

Marxist Literary Criticism

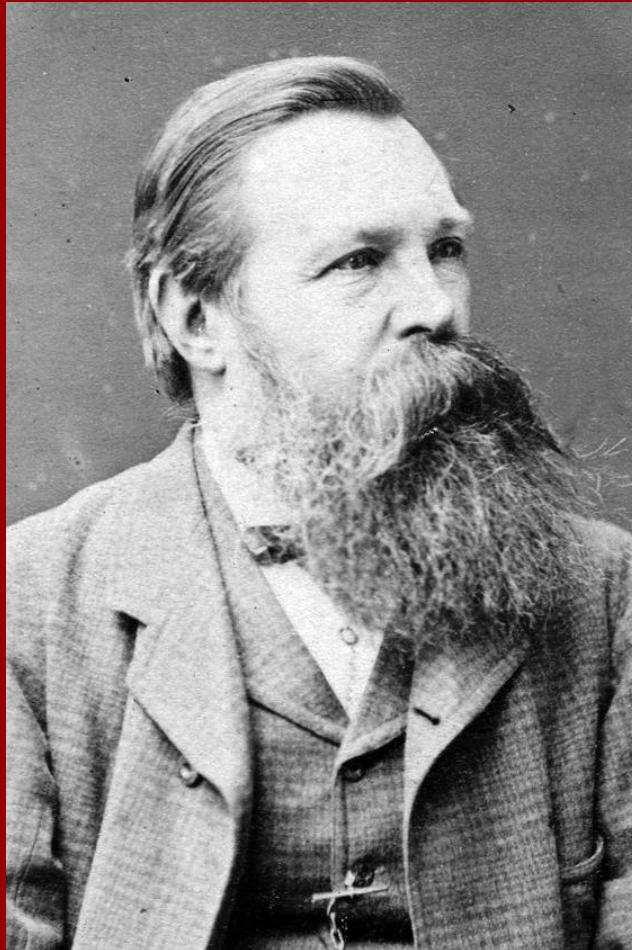
For Sem. VI, B.U

Prepared by Pallab Das, Mankar College.

Predispositions derived from Marx and Engels:

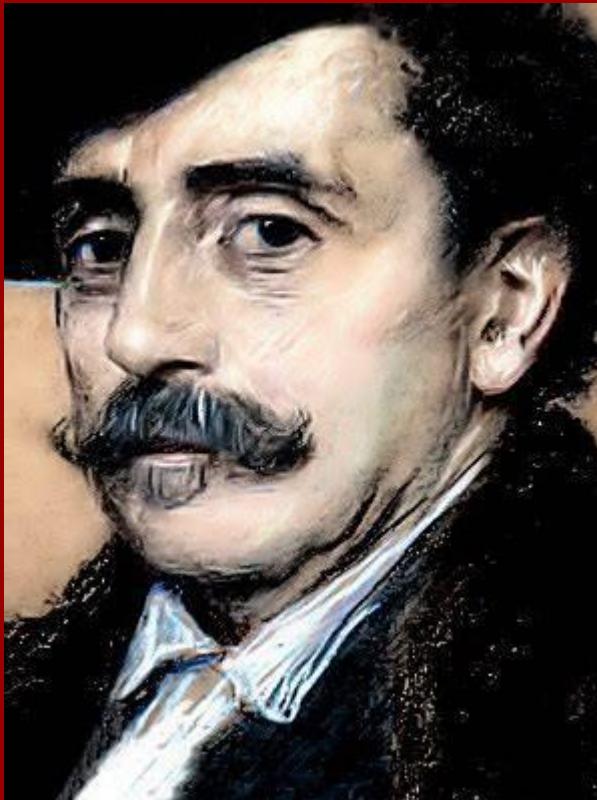
- The rejection of the notion of identity(following Hegel) and a view that literature can only be understood in the fullness of its relation with ideology, class and economic substructure.
- “objective” world is actually a progressive construction out of collective human subjectivity. What passes as “truth” is not internal but institutionally created.
- Language itself (as Marx said in *The German Ideology Part One*), must be understood not as a self-sufficient system but as social practice deeply rooted in material conditions.
- The understanding of art itself as commodity (attained through labour) sharing an entry into material aspect of production.
- A focus on the connections between class struggle as the inner dynamic of history and literature as the ideologically refracted site of such struggle.

