

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO CULTURAL MATERIALISM

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Abstract

A nascent discipline in literary theory and criticism, cultural materialism is generally considered to be the British counter part of American New Historicism. The term cultural materialism gained currency in the 1980s after the publication of *Political Shakespeare* in 1985, though its roots lie in the work of British academics of late 1970s and 1980s like Raymond Williams, Simon Hoggart Stuart Hall and Catherine Belsey, who challenged the traditional approaches to literature. Similarly cultural materialism is indebted to Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan whose work on ideology gave it a powerful methodological tool to analyse the inter-relations of subjectivity and society.

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A nascent discipline in literary theory and criticism, cultural materialism is considered to be the British counterpart of American New Historicism. The term cultural materialism gained currency in the 1980s after the publication of *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism* in 1985, though its roots lie in the work of British academics of late 1970s and 1980s like Raymond Williams, Simon Hoggart Stuart Hall and Catherine Belsey, who challenged the traditional approaches to literature. Similarly cultural materialism is indebted to Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan whose work on ideology gave it a powerful methodological tool to analyse the inter-relations of subjectivity and society.

Dollimore and Sinfield set out the key principles of cultural materialism in the Foreword to *Political Shakespeare*. They write that their “belief is that a combination of historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis offers the strongest challenge to traditional methods of interpretation and has already contributed substantial work.”(vii) Historical context undermines the transcendent significances traditionally accorded to the literary text and allows us to read between the lines; theoretical method detaches the text from immanent criticism which seeks to reproduce it on its own terms; socialist and feminist commitment confronts the conservative categories in which most criticism has hither to been conducted; and textual analysis implies the critique of traditional approaches.

Peter Berry, in his *Beginning Theory*, has offered brief and useful explanatory comments to the four basic principles outlined by Sinfield and Dollimore. He says that emphasis on historical context suggests that timeless value can't be accorded to a canonical text. (182) This aspect of cultural materialism aims to allow the literary text to ‘recover its histories’ (183). The emphasis on theoretical method signifies a rejection of liberal humanism and the alignment with

the structuralist and the post-structuralist methodological practices. (183) The stress on political commitment implies the influences of Marxist and feminist perspectives. (183) Finally, the emphasis on textual analysis means that nationally important texts are decanonized and demystified.

Barry's explanations make it clear that the British cultural materialism features a "leftist political orientation" critical of the aestheticism, formalism, art, historicism and apoliticism common among dominant post-war methods of academic literary criticism. (Sinfield 1985: 4) John Brannigan points out that the four key principles outlined "are not particularly descriptive of the method or critical practice of cultural materialism, but they are general indications of the conditions in which cultural materialists see themselves operating." (186)

Guided by a Marxist and feminist vision of the future, cultural materialists employ diverse and ever evolving strategies to study text, subjectivity and society. They aim "to read literary texts in ways which frustrate conservative interpretations, either by interpreting texts as the vehicles of radical critiques of conservative politics, or by exposing the means by which texts do serve the interests of conservatism." (Brannigan 2001: 186)

The study of ideology remains one of the prime strategies of cultural materialists to integrate the textual and the social domains. Sinfield, for instance, studies the feudal ideology and its different manifestations in the Renaissance period and how their limits create possibilities of dissidence in a text like *Othello*. Similarly Catherine Belsey studies fictional texts especially novels as interrogative texts so that 'radial critiques of conservative politics' can be made. Of late, cultural materialists have extended their analyses into the domains of 'queer' theory, post colonialism and feminism. Though of course, an undercurrent of feminist perspective has always been present in their work.

Sinfield's assertion that ideology "produces, makes plausible, concepts and systems to explain who we are, who the others are, how the world works," (Sinfield 1998: 806) can be conceptualized through Althusser's concept of ideology. Althusser's theory of ideology is immensely suitable to show how bourgeois ideology interpellants individuals to subject them to the dominate ideology. In his influential essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" he explains how dominant ideology saturates the lives of individuals through different organizations and institutions, enabling them to understand their lived experience in a particularly 'slanted' way which appears normal because ideology 'derives its strength' from the way it gets to be common sense; it 'goes without saying.' (Sinfield 1998: 806)

Althusser maintains that "Ideology is a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existences." (36) It implies that we can't know the real world directly; what we can know are always representations of that world or representations of our relations to that world. Catherine Belsey clarifies this concept thus: "Ideology is both a real and an imaginary relation to the world – real in that it is the way in which people really live their relationship to the social relations which govern their conditions of existence, but imaginary in that it discourages a full understanding of these conditions of existence and the ways in which the people are socially constituted within them." (109)

Althusser's second point is that "Ideology has material existence". It suggests that ideology always exists in two places – in an apparatus or practice, and in a subject, a person who is by definition material. Ideology has a material existence as it exists in the behaviour of the people acting according to their beliefs.

Althusser explains that ideology ensures the individuals' willing response to itself by constituting them as subjects through interpellation. The subjection of individual beings is achieved through the duplicate mirror – structure which ensures simultaneously:

- “1. The interpellation of ‘individuals’ as subjects;
2. Their subjection to the Subject;
3. The mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects’ recognition of each other and finally the subject’s recognition of himself;
4. The absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right: Amen – ‘So be it.’” (55)

Here subject with small s refers to an individual and subject with a capital S invokes something unique, Absolute i.e God, capitalism; the subject par excellence. The idea of Subject and subject also suggests the duality of being a subject where one is both the subject of language/ideology (as in being the subject of a sentence) and subject to ideology having to obey its rules / laws, and behave as that ideology dictates.

But it must be borne in mind that interpellation of individuals and its effects are not accomplished in successive steps. The existence of ideology and the hailing, or interpellation of individuals as subjects, is one and the same thing.

Catherine Belsey's critical practice distinguishes between a declarative, illusionist text and the interrogative text. The declarative text imparts knowledge “to a reader whose position is thereby stabilized through a privileged discourse which is to varying degrees invisible.” (91) The interrogative text, on the other hand “invites an answer or answers to the questions it poses.” It “disrupts the unity of the reader by discouraging identification with a unified subject of enunciation.” (Belsey: 75) Thus a declarative text generally generates a conservative reading which reinforces the legitimacy of the relations of existence / production. An interrogative text, on the other hand, questions the existing relations of production and generates a dissident reading. These categories, however, are not self-contained, final and exclusive. The texts contain traces of both categories as the *weltanschauung* – the vision of the world which pervades the text is itself ideological, complex and contradictory. Yet it is always possible to identify the domination of one kind of modality even where the text has elements in it of other modalities. Indeed, cultural materialists like Sinfield, Dollimore, Stallybrass and Catherine Belsey have read the declarative texts as interrogative texts through their various and unique methodologies.

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