

Introduction
Marxist Literary Study and the General Law
of Capitalist Accumulation
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Periodizing Marxist Literary Study

This volume brings together fifteen essays by scholars who are pursuing fresh ways of thinking about literature through concepts developed by Karl Marx. Together, they represent a shift in Marxist literary criticism that has emerged from changes in capitalism itself, from shifts in political resistance to capitalism, and from changes in theoretical approaches to Marx's writing. To read these essays alongside the Marxist literary criticism from the 1960s through the early 2000s is to be struck by a significant collective rethinking of what a Marxist approach to literature might be, and do.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, there has been a marked revival of interest in Marx and his thought across the English-speaking world, one that compares to the "return to Marx" that grew up around the social revolutions of 1968. In the first few years after the 2008 crisis, work in the academic social sciences by established Marxist figures like the geographer David Harvey and the sociologist Giovanni Arrighi enjoyed a significantly expanded readership. In the electronic public sphere, the aftermath of the crisis produced a range of new Marxist writing online, from the militant communism of *Endnotes* (launched 2008) and *Viewpoint* (2011) to the widely read socialist journal *Jacobin* (2011). Marxist writing has also found a welcome in more mainstream publications like the new *Los Angeles Review of Books* and *n + 1*. In social movement contexts, it is now common for eco-activists to acknowledge that the demands of capitalist accumulation stand in the way of real social change around the planet's climate. And most strikingly, the left wing of the anti-racist activism that has taken shape under the banner of Black Lives Matter since 2015 has brought the concept of "racial capitalism" to the center of conversations about race and class both inside and outside the academy.

This uptick in Marxist discourse forms the immediate backdrop of our volume, but it is also part of a longer story about changes in capitalism, in politics, and in intellectual life over the last half-century. It is widely agreed that the period roughly from 1965 to 1973 was the beginning of what Robert Brenner has called “the long downturn,” a tendential decline in profitability for capital that has bred, over the past decades, a variety of capitalist pushbacks against this decline – from the waves of privatization and cuts to public services that began in the late 1970s, to the speculative bubbles in credit, technology, and housing that have punctuated the years since then. These have been accompanied by class victories for capital throughout the period. Some of these were immediately recognized as political, like the defeat of PATCO (the US air traffic controllers’ union) in 1981, or the Thatcherite victory over the National Union of Mineworkers in 1985. Others were less obvious but have proved at least as important, like the rise of personal consumer debt and its eventual financialization. Under pressure of declining profitability, capitalist classes were pushed to adopt new technological developments in transit and telecommunication, which led to the “deindustrialization” of declining real wages and increased personal debt in the global north, and to massive displacement from the country to the city in the global south, where forced “underdevelopment” pushed formerly peasant populations into low-wage work in rapidly expanding cities. This dynamic eventually produced what historian Mike Davis has famously described as our “planet of slums.”

Even before this, a circum-Atlantic Cold War anti-communism had sowed political terror across the globe, from the US-abetted murder of Marxists and communists throughout Latin America to the mass murder of communist party members – up to a million people – in Indonesia (also carried out with American support). Along with defeats to organized labor, deindustrialization, and the pinioning of working people by debt, these global waves of terror and violence have had an incalculable blunting effect on anti-capitalist struggle, and have imposed a rigid ceiling on popular political imagination, so that even radical movement energies have been continually reabsorbed into a liberal political project whose highest aim has been to fairly distribute the diminishing social surpluses generated by a capitalism that is increasingly desperate for high returns on investment. This dynamic shaped the left politics of the last quarter of the “American Century.”

At the same time, however, the social revolutions of the 1960s bequeathed new forms of Marxist theory as well as theory that would, long after any European communist party ceased to exercise intellectual influence, continue to define itself as “moving beyond Marx.” The 1960s were, after all, the last period in which Marxism was still a defining

