Preface

Marxism and World Literature

The last two decades have witnessed an unprecedented revival of interest in globalized Marxism. This revival has recently been made all the more robust and sustained by four key major events or factors on the world scene. First is the (re)current and on-going capitalist economic depression or even crisis, according to some, across the globe. This global depression started with the housing markets and financial institutions in the United States in 2008; it continues to deepen and widen elsewhere, affecting even socialist China that has once been enjoying a healthy annual increase of the GDP of up to 13% for consecutive years. In particular, such a sustained global economic catastrophe reminiscent of the 1930s seems to have marked the beginning of an epoch of reasonable skepticism about the legitimacy and longevity of capitalism: both the general populace and critical thinkers have started thinking seriously about the implications of cyclical capitalist crises predicted by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels over a century and a half ago. In the 2004 *Capitalism: A Very Short Introduction*, James Fulcher seems unduly optimistic about capitalism, but his 2009 Preface to this book sounds more cautious and anticipates new discoveries about capitalism in light of the 2008 capitalist downturn. From a different angle, *Socialism: A Very Short Introduction* in the Oxford University Press series argues strongly the case for socialism; it offers much food for thought in a different vein going against the grain of capitalism on the global stage.

As a matter of fact, well before the foreboding year of 2008, philosophers, sociologists, and social theorists have taken the lead in paying renewed homage to Marxism, and several key publications in French and English have signaled the refreshing turn of global critical synergies. For instance, French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s *The Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International* published in 1993, which spells out, in no uncertain terms, ten major plagues or problems currently bedeviling the globe under capitalism and offers a philosophical and multi-cultural understanding. In the wake of Derrida’s seminal work, American and Italian scholars Michael Hardt and Antonio Ingri’s
2000 *Empire* has been proclaimed as a new “Communist Manifesto;” it prophetically prefigures the on-coming 2008 capitalist calamity, and is followed by another two ground-breaking books to form a trilogy: *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* in 2004, and *Commonwealth* in 2009. In these and other thought-provoking works called into question are the arrogance about, complicity with, and blind faith in, capitalism and the capitalistic discourse in its defence; affirmed are key relevant and functioning Marxist principles; and articulated is a new vision of the world without capitalism and its myriad diseases. Without doubt, these recent foundational, philosophical and socio-political texts have galvanized current critical thinking about Marxism, socialism, and capitalism alike; they are bound to recast literary and cultural studies in an interdisciplinary and theoretical way with far-reaching global effects.

Third, non-Marxist scholars in many fields, not least in literary and cultural studies, have returned to Marxist philosophy, political economy, and social and critical theory in search not only for answers and solutions to newly arising and perennial problems in modern and contemporary capitalist society, but also for re-interpretations of old and emergent capitalistic patterns and trends from novel perspectives. Jonathan Culler’s revised 2011 *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* embraces Marxism as a legitimate theory. Similarly, Manfred Steger’s *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (2009) also critiques capitalism from various angles. With these studies, the halo of capitalism no longer shines as some would have it. By 2014 this much has become sure: the Marxist revival in literary and cultural studies has been gaining strength since 2008, for this year saw the meltdown of the American housing and financial markets, and only those scholars in the humanities and social sciences who have turned a blind eye to the glaring capitalist problems can go blithely off in praise of capitalism. The rippling impacts of such a cataclysmic event continues to be felt globally, and is currently making life miserable and insufferable for the vast majority of people in most poverty-stricken and developing countries. People recall, once again, that the cyclical boom-and-bust pattern, which had long been predicted by Karl Marx in his epoch-making *Capital*, as well as the faces of poverty and massive, prolonged unemployment, has repeated itself over and over again in a relentless capitalist logic. Such a pattern has culminated in a string of catastrophic events in the financial, economic, industrial, and agricultural sectors since 2008, just as it had done so in the 1930s. One may reasonably ask: What theory can best explain capitalism and socialism in relation to literature and culture in an interdisciplinary and holistic, if not totalistic, manner? Marxist theory and criticism presents a ready answer. Relatedly and naturally, major anthologies after 2008, such as Vincent Leitch’s chiefly edited and revised *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2010) and Richard Lane’s newly edited 2013 *Global Literary Theory*, have both included Marxism as an important school of theory. Indeed, one can safely conclude: Never before has Marxism as a theory – in whatever re-invented forms it takes as applicable in the humanities and social sciences – been so fundamental to the study of literature and culture, as it is currently practiced in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Gone are the days when people can
be led – or rather misled – by the mass media or by dominant discourse to the uncritical belief and even blind faith in capitalism’s infallibility and superiority.

