

Lecture Notes on Karl Marx

Young Hegelians: A group of radical, humanist philosophers who played an important role in Marx's intellectual development. They viewed human society as progressing through a process of dialectical change. Human intelligence and reason are seen as the creative force in history. Society can be changed by criticizing and transforming ways of thought.

Young Hegelian (Feuerbach's) critique of religion: Religious ideas are a product of human reason and moral understanding. With the institutionalization of religion, these ideas become separated from their human roots and projected onto alien objects (gods, demons, divine laws), which are viewed as the all-powerful creators and rulers of human beings rather than being recognized as merely the products of the human imagination. Humans thus become subordinate to their own intellectual creations. The liberation of thought from religious alienation is essential to the advance of human freedom.

Marx's views on religion: Marx originally embraced the views of the Young Hegelian philosophers who saw religion as a false and alienating form of consciousness and believed the overthrow of religion would make people more free. Later Marx came to believe that the Young Hegelians exaggerated the causal importance of religion; he believed that oppression was rooted in material relations, rather than ideas, and that religion was more a symptom than a cause of oppression. This is what Marx means when he says that "Religion is the opiate of the masses."

Marx's concept of human nature: Unlike other animals that adapt themselves to a given environment, humans, through their labor, shape and change their own material environment, thereby transforming the very nature of human existence in the process.

Marx's concept of alienation: Workers in capitalist society do not produce freely as an expression of their true human potential and aspirations but under coercive conditions that dictate what and how they must produce.

Four aspects of alienation:

- Alienation from product of labor: The product of labor becomes an alien object that workers do not control and that comes to rule over them.
- Alienation from process of labor: In the process of labor, humans must suppress their unique human qualities as potentially free producers and subordinate themselves to external control. Labor becomes merely a means to an end, rather than a means of self-development and an end in itself.
- Alienation from other workers: workers relate to others workers not as full human beings but as means to an end and as competitors for their jobs

- Alienation from human "species being": workers suppress their unique human capacities for self-expression through creative labor, i.e., they suppress what distinguishes them as a species from other animals.

C. Wright Mill's summary of alienation in his book *White Collar*:

- No intrinsic motivation to work (work motivated by extrinsic reward).
- No feeling of satisfaction in the finished product.
- No control over own work activity; little participation in decision-making.
- Work not a means to self-development.
- Work not integral to life (only a means to life outside of work); separation of work and leisure.

Marx's concept of the mode of production: Every historically specific mode of production (economic system) consists of a combination of "forces" of production and "relations" of production. The forces of production are the technical capacities employed in production (machines, raw materials, energy, knowledge, human labor power). The relations of production are the social relations between persons in production (property and authority relations). Marx argues that the relations of production are ordinarily well suited to the utilization of the prevailing forces of production. But the forces of production tend to grow and advance until eventually they no longer match with the existing relations of production, resulting in a period of economic crisis and pressures for social change.

Marx's concepts of "base" and "superstructure": Base refers to the mode of production, the economic forces and relations of production. Superstructure refers to the political, cultural, and intellectual institutions of society and the forms of social consciousness associated with these. Marx argues that the superstructure of society is ultimately determined by the economic base. Marxist analysis of superstructural institutions like the state or education commonly examine the functions that they serve with respect to reproducing capitalism and protecting the interests of the economic ruling class.

Marx's concept of the state in capitalist society: The state functions to stabilize capitalism and to defend the interests of the capitalist class. For example, the state provides:

- police protection for private property
- suppression of dissent and obstacles to worker self-organization
- promotion of pro-capitalist ideologies
- training of the workforce at public expense
- subsidies for profitable capital investment
- efforts to stabilize economic downturns
- use of the military to dominate foreign markets
- buying off discontent through social welfare programs

Marxist view of education in capitalist society: Like other superstructural institutions, education functions to stabilize or reproduce capitalist relations of production and the privilege of the capitalist class.

- Socialization for alienating conditions of labor in the capitalist workplace.
- Sorting and selecting students into jobs within the hierarchical division of labor.
- Legitimation of capitalist social relations through both the form (appearance of meritocracy) and content (curriculum) of schooling.
- Repression of critical thinking and radical ideas.

Marx's concept of ideology: Ideology is a form of belief or consciousness that mystifies the nature of social relations, promotes acceptance of the status quo, and prevents people from recognizing or understanding the causes of their oppression. Dominant beliefs and ideas of any historical period tend to serve the interest of the dominant class because those who own the means of material production also tend to own or control the means of intellectual production (the press, mass media, educational system, religious institutions, etc.).

Forms of ideological consciousness:

- Ideologies hide or deny inequality and oppression, claiming that what's good for rulers is good for everybody (e.g., "what's good for General Motors is good for America").
- Ideologies morally justify oppression (e.g., "poor people deserve to be poor because they're stupid or lazy").
- Ideologies define oppression as inevitable (e.g., "there will always some on top and some on bottom; it's human nature").
- Ideologies offer false or symbolic solutions (e.g., "put your trust in religion and everything will be okay").

"Commodity fetishism" as a form of ideological consciousness: Not all ideologies are the result of ruling class efforts to manipulate consciousness. Some emerge spontaneously from the opaque and alienating relations of capitalism. Commodity fetishism is such an ideology in which the social relations among producers are not transparent but hidden behind the relations among things (commodities). The value of commodities thus appears as an objective property of the thing, not an expression of human labor. Human beings appear (and are in a certain sense) subordinate to things (commodities). Human agency is thus obscured and capitalist relations take on an appearance of naturalness and inevitability, rooted in the very nature of things.

