

Marxist Aesthetics: Exploring Karl Marx And Friedrich Engels’ Perspectives On Art And Literature

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Abstract. The text extensively discusses Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ approach to art and literature in an academic manner. It elaborates on their thoughts by referencing various sources, particularly focusing on Marx’s literary inclinations in detail. It explains Marx and Engels’ understanding of realism, their perspective on art, and the relationship between art and societal transformation, while conveying the fundamental principles of Marxist aesthetics. Additionally, the text delves into how art influences the structure of society and elaborates on the evolution of socialist realism. Therefore, the text provides an in-depth analysis of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ perspectives on art and literature using an academic language.

Keywords: Marxist Aesthetics, Realism, Proletariat, Social Change.

Marxist Literature and Its Formation

Karl Marx was a thinker who exerted significant influence on ideologies and world politics. Born in Germany, Marx is considered a pivotal source of many contemporary political and social ideas. Marx expressed his thoughts on humanity with the Latin poet Terans’ quote, “I am a human! Nothing human is alien to me.” (Kivilcimli, 2009:229). Marx delved deep into the history of humanity and endeavored to chart a new path for mankind.

Understanding Marx correctly necessitates a thorough examination of the era in which he lived. Amidst the ideas that shook Europe during the French Revolution and the initial workers’ uprisings, Marx, a young university student, closely observed the oppressed children and working class laboring under harsh conditions. He “felt the desperate cries of a dying world and the contradictions of a nascent one, albeit hazily” (Garaudy, 1975:17). The foundations of Marx’s thought were shaped by German philosophy of the time, particularly the ideas of Georg Hegel, English political economy, and French socialism.

Karl Marx and his close associate Friedrich Engels’ perspectives and teachings, which scrutinize individuals within their societies, are encapsulated under the name Marxism. According to Tunali (1976:30), “Marxism is an action philosophy and ideology that explains historical-cultural development through material and economic factors, known as historical materialism, aiming to replace the capitalist order with a socialist system through revolution.” This approach historically examines the production relations of a society—its origins, terminations, and collapses—philosophically, politically, and economically.

Tunali (1976:101-103) further describes Marxism as primarily introducing the theory of class struggle in the ideological realm, foreseeing the inevitable progression towards proletarian dictatorship and ultimately towards a communist world of social equality and freedom. At the core of these ideas lies the notion that the proletariat, considered the most revolutionary class of humanity, comprehends and transforms the world. Marx posits that societies progress towards communism throughout historical processes: “Marxism is a philosophy of history founded upon

economic theory, asserting that historical development occurs according to certain laws. Historical materialism elucidates these laws, thus enabling us to foresee that societies will ultimately advance towards socialism and, finally, communism” (Moran, 2002:43).

Fromm (2004:29) underscores Marx’s fundamental objective with these thoughts: “the liberation of individuals from economic patterns and determinisms, reclaiming the entirety and dignity of being human.” Marx and Engels argued that humanity’s emancipation and freedom could only be achievable through socialism and ultimately communism.

According to Marxist theory, social structure is divided into two main groups: the base and the superstructure. The material elements that encompass economic relationships and the production relations shaped around them are referred to as the “base.” The second group of elements, which consists of the spiritual, political, and intellectual events and institutions of society, is defined as the “superstructure.” The superstructure is a reflection of the society’s base. In any given society, the manner in which production is carried out, the types of relationships formed in the process of reproducing life, and the dominant class in these relationships all influence the characteristics of the elements that constitute the superstructure. Consequently, the prevailing ideas in any society are those of the ruling class (Akdere, 2010:9). In class-based societies, there is a continuous conflict between the base and the superstructure. In such societies, the superstructure assumes roles that hinder the development of the base. The class struggle generated by the base is in conflict with the superstructure’s cultural and political framework. As an element of the superstructure, art can induce changes in the base. In this context, art ideologically assumes a mission within the framework of socialist realism.

