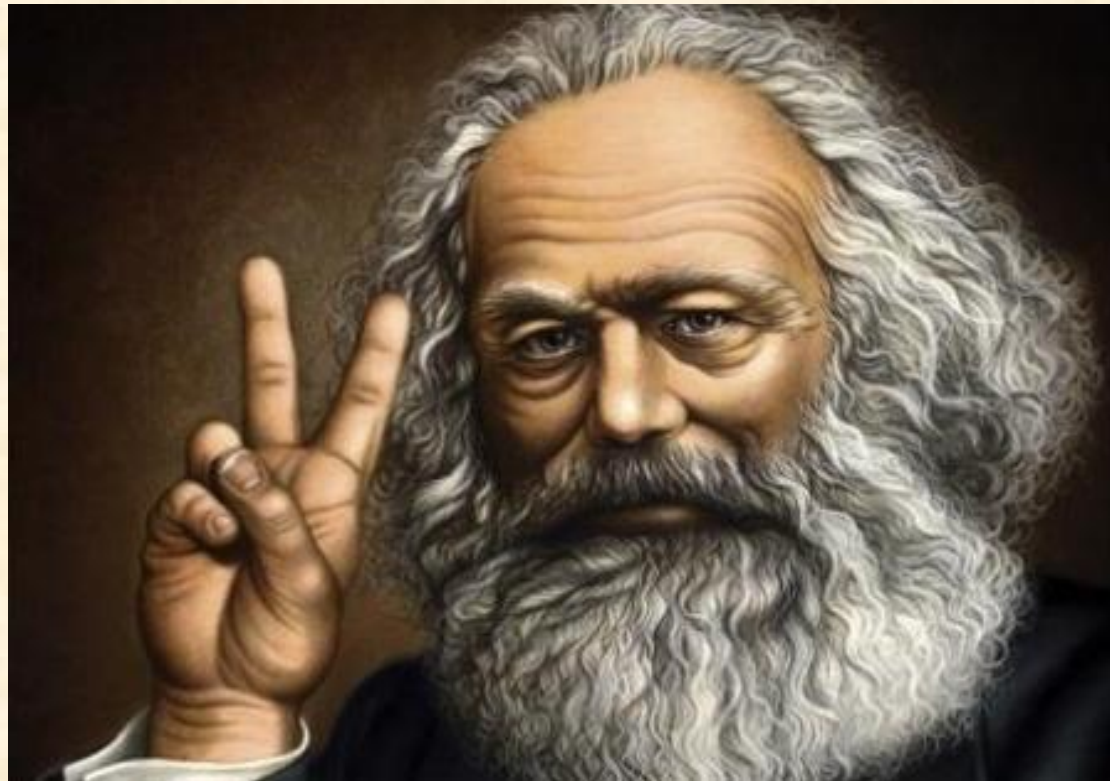


Ideology, History, and Marxist Criticism



Ideology

- Early definition, from late 19th century Marxism: false consciousness
 - What's problematic about this early definition?



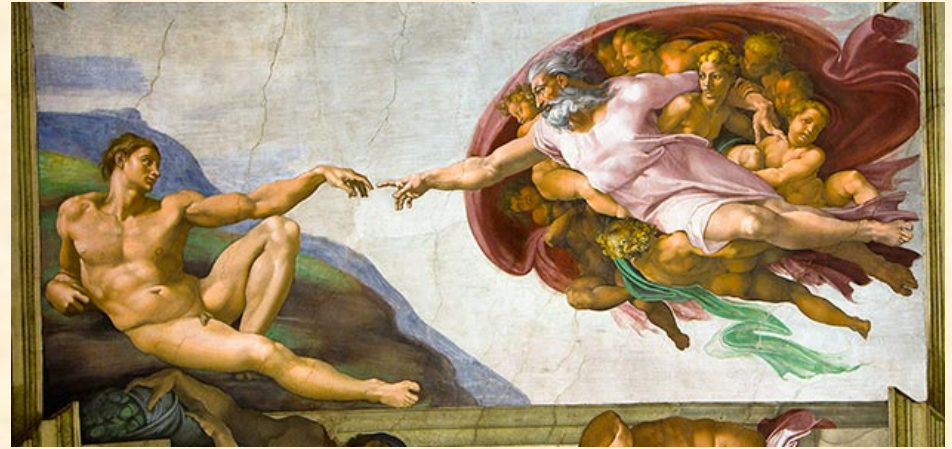
More Recent Definition of Ideology

The background of the slide is a collage of American symbols. On the right, the Statue of Liberty is visible. In the center, there is a document with the words 'We the People' written in cursive. On the left, there is a white dove with its wings spread. The bottom of the image shows the stars and stripes of the American flag.

