



Cultural Marxism Is Real

JAN 4, 2019



Allen Mendenhall



0 Comments



SAMUEL MOYN, A YALE LAW PROFESSOR, RECENTLY [ASKED](#), “WHAT IS ‘CULTURAL MARXISM?’” HIS ANSWER: “NOTHING OF THE kind actually exists.” Moyn attributes the term *cultural Marxism* to the “runaway alt-right imagination,” claiming that it implicates zany conspiracy theories and has been “percolating for years through global sewers of hatred.”

Alexander Zubatov, an attorney writing in *Tablet*, [countered](#) that the “somewhat unclear and contested” term *cultural Marxism* “has been in circulation for over forty years.” It has, moreover, “perfectly respectable uses outside the dark, dank silos of the far right.” He concluded that cultural Marxism is neither a “conspiracy” nor a “mere right-wing ‘phantasmagoria,’” but a “coherent intellectual program, a constellation of dangerous ideas.”

In this debate, I side with Zubatov. Here's why.

Despite the bewildering range of controversies and meanings attributed to it, cultural Marxism (the term and the movement) has a deep, complex history in Theory. The word "Theory" (with a capital T) is the general heading for research within the interpretative branches of the humanities known as cultural and critical studies, literary criticism, and literary theory—each of which includes a variety of approaches from the phenomenological to the psychoanalytic. In the United States, Theory is commonly taught and applied in English departments, although its influence is discernable throughout the humanities.

A brief genealogy of different schools of Theory—which originated outside English departments, among philosophers and sociologists for example, but became part of English departments' core curricula—shows not only that cultural Marxism is a nameable, describable phenomenon, but also that it proliferates beyond the academy.

Scholars versed in Theory are reasonably suspicious of crude, tendentious portrayals of their field. Nevertheless, these fields retain elements of Marxism that, in my view, require heightened and sustained scrutiny. Given estimates that communism killed [over 100 million people](#), we must openly and honestly discuss those currents of Marxism that run through different modes of interpretation and schools of thought. To avoid complicity, moreover, we must ask whether and why Marxist ideas, however attenuated, still motivate leading scholars and spread into the broader culture.

English departments sprang up in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century, ushering in increasingly professionalized studies of literature and other forms of aesthetic expression. As English became a distinct university discipline with its own curriculum, it moved away from the study of British literature and canonical works of the Western tradition in translation, and toward the philosophies that guide textual interpretation.

Although a short, sweeping survey of what followed may not satisfy those in the field, it provides others with the relevant background.

The New Criticism

The first major school to establish itself in English departments was the New Criticism. Its counterpart was Russian formalism, characterized by figures like Victor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson, who attempted to distinguish literary texts from other texts, examining what qualities made written representations poetic, compelling, original, or moving rather than merely practical or utilitarian.

One such quality was defamiliarization. Literature, in other words, defamiliarizes language by using sound, syntax, metaphor, alliteration, assonance, and other rhetorical devices.

The New Criticism, which was chiefly pedagogical, emphasized close reading, maintaining that readers searching for meaning must isolate the text under consideration from externalities like authorial intent, biography, or historical context. This method is similar to legal textualism whereby judges look strictly at the language of a statute, not to legislative history or intent, to interpret the import or meaning of that statute. The New Critics coined the term "intentional fallacy" to refer to the search for the meaning of a text anywhere but in the text itself. The New Criticism is associated with John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, I. A. Richards, and T.S. Eliot. In a way, all subsequent schools of Theory are responses or reactions to the New Criticism.

Structuralism and Post-Structuralism

Structuralism permeated French intellectual circles in the 1960s. Through structuralism, thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Louis Althusser imported leftist politics into the study of literary texts. Structuralism is rooted in the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist who observed how linguistic signs become differentiated within a system of language. When we say or write something, we do it according to rules and conventions in which our anticipated audience also operates. The implied order we use and communicate in is the "structure" referred to in structuralism.

The French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss extended Saussure's ideas about the linguistic sign to culture, arguing that the beliefs, values, and characteristic features of a social group function according to a set of tacitly known rules. These structures are "discourse," a term that encompasses cultural norms and not just language practices.