Engels comments on “Typicality”:



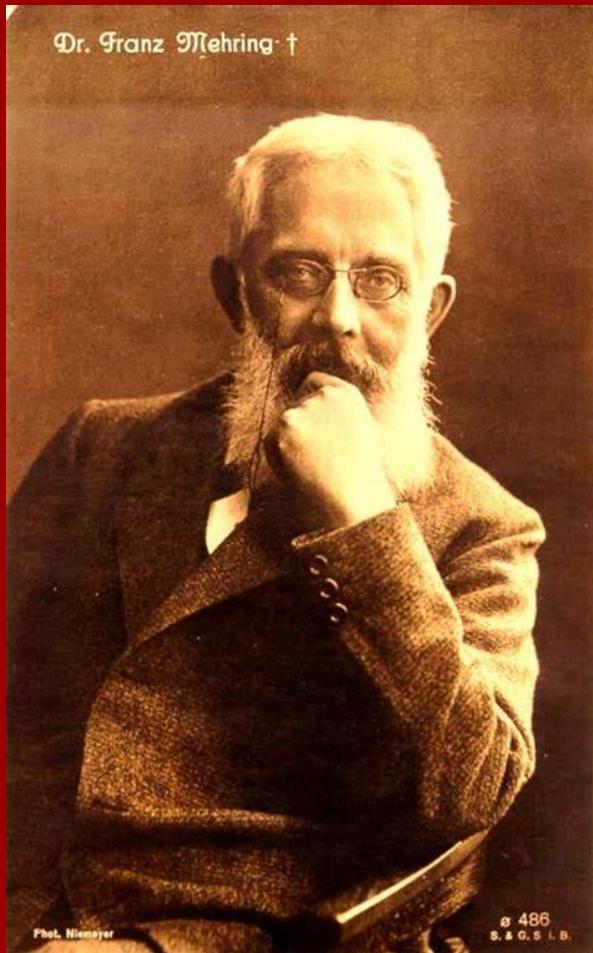
Art should express what is typical about a class or a peculiar intersections of ideological circumstances.

Antonio Labriola(1843-1904, Italy)



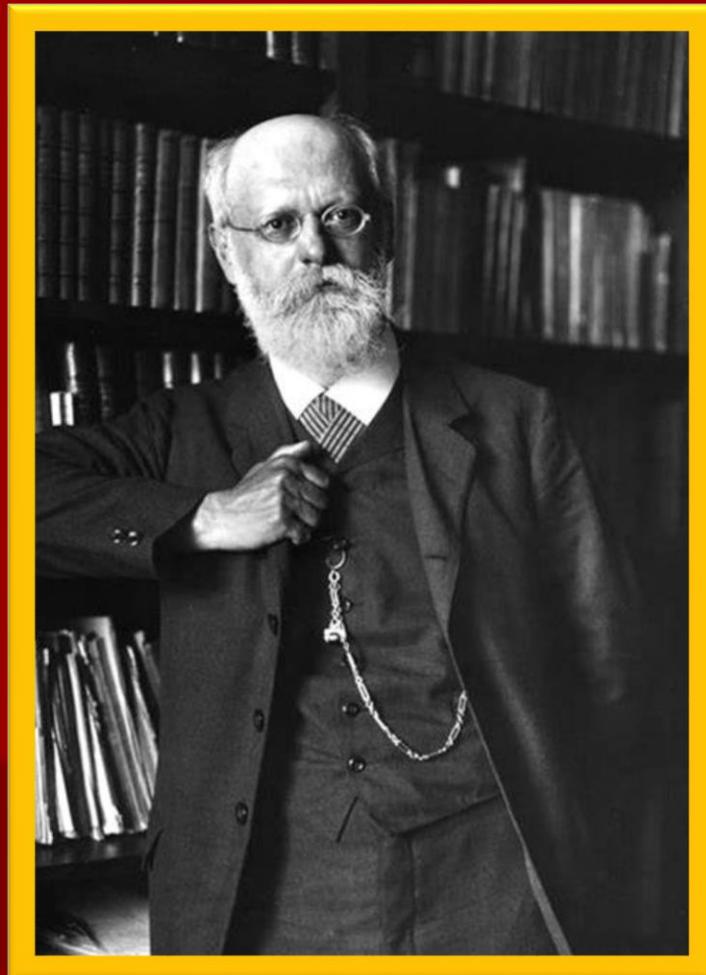
- Attempted first effective synthesis of Marx's thoughts.
- Although art and ideas can have no independent history, they are themselves a part of history in the sense that they too are causal agency in subsequent economic and superstructural developments.