Of course, Marxist literary and cultural critics/theorists have also weighed in actively and even proactively to reinvigorate Marxism in the twenty-first century. In a fashion somewhat similar to Derrida’s 1994 *The Specters of Marx*, Terry Eagleton’s *Why Marx Was Right* answers convincingly ten questions regarding an equal number of charges against Marxism in 2011. Similarly, Fredric Jameson’s 2011 *Representing ‘Capital’: A Reading of Volume 1* provides a refreshing angle on the foundational text of Marx’s *Capital* in terms of unemployment, an altogether too familiar worsening global phenomenon. Jameson’s other ensuing new works in a Hegelian-Marxist mode have likewise revived Marxism, even though the term post-Marxism has surfaced of late. Another indication of renewed Marxism taking roots in the academia across the discipline lies in this fact: Marxism has been consolidated and institutionalized as a critical theory that regards no disciplinary borders; it is not just a literary theory that has been conventionally and restrictively defined. Terry Eagleton, Gayatri Spivak, Stephen Eric Bronner (in *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*) and Fredric Jameson have all popularized Marxism as theory in the postmodern sense. In a word, Marxism has indeed become a theory in its own right in literary and cultural studies in an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural manner.

Last but not least, the general popular mood has also shifted toward questioning and challenging capitalist ideologies and practices. Nowhere is this animosity or even hatred for capitalist practices more obvious than in the responses to an otherwise normal or natural event of human mortality: while right-wing politicians and capitalist apologists mourned Right-winger Margaret Thatcher’s death, numerous workers and un- or –underemployed in London and elsewhere went to the street and publically celebrated it. Media coverage of these events abounded and has set people re-thinking the Reagan-Thatcher era with its inflated rhetoric flaunting capitalism and disparaging Marxism-Leninism. Since we hold that there is no impermeable line between literature and life, between politics and arts, and between beliefs and actions, we examine these subjects in an integrated and interdisciplinary way. We also cast doubts about the long-held and dubious notion that capitalism is faultless, flawless, and eternal, and that it is the best system available to the human race. There are always better choices, needless to say, and one thing has become clear: the 99 % versus 1 % occupy movements swept across numerous cities in the world, and thinking people are not to be taken as gullible. As the myths of capitalism’s presumed health and longevity are called into question, so are the literatures, literary criticisms, and theoretical discourses about capitalism’s superiority, permanence, and universality. We advance the following interconnected, dialectic if not dialogic position: where there is capitalism, there is Marxism, as its critique; and where there is capitalism, there might or will be socialism, as its ultimate other. Of course, ours is not an unrealistically rosy picture of socialism in theory or practice; we also offer a critical and aesthetical scrutiny of its basic assumptions and imperfections. We further ask this pointed question: Can socialism be an alternative, if not a supplement
or complement, to capitalism, in literature and in life? We examine searchingly the creative and crucial energies of writers and critics in several countries.

Given the drastically changed world that has fundamentally shaken the unwarranted belief in the workings and supposedly positive sides of capitalism, a new approach is called for in literary and/or cultural studies of Marxism in relation to literature and to theory and criticism. Marxism is, by all accounts, a huge subject, and we plan to deal with one focused subject at this juncture. Our immediate purpose is to examine Marx’s advocated socialism in relation to literature and, to a lesser extent, culture, in the Canadian series. The inaugural series will be followed by two series on American and British literatures respectively. Drawing on Marxist or neo-Marxist critical theories from the Frankfurt School figures such as Walter Benjamin onwards, and building on and going beyond the foundational theory of Marx and Engels, we will take a Marxist and particularly interdisciplinary, neo-Marxist approach to the literatures of three major English-speaking countries: Canada, the United States, and Great Britain. In particular, we re-examine and re-interpret Marx’s socialist theory and its far-reaching global influences or effects on literature and literary criticism. So far, these effects have escaped much previous critical attention due to various reasons; what is more, neo-Marxist theory and criticism will shed new light on the subject at issue. Globalization or globility theory, as well as postcolonial and multi-cultural theory, and even post-Marxist theory, will also be included.

We intend to re-examine received assumptions about capitalism in the spirit of finding truth. Thus, a whole-scale re-evaluation and re-interpretation of the past and contemporary literature of Canada, the United States, and the Great Britain have assumed new significance in the second decade of this millennium. We also scrutinize conventional models of interpreting Marxism as well as a counter-argument. With our combination of Marxist and neo-Marxist critical approaches, much of what has been taken for granted in literary and cultural studies can and must be reconsidered anew. Topics of investigation range from canonization to aesthetic standards, from the literary to the cultural, from the formal to the political, and from print to digital humanities and social sciences studies. The world is made new again, we hope, with re-constructed Marxism in the twenty-first century.