- Collection of ideas (myths, beliefs, doctrines, etc.) that informs and guides a social group, institution or individual
- These ideas tend to be so ingrained that we don't question them. We think of them as “natural” or obvious
- What do you think are some of our own American ideologies?

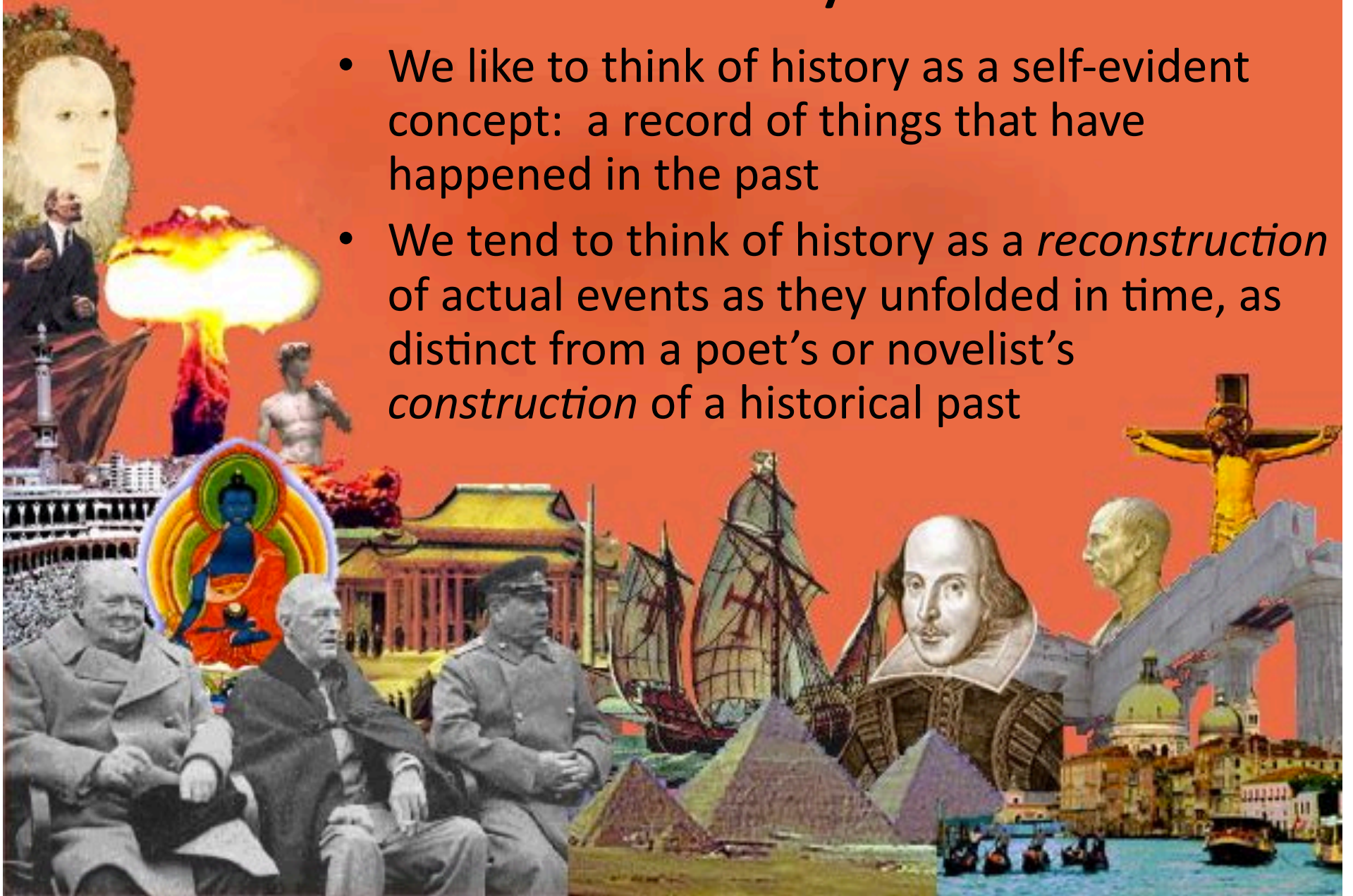
Ideology and Culture

- Both high and popular cultural art forms are purveyors of ideology
 - Does this mean they're bad or "false"?
- No escape from ideology
 - Questions we can ask: How does ideology work in a text? What unarticulated premises stand behind our cultural productions, or what we think we know?