Franz Mehring (1846-1919, Prussia, Germany)



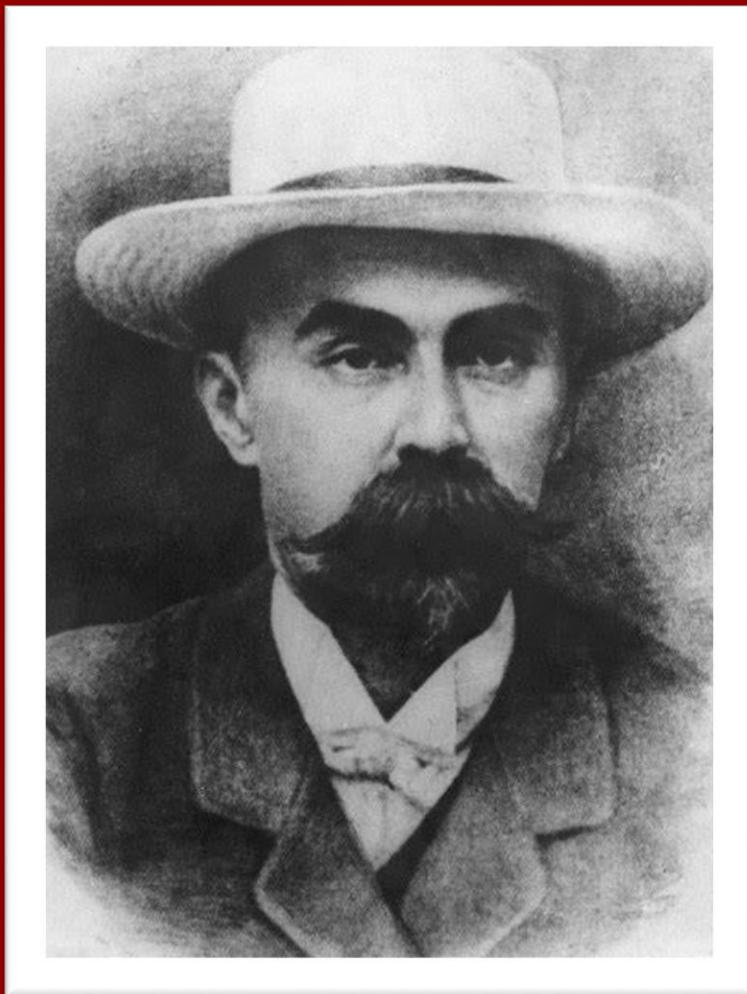
- Founded the German Communist Party in 1918.
- Works: Karl Marx – The story of His Life(1918), The Lessing Legend(1892-93).
- Applied Marxist categories to the analysis of major German literary figures and brought these within the reach of working class readers.
- Literary criticism must be determined by economic infrastructure.

Karl Kautsky(1854-1938, Germany)



- A propagandist for the Social Democratic Party.
Founder of a Marxist journal, Die Neve Zeit.
- Works: Karl Marx's Economic Teaching(1887), The Foundations of Christianity(1908), Development in Art, Art and Society, Artist and Worker.
- Showed how religious ideas are tied to the levels of artistic and industrial maturity allowed by a particular economic substructure.
- Developed the thesis that the major monotheistic religions arose in nations bound by a nomadic way of life; they had not developed the industry or art necessary to construct the localized human images of deities which facilitated polytheism. Ironically these more backward cultures could make a leap beyond polytheism to a higher form of religion whose progress was retarded in a advanced society.