We have chosen to commence this series with Canada for several reasons. First, Canada was, and remains, a country characterized by relatively obvious socialistic policies and characteristics in social welfare and medical services, something that the United States since Barack Obama’s election has been emulating in various ways. Second, Canada’s financial situation seemed and continues to be in good health, too, amid all the troubles that have haunted the rest of the G-7 industrialized countries. Third, former Canadian Governor of the Bank of Canada, Mark Carney, has been appointed to become Governor of British Bank, the first foreigner to ever achieve that status in the 350 years of Britain’s history. Certain financial theories and practices he has developed seemed to be in favour of the general public, not just the big corporations and capitalists and bankers.

Furthermore, the New Democratic Party is an oppositional party in Canada; its constitution continues to stay with a clause on the fundamental principles of
socialism. In addition, the general Canadian zeitgeist, and the social, moral, philosophical, and religious principles to which Canadians subscribe, seem to support the principles of the Canadian left thinking and Canadian-born left movements that include Canadian socialism. According to Canadian historian Ian McKay and Canadian literary historian James Doyle, Canada is blessed with a long and rich red tradition that has gravitated toward branches of socialism. Yet another decisive factor is the international images of Canada and Dr. Norman Bethune. In spite of Adrienne Clarkson’s downplaying of Bethune’s political role in her recent book, the general impressions of Canada and Dr. Bethune remain steadily good in China, and, by extension, in many other peace-loving countries. This has occurred partially because of Canada’s communal spirit, egalitarian mentality, and internationalism, as Robin Mathews has argued in his *Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution*. In like manner, James Steele, Wei Li, and Zhigang Wang’s edited *Angles of Snow: An Anthology of Modern English-Canadian Poetry* also testifies, in part, to Dr. Bethune’s fine poetry and ennobling politics of socialism and “internationalism” as Mao Zedong terms it.

Last but not least, Canada boasts an impressive and long list of Canadian writers as critics or critics under the influence of Marxism or socialism, or its variants. Indeed, we owe our studies to these pioneers or fore-runners in Canadian Marxist or Marxian theory and criticism. They include, but are not limited to: A.J.M. Smith, F.R. Scott, Norman Bethune, Louis Dudek, Hugh Garner, Morley Callaghan, and F.P. Grove from the 1920s onwards; Dorothy Livesay, Earle Birney, and Hugh MacLennan from the 1930s to 1940s; Robert L. McDougal, Robin Mathews, Paul Cappon, and James Steele from the 1950s to 1960s; Larry McDonald, David Arnason, Thomas Middlebro, F.W. Watt, Kenneth Hughes, and Pamela McCallum from the 1970s to 1980s; James Doyle, John Z. Ming Chen, Christian Bok, and Irvine Dean from the 1990s; and Colin Hill, Cheryl Lousley, Candace Rifkind, Jody Mason, and Naomi Klein from the 2010s. On the grounds mentioned above, we think we are well justified in putting Canada first in this Marxism and World Literature Series.

There is no politics without poetics, both broadly conceived, and vice versa. Even though some text-minded scholars may wonder what literary and cultural studies have to do with real life, we firmly posit this: it is here that the dialectic or dialogic interplay between socialism and capitalism as represented in literature has offered us the most dynamics and problematic, since we do not see the absolute or seamless boundaries between life and literature. The following questions are worth pondering over as well: What are the difference between socialism and scientific socialism? How has the term communism been much maligned and collapsed with that of socialism? What has happened to capitalism of late and how have literature and literary criticism related or responded to “late capitalism”, as Fredric Jameson has termed it? What has been going on with capitalism, socialism, and literature all along? It would seem that there are more questions than answers. However, to be inquisitive, skeptical, and critical is only human, and we hope to lay bare the deceptions, lies, and ideological camouflage under capitalism, in literatures as much as in the real material life and history of the peoples in Canada, the United States, and
the Great Britain. The answers to the questions raised above may just lie in the following pages and volumes.

