



OLLI Spring 2021

Introduction to Critical Theory

Week

4

Cultural Studies

Agenda



Part 1: Base and Superstructure, Hegemony

key thinkers:

- Marx & Engels
- Antonio Gramsci

Part 2: Stuart Hall & the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS)

key thinkers:

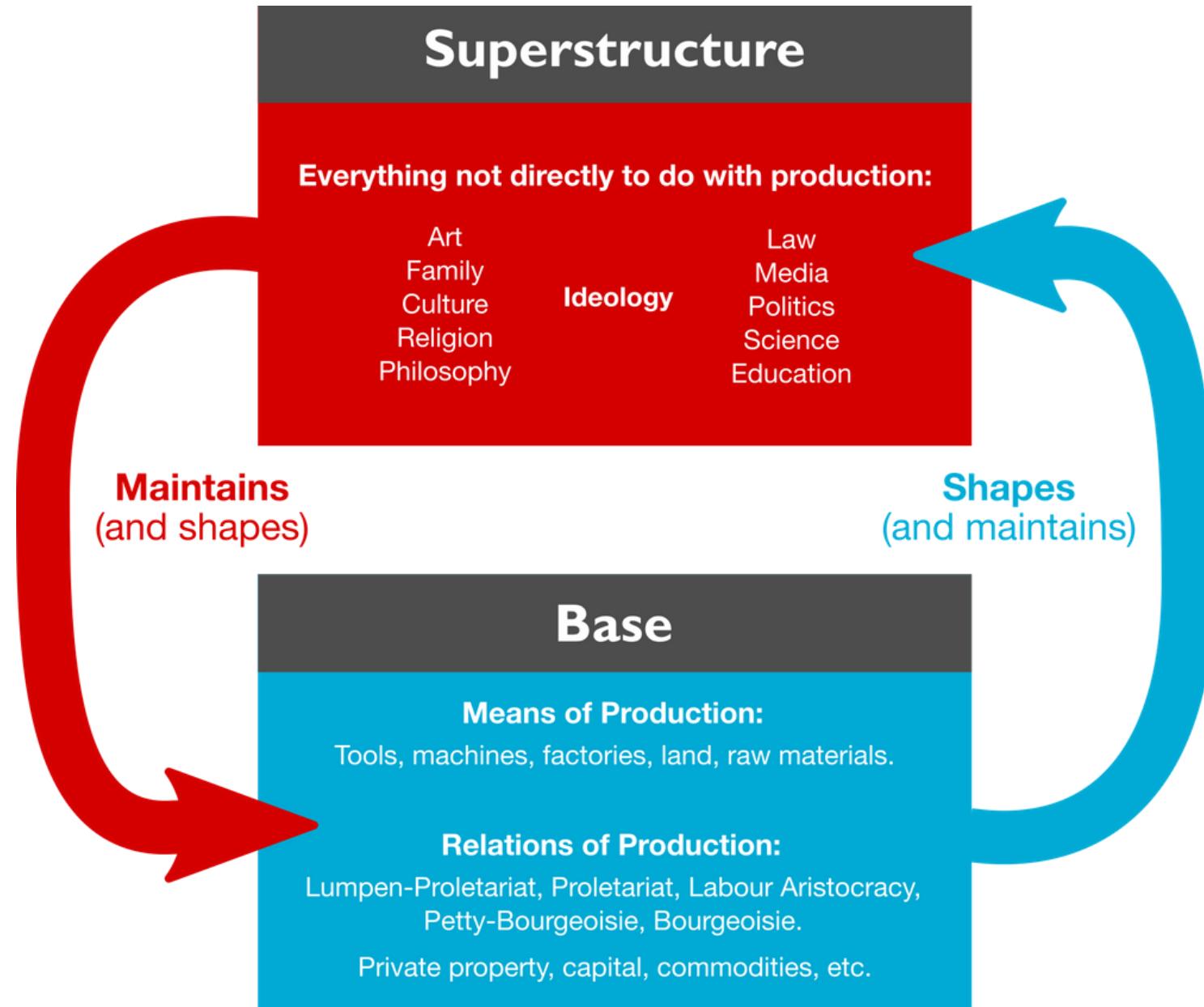
- Stuart Hall
- Raymond Williams

Part 3: Cultural Studies Since CCCS

key thinkers:

- Fredric Jameson
- Hazel V. Carby
- Edward Said
- Aníbal Quijano

Base and Superstructure



**This moves in a spiral pattern.
The base is generally dominant.**

- In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx proposes the question what upholds the current state of affairs? His answer: a set of ideological and cultural practices. These he calls **superstructure**, which maintain the '**base**' of the means of production (the material conditions under which societies live).
- It is in this document from which his rather famous dictum comes: "base determines superstructure."
- What Marx means by this, though, is contested (even between Engels and Marx). Engels will later say that the relationship between the two is 'reciprocal' (hence the two arrows pointing toward a circular movement).
- With the introduction of structuralism (by Althusser), this will become even more contested, as Althusser asserts it is the superstructure which upholds the base.
- Thus, the relationship between base and superstructure become a distinguishing factor between Soviet and Western Marxism.
- The concept is now utilized in disciplines including political science, anthropology, literary studies, cultural studies, sociology, and psychology

Antonio Gramsci



- Antonio Gramsci was a political dissident in Italy during the outset of fascism throughout Europe. As an outspoken leftist, he was quickly detained and remained in prison for a number of years
- While in prison, he continued to write prolifically
- After his incarceration, his contributions to critical theory in the tradition of Marxist thinking was secured after the publication of his *Prison Notebooks*, as they are called by the publishers.
- The importance of Gramsci is hard to overestimate. His influence on Western Marxist thinking has been increasing since the embrace of Cultural Studies as a praxis in the Anglophone academy.
- Of importance for Cultural Studies is the introduction of three key definitions to the Marxist tradition:
 - **hegemony** – Gramsci's take on the base-superstructure argument is that a cultural hegemony is upheld by the ruling classes in the form of domination (either military or social)
 - **war of position** – in the war of position, Gramsci argues that to produce the conditions of proletarian revolution, the Marxists must wage war against cultural hegemony first (a psychological or cultural war) and then pursue military efforts
 - **war of maneuver** – these military efforts (shock and disruption) he calls the war of maneuver

Louis Althusser

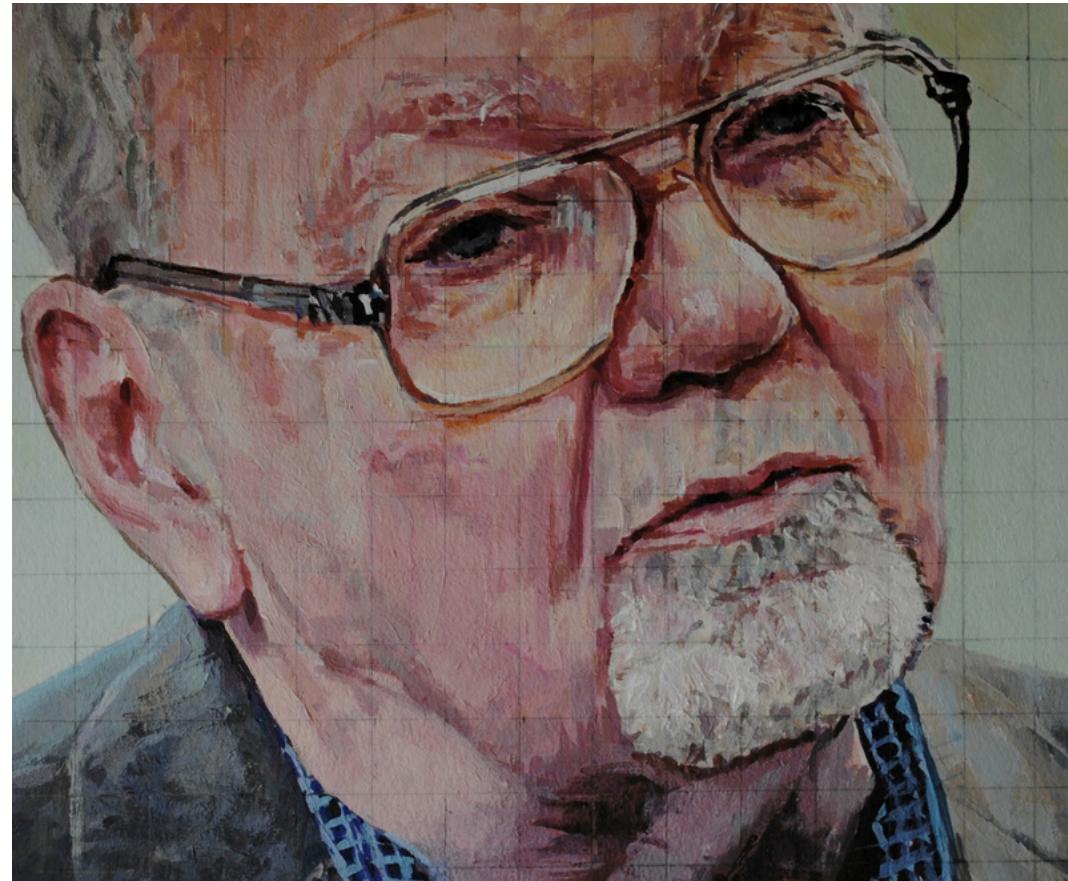
- Perhaps the most influential Marxist of the 20th century after Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser published his magnum opus *Reading Capital* in 1965 to rave reviews. The mammoth text proposes several 'updates' to Marxist cultural analysis, particularly the introduction of what Althusser calls 'ideological state apparatuses' and 'overdetermination.'
- Althusser is mostly influential for combining the theories of Marx, Freud, and Lacan to develop what will be very similar to Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony.
- Althusser argues that the reproduction of the conditions of production and the reproduction of the relations of production happens through the **state apparatuses** which are insidious machinations controlled by the capitalist ruling ideology in the context of a class struggle to repress, exploit, extort and subjugate the ruled class.
- Similar to the base-superstructure model, Althusser proposes that there is an infrastructure and a superstructure
- He also proposes the state uses **repressive state apparatuses** (RSAs) to subjugate the working classes. Similar to Horkheimer and Adorno's 'culture industry' theory, RSAs uphold the power of the ruling class through seemingly apolitical forces like educational institutions, political processes, the family, social clubs, sports teams, and churches.
- In updating Marx's conception of ideology, Althusser will propose that ideology rather than just lulling the masses into subjugation is actually the very method through which a society is held together. Thus it must not be avoided but redefined and monitored. He proposes, too, that ideology is not simply ideas or beliefs the way that Marx had proposed but include the processes through which these beliefs are upheld (social and material processes)

