A significant tendency of contemporary theory has been the high level of interest in a Marxist perspective. Even among critics who would not consider themselves Marxists in a doctrinal sense, Marxism has become a significant element in their thinking. One of the main reasons for this increased interest in Marxism has been the influence of the thought of the French Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser. He rejects the so-called ‘vulgar’ Marxist view that works of art are wholly determined by socio-economic forces and argues that they have ‘relative autonomy’ and are ‘overdetermined’, that is, determined by a complex network of factors. Althusser’s work created mental space for critics who were sympathetic to the political aims of Marxism but unhappy at the restrictive nature of most earlier Marxist criticism. Two important current forms of critical practice which particularly reflect the influence of contemporary Marxism are ‘cultural materialism’ in Britain and the ‘new historicism’ in the United States.

Althusserian influence has affected all the theorists included here, to a greater or lesser degree. They are all concerned with the relation between history and literature. Raymond Williams, probably the most influential British critic since Leavis, has gradually moved to an explicitly Marxist position. In his essay ‘Dominant, Residual, and Emergent’, he develops a theory of the relation between the culture at large and cultural products – such as literature – which attempts to do justice to the complexity of that relation, thus countering objections to earlier Marxist criticism. Terry Eagleton wishes to retain the Marxist concept of ideology but modifies traditional Marxist formulations and argues that the relation of the literary text to ideology should be seen in terms of ‘overdetermination’. More recently Marxist thinking has been aligned with other sets of ideas – structuralism and post-structuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Kristevan semiology, discourse theory, feminist theory – to create what has been called a ‘syncretist’ form of criticism in which Marxism is only one element among many. Rosalind Coward’s and John Ellis’s discussion of Roland Barthes’s book S/Z represents this movement in recent Marxist literary theory. Fredric Jameson, the leading American Marxist critic, has been influenced by Althusserian concepts and also favours aligning Marxism with contemporary theories such as
post-structuralism and psychoanalysis, but he has strong connections with traditional Marxism of the Hegelian totalising type since, for him, Marxism can subsume and incorporate within itself all other forms of thought. In contrast to the anti-interpretative tendency of much structuralist and post-structuralist influenced criticism, he supports an interpretative critical approach in which Marxism functions as the 'master code'.

**FURTHER READING**

Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago, 1983).

**Raymond Williams: ‘Dominant, Residual, and Emergent’**

The complexity of a culture is to be found not only in its variable processes and their social definitions – traditions, institutions, and formations – but also in the dynamic interrelations, at every point in the process, of historically varied and variable elements. In what I have called 'epochal' analysis, a cultural process is seized as a cultural system, with determinate dominant features: feudal culture or bourgeois culture or a transition from one to the other. This emphasis on dominant and definitive lineaments and features is