Marxism and Canadian Literature

It is entirely appropriate to start our preface to the Canadian volumes with a citation from another preface, since the latter serves fittingly not only as a theoretical foundation of, but also as a social and intellectual background to, our current study. Terry Eagleton, in his recent, 2008 “Preface to the Anniversary Edition” to *Literary Theory: An Introduction,* writes: “Things have changed for the better since I taught Marxist theory every week at Oxford in the early 1970s in an informal session which was not even advertised on the university lecture list, which was widely disapproved of by my colleagues, and which operated less like an orthodox seminar than a kind of refuge for ideologically battered students. Most students of literature can now expect a theory course on offer, a fact that one naturally welcomes” (vii). Eagleton’s Preface cited here was written in celebration of the inaugural edition of his, by now well-respected, best-selling 1983 book. Thirty years have passed since then, and Marxist or Neo-Marxist criticism has occupied a legitimate place in literary and cultural studies as a theory. In line with this development and taking a Marxist or neo-Marxist interdisciplinary critical approach, this inaugural volume has a dual purpose.

First, it examines the effects of realism as a literary theory on a freshly-established “canon” of English-Canadian works from the mid-1920s to the end of the 1970s. Since the term realism may sound controversial or hopelessly outmoded in this postmodern, or to a rare few (e.g., Patricia Merivale of the University of British Columbia), post-postmodern era, some words of explanation are in order. For one reason, literary trends often seem to move in a somewhat Hegelian dialectic so that the latter carries forward some qualities of the former; such a dialectic renders the site of demarcating literary movements fraught with uncertainties. Internationally, the twentieth-century literary phenomena – realism, modernism, and postmodernism – in divergent cultures overlap in time, co-exist in space, and complement one another in themes, forms, and ideologies. A glance at some of the most vocal and influential postmodern theorists may help illustrate this point. Linda Hutcheon, for instance, agrees, with another critic, that the “realist epistemology” is still a very much alive issue in “our [postmodern] culture” (74); she also accepts Gyorgy Lukacs’s view that postmodernism shares with realist fiction a common use of “historical events, duly transformed into facts, …” though she advances that postmodernism makes blatantly obvious this process (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 74). Likewise, Fredric Jameson, in “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” posits that postmodernism arises in “reactions against” high modernism’s extremities and ruptures with realism, especially its ivory tower practices typified by Joyce and Proust in fiction, and Pound and Eliot in poetry (111–12). One measure of postmodernism against its immediate literary precursor is to blur or efface some key “separations”
(112) between high culture and mass culture and revert to mundane, lived reality and to popular forms of literary expressions. This populist gesture recalls, not too distantly, the Brechtian-realist’s advocacy of approaching everyday subject matter in forms and language of high accessibility and intelligibility (1975). Though we have no intention whatsoever of equating realism with postmodernism, these signs of continuity are not to be brushed aside lightly.

In the Canadian context, a similar line of continuity as much as of rupture is visible. Robert Wilson in Ambivalence, a highly suggestive title in spite of the word’s own semantic meaning, points to the stubbornness and popularity of realism in English-Canadian literature and the latter not being “receptive to postmodernism”, especially outside the non-academic circle (1990:52–3). On a separate occasion, Hutcheon makes a strong case for realism and identifies this peculiarly Canadian phenomenon when she remarks: “… the strength of realist tradition could always be seen here [Canada]”. Her more incisive argument, however, points to the “conventions of realism” being resurrected and contested by postmodernism (The Canadian Postmodern 207–8) in a synthetic process (in Hegel’s sense), though she does not employ this concept.

Other tangible grounds exist to justify our realist enterprise if a wider perspective is adopted; realism as a literary movement seems to be slowly making its way back to center stage in some quarters of the world. Deep down south and on the other side of the Atlantic, a significant amount of Latin American and British postmodernist work is renowned precisely because of its magic realism (an objectionable term of course): exemplified respectively by Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie (Soderlind 227). On the North American scene, Jameson’s finds it necessary to have a chapter dealing with magic realism in his very recent work on postmodernism, Signatures of the Visible. We are aware that the term is associated more with postmodernism than with realism in current critical discourse but as Wilson perceptively notes, some Canadian critics have tried to recuperate or incorporate this “magic realism” in the oeuvre of Robert Kroetsch (by far the best known English-Canadian postmodernist (W.H. New 1989: 290–291)) into the tradition of “frontier yarn, tall tale or barnyard humour” of prairie realism (Wilson 1990: 61). New’s Editorial in the Spring 1993 issue of Canadian Literature, “Nineties Quizzes,” stresses the relations between realism and postmodernism (2).

