

Metaphor and Hegemony in Raymond Williams's Theories
of Base and Superstructure

Ideology seminar
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This essay shall outline two critical, but somewhat latent, arguments posed in Raymond Williams's very important essay "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory" and the related text *Marxism and Literature*, which includes a large portion of the essay. In these seminal works Williams redefines determination as "setting limits and exerting pressures," and connects it to domination using a very Gramscian concept of hegemony. This essay will examine these two carefully argued movements, which are elegantly connected by their combination of theoretical import and methodological weight.

Metaphorical concerns

Williams begins the essay by critiquing the frequent interpretation of the ways "determination" has been constructed in Marxism. He notes a large possibility of error related to the assumptions common in the major theoretical approaches, and the abstractions created from that initial error:

The proposition of *base and superstructure*, with its *figurative* element, with its suggestion of a *fixed* and *definite* spatial relationship, constitutes, at least in certain hands, a very specialized and at times unacceptable version of the [proposition that *social being determines consciousness*] (38, my emphasis).

This application of the metaphor of "base and superstructure," as a directly *spatial* relationship ignores Marx and Engels's important qualifications of the metaphor in *time*, not in space. "The first kind of qualification had to do with delays in time ... the famous lags; of various technical complications; and of

indirectness” (32-33). Williams argues that advancement beyond linear concepts of determination is unlikely in spatial or temporal frameworks of “reflection” or “mediation” erected from a hasty interpretation of base and superstructure. In either case, the language of the metaphor collapses incredibly complex, dynamic structures into abstract objects very much unlike those proposed by Marx:

When these forces are considered, as Marx always considered them, as the specific activities and relationships of real men, they mean something very much more active, more complicated and more contradictory than the developed metaphorical notion of “the base” could possibly allow us to realize (33-34).

The qualification is not unexpected, but Williams’s estimation of damage caused by this misapplication is shocking. Asserting the power of language in the construction of metaphor is less revolutionary after Voloshinov and Bahktin. However, discarding a century of Marxist criticism is much more dangerous. If Williams can achieve this reconfiguration, it is only because of the form of his analyses, which are skillfully constructed mixes of method (praxis) and theory.

The caution regarding metaphor is echoed in several places in *Marxism and Literature*. Williams echoes the essay’s warning regarding the terms which now describe base and superstructure—mediation and reflection—and notes that neither metaphor really expresses determination suitably:

It is difficult to be sure how much is gained by substituting the metaphor of “mediation” for the metaphor of “reflection.” ... [I]t is virtually impossible to sustain the metaphor without some sense of separate and pre-existent areas or orders of reality.... Mediation, in this range of use, seems little more than a sophistication of reflection” (99).

Neither metaphor does the job suitably well here. In fact, if the proper “setting limits, and exerting pressures” definition of determination is used,

metaphor “is really only a hindrance” that “takes us back to the very concept of the intermediary which, at its best, the constitutive and constituting sense [of determination] rejects” (100). Soon after setting aside these and several other misconstrued notions, Williams moves neatly into hegemony, which he finds a better way to express the work of determination.

Williams’s emphasis clearly implies that a Marxist abstraction which discounts the power of language may be ineffective. Hastily or overly applied metaphors of base and superstructure result in a spurious linearity and a tendency toward preconception or predestination. The danger of separating “material social processes” and “language” is creation of a retrogressive Marxism. This insistence does not mandate return to The Dogma of Marxism, but rather, the opposite—a careful reading of Marx educated by his mistakes, the difficulties of his contemporaries, and the century of political struggle which has occurred since he last put pen to paper.

A slightly hyperbolic example of misconstrued metaphor may more directly illustrate the negative possibility. Consider Lenin’s chain metaphor: a chain of nations is pulled by revolutionary weight. One link in the chain breaks, and the pressure is relieved. This explains why revolution occurred in only one European country after the end of the First World War. However, the success of this metaphor is largely contingent upon the preconceived notion of a chain forged of independent steel links capable of movement. But what if the chain were welded together or fashioned from crystal? In those cases, the slight change in presuppositions results in a far less suitable metaphor. Like the chain of steel, a rusted chain or one made of crystal would start to break along its weakest point—but would continue to come apart once its sanctity was disrupted.