political pole within a range of social movements, or at the very least a milieu with which many of these movements intersected. In the United States, where McCarthyism had been effective in purging communism from academia, Hollywood, and unions, dissident and unorthodox Marxisms found more of an opening with the New Left. The movements associated with the late New Left in particular – Second Wave feminism, Third Worldism, Black Power, Black feminism, environmentalism – all had a genesis in the context of a by-then deeply unpopular American war in Vietnam that helped to make the interconnections between racism, imperialism, patriarchy, and capitalism a common activist supposition. The Second Wave practice of “consciousness-raising,” for example, was first introduced by the New York Radical Women who took inspiration from Chinese communist “speak bitterness” campaigns that targeted the patriarchal structure of the rural Chinese family form along with landlordism. For Robert F. Williams and the Black Panther Party, the revolutionary communisms of Cuba and China offered concrete counterexamples to US racial oppression which informed their programs for Black liberation. And the Black feminism pioneered by Frances M. Beale understood Black women to be part of a larger international grouping called “Third World women” subject to the triple jeopardy of imperialism, patriarchy, and racism. The late New Left’s quest to conceptualize the interconnections between these forms of struggle, all understood to be global, was to remain an unfinished project. Long past the official demise of New Communism and conducted outside any Party framework, that unfinished project is detectable in the scholarship seeking to recover from the long-twentieth-century history of the Black radical tradition’s encounters with Marxism new theoretical insights into capitalism’s formal subsumption of earlier racial regimes and its invention of new ones.¹

The clearest advance in Marxism’s ability to relate divergent political tendencies without subsuming them into one narrative came in this period from the uptake of the work of French philosopher Louis Althusser, who had developed an anti-dialectical theoretical vocabulary in which different levels of political action, cultural activity, and economic production could be brought into relation without reducing them simply to expressions of an underlying economic reality, while still leaving open a way to imagine them as part of a complex unity. One of the most probing descriptions of the wide utility of Althusser’s work was offered by Jamaican-British theorist Stuart Hall. In a landmark essay of 1980 called “Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance,” Hall gave sustained attention to the Althusserian concept of articulation, which was conceived

as a figure for joint-making or connection-making – to articulate two things was to bring them together at their most appropriate point of contact. Hall persuasively demonstrated how this concept opened up space, not only for the study of the “relative autonomy” of processes of production, consumption, and exchange in capitalist economies, but of multiple kinds of political struggle. Hall felt that the promise of these concepts might be fulfilled with help from the earlier work of Antonio Gramsci on the concept of hegemony, which described how dominant classes developed nondirectly economic means of obliging other classes to adopt their worldview – that is, how actual movement might occur among the “levels” of capitalist societies. He was thinking about race, primarily, but he was clear that the analytic possibilities extended beyond it.

Hall’s optimism about the applicability of Althusser’s work across a range of political terrains had roots in his enthusiastic reception by students in France. As François Dosse has argued, for a young generation of leftists in France this reconception of Marx was powerful on two fronts: the struggle among academic disciplines for prestige in the French academy, and the struggle of young activists on the left with the official lines of the French Communist Party (PCF), not least over its relation to the disaster of the rightward movement of the Soviet Union. Dosse puts it this way:

This new Althusserian reading represented a youthful cure for Marxism and rid it of its tragic cast. Everyone used the mature Marx to turn him into the harbinger of the scientificity of his discipline, as the remarkable sales of the very theoretical *For Marx* attested. Moreover, the totalizing conception of Althusserian thought gave each discipline the feeling that it was an active participant in a common adventure. Marx became the intersection of all research, a veritable common denominator in the social sciences. (*History of Structuralism*, 309)

In the 1960s, the “tragic cast” that Marxism had taken on had to do, first, with the ongoing absorption of the extent of Stalin’s murderousness in the years of his power, and second, with the terrible contradiction between a Soviet Union that claimed to have abolished social classes and become a “humanist” society, on the one hand, while brutally crushing uprisings in Hungary and Czechoslovakia in 1956, on the other. For Althusser, overcoming this tragic coloration in readings of Marx was only possible if a “scientific” Marx replaced a Hegelian one.