More overtly and without the ambiguity characteristics of postmodernism, some American critics (e.g., Tom Wolfe 1989) and American-Chinese writers (e.g., Nie Hua Ling 1989), have independently of one another, hammered out loud manifestos for realism. Even Jameson, far better known as a postmodern culturist, calls for a return to a “new realism,” after his previous neutral position on realism and modernism (Kellner 1989: 35). Across the Pacific, many Chinese novelists and theorists (Xu Zhaohuai and Ding Fan, for instance 1989) are also calling for a return to realism or neo-realism in wake of the Chinese postmodernity heyday observed since 1985 (Wang Ning 1993). It could safely be said that the realist spectre in different masks still hovers somewhere globally; it is also clear that the term realism has already resurfaced though with new qualifiers. While the term (and its befitting epithets) as used under new circumstances may stand for divergent and innovative
forms, approaches, and techniques, careful distinctions should be made in relation to terminology. We shall deal with the persistence of the term below and in ensuing chapters.

Unfortunately, some of the realist novels (e.g., Durkin, Carter and even Baird) to be discussed have been either neglected and/or deliberately ignored, because they do not (and cannot) fit comfortably into the selection process of literary critics or anthologists, particularly of a liberal persuasion. Granted, the rather belated study of English-Canadian social realism appears undoubtedly, to the wary eyes at least, as a historical oddity; however, these uncanonical texts deserve due consideration. Larry McDonald, in “The Politics of Influence: Birney, Scott, Livesay and the Influence of Politics”, presents a sobering finding. After assiduous research into nearly a dozen of “standard” guidebooks and anthologies, all purposely appended, he reaches the conclusion that English-Canadian canonization has excluded, slighted, neutralized, or marginalized various texts (poetry or fiction) with socialist tendencies (434–45). Hence, part of our effort is to recuperate these “lost” or “Othered” (in the expanded sense of Spivak’s term, 1985) texts, and to (re)access, and (re)assess them from a new angle. Admittedly, our corpus has to be eclectic given the limitations of time.

The second principal purpose of the book is to cross discursive or disciplinary boundaries and reckon socialism1 as a sociopolitical discourse into the account of a “school” of writing – social realism, and in some exceptional cases, socialist realism. (The latter has so far been stigmatized, not without reasons, in a large portion of liberal critical discourse.) At stake are two issues. To begin with, the conventional and dominant liberal critical practice must be called into question. The cases of Northrop Frye and Wayne Booth are most illustrative. The Frye of the 1957 Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays champions pure, formalist, and archetypal criticism divorced both from other disciplines and from social reality. This double negation is changed when he advocates a more open-minded critical methodology in The Modern Century and The Educated Imagination that considers, among others, Marxist and Freudian theories. In the 1980s he reaches the point where he associates art with life: “I merely stress the possibility, importance, and genuineness of a response to the arts in which we can no longer separate that response from our social context and personal commitments” (Booth 1988:420). Booth, the eminent rhetorical

---

1 In this study, we deal mostly with the concepts of socialism as expounded by Marx and Engels in the Manifesto of the Communist Party and in Socialism: Utopian and Scientific. We may define Marx’s and Engels’s theory of socialism as one which champions class struggle as a means to overthrow the rule of the bourgeoisie and advocates public ownership of the means of production to establish a proletarian state and a society in which everyone is equal.

The next stage following socialism, according to Marx, is communism, the ultimate goal of history. To a critical mind, even a Marxist one, this reaching of a final historical goal without further possibility of evolution seems to defeat some of the intents of Marx’s dialectical and historical materialism, which claims that everything changes constantly and is to be negated by its antithesis in history. Arguing in the same vein, we want to suggest that just as capitalism constitutes one stage in history, so socialism or communism may also be a temporary phase of history, bound to be replaced by another.
guru, undergoes an even more dramatic conversion. By his own admission, he has
twice been infuriated and then persuaded by Jameson’s works respectively (*Marxism
and Form* and *The Political Unconscious*) into taking the political seriously in his
contemplation of formal or literary devices and techniques used in his two major
The two non-Marxist critics’ increasing urge to consider other subjects (philosophy,
religion, politics, etc.) and their eventual courage to embrace more than the purely
literary gave them both a fresh and wide ground for the exploitation of their
talents.

Marxist theorists and practitioners, of course, have always been dedicated to the
union of two or more discourses. Terry Eagleton has on various occasions reiterated
his belief that the establishment of “English Literature” as a legitimate subject, sepa-
rated from other disciplines in the Humanities such as Philosophy and History, was
itself a lamentable act despite its ideological function (1981:98; 1983:17–53;
1990:28–29). The reintegration of English Literature back into “the whole field of
cultural practices” both reveals the political context and meanings of the literary
texts (1990:83). Similarly, Jameson’s postmodern cultural enterprise embraces not
only the discourses of film, architecture, video (not to mention literature as tradi-
tionally defined) at home (1991), but also literatures of the Third World to give an
even wider dialectical worldview of global culture. Increasingly commanding our
attention is Spivak’s ambitious literary-cultural projects to combine deconstruction
with feminism and Marxism. The result has been fruitful so far, as evidenced in the
essays collected in the book, *In Other Worlds*.