George Plekhanov(1856-1918, Russia)



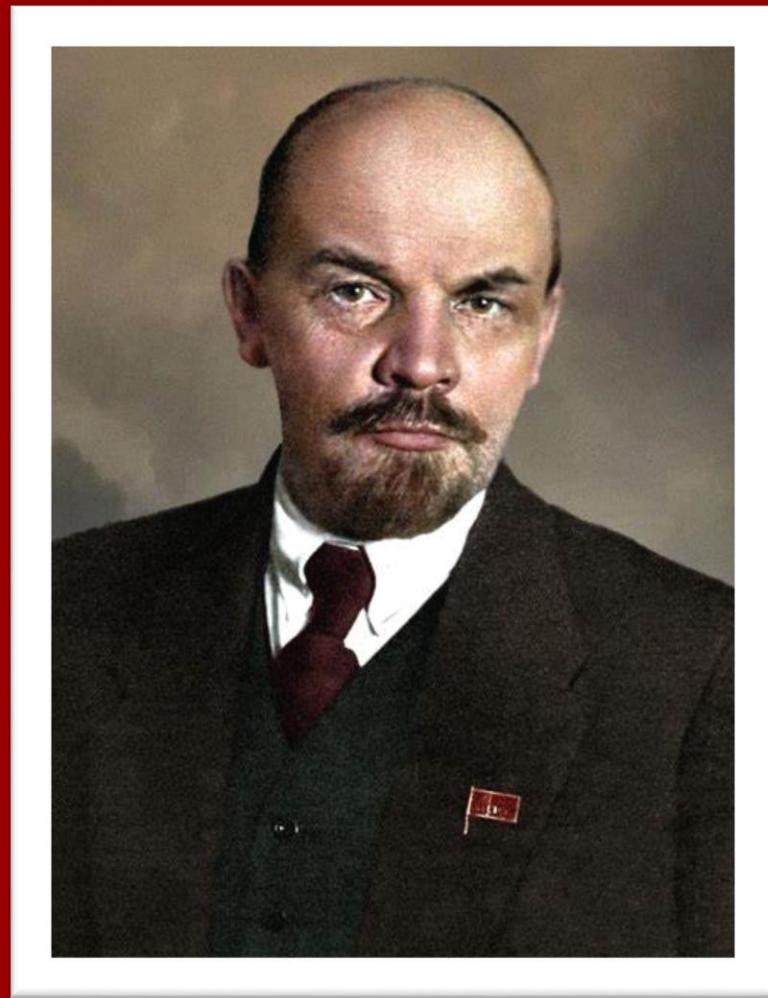
- Father of Russian Marxism.
- Founder of Russian Social Democratic Party.
- Works: Socialism and the Political Struggle(1883), Fundamental Problems of Marxism(1908), Art and Social Life(1912), Role of the Individual in History(1898) etc.
- Every talent which becomes a social force, is a force of social relations.
- Particular trends in literature or art do not depend exclusively on certain individuals or their expressions: it is determined by its significance for the class.
- Art for art's sake tendency arises when the artist is in hopeless discord with the social environment,
- The utilitarian attitude, which grants art a function in social struggle as well as power of judgment concerning the real world, arises and becomes stronger whenever a mutual sympathy exists between the individuals, interested in artistic creation, and some considerable part of the society.
- “Play” is dramatisation of labour and useful activities. Utilitarian activities determines its context.

Rosa Luxemberg(1870-1919, Poland)



- Migrated to Germany and joined the Social Democratic Party, was assassinated in 1919.
- Work: The Accumulation of Capital
- Was anxious to preserve an aesthetic form of art.
- Said, Dostoyevsky's and Tolstoy's doctrines were reactionary. She praised their liberating effects on the readers and their profound response to social injustice.
- Working class culture could not be produced within a bourgeois economic framework and that the workers, for advancement in struggle for liberation, had to create for themselves, intellectual weapons.

