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The New Development of Marxist Literary Criticism Today: An Interview with Barbara Foley

Zhang Shengzhen and Barbara Foley

Abstract: This interview with Prof. Barbara Foley covers a wide range of critical approaches and new challenges in the fields of Marxist theory, Marxist literary criticism, and Marxist pedagogy. Prof. Foley holds that Marxism provides a meta-theory, a privileged standpoint from which to study the connections between literature, politics and history. After examining fundamental principles of Marxism – historical materialism, political economy, and ideology critique – Foley analyzes long-standing debates over the nature of literature and sets forth key concerns of Marxist literary criticism. This interview also examines a broad range of literary works – from classical to contemporary, conservative to revolutionary – that displays Marxism’s continuing value in explaining the multiple mediations between abstract social forces and their expression in literary form. Her new book, *Marxist Literary Criticism Today* is pedagogical in orientation, directed at twenty-first-century readers interested in linking emergent texts, genres, and cultural debates with traditional principles of materialist inquiry.

Keywords: Marxism; Marxist Literary Criticism; Marxist Pedagogy; Proletarian Literature

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摘要: 本访谈考察了马克思主义理论、马克思主义文学批评、马克思主义教学法等领域的批评方法和当下挑战。福莱教授认为马克思主义理论提供了一种“元理论”，一种“特权”立场，对研究文学、政治和历史之间的联系及其内部关系而言极为有利。在审视了马克思主义基本理论，如历史唯物主义、政治经济学和意识形态批评等的基础上，福莱教授阐释了长期以来有关文学本质的争论并确立了马克思主义文学批评基本话语范式。本访谈也探讨了自古典时期迄今、兼具保守性和革新性气质的诸多文学文本，力图表明马克思主义在阐释抽象的社会力量及其文学表现形式之间多样式、多层次的交往和呼应等领域仍发挥着持续的功能。福莱教授《当代马克思主义文学批评》以方便教学为目标，能够为21世纪那些对新颖突出的文本、体裁和文化争论与唯物主义研究的传统原则之关联感兴趣的读者提供指引。

关键词: 马克思主义；马克思主义文学批评；马克思主义教学法；无产阶级文学

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The Origins of *Marxist Literary Criticism Today*

Zhang Shengzhen (**Zhang** for shorter hereafter) :

Dear Prof. Foley , thanks for accepting the interview. Let's get started with your latest publication , *Marxist Literary Criticism Today*. What inspired you to write this book? And why "today"?

Barbara Foley (**Foley** for shorter hereafter) : Before I begin: many thanks for this opportunity to bring my recent book on Marxist literary criticism to the attention of Chinese readers. I am hopeful that the book will soon be translated into Chinese and made widely available to both scholars and general readers interested in learning more about how Marxists analyze the relationship between literature and society.

I wrote this book—and featured the word "today" in the title—for three principal reasons. First , the only existing English-language general introductions to Marxist literary criticism appeared more than four decades ago: Terry Eagleton's *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976) and Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature* (1977) . While many of the concerns of Marxist literary criticism have remained constant—we are still , after all , in the centuries-long time span of capitalism and the contradictions that it generates—the past several decades have witnessed a number of important developments , both in the world and in theories about how the world works. This book is an attempt to grapple with the nature and extent of the impact of those developments upon Marxist approaches to literature , and more broadly , culture. Second , I have been teaching literature from a Marxist point of view over the same period of time , beginning with my anti-capitalist radicalization when I was a graduate student in the 1970s. This book is an attempt to assess and share with a wider audience the fruits of those pedagogical efforts; more than any of the other books I have written , it is a "teacherly" text. Its debt to the many students I have taught over the years cannot be measured.

Third , however , and most important , I have written *Marxist Literary Criticism Today* because I am more convinced than ever that Marxism remains a vitally important instrument for understanding , and therefore changing , the world. Although bourgeois pundits of various political stripes have continued to proclaim the irrelevance of class struggle to the lives of the workers of the world , reports of the death of Marxism have been , to say the least , premature. In both absolute and relative terms , the world's proletariat is larger

than ever , especially if we include the hundreds of millions of toiling in informal economies , laboring as unpaid caregivers , and former peasants losing agrarian employment as large parts of the planet undergo desertification. Estimates of the global polarization of rich and poor—with 1% of the population owning 44% of the wealth—become more egregious every day. At the time of this writing in mid-2020 , the COVID-19 pandemic is revealing the stark class-based (and racialized) inequalities between the haves and have-nots on the planet. As Marx pointed out 150 years ago , capitalism is inherently unstable , prone to self-generated contradictions. That instability is currently on naked display.