Althusser’s stance was highly persuasive and its triumph extended to the Anglophone academy, including literary and cultural studies in English, where it supplied an enduring method for reading texts politically. In a

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1976 essay with the very Althusserian title “Toward a Science of The Text,” Terry Eagleton sets out to establish the specificity of literary study, using structuralist language throughout:

Since the text is generally a complex unity of such modes of aesthetic production, it may therefore incorporate a set of differential, mutually conflictual relations to the general forms given to it by the structure of its significations . . . In producing such significations, the productive forms at once ‘pre-constitute’ them – that is to say, partly determine which significations are to be produced – and so operate on those selected as to displace, recast and mutate them according to the relatively autonomous laws of its own aesthetic modes, on the basis of those modes’ ideological determination and of the specific form and character of the ideological significations put to work. (“Towards a Science of the Text,” 326)

This passage deftly transposes Althusserian concepts from Marxist theory to the domain of literary study, where, like any other academic field, its object can be described as a “mode of production” that yields, not novels or poems or plays, but “significations” in “mutual conflict” that cannot exceed the structure. Literary texts are always ideological products of elite education, or the mass market, or both – but they enjoy a “relative[] autonom[y]” in that restricted terrain by being “operate[d] on” so as to shuffle them around: literary writers can alter the terms of a genre by mixing it with another, say, or can end up backgrounding a once-dominant mode by making it suddenly seem old-fashioned. But it is less an historical than a structural mode of analysis, focused on the specificity of literature as a subdomain or “level” of capitalist social production.

By 1996, when Eagleton and Drew Milne reprinted “Toward a Science of the Text” in their *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader*, Althusserian Marxism had lost its most significant adherents and interpreters. This may partly have had to do with the way the specifics of literature were difficult to establish without recourse to literary history. But there were external factors as well. As Eagleton himself notes in his introduction to the volume: “If . . . the 1960s came to an end in 1973–74 with the international oil crisis, then the heady Althusserian heyday of the early and mid-1970s, when something like a Marxist *culture* last existed in the West, was already, unbeknown to itself, the beginnings of a political downturn” (“Towards a Science of the Text,” 1).

This assessment points to the obverse of the crisis of the Soviet-style Party form that Althusserians were responding to in France: because the huge spike in oil prices in the early 1970s was in part an attempt by oil-exporting nations to counteract the effects of US President Richard

Nixon's uncoupling of the value of the US dollar from gold, it began a period of financial wealth creation (the cycling of "petrodollars" from oil-exporting countries to US banks and then to developing nations in need of assistance managing their increased energy costs) that was at the same time a blow to postwar US hegemony. The dollar, now obliged to prove its value as the world's currency on the basis of US economic and military power, extended American economic influence abroad while accelerating deindustrialization at home (Desai, *Geopolitical Economy*). As state communism began its downward spiral, US-led capitalism got high on oil fumes, enjoying the financial rush and ignoring the productive contraction underfoot. Marxist theory in the Althusserian vein had escaped from what it believed to be the foreordained certainties of Hegelian philosophy by shifting from a metaphoric of ever-upward dialectical synthesis to a very present-tense metaphoric of "production" – but by the 1980s it was confronted with the problem of a capitalism in which "production" was itself in crisis. Structure collided with history.

It was in this context that Fredric Jameson, by far the most probing and synthetic of American Marxist literary critics, reasserted the importance of a very different, German Marxist tradition of thinking about literature and art. In his 1990 study, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or The Persistence of The Dialectic*, Jameson saw fit to return to a figure he had been the first to introduce to Anglophone readers in *Marxism and Form* (1971). That earlier volume slightly pre-dated the rise of an anti-dialectical post-structuralism, whose proponents often took issue with the way dialectics seemed to presume a foreordained absolute "End of History." By 1989, however, with the Fall of the Berlin Wall, and with conservative commentators like political scientist Francis Fukuyama declaring precisely the "end of history" and equating it not with the dialectic, but with its terminus in an eternal capitalist future, Jameson brought the idea of the *critical* dialectic back into view. What was of "no great help in previous periods," Jameson wrote, "may turn out to be just what we need today" (*Late Marxism*, 5). Adorno was a key figure in the Marxist research center known as the Frankfurt School. Adorno was born fifteen years before Althusser, fled Nazi Germany, and lived in Los Angeles from 1941 to 1949, finally returning to postwar Germany to produce his masterworks, *Negative Dialectics* (1966) and the essays posthumously collected as *Aesthetic Theory* (1970).