According to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, literature should be analyzed from a social perspective. They argue that “the essence, origin, development, and social function of art can only be understood through the analysis of the entire social system, where the determining role is played by the economic factor—the complex interaction between the development of productive forces and production relations”. By introducing Marxist theory, Marx and Engels linked art to the economic structure and emphasized the nature of this connection. Accordingly, art is a form of social consciousness and should reflect social changes. Marx and Engels demonstrated that the social nature of art is influenced by class contradictions and ideologies.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels did not establish a systematic and definitive art theory; however, they expressed their thoughts on aesthetics, art, and literature in their philosophical, economic, political, and historical writings. Although they did not write a specific work on literature and aesthetics, their ideas laid the groundwork for the formation of certain frameworks. “Marx’s writings are filled with literary concepts and references. He has an extensive unpublished manuscript collection on art and religion, planned to publish a journal on theater criticism, conducted comprehensive studies on Balzac, and wrote an inquiry on aesthetics” (Eagleton, 2014:15). In his youth, Marx had a strong inclination towards literature and engaged closely with many literary genres: “Marx had a unique poetic imagination. His first literary works were poems. Marx’s wife carefully preserved his youthful works but did not show them to anyone. Marx’s parents envisioned a career for their son as a writer or professor. In their opinion, by immersing himself in socialist agitation and focusing on political economy, which was scarcely valued in Germany at the time, their son had diminished his destiny” (Kivilcimli, 1966: 61).

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels utilized the richness of literary works extensively. They did not limit themselves to the literature of a specific nation but drew upon literary traditions from around the world. Their styles laid the foundation for the socialist realist approach. Avid readers, both Marx and Engels, had particular admiration for W. Shakespeare in the realm of theater and for Russian authors in the field of novels. Marx frequently relied on literary works to elucidate his thoughts. As he stated, “Since money connects me to human life, to society, and to humanity, is it not the universal bond of all bonds? Does it not tie and untie all bonds? Is it not, therefore, the universal means of separation as well? It is as much the true agent of gathering as it is the principal agent of separation, the galvanic-chemical power of society” (Marx, 1971:31-33). As seen, Marx utilized literary works in the formation and presentation of his ideas. He especially relied on literary works for analysis and to support his arguments. Among the writers Marx held in high regard, Balzac and William Shakespeare were particularly significant.

One of the notable features of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the field of art and literature is their equal perspective towards the art of all nations. They sought to utilize the potential of these arts without deeming any one superior to another. Marx and Engels showed interest in the artistic and literary developments in England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Russia, as well as the cultural and artistic treasures of the East and smaller countries like Ireland, Iceland, and Norway” (Marx, 1971:30).

In the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels discussed socialist, communist, and revolutionary literature: “In France, where under the pressure of a bourgeoisie in power, the struggle against this domination assumed the form of a literary expression, socialist and communist literature was imported into Germany at the very moment when the bourgeoisie was fighting against feudal absolutism”. According to them, this type of literature was born out of proletarian culture and, since it inevitably reflected proletarian culture, they considered it to be reactionary. They also stated that the existing conditions of the working class played a significant role in the formation of this literature. These ideas later laid the groundwork for the development of socialist realism in art.

From a Marxist perspective, the capitalist system is hostile to art and literature. A social order free from class conflicts would significantly contribute to artistic creativity. Marx and Engels argued that the power to change the world and advance in economics, politics, and art lies within the proletariat. Art, in this context, would serve the function of transforming the proletariat. In the next stage, art would be used as a tool for the elevation of society.

In the Marxist framework, where art and literature are seen as tools, literature, as a product of the superstructure, would become more defined by the concept of realism. This would particularly lead to the emergence of a Marxist approach in literary criticism, grounding it in specific principles.