Zhang: I agree that capitalism is the source of many of the crises we are currently encountering. In the book , the words "socialism" , "capitalism" , and "communism" are frequently mentioned. Do they convey something special today?

Foley: In the US context , the word "socialism" enjoys increasing popularity among young people , for many of whom "capitalism" is now a dirty word. Even "communism" has lost much of the toxicity it possessed during the era of the Cold War , when I was growing up. My racially diverse working-class students at Rutgers University-Newark have read "The Communist Manifesto" and "Estranged Labor" , along with various works of US proletarian literature , with intense interest , seeing many connections between these works and their own lives. The "C-word" , which for several decades could not be spoken among academics , even self-proclaimed Marxists , has made its reappearance in such titles as Jodi Dean's *The Communist Horizon* (2012) , Alain Badiou's *The Communist Hypothesis* (2015) , and Bruno Bosteels's *The Actuality of Communism* (2011) . To herald the renewed appeal of a leftist worldview is not to downplay the threat posed by the dark clouds of neofascism looming on many a horizon; indeed , given the current absence of a mass international communist movement capable of deflecting and reversing the neoliberal class struggle from above , racist and xenophobic nationalisms may well shape the course of history in the short run. Another world war is not unimaginable. The "today" in the title of my book signifies , however , a recognition of the simultaneous potential for revolutionary social transformation that exists in many parts of the world , as well as a reminder of the need to conjoin Marxist theory with Marxist practice if , in the word of the communist "Internationale" , the world is to "rise on new foundations."

Zhang: How does studying literature from the standpoint of Marxist dialectics contribute to the project of revolutionary

social transformation?

Foley: Well, I hope it can! Amidst the many social practices affected by the increase in class polarization, literary criticism hardly occupies a vanguard position; the struggle for bread—and for power—takes precedence over disputes about how and what we read. But we would be mistaken to conclude that literary study is irrelevant to the class struggle. One of the many ways in which people remain entrapped within the circle of capitalist consciousness is in thinking that reality is divided into discrete and counterposed spheres: political versus economic, public versus private, social versus psychological, rational versus emotional, scientific versus aesthetic. Literature, and the study of literature, are all too often seen as a subjective zone hermetically sealed off from the objective world of history's hard knocks. Yet Marxist literary criticism teaches, among other things, that what seems at first to be isolated and apolitical is often saturated in ideological implications. If people are to "think totality"—that is, examine the mediations and interrelations among phenomena that at first glimpse appear to be separate and distinct—the study of literature in relation to society from the standpoint of Marxist dialectics is a good, indeed an excellent, place to start.

Critical Perspective of Marxism and Marxist Literary Criticism

Zhang: I see that the book is divided into two sections. What is the basis for this organizational scheme? Why do you start with a section simply titled "Marxism," if your book is about Marxist literary criticism?

Foley: Thanks for these questions, which give me an opportunity to explain why and how I have structured the book. Each of the book's two sections consists of three subdivisions. Section I contains chapters titled "Historical Materialism," "Political Economy," and "Ideology." In Section II, the chapters are titled "Literature and Literary Criticism," "Marxist Literary Criticism," and "Marxist Pedagogy."

The rationale for this structure, which starts with fundamental principles, is that I do not assume in advance that my readers know very much about Marxism. Indeed, even the valuable books by Eagleton and Williams mentioned above presuppose, in my view, too full an understanding of key Marxist concepts. Subsequent studies of Marxist approaches to literature and culture—including the works of Fredric Jameson, upon which I draw substantially in Section

II—are still more inaccessible to the lay reader in need of an introduction to the basics. After all, how can readers assess whether or not a given attempt at doing Marxist criticism is well grounded unless they are themselves acquainted with the building blocks of Marxist analysis?

Zhang: I do believe the building blocks of Marxist analysis are of great significance. Would you please elaborate more explicitly on these building blocks?

