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Base/Superstructure

TARA NEEDHAM

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. Despite tremendous variation and debate regarding what actually constitutes the categories base and superstructure and the nature of their interaction, most Marxist thinkers agree that cultural analysis must adhere to a historicist methodology, a necessity famously summed up by Fredric Jameson's imperative, in *The Political Unconscious*: "Always historicize!" (Jameson 1981: 9). The base/superstructure model is part of a method that rejects any purely formal critique. Instead, 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.

In an "orthodox" Marxist framework, the distinction between the two terms is quite clear. The base comprises the mode of production, which is the manner in which a society is organized to provide for its material needs, including the production of goods and reproduction of life itself. A particular mode of production – such as slavery, feudalism, or capitalism – comprises in turn particular means of production (buildings, technology, raw materials). Each mode of production generates a

specific set of social relations, a division of society into classes whose antagonistic relationship leads to a struggle over material resources and social power. For example, under industrial capitalism, the proletariat class, consisting of individuals who sell their labor, come into conflict with the capitalist class of owners and managers who buy this labor; antagonism emerges from this asymmetrical relationship in which the workers' labor produces "surplus value," while the workers themselves receive a subsistence wage (enough for food, clothes, and shelter). The superstructure, by contrast, encompasses all other social institutions, political and cultural practices, and forms of consciousness (including religion and philosophy) and constitutes the realm of "ideology." Ideology refers to the ways in which individuals within a particular class make sense of, manage, and represent the social relations of production and class struggle to themselves; *dominant* ideologies are those formed by the ruling class and can be coercive and repressive in nature. The superstructure, though it often appears neutral, natural, or universal, predominantly serves the interest of the dominant economic class. For example, laws protecting private property may appear to be "universal" expressions of abstract or natural principles of justice, when in fact they are particular and historical consequences of the superstructure, which functions to maintain the class privilege of the few who own the means of production. The process by which the proletariat seeks to overturn this social structure is the prime motivation of class struggle. This struggle can be understood from a variety of viewpoints, including literary and cultural analysis. As Jameson argues (echoing Marx in *Capital*), all history is the history of class struggle, and all narrative bears the traces of this unifying narrative, either covertly or overtly. To analyze narrative is to analyze both the formal conventions and the ideological moves and motives that confront, conceal, or resolve class struggle.

In their most direct treatment of art as it relates to the base/superstructure dyad, Marx and Engels explain formal qualities of epic poetry, such as repetition, as a consequence of the material and rather mundane need for stories to be orally transmitted. The decline of epic as the dominant mode of literature is as much a result of the invention of the printing press as it is of formal innovation or evolution. A Marxian or materialist perspective would tend to emphasize the mode of production, regarding formal innovation as a secondary effect. In some cases, this results in uneven development, as in ancient Greece, a society that was economically "backward" (in this instance, a slave society) but was able to produce sophisticated and enduring cultural forms. This demonstrates that the superstructure is not a mere reflection or reaction to the base, and can manifest achievements in society that may seem on the surface out of sync with the level of material progress or development as a whole.

Several key aesthetic concepts come under fire in subsequent reinterpretations of base/superstructure, including the "theory of reflection," the status of reality, and the role of representation in art. If great art reflects or reveals reality, what comprises that reality and how does art represent it? In an attempt to address these issues, Georg Lukács, Hungarian Marxist literary critic and philosopher, adapted the base/superstructure model for literary analysis, specifically in works such as *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács argued that base and superstructure are already concepts – or abstractions – and, most important, they point to a relationship between seemingly separate spheres of society that in fact comprise a totality, which is a principle object of analysis in dialectical materialism. One of

the illusions of advanced capitalist society is the apparent separation of spheres of life, which are, in the end, interconnected and interdependent, and cannot be understood except in complex relation to one another. Examples of apparently separate spheres are work and leisure, public institutions and private domestic spaces. The task of literature, according to Lukács, is to reveal the complete human personality – that is, the individual as part of a community – through the depiction of character types. A character type expresses all the necessary historical determinants bearing on human experience without succumbing to biological determinism (as in naturalism) or the extreme subjectivity of psychological realism (as in modernism). Lukács was a champion of literary realism as practiced by writers such as Balzac, and reviled German expressionism as a bourgeois art that represented an internalized or distorted reality that had little relation to the social totality. Bertolt Brecht and Theodor Adorno, arguing in different ways against theories of reflection, insisted that fragmentation was *the definitive lived experience* of modernity and that art should seek to engage that experience.