In the English-Canadian situation, as Larry Mcdonald demonstrates convinc-
ingly (1987:425), most criticism of literary-cum-political figures such as Livesay
and Birney has managed to erase the legacy of socialism in their writing. The rein-
sertion of this legacy into our interpretation of social realism is of urgent impor-
tance. Recently, this composite view of literature and politics has been gaining
ascension. In the present era of the 1990s, we find the postmodern project perform-
ing an undeniable political function; Hutcheon, for one, has repeatedly defended
postmodernism and particularly postmodern irony in answer to the charges of non-
Though we should not represent her ideological stance as socialist and should stress
her different political agendas, her express attitude towards the political (the title of
her *The Politics of Postmodernism* being sufficiently revealing) seems to signal a
drastic shift in English-Canadian criticism. The innocent notion that literature can
be void of political implications has come under increasing fire.

In addition, the complexity involved in our critical evaluation is compounded
further by the hybrid nature of social realism, a form of writing persistently haunted
by the labels describing it as social history or documents (e.g., critics on Baird and
Durkin). We submit that the aesthetics of this discursively mixed genre proves,
understandably, to lie beyond the confines of many a definition of literary realism
per se hitherto attempted by a large number of Canadian literary critics. Since the
social realism at issue intertwines both literary and sociopolitical discourses, the
pull of each constitutes a tension which tests the English-Canadian social realists’
literary creativity and critical consciousness. The difficulty is doubled because
social realist writers, whether they work seriously or flirt playfully with socialist
theory within the predominantly liberal milieu, ultimately have to make a decision
and the diametrically opposed ideological magnetic fields can be so powerful that
they waver in spite of themselves. For some, this trial is a blessing; for others, a
curse; for all, a novel experience. It is also true, however, that the references or
allusions to the Marxist narratives enrich the intertextuality of the best of social
realists’ works (e.g., of Durkin and Birney) to such an extent that it goes well
beyond the mere Bloomian “anxiety of influence”: the active and reciprocally
enriching interplay between the texts and intertexts reaches a full-blown Barthesian
“productivity” (Sherrill Grace 1990: 188) in the most dialogic and/or polyphonic
(in the Bakhtinian sense) novels, for example, by Douglas Durkin, Earle Birney,
and Hugh Garner.

Our discursive and interdisciplinary position is undisguisedly a Marxist or Neo-
Marxist one – classical and contemporary. This includes not only a textual analysis
of realism as a literary movement and a mode of writing from the Marxist point of
view, but also a scrutiny of the sociopolitical, economic, and philosophical factors
which gave rise to and shed light on literary realism. In the current parlance, the
latter stance can be re-presented as one of “Theory”, a word Jonathan Culler
appropriate one to name the practice that is entering North American universities
under the umbrella of “Literary Theory”. In the Canadian context, Hutcheon views
the advent of “Theory” in more or less the same way the Chinese handle crisis; it
is at once a danger, a threat, a hope, and an opportunity to the liberal humanist
tradition (1988:vii). With this in mind, our project constitutes, in part, an answer to
this “theoretical” challenge. Starting with Marx and Engels, founders of Marxism,
we shall draw on Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin, Sartre, and Bakhtin (exponents and
developers of classical Marxism); followed by Althusser, Williams, Eagleton,
Jameson (Neo-Marxists); McDonald, Mathews, Steele (Canadian Marxists); as
well as Kristeva, Barrett, Spivak (Marxist-feminists), to construct a Marxist or
Neo-Marxist aesthetic which may be pertinent and conducive to our close exami-
nation of Canadian social realist novels. Other formal features aside, we hope the
Marxist values and standards thus introduced throughout the book will foreground
and illuminate such topics and themes as class and class struggle, alienation, the
nature of art in capitalist society, commodification, money and power fetishism,
human nature and its devaluation and deterioration, and ideology; problematize
and challenge the universality, validity, and permanence of much of the existing
Canadian liberal critical consensus; engage the latter in a fully dialogical exchange
of ideas and world-views; and finally, strive for true and lively interpretive
pluralism.