Marxist Realistic Understanding

The most fundamental insights into the Marxist approach to art are gleaned from the correspondence between Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. For Marxism, the primary element of art is undoubtedly realism. “Marxism emerged during the most successful era of the 19th-century realist novel. Marxism is a critique of society in economic, political, and social terms, just as the realist novel critiques society within the realm of literature. Marx admired and praised realist writers like Balzac, Dickens, and Thackeray, finding their literary endeavors to be supportive of

Marxist principles in a way” (Moran, 2002: 63). Marx and Engels embraced realism, which developed independently of Marxism in the 19th century, as a perspective that contributed to their thoughts. They praised Dickens and other English and French realist writers, asserting that realism, especially the kind that reflects society, was the greatest achievement in literature.

Writers who accepted realism sought to see its pure form in their works. In a letter, Friedrich Engels criticized a friend’s work for not being sufficiently realistic, defining certain criteria for realism: “The only critique I can offer of your story is that it is not quite realistic enough. To me, realism means portraying typical characters in typical situations. Your characters are sufficiently typical as depicted, but the environments surrounding them and determining their actions are not. I am not faulting you for not writing a purely socialist novel, what we Germans call a tendentious novel, meant to elevate the author’s social and political views. The less the author’s opinions appear in the work, the better for the piece. The realism I am referring to can permeate the work despite the author’s views. For instance, Balzac’s greatness lies in his realism, which compelled him to depict the downfall of his beloved nobility, showing them as they truly were, and to see the necessity of their decline. He portrayed the people of the future with a realism that went against his own class sympathies and prejudices” (Marx, 1971:39).

Marxist realism is a type of realism that combines a materialist philosophy with a perceptual and artistic structure. This approach is a dialectical adaptation of the reflection theory. Although Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels did not extensively discuss direct realism, they found the artistic realism that best matched their aesthetics in Shakespeare and Balzac. Their selection of these authors indicates that Marxist realism is not about direct imitation. Engels’ views on realism are particularly noteworthy: “In addition to meticulous detail, realism to me means the faithful representation of typical characters in typical situations. Marx, on the other hand, emphasized integrating a broader historical realism into works. In a conversation with Marx’s son-in-law, the French writer Paul Lafargue, Marx mentioned that Balzac was not only a historian of his time but also a seer of the characters who would come to maturity during the reign of Napoleon III” (Lukacs, 2004:62).

Engels also provided insight into his perspective when evaluating Goethe, whom he described as a “great poet, universal and monumental”: “We do not criticize him from a moral or partisan viewpoint but from aesthetic and historical perspectives.” This underscores that Marxist realism values artistic and aesthetic criteria over political evaluations in art. This realism must convey historical context and particularly highlight class distinctions: “Marx and Engels wanted artists to depict truthfully, with a concrete historical approach to the events depicted, and to draw characters vividly and multidimensionally within the defining features of their class environments” (Calislar, 1996, p. 16).

Although initially a reaction, realism evolved into critical realism and eventually socialist realism under the influence of Marx and Engels. Anatoly Lunacharsky describes this process: “The initial phase of bourgeois realism was progressive. Bourgeois humorists mocked the upper classes, exposed their absurdities, defended bourgeois ‘virtues,’ and presented bourgeois ideology in lively forms, trying to make it the ideology of the awakening oppressed masses. But this vibrant phase ended. A new kind of realist emerged, portraying reality crudely and merely adapting to their surroundings. Nevertheless, the artists representing this second phase of realism, like Balzac or Dickens, produced significant works. Even if they didn’t know the exact direction society should

take or whose cause they were truly serving, they believed in serving a certain artistic truth. These artists inadvertently served the proletariat the most, not the immature proletariat of their time but the proletariat of a later period. Their works became weapons for the proletariat of the future” (Sahin, 2011, p. 62).

Result

This analysis of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ views on art and literature allows us to gain a deeper understanding of their thoughts and clarifies the fundamental principles of Marxist aesthetics. Emphasizing Marx’s literary inclinations, the impact of art on social transformation, and how art influences societal structure are thoroughly examined. Additionally, the evolution of Marxist aesthetics and its impact on the development of socialist realism are explored. This analysis provides an academic examination of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ perspectives on art and literature, offering a comprehensive understanding of the societal role of art from a Marxist perspective.

Resources

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