

Text: Raymond Williams: 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory'

This e-content is for

BA Hons (English) - Semester III
Class

It contains material for the Paper. Unit and Text as indicated below.

Paper IV: Literary Criticism (A) (Code: Eng- 304)

Unit- IV Raymond Williams: 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory'

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Lecture Ten 26.11.20

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Paper IV: Literary Criticism (A) (Code: Eng- 304)

Unit- IV Raymond Williams : ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’

I’m sending my final lecture on Raymond Williams’s essay ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’.

The essay is difficult to read as it requires a lot of background knowledge about Marxist concepts of Base and Superstructure. I have therefore provided you this –in the previous lecture and also within the body of this lecture. I’m sure you will be able to understand the issues involved here.

Just read both the lectures and then write in the exam in your own language.

In the Internal Assessment exam you will be asked short questions on both the essays that I have taught. Just read the lectures and you will be able to answer the exam questions.

All the best!

In Marxist theory of history, existence of human life depends upon economic activity. This activity is determined by the combination of superstructure and substructure/base. The notion of Base-Superstructure is mainly concerned with the mode of production, forces of production, relations of production and social consciousness. It is situated on the scientific view that course of history socioeconomic formation can be predicted on the basis of material needs and conditions of a society.

The concept of base/superstructure, which first appears in Karl Marx's *A Preface to The Critique of Political Economy* (1859), models the relationship between economic and productive forces in society and legal, cultural, educational, religious, and political forces. Because individuals must meet their material needs before anything else, and because they accomplish this in association with other people, these relations form the foundation – or base – of society on which all other forms of life – the superstructure – are built. The base/superstructure model is a cornerstone of Marx and Engels's materialist philosophy, which claims that social relations determine consciousness, in contradistinction to Hegelian idealism, which privileges immaterial and transcendent concepts such as Thought and Spirit as the driving forces of human civilization.

The base/superstructure model therefore proposes the idea that culture, as an element of the superstructure, must be understood in relation to the material conditions of its production, distribution, and consumption, as well as its engagement with the social relations of production.

Marx turned Hegel's view of cultural determination on its head. "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life," he and Engels asserted in a much-quoted passage. The French Marxist thinker Henri Lefebvre says that:

[T]here are only two ways to understand history. Either we start from consciousness; in which case we fail to account for real life. Or we start from real life; then we come up against this ideological consciousness that has no reality, and must

account for it. Historical materialism puts an end to the speculation which starts from consciousness, from representations, and hence from illusions.

In short, the material base of society determines the shape of its culture, not the other way around.

The theory of base and superstructure by Karl Marx has wide range applications

This is one of the most important aspects of Marxist theory for literary and cultural studies, especially as it relates to the theory of ideology and the role of art in the production of ideology.

The simplest Marxist model of society sees it as constituted by a base and a superstructure. The base contains the forces and relations of production, such as employer-employee work conditions, the technical division of labour and property relations, into which people enter to produce the necessities and amenities of life. These relations have an effect on the superstructure of the society, which includes its culture, institutions, political power structures, rituals, philosophy and morality.

An early articulation of this base/superstructure duality is found in Marx's critique of the idealism of contemporary German philosophy in *The German Ideology* (1945):

"In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and

intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.”

By “relations of production”, Marx refers to the relationship between those who own the means of production (the bourgeoisie) and those who do not (the workers or the proletariat). This is used vis-à-vis the term – mode of production – which refers to the specific organization of economic production in a given society, such as factories and machines. Marx offers a critique of capitalism as it is based on the private ownership of the means of production, something to which he was opposed to, as he believed in the collective ownership. In a capitalistic society, an owner exploits his workers by draining them of their self-worth. A worker gets paid only for his sustenance as the product he works on gets sold by the capitalists in interests of creating a profit. This leads to the worker’s alienation from the product he works on and also estrangement from the process of production as certain workers work on certain areas of machines. Hence, he just becomes a thing in the ultimate balance sheet under the sub-header of labour force. This social relationship is inherently antagonistic in nature and will give rise to class struggle that will eventually lead to the collapse of capitalism.