Out of structuralism and post-structuralism emerged Structural Marxism, a school of thought linked to Althusser that analyzes the role of the state in perpetuating the dominance of the ruling class, the capitalists.

Marxism and Neo-Marxism

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Frankfurt School popularized the type of work usually labeled as "cultural Marxism." Figures involved or associated with this school include Erich Fromm, Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin. These men revised, repurposed, and extended classical Marxism by emphasizing culture and ideology, incorporating insights from emerging fields such as psychoanalysis, and researching the rise of mass media and mass culture.

Dissatisfied with economic determinism and the illusory coherence of historical materialism—and jaded by the failures of socialist and communist governments—these thinkers retooled Marxist tactics and premises in their own ways without entirely repudiating Marxist designs or ambitions.

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Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, scholars like Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson were explicit in embracing Marxism. They rejected the New Critical approaches that divorced literature from culture, stressing that literature reflected class and economic interest, social and political structures, and power. Accordingly, they considered how literary texts reproduced (or undermined) cultural or economic structures and conditions.

Slavoj Žižek arguably has done more than any member of the Frankfurt School to integrate psychoanalysis into Marxist variants. "Žižek's scholarship holds a particularly high place within cultural criticism that seeks to account for the intersections between psychoanalysis and Marxism," wrote the scholar Erin Labbie.^[1] She added, "Žižek's prolific writings about ideology, revealing

the relationships between psychoanalysis and Marxism, have altered the way in which literary and cultural criticism is approached and accomplished to the extent that most scholars can no longer hold tightly to the former notion that the two fields are at odds."^[2] Žižek is just one among many continental philosophers whose Marxist and Marxist-inflected prognostications command the attention of American academics.

Deconstruction

Jacques Derrida is recognized as the founder of deconstruction. He borrowed from Saussure's theory that the meaning of a linguistic sign depends on its relation to its opposite, or to things from which it differs. For instance, the meaning of male depends on the meaning of female; the meaning of happy depends on the meaning of sad; and so forth. Thus, the theoretical difference between two opposing terms, or binaries, unites them in our consciousness. And one binary is privileged while the other is devalued. For example, "beautiful" is privileged over "ugly," and "good" over "bad."

The result is a hierarchy of binaries that are contextually or arbitrarily dependent, according to Derrida, and cannot be fixed or definite across time and space. That is because meaning exists in a state of flux, never becoming part of an object or idea.

Derrida himself, having re-read *The Communist Manifesto*, recognized the "spectral" furtherance of a "spirit" of Marx and Marxism.^[3] Although Derrida's so-called "hauntology" precludes the messianic meta-narratives of unfulfilled Marxism, commentators have salvaged from Derrida a modified Marxism for the climate of today's "late capitalism."

Derrida used the term *différance* to describe the elusive process humans use to attach meaning to arbitrary signs, even if signs—the codes and grammatical structures of communication—cannot adequately represent an actual object or idea in reality. Derrida's theories had a broad impact that enabled him and his followers to consider linguistic signs and the concepts created by those signs, many of which were central to the Western tradition and Western culture. For example, Derrida's critique of logocentrism contests nearly all philosophical foundations deriving from Athens and Jerusalem.

New Historicism

New Historicism, a multifaceted enterprise, is associated with Shakespearean scholar Stephen Greenblatt. It looks at historical forces and conditions with a structuralist and post-structuralist eye, treating literary texts as both products of and contributors to discourse and discursive communities. It is founded on the idea that literature and art circulate through discourse and inform and destabilize cultural norms and institutions.

New historicists explore how literary representations reinforce power structures or work against entrenched privilege, extrapolating from Foucault's paradox that power grows when it is subverted because it is able to reassert itself over the subversive person or act in a show of power. Marxism and materialism often surface when new historicists seek to highlight texts and authors (or literary scenes and characters) in terms of their effects on culture, class, and power. New historicists focus on low-class or marginalized figures, supplying them with a voice or agency and giving them overdue attention. This political reclamation, while purporting to provide context, nevertheless risks projecting contemporary concerns onto works that are situated in a particular culture and historical moment.

