

Comments on Terry Eagleton's "Base and Superstructure Revisited"

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LET ME FIRST CONFESS that, remarkably, I am also one of those people who is skeptical about alien abduction but do suspect that there is something important about the distinction between base and superstructure. Based on Eagleton's estimate, I calculate that the probability of two such people speaking at the same session is comparable to the chance of winning the lottery and, paradoxically enough, somewhat less than the chance that there really are alien abductions. However, I do still have some doubts about how this distinction should best be understood, some of which remain despite the many illuminating ideas in Eagleton's paper.

Let me approach the issue in an obvious if possibly plodding way, by saying a few words about the three obvious questions: What is the Base? What is the Superstructure? And how are they related?

A society's base, I take it, is the sum of its productive and reproductive resources, and would include at least the means of production and the relations of production. As Eagleton notes, there can be no doubt that this is fundamental to society in the sense that there would be no society without production of, at the very least, the necessities of human life. But of course there is more than this banal truth involved in taking seriously a doctrine of base and superstructure.

The superstructure is a more slippery concept. Sometimes it is understood as meaning simply culture. As Eagleton nicely remarks, the concept of culture tends to vacillate between the broadly anthropological and the narrowly aesthetic, neither of which is of much use for the present purpose. Eagleton, at any rate, presents a more interesting concept of superstructure as that part of culture the function of which is to contribute to the legitimation of the state. One important consequence of this definition is that it clearly does not constitute base and superstructure as exhaustive categories. Eagleton notes that a literary work can be studied infrastructurally, as part of material production, or superstructurally, as collusive with dominant power. And there is also the possibility of reading it neither way: it may be scrutinized for symptoms of subversion of the dominant power; or perhaps even treated as a

purely aesthetic object. There is also a problem that begins to surface here. If we think of the state as existing primarily to defend the relations of production, and hence of the ideological function of the superstructure as being to defend the relations of production, then the superstructure will have been defined in relation to the base. This will threaten some claims about the relation between the two with triviality.

So what of the relation between the two? Often, the Marxist doctrine is taken to be that base determines superstructure. But this is not easy to interpret. Certainly we shouldn't understand, for example, any straightforward statement of efficient causation. A sufficient reason for this is that the ideological function assigned to the superstructure could, presumably, be served by a wide variety of different ideological structures. One more promising line might be the following. The function of the state is to preserve the means of production and social relations of production. This function is carried out both by exercises of physical force and by ideological methods. The latter, more or less, constitutes the superstructure. The base, then, determines the superstructure in the sense that what counts as superstructure depends on the nature of the economic base: the superstructure is whatever serves to give ideological support to whatever in fact constitutes the economic base.

The problem with this interpretation is that it is merely analytic, whereas we presumably were looking for a substantive claim about how societies operate. Put another way, the claim about base determining superstructure simply falls out of Eagleton's perhaps rather idiosyncratic definition of superstructure. What this gives us is a suggestion as to what should make something count as an item of superstructure, but no idea whether there are many or any such items. So perhaps the substantive claim is not so much about the relation between base and superstructure—which proves to be merely analytic or conceptual—but rather in the prevalence of the superstructural in culture. Here we can properly locate Eagleton's thesis that the superstructural dominates culture when the economic base provides no more than the necessities of subsistence, the situation characteristic of most of history and most of the world at present. But economic surplus creates the possibility of cultural production that can liberate itself from the role of ideological support of social relations. And this is also a part of the reason for the vital point that Eagleton stresses, that only a substantial economic surplus creates the possibility of socialism. All this relates to Eagleton's comments about the economic, or more specifically, money, as a necessary condition of just about anything else that might be wanted in a human life. We should recall not only the necessity of money for the acquisition of anything, but the necessity of acquiring certain things, the means of subsistence, before it makes any sense to acquire anything else. These simple points

illustrate the general idea at a more basic level. Base determines everything, including superstructure, until there is a certain amount of it. (More strictly, until that point the only ideological production is superstructural.) Beyond that point the possibilities for choice, individual self-expression, and so on begin to multiply.

Related to all this is Eagleton's claim that one should be a socialist because one doesn't like work. Work is the realm of necessity and the realm in which base determines superstructure. As we become liberated from work so the superstructure becomes liberated from the base, or the ideological becomes liberated from the superstructural. But this presupposes a very specific and perhaps inadequate conception of work, and more should be said not only for William Morris, but even for Marx. There are several very different traditions for thinking about work. Certainly important is what Adam Smith—hardly a socialist—described as toil and trouble, and what Marx conceived as alienated labor. But surely we should also recognize Marx's idea of purposeful transformation of nature as essential to the realization of humanity in the individual, and the development of related ideas in Mill, Ruskin, or Morris. There may be a good case for restricting the anyhow technical term superstructure to specifically negative connotations, but doing so for such a central and familiar term as work seems likely only to confuse.¹