Stuart Hall



- Though Stuart Hall was born in Jamaica, he became part of what has been called the Windrush generation (named after a large ship that brought many people of color from British colonies to the UK mainland) when he won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford. After Oxford, he goes on to found the ***New Left Review***.
- Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams go on to use the theories of Antonio Gramsci to introduce a new discipline into the Anglophone academy that will shape the way humanities and social sciences exist forever: **cultural studies**.
- In the establishment of **the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies** in Birmingham, UK, which Hall leads for a number of years, the two theorists develop theoretical models that become the methodological center of Cultural Studies (as a discipline) to this day.
- Of particular interest for Hall and Williams is the ideological concerns of the working class. Both believed in Gramsci's notion of the war of position (fighting a proletarian war against cultural hegemony) and particularly the presupposition of the war of position: **that the proletarian class can have a culture which undermines, questions, or seeks to critique the dominating culture** (hegemony).
- Much of the work coming out of the CCCS was explanations or sociological studies of the subcultures in the UK, including 'punk' subculture, and particular interest in critiquing the Thatcher regime (out of which *Policing the Crisis* in 1978 comes)

Cultural Studies after CCCS



- Fredric Jameson is the founder of the Marxist Literary Group in the US at the University of California, San Diego.
- Most important for understanding Jameson is the combination of Freudian notion of the unconscious with politics and particularly the reading of literature in a Marxist analytic
- For Jameson, all of literature has a 'political unconscious' or a preceding ideological structure that may or may not have been part of the thinking of the author (likely it was not, Jameson contends—since he uses 'unconscious').
- It is, therefore, the job of the critic to demystify or decrypt this ideology such that the political unconscious is more readily available to the reader
- This has been **HUGELY** impactful in the American academy, as it introduces what Jameson calls the 'symptomatic' reading method through which the critic reads different literary events as 'symptoms' of some other larger thing that the critic will reveal. This method of scholarship is the chief method of scholarship for American literary studies after the 1980s

Symptomatic Reading vs. Close Reading

The Beast (1920) by Claude McKay

The statesmen-hirelings its favour seek.
And the world's news is under its control;
Great are the powers of the mighty clique
That owns the slaving peoples, body and soul.
Down in its shops and offices and streets
The toilers struggle, sullen, underpaid,
And pinch-faced poverty proud Plutus meets,
And pimps and harlots ply their wretched trade.
And in its gorgeous halls where gold holds sway
The smirking mother offers her young daughter
To haughty men for whom all women are play
Or babes, or ornaments, or sheep for slaughter:
Its system makes men parasites or brutes
And tends to make all women prostitutes.