History

- We like to think of history as a self-evident concept: a record of things that have happened in the past
- We tend to think of history as a *reconstruction* of actual events as they unfolded in time, as distinct from a poet's or novelist's *construction* of a historical past

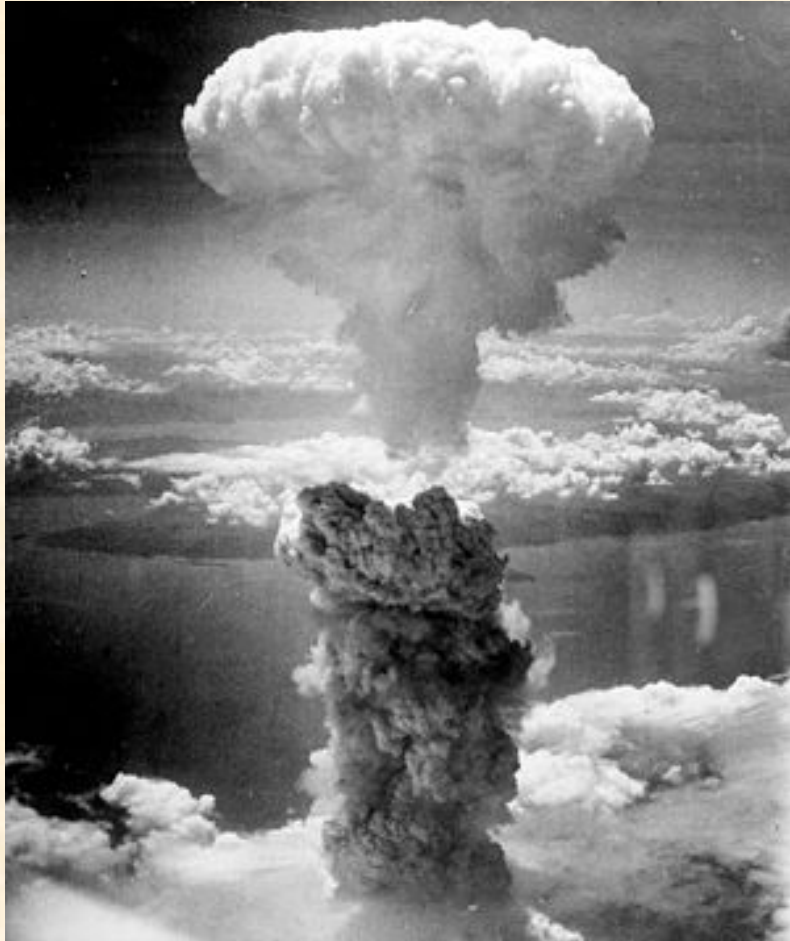


But...



- History itself must always be *interpreted*
- Historians assign order and coherence to events and determine their significance
- We have no access to the past that is *unmediated*; we have no access to a past reality that is not already a representation