Turning to a rather different matter, I find myself a little troubled by the concept of function. I have helped myself to this concept in these comments, and Eagleton does so in his paper. It is hard not to do so in this area of thought. Eagleton writes, for instance, that "the function of superstructure . . . is to help manage [contradictions in the economic base] in the interests of the ruling class." How is such a claim to be understood? Sometimes "function" is used to imply an intention, but presumably this does not apply here. (I don't want to deny that sometimes, perhaps often, policy is determined by members of the ruling class in proverbially smoke-filled rooms. But presumably conspiracy theories will not provide a general explanation for social functions.) Sometimes it refers to the role of something in a complex mechanism, as when it is said that the function of the carburetor is to regulate the proportions of fuel and air. But this only makes sense to the extent that we think of society as a whole as having an ultimate goal or purpose. Possibly Marx did sometimes think this; but it is an idea of which I would be very suspicious. The only other interpretation of which I am aware is that which is now most popular in biological applications of the term, the idea that to say that the function of an X is to do F is to say that the reason there are Xs is that they do F. This is the general idea of which the existence of an intention is a special case, and for which

natural selection provides the necessary nonintentional gloss for biology. So, for instance, we have hearts because they circulate the blood and that's good for us, the connection between benefit and existence being provided by the story of natural selection. Hence the function of the heart is to pump blood. Perhaps there is a selective process by which only those cultural forms that do something useful for the ruling class are allowed to survive, and that justifies this kind of attribution of function to elements of the superstructure. But I'm dubious about this, and so I think there is a philosophical problem here that remains to be sufficiently resolved.

Let me conclude with a matter on which perhaps—I'm not sure—I disagree more substantially with Eagleton. This is the matter of essentialism. Eagleton writes: "Marx's anthropology comes down in the end to what we share in virtue of the structure of our bodies, to our 'species-being' as he terms it—a thoroughly essentialist doctrine, naturally, and all the better for that." Essentialism is a topic on which I've spilled a good deal of critical ink,² and I naturally find this remark provocative. The problem is that we share very little in virtue of the structure of our bodies. It is important, certainly, that we share some basic needs—food, water, shelter, and so on—and, as Eagleton rightly emphasizes, most of humankind has been mainly concerned with the satisfaction of its most basic needs. But if there were an essence of humanity in the sense Eagleton requires, it would certainly go much beyond the most basic needs, and in ways that Eagleton in fact notes. I take it that when, just after the last quoted passage (interrupted only by some Aristotelian metaphysics that struck me as obscure even by the standards of Aristotelian metaphysics), he says that we cannot answer questions like, "Why should we take delight in each other's company?", the reason is that our liking for one another's company is part of what it is to be creatures of the kind we are. I think this is more or less true, but not usefully put in terms of essences. Sociopaths are still human so that this species-typical characteristic is not as basic as, say, the need for water. There is, I think, a continuous spectrum from what is absolutely physically necessary for human survival, through that without which almost no humans will thrive, to those things in which only humans with very specific tastes have any interest. This is a way of putting things that has no problem stating facts about all or most humans, acknowledges the crucial distinction between needs and desires often rejected by both post-modernists and neoclassical economists, but does this in a way that has no truck with essentialism.

In the end I'm fairly sure Eagleton can't be an essentialist. He writes that "that continuous transgression or self-transcendence which we call history, or culture, is part of our nature." This seems to me importantly

true. But surely self-transcendence is just what one cannot hope to do to an essential nature. While I am reluctant to accuse Terry Eagleton of being insufficiently dialectical, in biology, at least, it does seem that essentialism is naturally opposed to dialectics. To transcend one's nature is to leave it behind and construct a new and different one; if that nature is one's essence, to do this is not to transcend one's self but to destroy it. This needs to be said in a way that does not deny obvious and important truths about our physical needs; but it needs to be said. One reason it needs to be said is that essentialism, it seems to me, leads inexorably to biologism, something one might be tempted, though surely wrongly, to associate with Marx's talk about species-being. Biologism, as in contemporary sociobiology recently renamed evolutionary psychology, is a booming intellectual project, and it typifies the problems with essentialism. Sociobiology presents human nature as fixed by forces in the distant past and in a great variety of ways, most notably those to do with gender relations, as incapable of, or at least highly resistant to, self-transcendence. And it is this kind of example, I think, that has led so many radicals, perhaps even including Eagleton, to reject essentialism. There is a straight and narrow path, I hope and believe, between being dashed on the unyielding Scylla of essentialism, and being sucked down into the formless Charybdis of postmodernism.

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NOTES

1 For more details, see John Dupré and Regenia Gagnier, "A Brief History of Work," *Journal of Economic Issues*, 30 (1996), 553–59.

2 See my *The Disorder of Things* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993).