Foley: I'd be glad to. Here is a brief sketch of Section I. Chapter One, "Historical Materialism," takes the reader through a series of keywords theorizing what Marx called the "real foundation" of behavior and consciousness in social organization: materialism and idealism; modes, relations, and forces of production; dialectics; base and superstructure; relative autonomy and mediation; levels of generality. The dialectical notions of contradiction, negation and sublation will prove central to an understanding of both micro- and macro-processes of change. Relative autonomy and mediation will help us analyze the multiple connections, many of them very subtle, between literary texts and traditions and what Marx called their "real foundation" in modes of production and class struggles. Raymond Williams' formulation of "residual" and "emergent" social formations helps us analyze uneven development in historical processes. Levels of generality—a phrase used by Bertell Ollman to designate different modes of abstraction in Marx's methodology—will help us examine varying claims to universality embedded in both literary works and critical discourses. Inserted throughout the text are a series of boxes featuring topics I have found to be of particular interest to readers/students influenced by recent developments in theories connecting literature with power relations, such as postcolonial and gender- and race-based studies. These topics also include: how are socialism and communism to be differentiated from another? how does Marxism respond to the charge of Eurocentricity? how do sexism and racism relate to Marxism's primary emphasis upon class and class struggle?

Chapter Two, "Political Economy," introduces readers to key basic concepts in Marx's economic writings: use value and exchange value; commodity fetishism; labor power, socially necessary labor time, and exploitation; surplus value; alienation; capital. The interspersed explanatory boxes take on such issues as the connection between surplus value and profit; the relationship between slavery and wage-slavery; the political economy of women's oppression; and the labor theory of value in the era of the Internet. The challenge I face in this chapter—which I ended up rewriting several times! —

has been to explain profound ideas (for Marx's discoveries were truly paradigm-altering) in accessible language. I also need to show how, for Marx, "economics" means much more than markets, costs, wages, and productivity: it is capitalism that puts a price tag on the production and reproduction of life.

Zhang: Certain key concepts are examined in the chapter on political economy: the relegation of value to money; the material basis of alienation; commodity fetishism; and the specious "freedom" of the wage-slave to sell their labor power. Readers will be interested in seeing how you relate these economic concepts to literary study and pedagogy in the second part of the book. First, though, can you indicate how ideology supplies a link between political economy and literary criticism?

Foley: In Chapter Three, "Ideology," I tackle the range of definitions of ideology that have been influential in Marxist thought. Starting with an examination of the three different (if overlapping) theorizations of ideology we find in the writings of Marx and Engels (as well as Lenin, Mao, and Cabral, among others), I focus on dominant ideologies that shore up class societies in various ways, enacting Marx's assertion that "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas... given the form of universality." Georg Lukács's notion of reification and Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation prove especially useful in analyzing the ways in which everyday experience in capitalist society binds people to their own oppression. Although these concepts are premised upon very different philosophical standpoints—Lukács's upon the Hegelian notion of expressive totality, Althusser's upon antihumanist structuralism—I find that together they help to explain how identities formed in and through the division of labor are naturalized, and it becomes habitual to live on the surface of things, never inquiring into why things are the way they are. The chapter ends with a discussion of Antonio Gramsci's notions of hegemony and alternative hegemony and the role of organic intellectuals in challenging the ideological distortions and obfuscations that pass for common sense. Throughout this chapter, I try to draw from each theoretical tradition concepts that will augment the toolkit of Marxist literary analysis without falling into the swamp of eclecticism. My principal purpose is not, after all, to put different Marxist schools in a boxing competition—my book is not "about theory" in the sense of being "about theorists"—but to defend Marxist orthodoxy as a privileged standpoint from which to comprehend the connections between literature and society.

Zhang: How has the discussion of fundamental principles of Marxism in Section I laid the groundwork for the discussion of "literature" in Section II?