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin(1870-1924, Russia)



- Occupied the central role in the revolution of 1917.
- Had central role in the unfolding of Marxist aesthetics towards a major politically interventionist stance.
- Work: Party Organisation and Party Literature(1905).
- Free speech and free press need to exist.
- Literature must become a part of the single great social democratic mechanism, the common cause of the proletariat.
- Lenin is aware that art can not be subject to mechanical adjustment, to the rule of majority over minority. But he was only speaking of party literature.
- The freedom of the bourgeois writer is illusory and false, dependent on commercial relations and interests.
- Free literature will be openly related to the proletariat.
- Calls Trotsky's doctrines "socialistic" – a step forward in the artistic development of the whole mankind.
- At a deeper level, Lenin's approach to aesthetic value, embracing the totality of historical circumstances including class, preceding literary traditions and relation to political exigency, can be seen to derive from his acknowledgement of the dialectical character of Marxism.

Leon Trotsky(1879-1940, Russia)



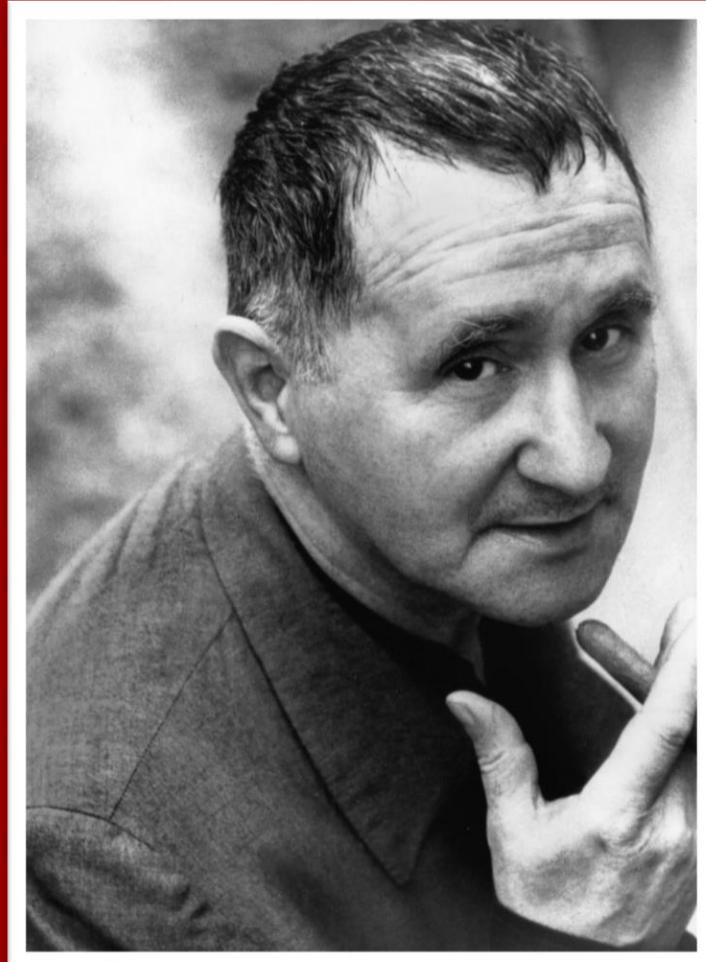
- Works: Lenin(1924), History of Russian Revolution(1932), The Revolution Betrayed(1937), Literature and Revolution(1923), Class and Art(1924).
- The domain of art is not one in which the party is called upon to command. It can and must protect and help art.
- What is needed is a watchful revolutionary censorship and broad flexible policy in the field of art.
- It is important to define limits of censorship very clearly.
- He is against the liberal principle of laissez faire and laissez passer, even in the field of art.
- Though in “Towards a Free Revolutionary Art” (1938) he advocates complete freedom of art.
- Party should give its confidence to what he calls literary fellow travellers sympathetic to revolution.
- The proletariat can not begin their construction of a new culture without taking help of the creative bourgeois intelligentsia, which gravitate towards the proletariat.
- The proletariat acquire power for the purpose of doing away forever with the class culture and to make way for human culture.
- Art has its own laws of development and there is no guarantee of an organic link between artistic creativity and class interest.