Important is the light that Marxism sheds on a number of serious concerns faced
by women under capitalism: their objectification and subjugation within the fam-
ily, their devaluation by default of a presence in the economic and social spheres,
and their lack of political power and ideological choices. Our work not only traces
one of the waterheads of Marxist writings (e.g., Engels’s) pertaining to a feminist
problematic, but also constitutes a vigorous refutation of the accusation that Marxism does not or cannot lend its aid to the feminist movement as a whole. Viewed from our new angle, writers like Morley Callaghan and Philip Grove (male as they are) have portrayed women estranged by the capitalist machine, powerless and helpless. The Marxist-feminist perspective can both ruthlessly reveal and cogently explain the full economic, existential impacts, political meanings, and social, material conditions that are the blind spots of the psychoanalytic (e.g. Freudian, Lacanian) approach to the individual psyche and experience; it also establishes a social psychological discourse that helps to illuminate issues besetting women under patriarchal capitalism in particular. Since the often creative re-reading and expansion of the master narratives of Marx and Engels by modern and contemporary theorists have in fact produced an impressive Marxist hermeneutics encompassing various and even conflictual views, we have taken a syncretic approach and compiled a glossary of the key terms updated to the most recent publications of 2013.

A change of critical paradigm is usually accompanied by new horizons and discoveries. From our historical hindsight, the Lukacs-Brecht theoretical rhubarb over realism and modernism stems initially from their diverging approaches. However in the long run, this Marxist inner fight proves to be less internecine than self-salvaging. Similarly, the Moi-Showalter feminist controversy concerning Virginia Woolf’s corpus not only raises anew issues of methodology, a problem somehow anticipated by Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (546–553), but also revives Woolf and invigorates Woolf criticism. Just as the afore-mentioned two debates respectively heighten our sensitivity to modernity in general and feminist modernist poetics in particular, and lead to new critical registers and concepts, so we cherish the hope that our Marxist approach and canonization may yield fruitful results or findings that are not readily obtainable through any other means. Here, we quote Sylvia Soderlind’s quite succinct summary written in the spirit of genuine academic pluralism: “each methodology invents its own object, every canon is a creation of a certain way of seeing” (*Margin/Alias* 228). Needless to say, whether our hope will come true or not awaits readers’ further reading. As the Chinese Marxist Mao Zedong says rather humorously about trying anything new: “if you want to know the flavour of a pear, you need only to taste it.”

Having suggested our approach, we deem it necessary to say a few words on the scope and arrangement of this book. The Introduction, drawing on the aesthetic views of Karl Marx and his followers, ventures a brief historical review of the mimetic/realist discourse since Plato, places the Marxist legacy in the tradition of Western culture, establishes a Marxist(–feminist) critical paradigm, and identifies the deficiencies of English-Canadian literary criticism on social realism. Chapter 2 highlights significant socioeconomic, political, and intellectual events from the 1920s to the mid-1960s and offers a broader view of relevant materials on writers not treated at length in this study. These events and the larger Canadian community of writers are related to the social realists’ thematic concerns, language, imagery, and ideology; these are further explored in the third chapter by looking at the writers’ own theory of social realism. The literary practice of these writers is thus
viewed as conscious or conscientious, and as guided by certain shared literary tenets and sociopolitical beliefs.

Intended to focus on eight key authors, the main body of our work generally limits itself to one major novel by each author. Where appropriate and possible, references are also made to an author’s other works to see the continuity or discontinuity in his or her artistic theory, moral sensibilities, ideological orientations, and craftsmanship. The primary works to be discussed are representative rather than exhaustive. In other words, they are in our estimation the best examples from the author’s oeuvre to demonstrate the shared beliefs and praxis of social realism.

The novels under discussion are placed in an order of climax according to the writers’ attitudes towards social and political commitment; not on the ostensible pattern of the general geographical movement from the west to the east, from the country to the city, nor on the discernible rough chronological scheme. We begin with Durkin in Chap. 4, which commences the process of scrutinizing specific social realist novels. Particularly, the chapter focuses on a transitional writer who shifts decidedly from rural to urban realism. Douglas Durkin is treated as both the first modern writer to approach socialist ideology and as a pioneer in presenting personal conflicts related to large-scale social and economic situations. The chapter also presents the view that though literary matters figure largely, there are two contrasting, if not contradicting, traditions of political commitment – the liberal and the socialist. The socialist ideal (Leninist) is brought from Europe by the veterans like those in The Magpie who, together with the striking workers in Winnipeg, struggle to bring it to fruition in Canada; here we find the concepts of Engels’s “family” and “private property”, of Bakhtinian “ideas”, of Benjaminian art “in the age of mechanical production”, and of Lukascian “ideal of the harmonious man”, to be particularly useful.