Foley: In Section II, I utilize the philosophical and economic concepts developed in Section I to enter the domain of literary study. In a loosely schematic sense, Section I has supplied the "base"; Section II now supplies the "superstructure" of my analysis. I begin Chapter Four, "Literature and Literary Criticism," by examining the term "literature"—which has metamorphosed significantly over the centuries—through the lenses of historical materialism. Aided by a "family resemblance" approach to definition that draws upon the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, I examine fourteen features of literature—and literariness—commonly deployed by both literary critics and classroom teachers. These include: fictionality; qualities of literary language such as density, depth, concreteness, particularity, defamiliarization, and "showing not telling"; literature's ability to foster appreciation of such humanistic concerns as universality, empathy, individuality, and group identity; and aesthetic criteria, such as formal unity, autonomy, and beauty; and, finally, greatness, perhaps the most widely recognized (if poorly defined) criterion for distinguishing literature from non-literature. The discussion throughout the chapter frequently refers to websites offering literature teachers advice about how best to heighten their students' appreciation of formal and thematic complexities—to become "smart readers." However inadvertently, these pedagogical toolkits not infrequently validate certain ideologically freighted premises—such as the notions that literary works should never "preach," or that they characteristically feature the struggle of "the-individual-versus-society"—as intrinsic to literature itself, and thus indispensable to literary analysis.

Zhang: Do you hold that these fourteen features of literature—and literariness—commonly deployed by both literary critics and classroom teachers are indispensable to literary analysis?

Foley: Well, I'd make the claim that, in the United States at least, these features are quite widely deployed. I would of course hesitate to generalize about how literature is defined among Chinese scholars and in Chinese classrooms! The fourteen criteria that I examine, such as attention to linguistic depth and formal coherence, are, we shall see, routinely deployed in both Marxist and non-Marxist approaches to literary criticism. Others—such as the propositions that literary works make no assertions about reality but also purvey eternal human truths—are mutually

contradictory. Still others—such as the doctrine that literary works should “show not tell,” a mantra inherited from the Cold War-era institution of creative writing workshops—invite skeptical scrutiny, since they accept as normative the commonsense of capitalist everyday life and often stigmatize leftist politics—but not mainstream politics—as intrusively didactic. The class struggle, I argue, is fought out not just in analyses and evaluations of specific literary works but also at the very level of defining the object of literary study. The closing interrogation of “greatness”—what, after all, are the criteria, aesthetic, moral, and political, involved in assessing the value of a literary work?—prepares us to discuss the inevitably political nature of both literature and literary criticism.

Zhang: What are the principal concerns of Marxism literary criticism?

Foley: Chapter Five turns to some principal concerns of Marxist literary criticism. I start with the caution that Marxism should not be seen as only—or even especially—“applicable” to texts anchored in the capitalist era and explicitly addressing such issues as the exploitation and alienation of labor; because of its grounding in historical materialism and ideology critique, Marxist analysis is, I argue, as relevant to a sonnet by Shakespeare as to a play by Brecht. Moreover, the embrace of a Marxist standpoint does not dictate a single set of concerns, but instead encourages a series of questions. Marxism, for instance, shares with other modes of literary criticism a concern with rhetoric, that is, the formal means—poetic, narrative, dramatic—by which a text positions its reader as amenable to—that is, readily interpellated by—the ideological premises embedded in a text. Indeed, Marxism often builds off the insights afforded by other modes of critical inquiry. A feminist analysis of gendered property relations, for instance, can enhance our understanding of how reification is at once codified and asserted in a text. A close formal analysis of tensions and ambiguities can enhance the Marxist critic’s ability to target ideological contradictions. In absorbing insights from a range of alternative methodologies, Marxism makes the claim to being a “metatheory,” in which, as Jameson puts it, the political is the “ultimate horizon” toward which textual analysis extends. To follow the imperative “always historicize!” means, however, that the Marxist critic moves beyond “mid-level analytics,” taking care to link rhetorical patterns and ideological premises to their “real foundation” in political economy, class struggles, and contradictory developments in modes of production.

Zhang: Distinctive to a good deal of Marxist criticism, as one might expect, is a concern with ideology critique: given that most literary texts and traditions reflect an epoch’s “ruling ideas,” how could they not, however directly or indirectly, reinforce various dominant ideologies? How does ideology critique fit into the project of Marxist literary criticism?

Foley: Marxist critics characteristically adopt what Paul Ricoeur calls a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” alert to the various ways in which reification is affirmed in literary works that gesture toward universality through such idealist maneuvers as naturalization and dehistoricization. Teachers who view such assumptions about the human condition as intrinsic to literature’s exploration of universality make their classrooms sites of ideological reproduction, whether they know it or not. But the goal of Marxist critique is not to scold writers for promulgating dominant ideologies—a practice yielding readings both predictable and tedious—but instead to analyze the historical forces giving rise to those ideologies in the first place. Perhaps of greatest interest to the Marxist critic is the materialist analysis of ideological contradiction: since the worlds giving rise to literary works are riven by contradiction, so too will texts and traditions embodying and representing those worlds. That is, texts can be read symptomatically, as registers to conflicting historical forces that at once cry out for acknowledgement and elude coherent expression.