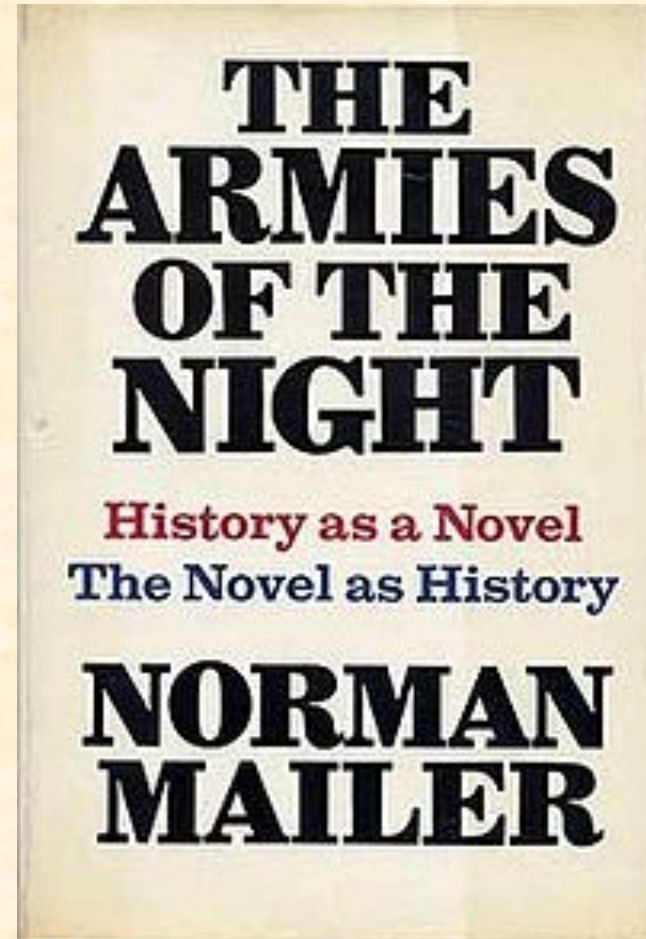
Multiple Interpretations



- No singular “true” or objective description of any historical context
- Instead, many different representations of past events and people
- While historians aren’t free to make up events, they do make choices about the different meanings they assign to factual data
- Use of atomic weapon in Japan: triumph or tragedy?

History and Literature

- Histories are *narrated* from a point of view
- Important events are *chosen* according to certain criteria
- Those events are *explained* in terms that promote particular visions of the past, present, and future
- In fact, both literature and history share a narrative *form*



Should we reject history then?



- So, is all history simply propaganda?
- Do we have to take a relativist position (one account is as good as another, since they're all constructions of the past)?