Antonio Gramsci(1891-1937, Italy)



- Elaboration of the notion of hegemony. Wrote some 34 notebooks while in prison.
- Autonomous revolutionary potential on the part of the proletariat could only be realised through political and intellectual autonomy.
- The working class must educate themselves in the management of the society, acquiring both the culture and psychology of a dominant class through its own channels: meetings, congresses, discussion and mutual education.
- Transformation of a socialist state can not be successful without the proletariat's own organic intellectual forging an alternative hegemony.
- The notion of hegemony is effectively a metonymic affirmation of the dialectical relationship between economic and superstructural spheres, stressing the transformative role of human agency, rather than relying on the 'inevitability' of economic determination.
- critic's task is one of harmonising with the general cultural and political struggle towards a socialistic order.

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956, Germany)



- For him art is a potential tool for fighting against bourgeois ideology.
- He opposed the idea of art being considered as a source of idle entertainment.
- Says, representation of reality is an illusion.
- Pleads for alienation effect which creates illusionist realism only to shatter it when it is most intense so as to enable the audience to distance them from stage and character and think critically of present slice of life.
- Art redeem the audience from a state of passive consumer to a state of active creator of meaning.
- Art is not reflection of but reflection on reality.

Frankfurt School of Literary Criticism

FRANKFURT SCHOOL...

- Established in 1923, initially funded by Felix Weil, a young Marxist thinker.
- Aim of the institute was to bring together different strands of Marxist thinking into one interdisciplinary research center.
- Moved to New York in 1933.

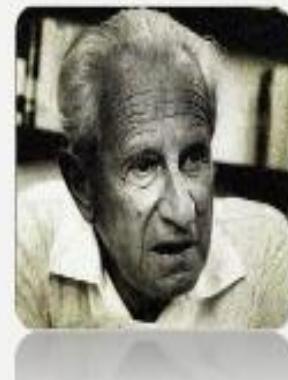


FRANKFURT SCHOOL.. THE TEACHERS!

Jurgen
Habermas



Herbert
Marcuse



Theodore
Adorno



Max
Horkheimer

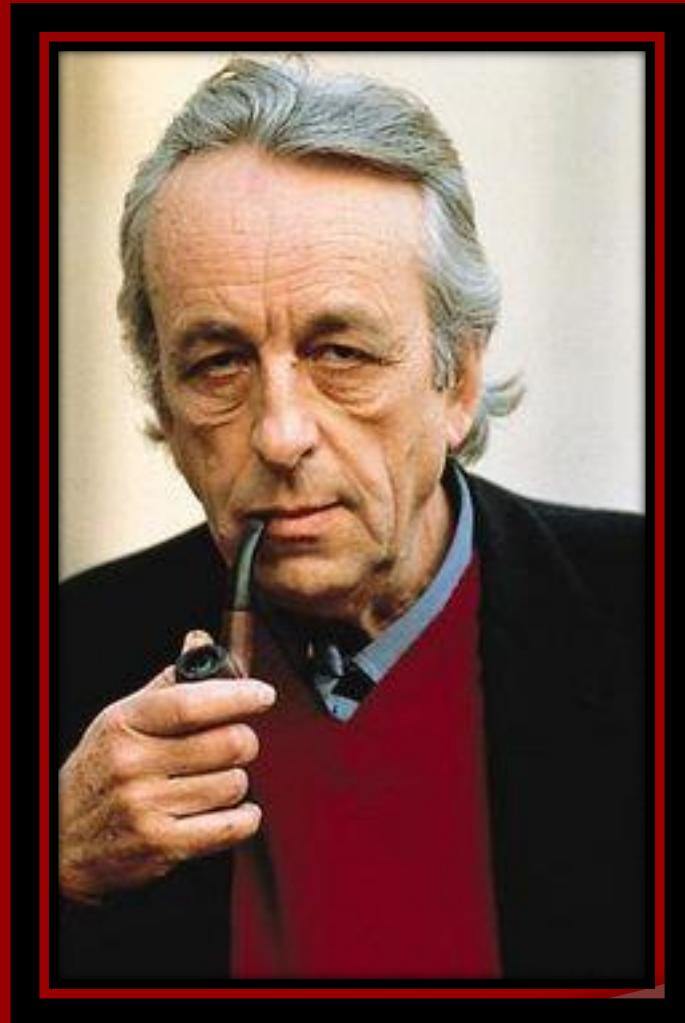


- Exponents: Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin.
- Were also influenced by Hegel and Freud.
- Works: Adorno – “Aesthetic Theory” (1970)

