

### The Basics of Marxist Analysis

Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) is a 19th century economic and cultural theorist associated with communist critiques of capitalism as dependent upon economic inequality. Marx is particularly important for literary and cultural theory because of his concept of **ideology**--the dominant ideas that both express the interests of the ruling class and ensure that the power of the ruling class is seen as natural.

“Those ideas [in dominance at any given moment in history] usually expressed the interests of the dominant social, economic, and political group of the era. They usually made economic inequality seem just and right, and they made the rule of those in dominance seem natural and legitimate. The purpose of the ideas, then, was to ensure that the dominant group or class remained in power.” (Ryan 115)

Thus, “cultural values have become increasingly important for maintaining the unequal distribution of wealth” (115). These cultural values are expressed in the products of a culture--its goods/services, modes of behavior, literature, music, visual art, and so on (text broadly conceived). The terms at work here are “base” and “superstructure”--so, is Marxism more like Structuralism or Post-Structuralism?

Examples of ideology in the working of feudal aristocracy? of the capitalist class?

“Vulgar” Marxism is often described as overly “determinist,” and it is true that there is an element of determinism in most Marxist analyses. To some extent, economic conditions inform cultural values and culture itself--for “vulgar” Marxists, economic conditions *determine* culture, and one cannot escape this determination. Later refinements in Marxist analysis sought ways to address the problems posed by such over-determination.

**One way to address over-determination** is to point out the internal contradictions inherent in all class based societies. Classically, “The merchant class ideal of individual liberty is contradicted by the reality of wage labor, which imposes a kind of servitude on the large mass of the population. A ruling ideology may make such societies appear unitary and coherent by contending that those who labor are in fact free, but the interests of subordinated groups can never be reconciled with those of their rulers” (116-117).

Which example does Ryan discuss?

**Another way to address over-determination** is to think dialectically (dialectics refers to a philosophical method that seeks truth through reasonable conversation--thesis, antithesis, synthesis). Art, for theorists like Adorno and Horkheimer, can “play an antithetical and critical role in capitalist culture” (117). The culture of capitalism tends to “turn everything into a commodity, and commodity culture creates a way of thinking...appropriate to it. Minds become

routinized and uniform/ We cease to be able to criticize intelligently the world we live in because we are pacified by consumption" (117). Art gives us a way to critique the culture--and the economic base--of capitalism.

How does Ryan explain the dialectical method (118)?