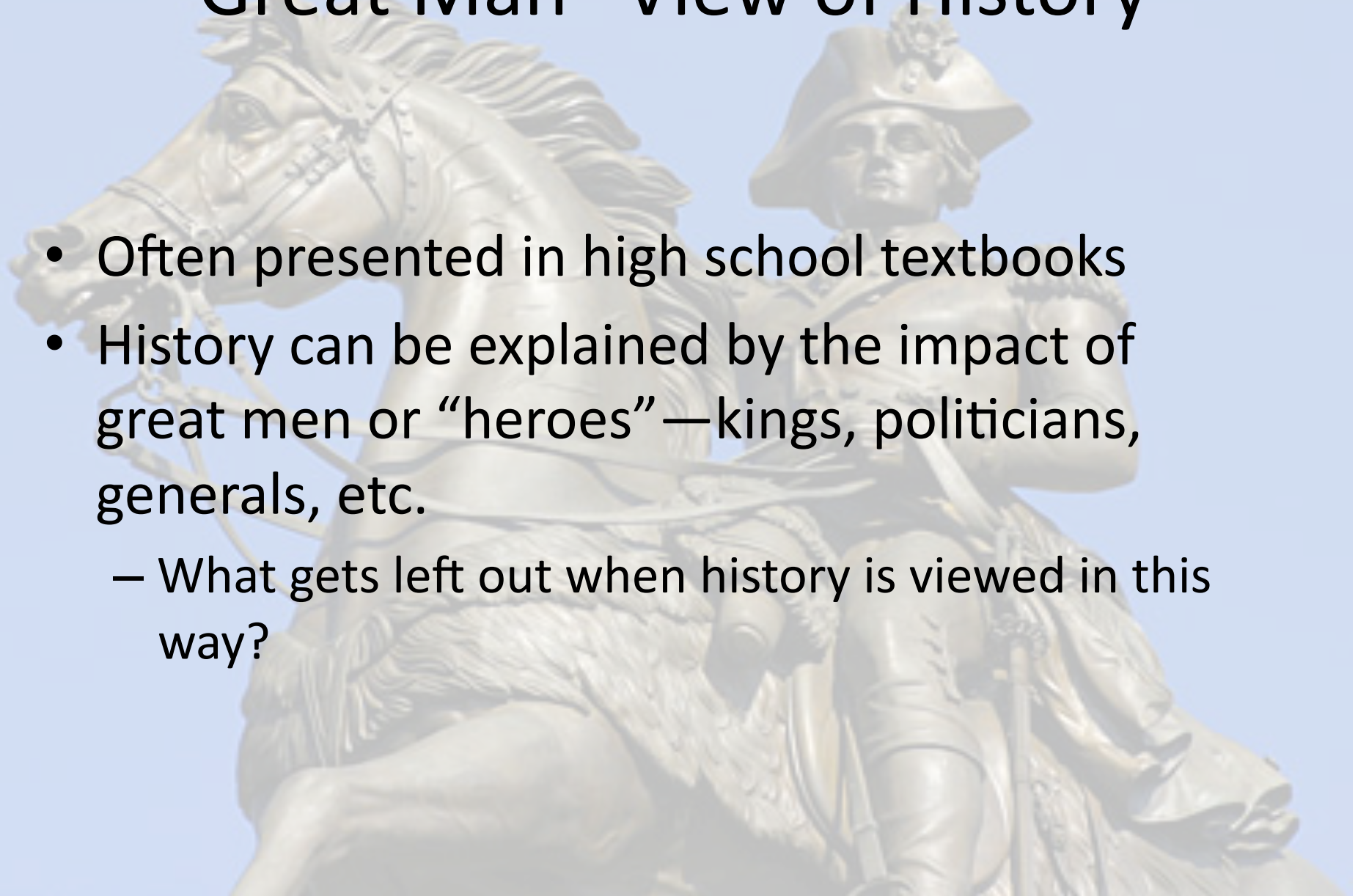


Should we reject history?

- No, but history does need to be subjected to the same scrutiny as other ideological truth claims
- We can still make judgments about history
- Some questions to ask:
 - What are the criteria that determine “significance”? Who determines them?
 - What are the consequences of different selections of past facts?
 - How do different historical narratives of the same event color our understanding of it, and how do these in turn shape our actions, or the collective action of communities, militaries, governments, and nations?

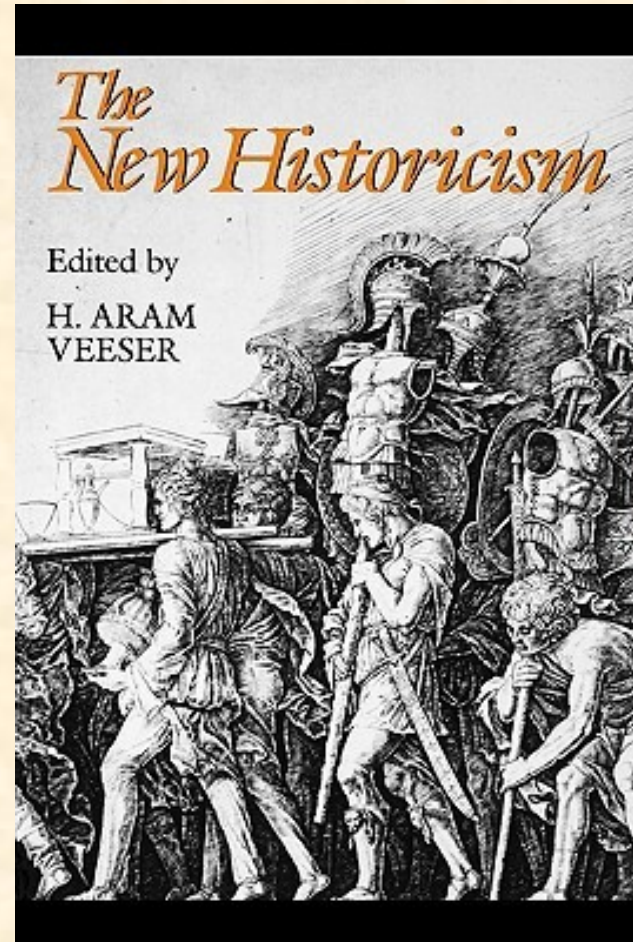
“Great Man” View of History

- Often presented in high school textbooks
- History can be explained by the impact of great men or “heroes” —kings, politicians, generals, etc.
 - What gets left out when history is viewed in this way?