Zhang: What is the “political unconscious”? Why does it figure centrally in your argument?

Foley: I have found that one especially useful tool of symptomatic analysis is the notion of the political unconscious, most lucidly set forth in Fredric Jameson’s 1981 *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Motivated less by the formal coherence of a literary text than by its moments of rupture and dissonance, analysis focused on the political unconscious posits that texts characteristically allude only obliquely to “the history that hurts”; the function of the critic—in some ways comparable to a psychoanalyst exploring individual mechanisms of repression, displacement, and sublimation—is to uncover the sources of repression in larger historical contradictions. Moments of incoherence or formal stumbling—when narrative closure preempts further exploration of social conflicts, or key tropes are suddenly abandoned—are of greatest interest to the critic engaged in symptomatic reading.

Zhang: What are some other key concerns of Marxist literary critics?

Foley: Another issue that has preoccupied Marxist critics—from Marx and Engels onward—is the relationship between literature (and art more generally) and human need. To what extent does a literary text, as a unique embodiment of use value, rebel against the market, where exchange value reigns supreme? To what extent, conversely, does its humanist stance reinforce the regime of the market through its very refusal to participate? A related concern has to do with the nature of realism in literature. In what ways, as Lukács urged, are realist texts those that most successfully embody the complex dialectical totality of the worlds they reflect? Conversely, as Brecht proposed, are realist texts those that battle false notions of totality, and that therefore direct attention to the fissures in dominant ideologies, including dominant conceptions of literature itself? Or, as the Frankfurt School's Theodor Adorno opined, are literary works most effectively realist when they accede to reification, thereby displaying the futility of frontally contesting capitalism by means of conventional genres? The debate waged between and among Lukács, Brecht, and the Frankfurt School, while grounded in modernist-era debates over politics and form, fascism and mass culture, is not, I argue, confined to the middle decades of the past century. Twenty-first-century critics—whether of “capitalist realism” or of “alternative modernities” confronted in literature coming from the global South—continue to debate whether certain literary forms are better vehicles than others for grappling with capital's devastating contradictions—or, indeed, whether the act of representation itself ends up being coopted in a society so imbued with cynicism that even “anti-capitalism” has become a routine marker of literature and literariness.

We are in the *long durée* (that is, centuries-long lifespan) of capitalism; the issues facing Marxist criticism are part of the “changing same.” While attuned to alterations in both the world and the ways people are writing about it, Marxist critics should not be caught up in the constant search for novelty that characterizes capitalist production and reproduction. Writers can anticipate future worlds very different from ours; indeed, what Lenin called “revolutionary dreaming” can contribute to “emergent” historical tendencies. But genuine novelty in literary—and more broadly artistic—production will occur only when the “real foundation” in material social relations has been negated and sublated: when, as Marx and Engels declared, the knell of private property is sounded, and mankind can move from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom. There can be no “post-Marxism” until there is “post-capitalism.” A final

concern raised in Chapter Five has to do with the place of proletarian literature—or, to use Gramsci's term, the “literature of alternative hegemony”—in Marxist theorizing about literature and literary criticism.

Zhang: Many Marxist critics do not pay much attention to proletarian literature. What does the study of proletarian literature add to the project of Marxist literary criticism? Why is it of particular importance to you?

Foley: While much of my previous research—in US literary radicalism, in African American literature—has focused on literature that fundamentally contests the status quo, this diverse body of texts still inspires in me more questions than answers. How does attention to literary works written from a revolutionary perspective not only expand our notion of the canon but also alter our conception of what literature itself is, and does? What tools does the critic adopt in analyzing and evaluating texts that attempt to anticipate the dialectical emergence of a world that does not yet exist—what the US proletarian novelist Tillie Olsen called “the not-yet in the now”? Can revolutionary writers and critics be seen as versions of Gramsci's organic intellectuals, mediating between what is and what can be? What does “realism” mean in connection with such works? Does the notion of a “political unconscious” have much relevance to works that condemn the world as it is, and its self-justifications, and thus have little stake in repressing the “history that hurts”? What, finally, is the role of didacticism (that is, explicit teaching) in literary (and more broadly artistic) works that are inspired by Mao's call upon writers to create works that “operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy”? Or that are guided by the maxim—often attributed to Brecht—that “Art is not a mirror to reflect reality but a hammer with which to shape it”? How do such unabashedly functionalist views not only disrupt but in fact negate the formalist proposition that literature should “show not tell”? My own curiosity has been whetted by these questions. I am hopeful that, in years to come, other Marxist critics will pursue them more fully.

