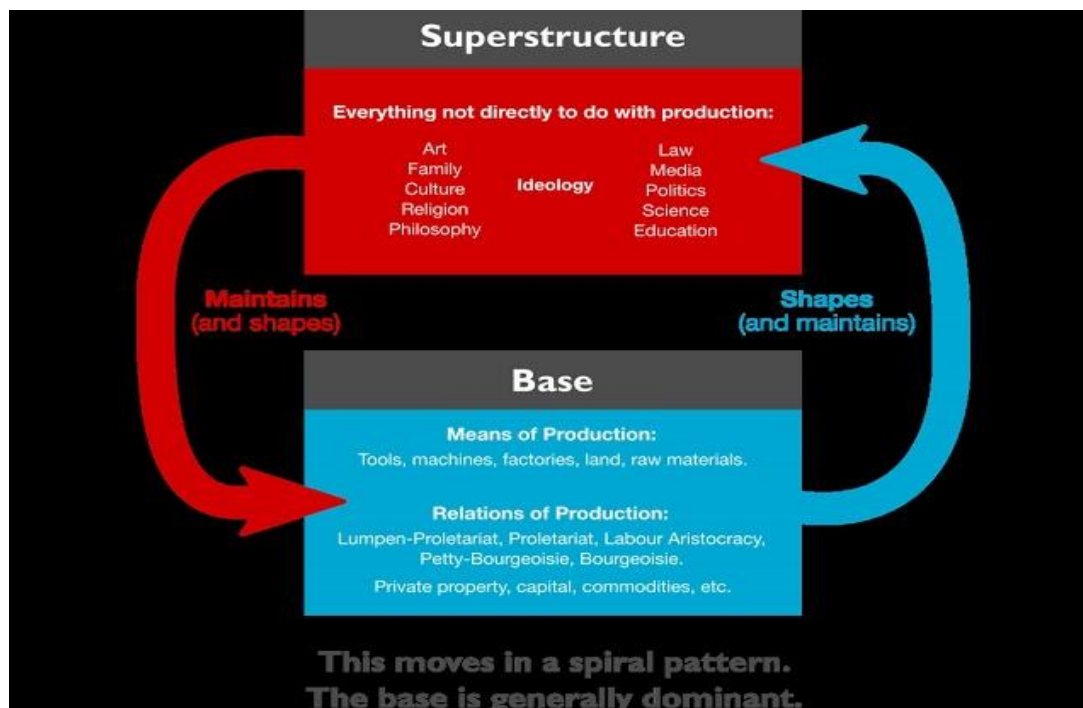


Base and Superstructure Theory

Dr Rana Indrajit Singh
 Associate Professor
 I.S.S.S.S. Government Degree College,
 Pachwas Basti



I. INTRODUCTION

Base and superstructure are two linked theoretical concepts developed by Karl Marx, one of sociology's founders. Base refers to the production forces, or the materials and resources, that generate the goods society needs. Superstructure describes all other aspects of society.

Marxian theory of history largely speaks about how the economy offers a foundation to social life. He considers that economy is defined by modes of productions. Modes of productions are characterized by factors of production that include land, industry, technology, labour, and capital. The factors of production necessarily define production relations. Therefore, Marx considers that production relation is an economic relation that offers a foundation to human society.

Production relationship offers a foundation to human history because the conditions present in the economic base will impact the conditions present in the superstructure of society where politics, religion, education, law, and culture are placed. Therefore, Karl Marx advocates that the economic base is a foundation for social life. The superstructural institutions will always respond, cater and gratify the needs of the class that dominates in the economic base will be influencing the super-structure and resulting in social change. His theory of historical materialism is grounded on his base and super-structure analysis.

In several books, Marx and Engels have elaborately dealt with the matter. Marx's Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy contains an exhaustive analysis of the concept of Base and Superstructure.

Stalin's version is that "the basis is the economic structure of society at the given stage of development. Historical materialism states that there are various stages of social development and each stage has its own economic structure." This is called basis.

In the Anti-Duhring Engels says "The economic structure of society is always the real basis, starting from which we can alone work out the ultimate explanation of the whole superstructure or juridical and political institutions as well as of the religious, philosophical and other ideas of a given historical period."

The basis according to Marxism is the totality of the relations of production, that is, the relations of property exchange and distribution. These are included in the basis because all these constitute the economic structure. It is nevertheless connected with the dominating mode of production. Only the dominant mode of

production determines the character and essence of the basis. In Marx's famous writing *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, he says "In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely, relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness."