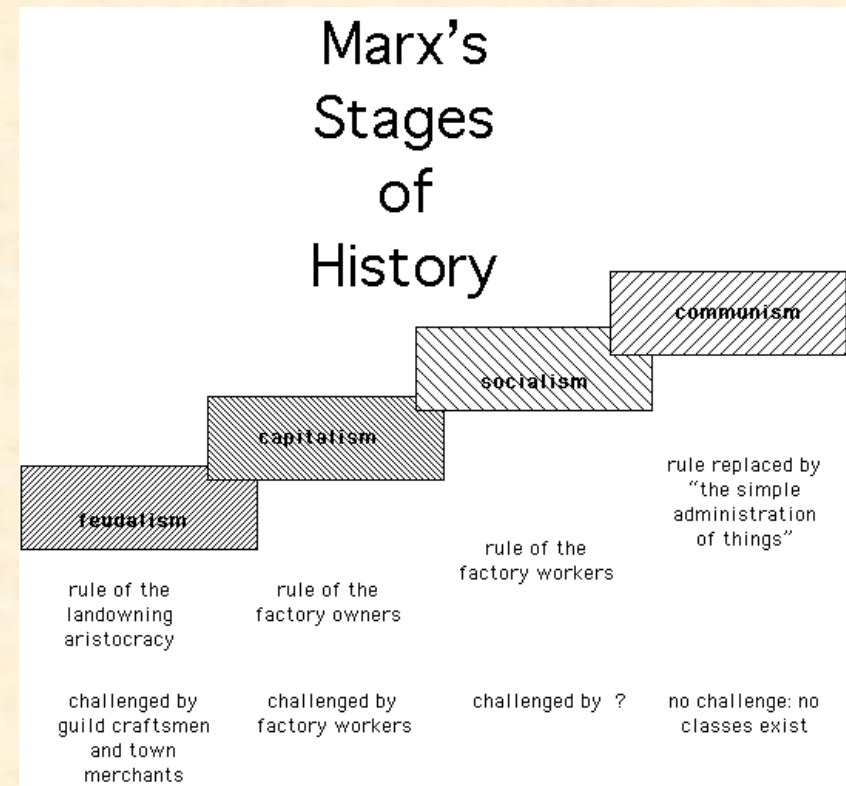
New Historicism

- Starts with the assumption that history is a story a culture tells itself about its past, rather than a set of provable facts
- Takes as its object of study any cultural “text,” broadly defined, including written documents, rituals, performances, speeches, advertisements, and any form of cultural practice that makes meaning within the culture

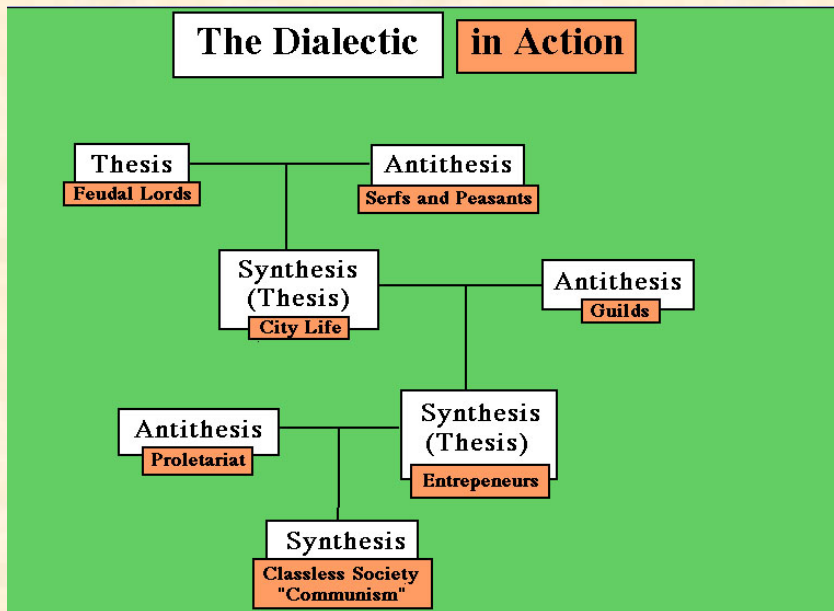


Marxist History

- Marxism views history through the lens of *economics*
- A society defined by its *modes of production*
- Stages of history: Primitive communism-slavery-feudalism-capitalism-socialism