In the words of literary critic Paul Cantor, "There is a difference between *political* approaches to literature and *politicized* approaches, that is, between those that rightly take into account the centrality of political concerns in many literary classics and those that willfully seek to reinterpret and virtually recreate class works in light of contemporary political agendas."^[4]

Cultural Marxism Is Real

Much of the outcry about cultural Marxism is outrageous, uninformed, and conspiratorial. Some of it simplifies, ignores, or downplays the fissures and tensions among leftist groups and ideas. Cultural Marxism cannot be reduced, for instance, to "political correctness" or "identity politics." (I recommend Andrew Lynn's short piece "Cultural Marxism" in the Fall 2018 issue of *The Hedgehog Review* for a concise critique of sloppy and paranoid treatments of cultural Marxism.)

Nevertheless, Marxism pervades Theory, despite the competition among the several ideas under that broad label. Sometimes this Marxism is self-evident; at other times, it's residual and implied. At any rate, it has attained a distinct but evolving character as literary scholars have reworked classical Marxism to account for the relation of literature and culture to class, power, and discourse.

Condemning these ideas as forbidden, as dangers that corrupt young minds, might have unintended consequences. Marxist spinoffs must be studied to be comprehensively understood.



Feminism, gender studies, critical race theory, post-colonialism, disability studies—these and other disciplines routinely get pulled through one or more of the theoretical paradigms I've outlined. The fact that they're guided by Marxism or adopt Marxist terms and concepts, however, does not make them off-limits or unworthy of attention.

Which brings me to a warning: Condemning these ideas as forbidden, as dangers that corrupt young minds, might have unintended consequences. Marxist spinoffs *must* be studied to be comprehensively understood. Don't remove them from the curriculum: contextualize them, challenge them, and

question them. Don't reify their power by ignoring or neglecting them.

Popular iterations of cultural Marxism reveal themselves in the casual use of terms like "privilege," "alienation," "commodification," "fetishism," "materialism," "hegemony," or "superstructure." As Zubatov wrote for *Tablet*, "It is a short step from Gramsci's 'hegemony' to

the now-ubiquitous toxic memes of ‘patriarchy,’ ‘heteronormativity,’ ‘white supremacy,’ ‘white privilege,’ ‘white fragility,’ ‘and whiteness.’” He adds, “It is a short step from the Marxist and cultural Marxist premise that ideas are, at their core, expressions of power to rampant, divisive identity politics and the routine judging of people and their cultural contributions based on their race, gender, sexuality and religion.”

My brief summary is merely the simplified, approximate version of a much larger and more complex story, but it orients curious readers who wish to learn more about cultural Marxism in literary studies. Today, English departments suffer from the lack of a clearly defined mission, purpose, and identity. Having lost rigor in favor of leftist politics as their chief end of study, English departments at many universities are jeopardized by the renewed emphasis on practical skills and jobs training. Just as English departments replaced religion and classics departments as the principal places to study culture, so too could future departments or schools replace English departments.

And those places may not tolerate political agitations posturing as pedagogical technique.

The point, however, is that cultural Marxism exists. It has a history, followers, adherents, and left a perceptible mark on academic subjects and lines of inquiry. Moyn may wish it out of existence, or dismiss it as a bogeyman, but it is real. We must know its effects on society, and in what forms it materializes in our culture. Moyn’s intemperate polemic demonstrates, in fact, the urgency and importance of examining cultural Marxism, rather than closing our eyes to its meaning, properties, and significance.

Allen Mendenhall is an associate dean at Faulkner University Thomas Goode Jones School of Law and executive director of the Blackstone & Burke Center for Law & Liberty. Visit his website at AllenMendenhall.com.

Editor’s Note: Allen Mendenhall’s [recent video interview with the Martin Center](#) touches on themes from this article.

[1] Erin F. Labbie, “Žižek Avec Lacan: Splitting the Dialectics of Desire,” *Slovene Studies*, Vol. 25 (2003), p. 23.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (Peggy Kamuf, trans.) (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 3-4.

[4] Paul Cantor, “Shakespeare—‘For all time?’” *The Public Interest*, Issue 110 (1993), p. 35.



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