Marxist Pedagogy

Zhang: How does the theoretical perspective you have been outlining guide the discussion of Marxist pedagogy in the final chapter of *Marxist Literary Criticism Today*?

Foley: Considerations of space have prevented me from mentioning thus far the wide range of literary works that I have invoked in earlier chapters to illustrate key concepts:

from Shakespeare's *King Lear* to Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*; from Richard Wright's *Native Son* to George Orwell's *Animal Farm*; from Helena Maria Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* to Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*; from William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* to Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*; from Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* to Mike Gold's *Jews Without Money*; from Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" to William Morris's *News from Nowhere*; from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* to Dylan Thomas's "Fern Hill." It is in the book's final chapter on pedagogy, however, that I explore in greater detail some of the fuller implications of the arguments thus far developed in Sections I and II.

Zhang: Chapter Six is organized around ten topics comparable to the thematic clusters often used in humanities classrooms to juxtapose texts addressing common issues and concerns. Would you please briefly list the topics and texts and then elaborate on a few examples?

Foley: In relation to Alienation (1), the featured texts are Matthew Arnold's "To Marguerite—Continued" (1852), Muriel Rukeyser's "Boy with Hit Hair Cut Short" (1938), and Xu Lizhi's "I Swallowed an Iron Moon" (2014; English translation 2017). Rebellion (2) treats W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" (1919) and Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" (1919). Nation (3) comprises discussions of The Preamble to the United States Constitution (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa's "We Call Them Greasers" (1987), and Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852). War (4) analyzes three works all about World War I: John McCrae's "Flanders Fields" (1919), Carl Sandburg's "Grass" (1919), and Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939). Money (5) juxtaposes discussions of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), and Langston Hughes's "Always the Same" (1932). Race and Racism (6) features Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1886) and Ralph Ellison's "A Party Down at the Square" (written in the late 1930s, published 1996). Gender and Sexuality (7) contains discussions of E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), Anne Petry's "Like a Winding Sheet" (1946), Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain" (1997), and Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993). Nature (8) treats William Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (1807), Oswald Mtshali's "Sunset" (1975), and Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* (1974). Mortality (9) involves commentary on Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay" (1926), Abel Meeropol's "Strange

Fruit" (1939), and Shakespeare's Sonnet 63 ("Since Brass, Nor Stone, Nor Earth"). The final cluster (10) comprises works about Art: Archibald MacLeish's "Ars Poetica" (1926), Hughes's "Johannesburg Mines" (1925), and Brecht's Depression-era "A Bed for the Night" (English translation 1976).

It is clear that both the topics and the texts I have chosen for discussion make no pretension to comprehensiveness: other critics might choose very different texts to illustrate these topics or indeed very different topics altogether. Moreover, the list is clearly weighted toward works by US- and UK-based authors, mainly of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: while this choice reflects my own areas of scholarly expertise, I am aware of the limitations that this bias imposes upon the discussion. It can be noted, further, that the list mixes classics familiar to many readers (e.g., *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, "Nothing Gold Can Stay") and popular blockbusters (e.g., *Fifty Shades of Grey*) with lesser-known works of proletarian literature (e.g., those by Hughes, Olsen, Petry, and Ellison). What may stand out most is that the topics chosen for discussion range from concerns specific to capitalist modernity—such as Alienation, Nation, and Race/Racism—to issues that to a large degree transcend historical particularity, such as Nature, Mortality and Art. In particular, these last groupings, which encompass realms of experience shared not only by all humans but in fact by all living things, challenge teachers to think carefully about how historical materialism—including the dialectics of nature—is connected to literary analyses of quite different kinds.

Zhang: I recognize that it is very difficult to summarize the particulars of any given textual reading. But would you please try to sketch in a bit more detail how a few of the chosen pedagogical clusters enable—and challenge—the teacher to focus on various key Marxist concepts?