Benjamin – “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

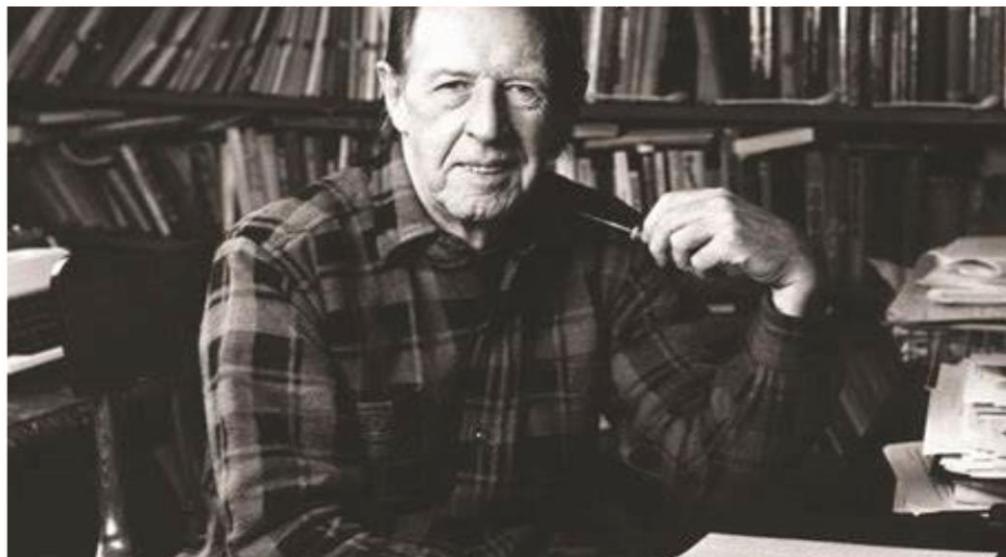
- They saw modern culture as regimented and reduced to a commercial dimension.
- Saw art as embodying a unique critical distance from the social and political world.
- Walter Benjamin Said that, modern art works are reproduced for mass consumption and are effectively copies which relate to the original form.

Louis Althusser (1918-1990, France)