SOME FEATURES OF BASIS AND SUPERSTRUCTURE:

- Marx argued that the superstructure grows out of the base and reflects the ruling class' interests. As such, the superstructure justifies how the base operates and defends the power of the elite.
- Neither the base nor the superstructure is naturally occurring or static. They are both social creations or the accumulation of constantly evolving social interactions between people.
- The economic structure is not conceived as a given set of institutions, productive units, or material conditions, it is rather the sum total of production relations entered into by men, or, in other words, class relations between them Marx says – "it is always the direct relation of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producer."
- The most important feature of the economic basis is that its existence is represented by material relations. That is, the economic basis is the result of material relations. On the other hand, the superstructure is not based on material relations. The elements of superstructure are ideology, culture, art, literature, history, etc.
- The base or basis has a general character. All the members of the society in one way or other are connected with the basis. The source of sustenance of the superstructure is the basis. This is due to the fact that the basis is economic and no one, small or big, is away from the economic influence of the basis. Thus, all are participants in the activities of the basis. It is true that there is anomaly and inequality in the distribution of material benefits produced by the economic basis. But this is a different issue. The mere fact is that the economic basis is all-embracing.
- One of the most important features of the basis is it has a class character in an antagonistic society. The totality of the production relations is based on private ownership of the means of production. So the capitalists or the owners of the means of production are the controlling elements of the economic base. In an antagonistic society, the basis is bound to be controlled by the bourgeoisie.
- A. P. Sheptulin has pointed out another aspect of basis. He says "the basis represents a kind of intermediate link between productive forces and superstructure. Neither the productive forces nor changes in them have a direct influence on the superstructure or political, juridical, and other social ideas and corresponding institutions. This influence is indirect, through the basis."

INTERACTION OF BASE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE

In the Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* Marx writes "The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."

This observation of Marx clarifies the relationship between base and superstructure or the interaction between the two. The interaction between base and superstructure implies that one influences the other. It is said that the base has a dominant and determining role. On the other hand, in some cases, the superstructure exerts its influence upon the base.

Whatever the nature of the basis, such will be the nature and hallmarks of the superstructure. If one basis is replaced by another, the old superstructure will be replaced more or less rapidly by a new superstructure. Generally, the superstructure is the reflection of the basis.

In the feudal society the basis was feudal, that is, the production relations were feudal. The superstructure was also feudal. When the feudal basis was replaced by a capitalist basis the feudal superstructure also lost its relevance and, hence, was replaced by a capitalist superstructure.

Analyzing the interaction between base and superstructure Engels writes "political, juridical, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic, etc. development is based on economic development. But all these react upon one another and also upon the economic basis. It is not that the economic situation is the cause, solely active, while everything else is only a passive effect. There is rather an interaction on the basis of economic necessity, which ultimately always asserts itself." The relationship between basis and superstructure is never one-way traffic.

In a class society, the superstructure has a class character and becomes a battleground for a fierce class struggle reflecting the opposite interests that are determined and consolidated by the antagonistic basis. The struggle at the superstructure level is the struggle between ideas and ideologies. The capitalists utilize the various modes of expression for the propagation of ideas and ideologies. Particularly the audio-visual methods

are under their control. The proletarians use their own methods. But they are in an inferior position. However, that does not discourage them.

ROLE OF SUPERSTRUCTURE

Though the change of the economic foundation immensely transforms the super-structure, it is wrong to assume that the superstructure is a passive and completely dependent force. It is an active force.

As far as the development of society is concerned we witness an active and sometimes independent role of the superstructure.

The bourgeois superstructure, by utilizing the various propaganda machines, severely criticizes the various aspects of socialism in order to resist the downfall of the capitalist system. But all the elements of the bourgeois superstructure are not under the control of the bourgeoisie. The working class also utilizes a part, though it might be a microscopic fraction, of the vast superstructure for the propagation of the socialist ideology, for the exposition of bourgeois exploitation and finally to make working men conscious. Part of the literature, history, and law is used by the proletarians. The literature of every country and of every epoch exposes the real character of the bourgeoisie.

It has been argued by Marxists that superstructure, though dependent on the basis, has its own laws of development and operation. Moreover, several of its elements interact and influence each other. All the changes in the superstructure are not due to the changes in the economic basis of society. Many changes in the superstructure are caused by the class struggle.

There are a number of contradictions on the basis which are created by private capitalist property in the means of production. These contradictions "In effect split the political and ideological superstructure into two antagonistic parts the ruling and the non-ruling". The ruling parts consist of the bourgeois state, bourgeois party, bourgeois law and bourgeois theoreticians, and the proletarian parties, proletarian organizations and Marxist-Leninist ideologies are the non-ruling parts.

REFERENCES

- [1]. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3070-raymond-williams-base-and-superstructure-in-marxist-cultural-theory>
- [2]. <https://academic.oup.com/book/25371/chapter-abstract/192453185?redirectedFrom=full-text>
- [3]. <https://philpapers.org/rec/MARBAS-7>
- [4]. Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory
- [5]. *by Raymond Williams*