

Space for Notes



LITERATURE AND CLASS STRUGGLE
Or,
Why reading a Couple of Novels is
a Useful Complement to Reading *Capital*

While all forms of literature — novels, short stories, plays or poetry — have been employed by many different writers for many different purposes, in this course I am interested mainly in calling your attention to the ways in which some authors have quite self-consciously addressed themselves to the human and social problems associated with the class struggles of capitalism and, as a result, given us more or less interesting expressions of the conflicts of their times. The forms of such expression, of course, differ enormously over time and have evolved with the more general development of literature —from such allegorical poems as Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in the 17th Century to the modern novel which was developed in the 19th Century and became a staple of popular culture in the 20th.

Examining aspects of class conflicts through literature provides interesting and complementary points of view in a course like this where the main text (Marx’s *Capital*) was written in the style of what we now call “social science”. Although Marx did provide copious illustrations of the various aspects of capitalism which he analysed, they are mostly brief and distilled for the particular aspect of class conflict which interests him at the moment. Novels, poetry and short stories give us much more richly detailed, nuanced and human views of the same phenomena. Where Marx strips the capitalist world down to discover the bare bones of its most fundamental character, literature gives various views of the beast itself in all its fleshy and spiritual reality.

Such a combined approach is also consistent with the general Marxist rejection of what are called “academic disciplines” whereby our understanding of the world is subjected to a strict (disciplined) division of labor. Instead of separating the hard sciences from the soft, the liberal arts from medicine, economics from sociology, psychology from art history, and so on, Marxism tends to draw from whatever source is required to throw light on its subject (the class conflicts of capitalist society). In the language of the contemporary university, it is always “multidisciplinary”. Such an approach flows naturally to anyone concerned with humans because individuals and the society they constitute are a complex whole, only partially graspable by any particular “discipline”. For Marxists who take the 11th Thesis on Feuerbach seriously — “The problem with the philosophers is that they have only sought to understand the world. The point is to change it.” — the object of research is learning how to act in the world in order to end domination (e.g., overthrow capitalism) and achieve freedom (a post-capitalist world in which people are as free as possible to live according to their desires). To contribute to such a project, both for oneself and for others (one’s larger self) requires exploring whatever approaches might prove fruitful for figuring out how to resist domination and expand the spaces and times free of it. It is from this point of view that I have spliced morsels of literature into this study guide (along with songs and cartoons from popular culture) and am asking you to read a couple of novels along with *Capital*.

I have chosen one novel from the Victorian period during which Marx was active politically. In the past I have always emphasized, in my lectures, the contemporary relevance of Marx's writings and spurned dwelling on his own time. However, I have also come to recognize the lack of opportunities available to most students to obtain any familiarity with or feeling for 19th Century English social history. Therefore, I have decided to provide such an opportunity — which also helps understand Marx. *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* by Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) was written in 1848 just 4 years after Marx wrote the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, the same year he and Engels wrote the *Communist Manifesto* and 19 years before he published the first volume of *Capital*. Gaskell lived in Manchester and was as intimately acquainted with the problems of the industrial working class as a concerned woman of middle-class status could be.

Gaskell, like many of her contemporaries (including Marx), was appalled by the conditions of life of the workers, both on the job and off, in good times as well as bad. A woman in Victorian England with limited opportunities for action, she nevertheless found a vehicle for her social concerns (as well as her artistic talent) in writing novels dealing with the times and the difficulties and struggles of those living through them. In so doing she contributed to a worthy 19th Century tradition in English literature alongside men like Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli and Charles Kingsley and women like Charlotte Brontë, Charlotte Tonna and George Elliot. (See the chronology of Victorian literature which follows.) All of these writers wrote not only to call attention to the suffering caused by the development of capitalism, but also to spur action to alleviate it. They were not revolutionaries like Marx — who sought the overthrow of capitalism by the workers — but they were at least social activists who sought humanistic reforms of capitalist abuses. As a result they all wrote elaborate and detailed fictional accounts woven around and giving vivid life to the realities of class conflict — even when they didn't think about them in those terms.

Unlike many other social novels of the time, which dealt with widely varied aspects of an English society being transformed by capitalism, *Mary Barton* deals directly with the English working class. Whereas, for example, in George Elliot's *Felix Holt* or Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* working class characters play only minor roles, in *Mary Barton* their lives and tragedies form the substance of the novel. The action of the novel is located in Manchester where the workers toil in textile mills and live in slums. Their opportunities are few and restricted by their class position; their fates are often decided by the impersonal ebb and flow of the business cycle with its recurrent waves of rising and falling wages and unemployment. They are living and struggling in a period of only incipient unionization, little legal recourse and of considerable violence. Gaskell's story is written to instill sympathy and understanding with the workers but it is written from a middle-class point of view that displays little identification with workers' efforts to organize themselves to defend their own interests. As a result its view of efforts of union organization is both hostile and ignorant. It does, however, amply demonstrate why workers came to create such new alliances.