The change in the presupposed material characteristics of a chain also results in the failure of the metaphor to answer the question at hand. This potential disruption of Lenin's argument clearly demonstrates that for even Marxist theory, metaphor matters. As Williams insists over and over again, careful theorists will always consider the contradictory possibilities of introducing metaphors when seeking to clarify abstractions such as the class struggle or the rhetoric of politics: ideas can be more clearly related and understood, and thus productively introduced into the discussion at hand; or they can be rendered in a manner different than expected, and quickly made useless.

This insistence on rigorously conceived metaphors of determination does not make for sexy argumentation, but does give rise to sound theories. Certainly, Williams's notions of "setting limits" and "exerting pressures" were chosen for, not in spite of, their metaphorical significance. In another recognition of the importance of methodological language, Williams positions hegemony very carefully in his argument, using its unique connotations to facilitate movement from his redefined concept of determination to "domination" as it is used in the latter portion of *Marxism and Literature*.

Hegemony: connecting determination to domination

Throughout *Marxism and Literature*, Williams is careful to emphasize the necessity and importance of his redefinition of determination, in anticipation of its reconfiguration as "setting limits" and "exerting pressures." In a discussion of Chomskyan linguistics, he notes that "An emphasis on deep constitutive structures ... can of course be reconciled with the view of language as a constitutive human faculty: exerting pressures and setting limits, in determinate ways" (43). Later, in a remark about literary criticism, he observes that criticism

and literature are the forms “of a class specialization and control” (pressures), and created of “a class limitation” (49). Williams’s insistence upon his conception of determination becomes forceful as he approaches the concept directly: “A Marxism without some concept of determination is in effect worthless. A Marxism with many of the concepts of determination it now has is quite radically disabled” (83). The strength of this language is surpassed only by that of the analysis which it precedes.

The connection between determination and domination is introduced, but not made too quickly, as Williams begins explicit discussion of “setting limits.” This rather complex problem is succinctly stated:

The key question is the degree to which the “objective” conditions are seen as *external*. Since, by definition, within Marxism, the objective conditions are and can only be the result of human actions in the material world, the real distinction can be only between *historical* objectivity—the conditions into which, at any particular point in time, men find themselves born, thus the “accessible” conditions into which they “enter”—and *abstract* objectivity, in which the “determining” process is “independent of their will” not in the historical sense that they have inherited it but in the absolute sense that they cannot control it; they can seek only to understand it and guide their actions accordingly. (85)

Domination enters the discussion as “finding oneself born,” “accessible conditions,” “guid[ing] of actions,” and lack of self-control. Williams’s caution is oft-repeated: connection of “setting limits” with domination can only be made as long as “‘society,’ or ‘the historical event,’ are never categorically abstracted from “individuals” and “individual wills” (87). Such an abstraction reduces this “complex and interrelated process of events and pressures” (87) to an ahistorical predestination. The setting of limits and exertion of pressures is not abstract at all; but active and dynamic, real and concrete.

In fact, this careful connection of “setting limits” with “exerting pressures” allows us to consider determination and domination without lapsing into abstractions of predestination. The activity of these senses of determination removes the abstract agency of passive voice (again, Williams is very conscious of the power of his language) and places it firmly in the actions of human beings. At this point Williams’s argument calls upon a Gramscian construct of hegemony (refer to *The Prison Notebooks*; for the definition, 12-13; for an example, 104-106):

“Society” is never only the “dead husk” which limits social and individual fulfillment. It is always also a constitutive process with very powerful pressures which are both expressed in political, economic, and cultural formations, and, to take the full weight of “constitutive,” are internalized and become “individual wills.” Determination of this whole kind—this complex and interrelated process of events and pressures—is in the whole social process itself and nowhere else. (87)

In some ways this incredibly important passage prefigures the remainder of Williams’s argument: the movement through dominant, residual, and emergent cultures, the related alternative or oppositional forms, and even the concept of “structures of feeling” are enabled by the particular use of determination.

