to my work, "Zur Kritik der Pol. Oekonomie, 1859." In the estimation of that paper, my view that each special mode of production and the social relations corresponding to it, in short, that the economic structure of society, is the real basis on which the juridical and political superstructure is raised and to which definite social forms of thought correspond; that the mode of production determines the character of the social, political, and intellectual life generally, all this is very true for our own times, in which material interests preponderate, but not for the middle ages, in which Catholicism, nor for Athens and Rome, where politics, reigned supreme. In the first place it strikes one as an odd thing for any one to suppose that these well-worn phrases about the middle ages and the ancient world are unknown to anyone else. This much, however, is clear, that the middle ages could not live on Catholicism, nor the ancient world on politics. On the contrary, it is the mode in which they gained a livelihood that explains why here politics, and there Catholicism, played the chief part. For the rest, it requires but a slight acquaintance with the history of the Roman republic, for example, to be aware that its secret history is the history of its landed property. On the other hand, Don Quixote long ago paid the penalty for wrongly imagining that knight errantry was compatible with all economic forms of society.

***Capital*, vol. 1, ch. 1 (1867).**

What we have to grapple with is the cause and not the effect — the economical basis, not the juridical superstructure.

"Report of the General Council on the Right of Inheritance" (1869).