Secondly, by the phrase “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness”, Marx posits that human consciousness cannot be divorced from its class or socio-economic group. Consciousness is how a human being defines themselves. A person who is born in the lowest of classes will experience a consciousness that is closer to those of similar class distinction to them, as opposed to someone of a different, presumably higher, class. For Marx, history is an unfolding of this dialectic between the haves and the have nots. Therefore, the existence of a human being is ultimately chained to his socio-economic reality which shapes his consciousness.

The essential Marxist view is that the elements of superstructure are not ‘innocent’ but ‘determined’ by the nature of the economic base. It is upon the economic ‘base’ that a superstructure “arises”. This belief about culture, known as economic determinism, is a central part of traditional Marxist thinking. The orthodox Marxist thinkers accorded a straightforward mechanical causality to the relationship between the base and superstructure. According to this argument, a feudal economic order will inevitably produce the particular forms of government, law, art, religion, etc., characteristic of the middle ages, while a capitalist economic order will produce those of modernity. But this straightforwardly mechanistic understanding of the relationship between base and superstructure is seen as too simplistic by most contemporary Marxist critics. They argue that just as the base influences the superstructure, the superstructure also influences the base.

Raymond Williams, , tried to topple this simplistic notion of the relationship between the base and superstructure in his essay “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory.”

Raymond Williams for example, has argued that Marx's own usage of the terms *base* and *superstructure* was flexible and relational, and that it is mistaken to think of these concepts as enclosed categories or enclosed areas of activities. He also calls for a more active role for ideology in the shaping of the societal base, citing as evidence a letter to Bloch in September 1890 in which Engels states:

The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure—political forms of the class struggle and its results, to wit: constitutions established by the victorious class

after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogma—also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form.

The relation between culture and material conditions, it appears from these statements, is often more complex than the theoretical literature portrays.

Raymond Williams, , tried to topple this simplistic notion of the relationship between the base and superstructure in his essay “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory.” He says that the base and the superstructure should not be treated as separate entities but as interacting ones which mutually influence each other. In “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory.”,

Williams assesses Marx’s use of the word “determine”, which he states that the term has an idealist connotation of an external force outside man and thus it is problematic as it incurs multiple meanings. Secondly, he says that the base is never static but can be seen as a continuous process – an entity which is dynamic. Therefore, to consider culture to be a plain reflection of the base is a flawed approach. Rather, according to Williams, the correspondence should be seen as that of “mediation.”

Thirdly, Williams asserts that the Marxist notion of “totality” can be properly understood when combined with the concept of “hegemony.” He builds upon Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, which are a central system of practices, meanings and values, which may not be rationally true but saturates the society to such an extent that it becomes an ideological common sense, such as the patriarchal notion of the inferiority of women. This combination of totality and hegemony would help us to consider the asymmetrical and exploitative aspects of the society, as hegemony links social inequalities to culture as these influence and conditions cultural practices.

Williams also posits that a superstructure is not entirely determined by the nature of the economic base.

Williams in his essay, ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’, establishes the proposition that “social beings determine consciousness” as contradictory to the conventional model of analyzing Marxist theory by establishing the relation between the base and superstructure where base denotes the forces and relations of production and superstructure represents societal behaviour and culture as a whole. He dwells back to the linguistic roots of the word ‘determination’ and follows its inversion pattern in its English translation. ‘Determines’ which is translated from the German word *bestimmen* which determines the relationship between base and superstructure. He also brings in the idea that in European language there is a possibility of synonyms which might alter the meaning of a word. He brings about two possible meanings to the word ‘determines’, which can either be an external cause which controls a subsequent activity or can be seen as setting limits to an action.

Williams examines the predominant terms in Marxist theory mainly the model of ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ as is also indicated through the title. One of the established definition of superstructure is, “...the reflection, the imitation or the reproduction of the base in the superstructure in more or less direct way”.