Foley: Thanks for the request! The section titled "Money" opens up a discussion of commodity fetishism: In Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, where incomes are often mentioned, but their grounding in labor and investments is invisible, contrasts vividly with Hughes's open condemnation of "dollar robbers, pound robbers . . . life robbers" in his anti-imperialist poem "Always the Same." In the section titled "Gender and Sexuality," Ann Petry's "Like a Winding Sheet," which situates gendered and racialized oppression in the "real foundation" of alienated labor—a worker's out-of-control hands—is counterposed with the "mid-level analytics" occluding the origins of homophobia in Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain." The section titled "Nation"

explores the different forms taken by dominant ideologies proclaiming themselves as universal: from the genteel rhetoric of the Founding Fathers in the Preamble to the United States Constitution to the viciously sexist and racist nationalism of the settler colonialist speaker in Anzaldúa's "We Call Them Greasers." The discussions of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and "A Party Down at the Square" display the very different notions of moral and historical possibility available to Mark Twain in the late nineteenth century and Ralph Ellison some fifty years later. The highly disturbing ending to Twain's novel—returning the enslaved Jim to the level of racialized stereotype and showing the rebellious Huck kowtowing to the imperious commands of the aristocratic Tom Sawyer—is read as at once a formal and a historical eruption of the text's political unconscious, consequent upon Twain's quasi-repressed recognition that post-Civil War Reconstruction merely substituted one mode of racist servitude for another. Ellison, by contrast, active with the Communist left when he wrote his story, could envision revolutionary class-based multiracial unity as a means of negating and sublimating Jim Crow violence. His nameless young white protagonist, reminiscent of Twain's Huck in many ways, has a possible way out of the prison-house of racist ideology.

Zhang: These interpretations are instructive and illuminating! The texts explored in the last three clusters feature centrally the question of universals, valid and invalid, as well as levels of generality. Do these clusters—which address matters that would appear to transcend politics and history—pose particular challenges to Marxist criticism?

Foley: You are right: these last clusters do challenge the Marxist critic, since universals such as "nature," "mortality," and "art" address experiences shared by many people. These concepts would thus seem to call into question the Marxist imperative that we should "always historicize." But I believe that, if one probes deeply, one finds that history—and ideology—cannot be so readily transcended. In the "Nature" grouping, Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" symptomatically reveals that the natural world, presumably an escape from existential loneliness, is in fact its reified inversion. By contrast, Oswald Mtshali's "Sunset" insists that there are no "natural" experiences with the sun that do not pertain to the exploitation of labor in apartheid South Africa. Mortality, for Robert Frost in "Nothing Gold Can Stay," links the death of a day and a tree's seasonal loss of leaves with the cycle of human life; but its allusion to the Garden of Eden ("So Eden came to grief") links natural processes to presumably timeless myth that have nonetheless

functioned ideologically to validate the human condition of suffering and death as God's punishment for Adam and Eve's original sin. By contrast, the causal connection between the death of a black man in the US South and the "blood-root" of a lynching tree in Abel Meeropol's "Strange Fruit" (made famous in a song by Billie Holiday) precludes any such ready equation of the human with the natural, the timeless with the timebound. Finally, the closing set of poems about "Art" puts Archibald MacLeish's highly formalist "Ars Poetica"—which concludes its succession of detached, hyper-concrete images with the caution that "a poem should not mean but be"—in conversation with Hughes's "Johannesburg Mines" and Brecht's "A Bed for the Night." These latter two poems not only query whether poetry can be written about certain themes ("125,000 natives working in the Johannesburg mines/How do you make a poem about something like that?") but also whether poetry by its nature affirms or explodes familiar moral nostrums. These closing clusters of texts ask, are there shared human experiences that transcend history? Can there be such a thing as an apolitical literary work? Thinking about these texts from a Marxist standpoint urges teachers—and students—to contemplate some important questions not just about individual texts, but the nature of literature itself.

Zhang: Prof. Foley, you state that Marxism addresses many of the concerns of other modes of critical inquiry linking literature to society; you particularly mention post-colonial theory and race-and gender-based criticism. Can you expand upon your claim that Marxism provides a "meta-theory," a "privileged" standpoint from which to study the connections between and among literature, politics and history?