- Jameson's method of **symptomatic reading** actually is influenced by a set of critical assumptions and methods that precede it.
- Historicism and aesthetic theory are the mode through which most literary studies is done prior to the 20th century. **Historicism** argues that an author creates things based on things that happen in their lives, so studying the author's life might help us understand the literature. **Aesthetic value theory** places value on art based on how its aesthetics make one feel when encountering it
- **New Criticism** develops 'close-reading' which will be the mode through which most criticism exists in the 20th century (even if they use close-reading to develop another method, like Jameson does). Close-reading reads formal events of a piece of literature as the focus of literary criticism
 - Opposed to the New Critics were **ideology critics** who like Jameson developed an idea that each piece of literature was indicative of a social ideology that ought to be revealed by the critic
- **New Historicism** proposes that each piece of literature is an object that comes out of its history and thus history becomes important to studying literature
- Symptomatic reading combines most of these methods into one. Symptomatic reading uses the literary event as the point where the critic will come in and either talk about the political unconscious or the historical meaningfulness of that event in reference to the rest of the poem ideologically. This is a type of formalism, a type of historicism, and a type of ideology critique all in one.

Cultural Studies after CCCS



- Hazel Carby's most influential contributions to African Diaspora studies came with her first book, ***Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*** (1987). *Reconstructing Womanhood* offers one of the earliest and most comprehensive studies on black female writers including Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, Anna Cooper, and Ida B. Wells, among others.
- In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Carby argues that black women produced their own ideologies to complement their lived experience under racial capitalism and patriarchy. She also argues that white women were more inclined to show allegiance to race instead of gender by allying themselves not with black women, but with the dominant white male patriarchy.
- However, in addition to *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel V. Carby becomes a larger voice in Cultural Studies in critiquing the male-centric (or rather the lack of discussion of gender whatsoever) in Cultural Studies. In focusing on the proletarian classes, women (particularly black working class women) are left out of the potential objects of study in Cultural Studies.

Cultural Studies after CCCS



- Aníbal Quijano introduces Cultural Studies to the South American continent with his work on (philosophical) modernity and critique of Eurocentrism
- In his most cited piece, *Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality*, he proposes that all of the production of knowledge that we today call 'liberalism' (political liberty) can be dated back to Eurocentric understandings of the human
- He develops a theory of decoloniality by which Latin American scholars can untangle the production of knowledge from a primarily Eurocentric 'episteme' or ideological apparatus.
- Decoloniality has developed as a discipline and critiques the perceived 'universality' of Western knowledge and the superiority of Western culture.
- The perspective of decoloniality is that Western cultural hegemony has remained the fundamental way that Western imperialism has continued into the 20th and 21st centuries and that through decolonialism, this may be undermined or done away with

Cultural Studies after CCCS



- Similar to Quijano, Edward Said proposes that Eurocentric notions have clouded the ideas of all of society by appearing to be 'universal.'
- In *Orientalism* (1978), he develops the term orientalism which is *the process through which Eurocentric stereotypes of non-Western cultures get to be associated with that culture such that the complex reality of that non-Western culture are undermined or outright ignored/unknown*
- **Orientalism**, he argues, is a logic that develops out of imperialism in order to (a) make it seem like what the imperialists were doing were with good intentions and (b) to sexualize or eroticize the non-Western culture while at the same time being repulsed by its savagery such that imperialists still carried out military campaigns of violence
- Orientalism has been the totem book of post-colonial studies in the same way that Frantz Fanon's texts have also. **Post-colonial studies** as a discipline is concerned with the way that the cultures of post-colonies (colonies who have reached independence) are the subject of orientalizing discourses such that Western countries invade those countries in a new Imperial military effort. Recent example of this would be the notion that the Iraq War needed to happen because Muslim women were 'oppressed' from the perspective of Western feminism.

Relation of Cultural Studies to Post/Structuralism and (Post-)Modernism

- Louis Althusser has often been called a "structural Marxist" by which is meant that he adds together notions of structuralism (which he gets from Lévi-Strauss and Saussure) and then combines these conceptual outlooks with the content he is updating from Lacan (and thus Freud) and Marx
- Raymond Williams will write a book on Modernism called *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* which will be the place where he positions Modernism as an avant-garde movement that had particular ideologies behind them. He argues that the relationship between the revolutionary socialism of the 1920s-1930s was undermined by the ambivalent relationship that the artistic avant-garde had for politics. In other words, the Modernists were more interested in their own work than mounting any sort of combined effort against the cultural process that was making them money at the time
- Fredric Jameson's book *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* argues that hegemony is actually a process through which mass media produces its cultural hold on us, making it "popular" culture by the nature of its being everywhere. That capitalism indicates what culture will look like means it is a 'cultural logic' for postmodern aesthetics.