Chapter 5 compares Morley Callaghan and Hugh Garner in terms of social realism in the cosmopolitan setting. The emphasis is on the means by which the “ordinariness” of marginal(ized) characters and common situations is rendered intriguing; the heightened sense of law and order and of social changes; and the ambivalent or transparent ways of incorporating the socialist ideal and Utopian themes. Equally important is Callaghan’s and Garner’s more sophisticated study of how the ideas of socialism filter down to the lower class, the ordinary people, and eventually affect the middle class, or even the upper class. A classical Marxist as well as a Spivakian-Marxist treatment of class is apt, while an Eagletonian aesthetic of the particular and sensuous seems to render the ordinary not so ordinary, and an Althusserian study of ideological apparatuses and the “lived experience” helps to illuminate men’s and women’s real status in capitalist society.

Chapter 6 shows some parallel developments in Irene Baird’s and Earle Birney’s novels: the integration of the individual into a larger social unit, and the conversion of a non-political being to a political activist. The issue of class and class struggle is viewed as crucial to characterization, to thematic development, and to the construction of a secularized political discourse. Whereas Garner’s and Callaghan’s characters are just becoming socialists, Baird’s and Birney’s characters are already in the
process or act of making revolution as best understood in the Trotskyan paradigm. Further, the rich intertextuality or interdiscursivity clamours for more than a traditional influence study to realize paradoxically, the Brechtian alienation effect and Lukacsian organic totality, while the rich structural or situational ironies illuminate a Barthesian disillusionment.

Chapter 7 draws an analogy between Frederick Philip Grove and Dyson Carter in their skillful representation of the complex economic and industrial subject and realistic depiction of socialist-minded characters; emphasis is also put on female protagonists. In addition, the chapter delves into the Marxist concepts of alienation, history, and commodity fetishism under capitalism at work. Moreover, we see intertextually, the socialist ideal as expressed in Grove’s book changing into reality in Carter’s novel where the working class organizes its own unions and even establishes a sort of miniature socialist state, effecting Marx’s comic vision of history. Just as a classical Marxist analysis of the economic discourse and a Leninist anatomy of imperialist war prove fruitful, so do Kristeva’s notion of socialist women and Jameson’s expanded concept of capital as a powerful international presence not unlike Frankenstein’s monster. In brief, the socialist ideal has come full circle in the Canadian writers’ works in that it has evolved from an idea to material realization.

Chapter 8 takes a Marxist-Bakhtinian approach and examines Margaret Laurence’s The Diviners with an emphasis on issues of class, race, and nation seen in intersection. Laurence is presented as continuing with the Marxist socialist tradition with increasingly complex and diversifying visions of social and political life in an unstoppable globalization of capitalism.

The Conclusion recapitulates both the literary traits and the socialist ideas and arguments previously developed and contrasts social realism with Socialist Realism. The chapter not only stresses the fine qualities that make social realist writing artistically enduring and politically challenging, but also traces some of the influences that are exerted indelibly on later writers. The realist techniques used by this latter group as well as some developing modernist elements that will manifest themselves more conspicuously with time are identified.

While dealing with a pair of writers from the same region in the majority of the chapters, we also make cross-references to and cross-examination of writers in different chapters. The thread of connection has to do with the authors’ own social or political class position or point of view; sometimes it also involves the class of their families. With Durkin breaking a new trail as well as effecting an ideological polarization, Garner, Baird, and Carter belong in one group; their class origins are comparable, their point of view is focused on the working class, or the unemployed poor, and the ideology revealed in their books is a socialist one. Callaghan, Birney, and Grove fall into a different category; they are more or less from the middle class, or are members of the middle class; and their outlooks as seen in the novels remain

---

2Revolution in this book means the changing of the social, economic, and political order of capitalism by the working class or left-wing activists. Before the total take-over of political power, it may be prefigured by a relatively moderate form like a peaceful sit-in or a more radical one like a general strike or street fight. See Glossary for a more comprehensive and theoretical view.
mainly liberal humanist ones (albeit with conservative, progressive, and radical overtones). To group these writers into one category or another is, of course, not to lump them together without due discrimination; we also show the existence of a wide spectrum of attitudes among writers even within the same camp; for instance, within the same category, heterogeneity of political allegiances (e.g., Marxist, Leninist, Stalinist, Trotskyist, Maoist) is well-nigh possible\(^3\); in the same way that artistic manifestations are multiple and varied. It is hoped that such arrangements and linkages will be beneficial in the unfolding of our methodology and the understanding of the Canadian social realist novels and poetry.

Xiamen, China

John Z. Ming Chen
Yuhua Ji

Marxism and 20th-Century English-Canadian Novels
A New Approach to Social Realism
Chen, J.Z.M.; Ji, Y.
2015, XXVII, 296 p., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-3-662-46349-9