The connection of “society” and determination/domination to hegemony is becomes apparent when comparing “a *constitutive process* expressed in political, economic, and cultural formations” (my emphasis) with a later, more direct definition: “a complex interlocking of political, social, and cultural forces” (108). Williams elucidates this point soon afterward in a manner which shows his movement through hegemony toward domination is not complete:

For “hegemony” is a concept which at once includes and goes beyond two powerful earlier concepts: that of “culture” as a “whole social process,” in which men define and shape their whole lives, and that of “ideology,” in

any of its Marxist senses, in which a system of meanings and values is the projection or projection of a particular class interest. (108)

Hegemony at once imposes limits on “culture” and “ideology,” is pressured by them, and vice versa. It is an active process which is constantly refined, adjusted, and redefined by men; but at the same time, retains shapelessness: “to say that “men, define and shape their whole lives is true only in abstraction” (108).

Here, then, after beginning with determination, which Williams insists is the necessary point of departure for all Marxism, and reaching hegemony, the proper place for domination and the related constructions of “dominant, residual, and emergent” culture becomes apparent. First, the connection to domination is reinforced:

[Hegemony] sees the relations of domination and subordination ... as in effect a saturation of the whole process of living ... to such a depth that the *pressures and limits* of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political, and cultural system seem to most of us the *pressures and limits* of simple experience and common sense (110, my emphasis).

Williams’s explicit definition of hegemony is absolutely impossible without his specific notion of determination—pressures and limits—and a saturating domination. Hegemony, the determination of everyday life and experience, reinforces and maintains the dominating presence of the class system.

Noting the advantages of considering hegemony in this way, Williams observes, “its forms of domination and subordination correspond much more closely to the normal processes of social organization and control in developed societies,” (110) and notes that, “cultural tradition and practice are seen as much more than superstructural expressions ... of a formed social and economic structure” (111).

The particular way that Williams configures the connection of hegemony to domination—hegemony *as a culture*—“a culture, a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular class” (112)—is in fact stabilized by its form as a living process:

In practice, then, hegemony can never be singular. Its internal structures are highly complex, as can readily be seen in any concrete analysis. ... It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own. We have then to add to the concept of hegemony the concepts of counter-hegemony and alternative hegemony, which are real and persistent elements of practice (112-113).

Hegemony, then, not only requires, but reinforces and maintains the division of culture into dominant, alternative and oppositional subcultures. It is the “glue” which enables the very different limits and pressures of any society to be channeled in a manner that benefits the dominant culture. In fact, this division, which on its face may seem to weaken hegemony, strengthens it by allowing a wider range of reactions and possibilities for control.

But this does not mean that hegemony is the only force which controls men. Nor does it mean, as Williams states clearly, that all “political and cultural initiatives and contributions” should be reduced to the terms of hegemony. To do so would require metaphors of superstructure similar to those argued against earlier. It is not by accident that here Williams refers us back to the principles that have guided this work up to this point: “namely, that social being determines consciousness.”

Almost any Marxist critic can relate domination to hegemony—but Williams is not any critic. Instead, he shows that hegemony and domination are intertwined, enforcing the division of culture into dominant, residual, and

emergent orders. In this view, hegemony is both a sort of “glue” that determines the structure of culture, and an exerted pressure which sets its limits.

While the innovations here could be attributed only to theory, the importance of methodology should not be discounted. The purposeful stride of Williams’s argument shows clearly the need for a careful, reasoned theoretical style—reminiscent perhaps of Foucault, without the numbered lists and notology (not this, not that, not this other thing...)—and a nondogmatic Marxism which learns from its progenitors instead of venerating them without question.

Works cited and consulted

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Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1971.

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A few notes

It's been a few months since we completed the ideology seminar, and *twice* in that time I've had the opportunity to review various drafts of this paper in the ER of North Florida Regional—once because Erin stepped on a nail, and most recently because I discovered the hard way that I really was quite allergic to peanuts. Both times I thought it was very ironic: there I was, reading Williams and Gramsci in a hospital which none of the indigent can afford ...

The time that's intervened between the seminar and today has been perhaps my most noteworthy period of academic production. I've expanded the horizon of my theoretical knowledge considerably, but in the process grown a bit muddled. How can one handle the vast number of text that one wants or needs to read? How can I determine which of Foucault, Derrida, Williams, or another theorist I have yet to encounter should be sacrificed when theories collide?

Any thoughts?

I regret missing Peter Hitchcock in the crush of this semester, but look forward to being well-prepared (and seated in the front row) when Evan Watkins visits this coming spring.

Once again, I look forward to your insightful remarks, critical eye, and the devastating threat of that quick out pattern.