Williams says that this proposition can be contested due to the non-economical basis of some actions, such as philosophy and other such fields. The notion of reflection and reproduction was later modified into the notion of 'mediation' in which something more than reflection and reproduction actively occurred. In the twentieth century there was the notion of 'homogenous structures' which was viewed as a correspondence in all structures which can be discovered thorough the process of research.

He speaks about the inter-dependence and inter-relation between activities which blur the distinction between economic base and superstructures but instead make them related and connected or intertwined with each other.

Williams also speaks about the proposition of economic base being more crucial and vital for understanding the realities of cultural process. He says that base is never static or uniform since there are deep contradictions in the relationships of production thereby effecting the social relations.

The base can thus be seen as a continuous process and not as a 'state of being' or as being static and constant. Williams talks about re-valuing notions in order to make them realistic and rational when placed in contemporary socio-economic relations.

He argues that Marxist ideology is based on a certain economic structure which might be ambiguous when placed in the modern cultural scenario which is fast changing.

He presents a much dynamic, interrelated and complex structure of the developing social conditions which in certain ways contradicts Marxist concepts of economic relations. Williams says that most often the complexities of modern society cannot be examined based on the ideologies of classical Marxist concepts.

Another key Marxist concept which has influenced many other Marxist thinkers is the concept of 'totality'. One flaw in the concept of totality is that it can easily empty itself of the cultural phenomena attached to any concept. Thus the question put forth through the essay is "whether the notion of totality includes the notion of intention." Williams contests the idea of categorizing work of art as superstructure. But he states that certain kind of practices and customs have been so naturalised that they have to be considered as a part of superstructure in order to understand reality. He argues that 'totality' should be combined with Gramsci's concept of hegemony so that asymmetrical and exploitative aspects of the society are considered.

Williams finds the traditional notion of superstructure incomplete and ambiguous

Williams also introduces the distinction between residual and emergent form of cultures. He defines residual culture as a practice which has evolved or rooted out from a previously existing dominant culture. Some of the religious practices which are influenced from the mainstream practices could serve as examples. Williams associates emergent culture with the newly evolving cultural practices, which demand to be incorporated within the mainstream practice. Thus they are neither an individual cultural concept nor completely accepted in the mainstream culture. Such cultural practices are in a limbo like state.

Williams says the emergent culture will be valued and recognized if the dominant culture has a stake or interest on it. Otherwise an evolving culture might not receive due acknowledgement or

recognition. For instance, artistic pursuits are encouraged till the time profit is made and it doesn't contradict the dominant beliefs.

Williams also raises the issue of the connection between literature and society and concludes that literature evolves from the society and thus can't be evaluated separately. It is an integral part of the society. He says that any form of writing is highly influenced by the dominant cultural practices in the society. It embodies features and beliefs of the dominant society.

He also says that some of the art expressions might include aspects of the emergent culture which might appeal to the masses. The dominant culture thus tries to "... transform, or seek to transform, them." In the process that dominant culture itself develops. Williams says that in modern cultural society, dominant culture should develop and change in accordance to the changing times and attitude of the masses in order to be realistic and remain dominant. Literature thus coexists as a part of the dominant culture and becomes a prime mode of its articulation.

Williams puts forth the contradiction of cultural theory as the work of art being perceived as an object and the alternative view of art as a practice. Art can be seen as an object, i.e. buildings, sculptures etc which exist as objects, on the other hand the phenomenal work of Shakespeare, the melody of music and other art forms such as dance, drama etc are perceived as a practice. Williams says that we shouldn't look for the components of a product but for the conditions of practice.

He says an active, encompassing and self renewing mode of analyses is what is needed to understand the cultural context and value of any studied material.

Thus in the essay 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory' Raymond Williams posits a concept of the relationship between Base and Superstructure that is different from the classical Marxist formulation.

Williams's conclusion is that there are mutually influencing relations between society's material base and its cultural superstructure—which are complex, not always identifiable, and always changing from period to period.

With this I have finished your course. You can get in touch with me on phone/ WhatsApp if you have any questions.