Unlike Althusser, Adorno remained committed to a version of the Hegelian dialectic, specifically to a humanist language of possibility and transformation. For Jameson, the dialectical character of Adorno's mature

work, as well as the stanching flow of German-American intellectual traffic after the war, made his thought seem parochial when measured against the backdrop of rising student militancy and anti-Hegelian theoretical positions on offer in France, which focused less on the long unfolding of history and more on the character of politics in the present tense:

The seventies – the age, in this country at least, of Theory and theoretical discourse, of *jouissances* that ranged from structuralism to poststructuralism, from Maoism to narrative analysis, and from libidinal investments to Ideological State Apparatuses – were essentially French; Adorno . . . seemed an encumbrance, not to say an embarrassment, during the struggles of that time. (*Late Marxism*, 5)

But if Adorno's thought seemed ill-equipped to grapple with younger radicals' resistance to capitalism, imperialism, racism, and patriarchy, Jameson suggested, it might turn out to be useful for understanding the other side of the dynamic that produced the radicalism in the first place: a fully developed global capitalism that had reached into every aspect of collective and individual life. What mattered for Adorno, in his attempt to rescue some sense of the possibility for human transformation in the face of an all-subsuming capital, were the intricacies by which individual consciousness tried to wedge open space for itself to breathe. The way to survive capital was to "stay human," as the singer Michael Franti puts it; and the way to do that, for Adorno, was to imagine happiness, fulfillment, an image of a world without capital, but to do so while centering attention of the ongoing horrors capital has produced. In the broadest sense this meant a loyalty to the idea that all pleasure and intellectual joy must be measured against the mass murder of European Jews by the Nazis; in the more restricted scene of artistic production, it meant that the dialectical capacities of the mind had always to be "negative," measured by impossibilities, limits determined by shifting social conditions. These limits shape human creativity, and run so deep that they can be thought of in almost Freudian terms, as "taboos" (*Late Marxism*, 192–193).

Indeed, one way to imagine the difference between the Adornian and the Althusserian currents is as an underlying difference between Freudian and Lacanian versions of psychoanalytic accounts of the birth of the individual as a subject – the Freudian one more organic, the Lacanian more structural. This difference can also be represented as a relative emphasis on capitalist form or logic (Althusser) instead of capitalist history (Adorno). Or, in turn, we can distinguish the two strands by key concepts derived from Marx: "reproduction," in Althusser's case, deriving from Marx's description of capital's need to reproduce the working class, which

Althusser extends to the reproduction of good capitalist subjects through ideology; and “commodification,” in Adorno’s case, derived from a blend of Marx’s initial analysis of the commodity and his analysis of the capitalist “subsumption” or restructuring of the labor process to suit its needs. Perhaps most usefully, though, the two theoretical strands can be read as competing abstractions of capitalist production: the one devolving from the spatial metaphor of “base and superstructure,” and the other derived from a temporal sense of capital’s power to subsume more and more of human experience over time.

But the declining profitability of twenty-first-century capitalism put the question to both the presentist model of base and superstructure and to the linear timeline of all-subsuming accumulation. Capital, while more productive of material goods than ever before, has proven incapable of maintaining a rate of surplus value that would enable another great expansion of accumulation along the lines of the postwar years.² This contrary situation – expanded production, declining profitability – calls for a theoretical vocabulary that imagines capitalist accumulation not only in terms of its ability to reproduce the working class, or to subsume social relations, but in terms of the capitalist imperative to overcome a tendency toward diminished profits, which has produced both the deindustrialization of the global north and the slumification of the south. The situation demands a vocabulary that contends with the incorporation of ever more people into the ranks of what Marx called “surplus populations” – those who are not worth incorporating into waged work on a regular basis. The scholars gathered in this volume have begun to take on this project, with the additional twist that literary studies itself has become a kind of “surplus” discipline in the academy today.