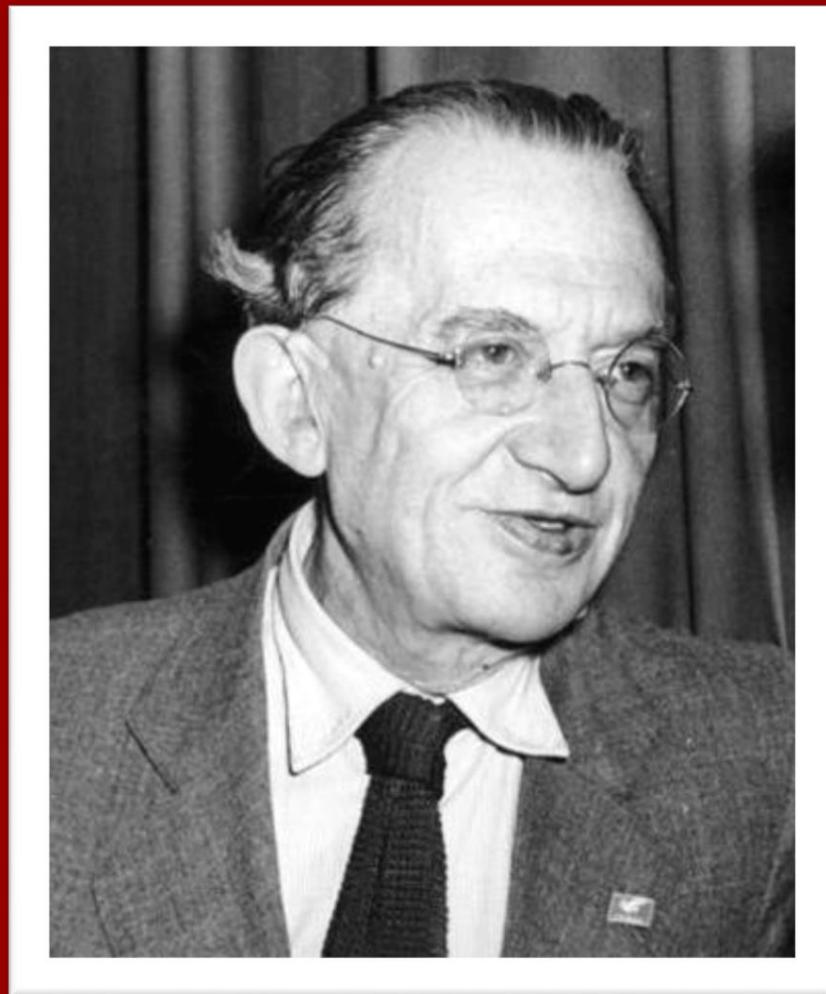
- Work: “Pour Marx” (For Marx, 1965), “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus”.
- Turned away from Hegel.
- Heavily influenced by the structuralist movement of the early 20th century which stressed the role of larger signifying systems and institutional structures over individual agency and intention.
- Althusser emphasized the later Marx’s ‘epistemological break’ from his own earlier humanism and from Hegel.
- Althusser’s structuralist Marxism rejected earlier reading of Marx and literary critical emphases on authorial intention.

Raymond Williams (1921-1988, U.K)



- In the Anglo-American world ‘cultural materialist’ criticism was first revived by Raymond Williams in “Culture and Societies 1780-1950”, which analyses the cultural critique of capitalism in English literary tradition.
- Stressed on contribution of cultural form to economic and political development.
- “The Long Revolution” (1961) continued and refined this project using categories such as dominant, residual and emergent culture, mediated by ‘structures of feelings’.
- “Marxism and Literature” (1977) undertook a critical review on Marxist theories ; analysed ideology, hegemony, base and superstructure.

Gyoergy Lukacs (1885- 1971, Hungary)



- Works: Soul and Form (1911), History of the Development of the Modern Drama (1911), The Theory of the Novel (1916), History and Class Consciousness (1923), The Specific Nature of Aesthetic (1962) etc.
- Joined Hungarian Communist Party in 1918.
- Overlooked the centrality of labour to marxist analysis.
- Offered an idealistic concept of revolutionary praxis.
- Attempted to reinstate the Hegelian category of totality at the centre of Marxist system.
- Defined orthodoxy in Marxism as exclusively a question of methodology rather than content.
- He advocates a theory of reflection whereby art reflects a totality of historical forces rather than merely documenting mechanically surface details of the world.
- Saw Shakespeare as concentrating typical human relations around historical collisions with a force unparalleled before and after him.
- Views the mere photographic reproduction of reality by art as Naturalism.
- Views modern literary form as a descendent of Naturalism.

- Views the aesthetic contextually as one mode of reflecting reality among others.
- Expresses objectivity as conjoined with peculiarity of subjective conditions and genesis.
- Understanding art as another form of man making himself through his work.
- The articulation of a genuinely dialectical and historical method as well as historical nature of objective reality itself.
- Stressing the connections between marxism and other traditions of thought.

Terry Eagleton (1943- present, U.K)



- Works: Marxism and Literary Criticism (1976), Criticism and Ideology (1976).
- Most influential among contemporary theorists.
- Raises certain basic questions:
 1. Relation between text and ideology.
 2. Thinks that art is held within Ideology, can distance itself from it, makes us to “feel” and “perceive” the ideology from which it springs.
 3. Each element of society’s superstructure has its own tempo of development.

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