The second novel I have chosen is from a later period and another country. *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair was the result of careful investigative reporting in turn-of-the-century America, specifically about the immigrant labor force that slaved in the meat packing industry in Chicago. Written 23 years after Marx died, *The Jungle* vividly illustrates how the conditions he

analyzed in England continued to be characteristic of capitalism in America at the beginning of the 20th Century. Where Marx's interest in immigrant workers had focused on the Irish in England, Sinclair's novel focuses on Lithuanians (and other recent arrivals) in America. Sinclair went to Chicago and carried out an extensive investigation of the Chicago stockyards in preparation for writing this novel. It is highly accurate in the best American "muckraking" tradition and led directly to congressional investigations and indirectly to legislation bringing the meat packing industry under federal regulation. At the same time, its power derives less from its graphic depiction of working and living conditions and more from its sympathetic description of a family, its members, their interactions and their efforts to cope with a harsh reality that crushes their dreams and kills many of them. Pro-Socialist Party, and therefore more overtly political than Gaskell, Sinclair has his main character eventually find hope in political struggle. In Gaskell's novel, by contrast, the central couple could only flee their oppressions by escaping to the new world. Indeed, Sinclair's novel provides a sober antidote for the brief but rosy view of North American freedom painted by Gaskell a generation earlier.

In both of these novels, because they deal with the lives of individuals, we gain some understanding not only about the circumstances under which people were forced to work but also about those under which they were forced to live. From the slums of Manchester to those of Chicago we discover something about the sorry conditions of what Marxists call the sphere of "reproduction", i.e., the housing, shopping, child raising, coping with illness, giving birth, and so on that constitutes daily life outside the official waged job. In that sphere we find every activity shaped and distorted by the after-pains of work and the hardships of poverty. As you will discover in my notes here, and in my lectures, I feel that Marx's analysis of the capitalist industrial factory must be complemented by equal attention to the other parts of the larger "social factory". These novels help provide points of reference for evaluating the limits of Marx's text as well as what is needed to extend the analysis to all those parts of life shaped and warped by capitalism.

There are other sources for the study of working class life and struggle, including a variety of official and unofficial studies in 19th Century England and a much vaster array of "social science" studies in 20th Century America. During Marx's time, however, such sources were limited in number (he used most of them) and by no means widely distributed. Novels dealing with the so-called "condition of England question" reached a much wider audience and probably had more influence on public opinion than more detailed "scientific" studies. Moreover, we now know that many of the authors of such fiction knew well the reality about which they wrote either from first hand experience or from close study of the reports that were available. One such unofficial study was done by Marx's collaborator Frederick Engels who wrote a book called *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in 1844 and 1845 — which Marx quotes several times in *Capital*. It is still a very readable accompaniment to both *Capital* and *Mary Barton* for anyone wishing further illumination about the times. It was published in English for the first time in 1887 in New York. In general I would encourage you to not only read the footnotes in *Capital* but to explore the original materials upon which Marx draws, a considerable number of which are available in the libraries of the University of Texas. By so doing you can learn something about the relationship between the information that was available to Marx and his manner of appropriating it.

In the next section, I am sharing with you a chronology I have been

constructing on the social literature and events of the English 19th Century. On the left are literary works and on the right are non-fiction works and important events in the history of the class struggle. The years that were marked by capitalist crisis are boxed off to make them immediately identifiable. This chronology is intended to serve two purposes: first, to provide you with a reading list of social literature that you might want to explore beyond *Mary Barton*, and second, to provide a sketch of the historical background to Marx's writings.

Recommended Further Reading

On the social fiction of Marx's period you might consult the following books: Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1945; C. L. R. James, "Whitman and Melville," (1950) in A. Grimshaw (ed) *The C. L. R. James Reader*, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992; Arnold Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel*, London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1951; C. L. R. James, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (1958), Detroit: Bewick, 1978; Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, New York: Columbia University Press, (1958) 1983, Chapter 5: "The Industrial Novels"; Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1961; George Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, London, 1962; Louis Cazamian, *The Social Novel in England 1830-1885*, London: Longman, 1964; Robert Colby, *Fiction with a Purpose*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1967; Mary Eagleton and David Pierce, *Attitudes toward Class in the English Novel*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1979, chaps 2-4; Janet Murray (ed) *Strong-Minded Women and Other Lost Voices from Nineteenth-Century England*, New York: Pantheon, 1982; Joseph Kestner, *Protest and Reform: The British Social Narrative by Women, 1827-1867*, London: Methuen, 1985; Robin Gilmour, *The Novel in the Victorian Age: A Modern Introduction*, London: Edward Arnold, 1986.

Of the non-fiction studies of the poor and of the working class, other than Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, you might consult the following: John Bown, *Memoir of Robert Blincoe*, 1828; James Kay, *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes Employed in Cotton Manufacturing in Manchester*, 1832; Peter Gaskell, *The Manufacturing Population of London*, 1833; Joseph Adshhead, *Distress in Manchester: Evidence of the State of the Labouring Classes in 1840-1842*, 1842; Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 Volumes, 1851 (expanded edition 1861); John Cobden, *The White Slaves of England*, 1853; G.A. Sala, *Twice Round the Clock*, 1862; C. Booth, *Life and Labour of the People of London*, 1889. Mayhew's books are particularly interesting because they contain a vast number of autobiographical statements of the workers themselves. These and other references can be found in the following chronology of life and literature in the 19th Century.