Reading *Capital* in the Post-2008 English Department

To propose that contemporary literary and cultural criticism might be able to contribute to the development of a Marxist social vocabulary is to do so from within a very different institutional context than the one when the English department had represented a stronghold of “theory.” The 1980s and 1990s, when literature along with everything else was regarded as a text, may not have been the first period in which literary critics drew upon the professional aura of scientific labor. It was, however, the first time that literature itself came to be analyzed systematically as ideology (Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 22). English’s “theory” moment made literary criticism in practice a form of ideology critique, in the sense that literary criticism’s

transdisciplinary prestige was based upon a widely shared semiological conviction that literature was a representative social text and that literary criticism was thus the potential source of critical social theory, regardless of the particular attitude of the literary critic or school toward Marxism. Indeed, but for the exceptional examples of a few singular and diverse figures (Jameson, Gayatri Spivak, Franco Moretti), the critical innovations within literary studies that commanded professional influence during these years were premised upon the idea of a world that had definitively moved “beyond Marx.” The fact that the reigning methods at the time – deconstruction, new historicism, late British cultural studies, and postcolonial theory – owed their authority to the shared premise of Althusser’s metascientific reading of Marx meant that critics would evoke the ghost of “orthodox Marxism” long after any communist party held intellectual sway, at the same time that Marx himself was only selectively read.

The turn of the millennium brought with it an opposite set of paradoxes characterizing the institutional basis and content of literary studies. With every financial downturn and especially after 2008, the sense of a crisis-ridden present has helped fuel a renaissance of Marxist economic, political, and social theory. Until very recently, however, these crises have not led to a reactivation of Marxist literary study.

What might explain this lag or dialogic gap? One obvious explanation is that while the 1960s’ intra-Marxist critique of economism had provided the foundation for a post-1960s “cultural turn” to which former Third World revolutionaries, SDS alumni, and McGovernite liberals alike could subscribe, the current return to Marx gives no primacy to cultural revolution and thus no special epistemological privilege to the literary or cultural critic. Another explanation might be that the impact of neoliberal disinvestment in higher education has led to a sharp contraction of the theoretical ambitions of literary studies, seen now as an endangered craft practice, and the discipline’s retreat to a core remit of reflecting on reading – reading’s technical differentiation from other kinds of leisure activities in the age of new media – so as to defend the specificity of literary knowledge work. In the contemporary English department of radically reduced expectations, such hopes for transdisciplinary address (and socially transformative significance) as had once attached to literary reading can perhaps literally no longer be afforded.

But another legacy of the 1960s was a revolution in the social identity of literature (its writers and readers) conducted in the name of multiculturalism that ran opposite to the model of literary reading as a critique of the classroom text. Despite perennial right-wing effort, this democratic

representational ideal of literature has proven difficult to undo. Just as English in the nineteenth century had originally been institutionalized in the Mechanic Institutes as the poor man's classics – from the beginning promising to effect a solidarity between social classes via the cultivation of “larger sympathies” and the instillation of national pride – so too had the US canon wars of the 1980s concluded in English's internalization of a mission to represent the nation's racially diverse populations more faithfully than had yet been achieved by electoral government.

This institutionalization of multicultural literary education has developed a class dimension as well. With both English literary studies and US/UK world domination on a path of steady decline, the undergraduate English major was becoming a shrinking pipeline of social mobility and immigrant professional assimilation. And it was also becoming disproportionately non-middle class in constituency. Unable to afford four years of tuition at increasingly marketized public universities, community college transfers (many of whom are minority, immigrant, and first-generation college goers) would increasingly form the majority of the humanities, where many course requirements, unlike in the science and engineering majors, could be fulfilled in just two years.³ At a time when the “two cultures” problem is increasingly also a class divide among student populations, literature is neither necessarily for the elite nor even a perceived route to joining it. This divide is clear to students; in a widely circulated document released during the struggles against new austerity measures in the University of California system in 2009, the anonymous authors wrote,

Student loan volume – a figure inversely proportional to state funding for education – rose by nearly 800 percent from 1977 to 2003. What our borrowed tuition buys is the privilege of making monthly payments for the rest of our lives. What we learn is the choreography of credit: you can't walk to class without being offered another piece of plastic charging 20 percent interest. Yesterday's finance majors buy their summer homes with the bleak futures of today's humanities majors. (*Communiqué*, 3)

As English in the age of deindustrialization returns to its nineteenth-century institutional origins in providing a “poor man's education,” its students more often find themselves in unexpected proximity to the standpoint of the wageless. Experientially attuned to the racial stakes of the privatization of public goods and social services, the standpoint of precarity makes more students receptive to perceiving the political limits of racial liberalism, for instance, since that liberalism is premised on an obviously impossible expansion of middle-class prosperity. In this