Defining features of capitalist mode of production (as compared with feudalism):

- Private ownership of large-scale means of production (feudal lords did not own the land nor could they sell it; serfs had the right to occupy and use the land and, in return, owed material obligations to the lord)
- Wage labor (feudal lords did not hire serfs for a wage; they received an unpaid share of the serf's labor or product in exchange for military protection and access to the land)
- The transformation of almost everything into a commodity bought and sold on the market (in feudal society there was a limited market in commodities and serfs produced for their own subsistence needs)
- A complex, hierarchical division of labor (among serfs there was little specialization of tasks and little supervision by the lord)

Marx's labor theory of value: The labor theory of value argues that the values at which commodities exchange in the market is determined by the relative amounts of socially necessary labor that went into producing them.

Marx's theory of surplus value: Marx argues that surplus (profit) is accumulated by capitalists through the mechanism of paying workers less in their wages than the value of the product that they produce during the entire working day. Marx refers to the part of the working day that goes toward creating the value that workers receive in wages as "necessary labor" and any additional hours that workers work beyond that as "surplus labor." Capitalists seek to increase the rate of surplus value by increasing the length of the work day, increasing the pace of work, mechanizing production to enable workers to produce more output in the same amount of time, and substituting labor that has a lower cost of reproduction and therefore a lower wage.

The reserve army of labor: A crucial mechanism that allows capitalists to keep wages low and profits high is the "reserve army" of unemployed or underemployed workers competing for jobs. If unemployment drops too low, workers are better able to improve their wages and working conditions, thereby cutting into capitalists' profits. The reserve army must be continually replenished through the importation of foreign workers, the displacement of workers by machinery, and economic downturns that result in layoffs of workers, thereby reestablishing conditions for renewed profitability.

Developmental tendencies of capitalism:

- the unceasing drive to expand the market, both externally and internally
- capitalist efforts to intensify the exploitation of labor
- mechanization of production
- the expansion and contraction of the "reserve army of labor"
- concentration and centralization of capital in large-scale enterprises
- periodic economic crises

Sources of economic crisis in capitalist society: Marx identified a number of potential causes of economic crises in capitalist society, rendering capitalism an inherently unstable system.

- The "anarchy of capitalist production," which often leads to a mismatch between supply and demand. Excess supply in any sector can lead to cutbacks which spread through other sectors of the economy.
- A squeeze on profits, for example when the reserve army is reduced and workers are able to improve their wages and working conditions.
- Underconsumption or the inability to find buyers for the growing output of production. This is a persistent tendency in capitalist society because of the fact that workers (the vast majority of society) are paid wages less than the value of their product. Other buyers must be found for surplus product (the state, foreign markets, etc.).
- A declining rate of profit. Marx argues that there is a long-term tendency toward a decline in the rate of profit as a result of what he calls the increasing "organic composition of capital." Essentially, this means that the rate of profit will become increasingly difficult to maintain as an increasing share of capitalist investment goes into means of production and a declining share goes into living labor power, the ultimate source of economic surplus.

Marx's concepts of class and class struggle: The conflict between classes is the driving force of history, responsible for epochal changes in the major structures of society. There are two main classes in every society: the laboring class and the property owning class. In capitalism, Marx refers to these as the "proletariat" and the "bourgeoisie." The proletariat owns no means of production and must sell its labor to the bourgeoisie for a wage. The bourgeoisie owns the means of production and hires the labor-power of proletarians to produce a profit. Marx sees this as a relationship of exploitation in which the bourgeoisie is forced to squeeze profits from its workers and the proletariat seeks to limit this exploitation.

Marx's views on the intensification of class struggle under capitalism. Marx expected the proletariat to become more class conscious and politically organized and ultimately to overthrow capitalism and replace it with socialism. Among the developmental tendencies contributing toward this end are:

- the concentration of capital bringing large numbers of workers together in large plants, facilitating their communication, common consciousness, and organization
- the elimination of small producers (the petty bourgeoisie) as potential allies of the bourgeoisie and a corresponding growth of the proletariat to become the largest class
- the constant need for workers to organize defensively to protect themselves from efforts by capitalists to intensify their exploitation
- periodic economic crisis that intensify the hardship of workers and make the capitalist system vulnerable to political challenge.

Socialism as the goal of working-class revolution.

- Abolition of private ownership of large-scale means of production.
- Economic planning; production for use rather than for private profit.
- Economic democracy; greater public participation in economic decisions.
- Overcoming or reducing worker alienation and a rigid hierarchical division of labor.
- The expansion of leisure and opportunities for personal and cultural development.

Explaining the failure of proletarian revolution.

- False consciousness; capitalist ideological and cultural domination.
- Economic gains by parts of the working class; consumerism; reformism.
- Growth of a new (salaried) middle class as allies of the bourgeoisie.
- Capitalist manipulation of racial, ethnic, national, and gender divisions among workers.
- Effectiveness of the state in repressing or co-opting dissent and stabilizing the economy.

Marx's legacy in sociology. Marx's way of theorizing social life suggests the following general guidelines for research:

- First, seek to understand the material relations of society (property, technology, labor).
- Study non-material institutions (state, culture, ideology) in terms of how they are shaped by and serve to maintain material institutions.
- Examine relations of exploitation, the forms of domination that these require, and the forms of struggle that result.
- Examine the importance of class situation with respect to lived experience, behavior, motivation, and social change.
- Identify the relatively enduring structures -- economic political, and cultural -- through which the activities of individuals in society are channeled.
- Recognize the historically specific nature of these structures, their potential contradictions, and susceptibility to change.