Dialectical Materialism



- Each stage contains its own internal contradictions
- Thesis+Antithesis = Synthesis
- In capitalist stage:
 - Thesis = owners who control the means of production
 - Antithesis = proletariat whose labor produces the wealth of the capitalists
 - Synthesis = socialism; a classless society; the end of history

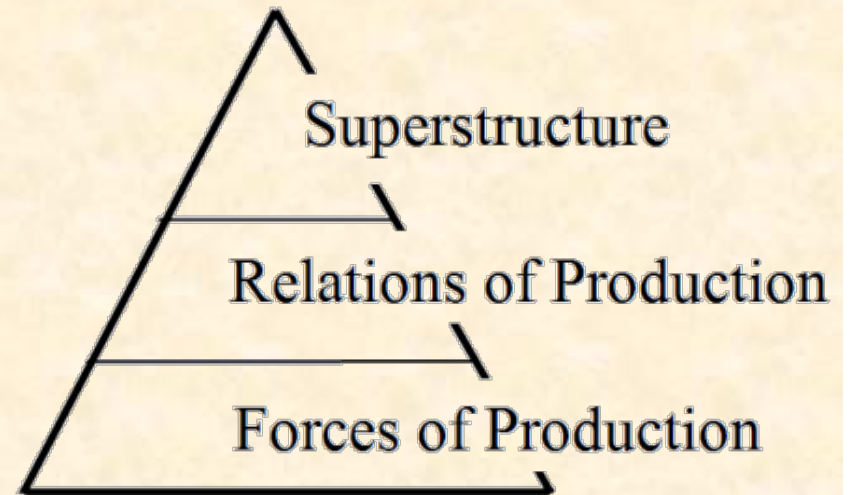
Alienation



- In capitalism, workers are alienated from their labor
- In turn, they become alienated from themselves (commodities)

Superstructure

- The economic base of a society generates other social formations called the *superstructure*
- Includes politics, religion, philosophy, morality, art, and science (which are all shaped by the economic base)
- These ideologies, in Marxist thought, work to justify the economic base
- Ideologies present in capitalism (including those expressed through literature) will explain, justify, and support the capitalism system



Marxist Literary Criticism

- Marxist critics see a literary work not as an aesthetic object to be experienced for its own intrinsic worth, but as a product of the socioeconomic aspects of a particular culture
- Later Marxists recognize that not only does the base shape the superstructure, but that the superstructure can also affect the base
- Thus, literature not only reflects dominant ideologies, but can challenge those ideologies as well.

Some Questions a Marxist Critic May Ask About a Text (from Ann Dobie)

Economic Forces

- Who are the powerful people in the society depicted in the text?
- Who are the powerless people?
- Are the two groups depicted with equal attention?
- Which group are you encouraged to admire?
- Which do you have sympathy for?
- Why do the powerful people have their power?
- Why is this power denied to others?
- From what is the power in the narrative derived? Is it based on money, for instance? A result of violence?

Class Conflict

- How many different social classes do the characters represent?
- Where do they struggle with each other?
- Do you find repression and manipulation of workers by owners?
- Is there evidence of alienation and fragmentation?
- Does the bourgeoisie in the text repress and manipulate less powerful groups? If so, what are the tools they use?
- Do the working class characters realize their lack of power?
- Does the work of literature advocate reform or revolution, either overtly or obliquely?

Some Questions About Context

- What are the values of the author's time and place? Where are they reflected in the text?
- What biographical elements of the author's life can account for his or her ideology? For example, to what social class did the author's family belong? Where is that evident in the text?
- What are the socioeconomic conditions of the writer's culture? Where are they reflected in the text?
- Who read the work when it was first published? How was it initially received? Was it widely read? Banned? Favorably or unfavorably reviewed?
- What were the circumstances of its publication? Was it quickly accepted, widely distributed, highly promoted? Or was it published with difficulty? Was it given a limited distribution?

What might a Marxist
reading of *Frankenstein* look at?