If Lukács regarded great art as restoring the individual to the social totality, Theodor Adorno and other Frankfurt School theorists regarded it as one of the last remaining spheres "outside" of a thoroughly commodified culture. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Adorno and Max Horkheimer analyze the rise of mass and popular culture and its role in numbing the critical sensibilities of individuals, thereby reducing the potential for independent thought and resistance to oppression and the status quo. They argue that once the artwork becomes a commodity, it becomes dependent on the mechanisms of economic exchange and circulation. In this way, mass entertainments take on a new and, for Horkheimer and Adorno, regrettable relation to the means of production. The danger for critical theory was the subordination of culture to economic and political institutions. Adorno in particular responded to the conflation of the economic and cultural by arguing for the autonomy of high art, assigning it a strictly aesthetic function that allowed individuals to glimpse "freedom" (from necessity) despite the material reality of exploitation.

In its most reductive treatments, the base/superstructure model has been interpreted as a form of mechanical or economic determinism, sometimes called "vulgar" Marxism. Marxists and non-Marxists alike have resisted strict economic determinism because of the limits it places on both the act of interpretation and the possibility of change and progress being initiated or achieved through superstructural elements, such as reforms in government or the dissemination of radical ideas through culture. As British cultural theorist Raymond Williams has observed, the base/superstructure model has at times been so simplified that "base" becomes synonymous with "reality" and the superstructure with so many echoes or reiterations of it. By reconsidering the base as a set of dynamic social and productive processes, rather than a static economic system, Williams was able to recognize the complexity, richness, and material effects of cultural practices and to regard them as part of humanity's productive activity and not a mere reflection of it. In doing so, Williams aligns himself with the concept of hegemony as developed by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, and which designates all of the complex relationships which make up the experience of domination and subordination in society. Influenced by the structuralism of Jacques Lacan and Ferdinand de Saussure, French Marxist Louis Althusser also reworked the dyadic model of base/superstructure in favor of the concept of practices. For Althusser, the

mode of production essentially subsumes both base and superstructure. Economic and social relations cannot be discretely separated from superstructural activities; rather all "practices" contain both dimensions. This move allows for the "semi-autonomy" of layers of society, moving further from any sense of a mechanistic cause–effect relationship. More recently, Terry Eagleton reasserted the basic premise of the base/superstructure model: that it defines a hierarchy in which the economic takes priority over the cultural. The irony is that socialism projects a future in which humans are free from necessity to be purely "cultural"; but, Eagleton maintains, we are simply not there yet. He also adds that *only* when art is *thoroughly economic* (i.e., participating in the market, rather than serving the church, state, or law) can it appear "autonomous" (i.e., modernism, "art for art's sake") and perform critique, echoing Adorno's argument for the autonomy of art. This is a good example of how one cannot understand the function or place of art in society without understanding its relationship to material conditions.

SEE ALSO: Adorno, Theodor; Althusser, Louis; Commodity; Commodity/Commodification and Cultural Studies; Critical Theory/Frankfurt School; Cultural Materialism; Culture Industry; Determination; Dialectics; Eagleton, Terry; Gramsci, Antonio; Jameson, Fredric; Lacan, Jacques; Lukács, Georg; Marx, Karl; Marxism; Materialism; Modernism; Modernist Aesthetics; Saussure, Ferdinand de; Structuralism; Totality; Williams, Raymond

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Georges Bataille

TIM KAPOSY

Georges Bataille (1897–1962), novelist and critic, flourished in Parisian intellectual circles in the period between World Wars I and II. Known for his erudite approach to eroticism and his iconoclastic writing style, Bataille focused his attention on a wide variety of themes and problems in anthropology, philosophy, literature, sociology, and economics. Although he was