Foley: First, let me note that Marxists share with scholars and teachers in these other fields a common concern with power relations and structures of inequality. Let me note, further, that Marxists often focus their scholarship and research on these fields. Significant numbers of post-colonial scholars are also Marxists: I think of Crystal Bartolovich, Timothy Brennan, Vijay Prashad, Kanishka Chowdhury, and the Warwick Research Collective. Some of the most astute scholars of critical race theory, as well as of "minority" literatures, are Marxists: Rosaura Sanchez, Marcial González, Barbara Fields, Stephen Ferguson, and Theodore Allen come to mind. Kevin Floyd, Rosemary Hennessy, Lise Vogel, Martha Gimenez, Hester Eisenstein, and Teresa Ebert, moreover, have significantly shaped feminist and queer theory through their rigorous interventions as Marxist scholars focused upon gender.

Zhang: How are Marxist critics different from other critics who stress matters of politics, power and class?

Foley: What sets apart the work of Marxists from non-Marxists in these and adjunctive fields is not that the Marxists are more political or more passionate, but that they insist upon causal models that anchor cultural practices in the “real foundation” supplied by Marxist historical materialism and political economy. Ebert and Mas’ud Zavarzadeh have used the term “mid-level analytics”—which I invoke throughout my book—to describe the modes of analysis that leave designations of causality stranded somewhere in the zone of superstructure, or indeed abandon base-superstructure thinking entirely. While the stipulation that Marxists should locate ultimate causality in class struggles and modes of production does not mean that each and every instance of Marxist literary criticism needs to revert to the question of surplus value extraction, Marxists need to supply mediating terms that accurately describe actual social relations, as well as criticize terms that muddy the waters of analysis. For instance, the use of the term “the West” in a good deal of post-colonial theory—often conflated with “Western rationalism” or, simply, “the Enlightenment”—equates the capitalist-era colonial project with not just a part of the world but also with ruling ideologies presumably distinctive to that part of the world. Class contradictions internal to “the West,” as well as to “rationalism” and “the Enlightenment,” are simply elided. “Mid-level analytics” can give rise to partial explanations that are at times worse than no explanations at all. Marxists try hard to avoid this kind of fragmentary thinking.

Zhang: Let me press you here. If you claim that Marxism supplies a “privileged” standpoint from which to study the relationship of literature to society, how is this use of the term “privilege” different from the way it often appears these days in identity-based notions of “difference” as the basis of social inequality?

Foley: Thank for you this important question, which may be on the minds of many readers. One last advantage of a Marxist approach to gender, race, and imperialism is the superiority of a class analysis keeping in view the shared interests of the great majority of the world’s population. This

issue is vitally relevant to current political practice. Too often these days the term “privilege”—“male privilege,” “white privilege,” “Western privilege”—crops up in movements aimed at contesting oppressive policies and regimes. Marxists insist that there can be no successful social change unless the egregious inequalities experienced by female, non-gender-conforming, dark-skinned, and immigrant populations are the centerpiece of struggles for revolutionary working-class social transformation. Rather than featuring differential levels of oppression as matters of “privilege,” however, Marxists take as their measure of comparison the future classless world of communism—in relation to which many white workers are currently “less oppressed” than some workers of color, or many male workers are “less oppressed” than some women. The basis for strategic unity is not to proclaim that everyone in the “99%” is in the same boat—which is clearly not the case—but to assert that just about everyone in the “99%” has an urgent interest in abolishing the conditions that have put the world’s workers—North and South, East and West—into boats to begin with. Given the waves of undocumented and precarious laborers moving around the world these days, the “boat” metaphor takes on particular urgency.

While this discussion of Marxism’s claim to being a “meta-theory” has taken us a bit away from literary criticism and pedagogy, this question of “privilege”—usually accompanied by identity-based notions of “difference” or accusations of “cultural appropriation”—is on the minds of many of our students these days.

A literature teacher who can establish materially-based, class-conscious grounds for solidarity in their classroom is not only promoting both better reading and better thinking. They are also enabling students to link what they are learning in the classroom to the much larger project—and challenge—of changing the world. For there is no question: the world does need—urgently—to rise on new foundations: communist foundations.

Zhang: Thank you for the illuminating and lucid responses. They will be invaluable for Chinese readers and researchers as well. Thank you for the interview.

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