

Brief Answers to First Mid-Term

All questions are graded on a 10-point scale. Scores on Part A (questions 1-3) are then multiplied by 3.5, since these are worth 35 points each and those on Part B are multiplied by 1.5, since they are worth 15 points each. Below is a summary of the key points that we looked for in deciding your grade. By comparing your exam with the answers below you should be able to see what you may have left out or gotten wrong. Please speak with the TA if you have questions about your exam. Changes of grade are highly unlikely, but going over your exam could be useful in preparing for the next exam. If you wish to make an appointment with the TA, his email address is on the course web page and the syllabus.

1. (a = 2 points) According to Marx, what is the most important feature that distinguishes human nature from that of other animal species? Unlike other animals that adapt themselves to a given environment, humans, through their labor, shape their own material environment, thereby transforming the very nature of human existence in the process.

(b = 1 point) What does Marx mean when he says that workers are alienated from their authentic human nature under the conditions of capitalism? 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.

(c = 2 points) Explain Marx's claim that workers are alienated from the product of their labor. The product of labor becomes an alien object that does not belong to them (but to the capitalist) and that comes to rule over them.

(d = 2 points) and from the process of their 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.

(e = 3 points) Show that you can apply Marx's concept of alienation by choosing two specific white-collar jobs and comparing them in terms of the similarities and differences in the manner and extent to which each of them is (or is not) alienating in Marx's sense of the term. Judgments may vary in terms of which of the two jobs is more alienating and why. Comparisons might focus on self-employment versus working for others; degree of control over the work process; whether the work is intrinsically interesting or motivated only by a paycheck; whether the work serves as a means of self-development; whether the worker has a sense of pride in the finished product; the extent of creativity allowed on the job; etc.

2. (a = 2 points) What importance does the concept of "mode of production" have in Marx's theory of society? The mode of production refers to the economic practices and relations that distinguish one type of society from another. Marx views economic relations as the most important in determining the overall pattern of social life. History is seen as a succession of different modes of production (slave, feudal, capitalist, etc.).

(b = 2 points) Explain the distinction Marx makes between "forces of production" and "relations of production." The forces of production are the productive tools, skills, resources, and technologies used in production. The relations of production are the social relations among people within the production process. The most important relations of production are the property relations that specify how the ruling class extracts economic surplus from the laboring class.

(c = 2 points) Discuss two important ways in which the relations of production under capitalism differ from those in earlier modes of production. Possibilities include: (i) private ownership of most large-scale means of production; (ii) the predominance of wage labor; (iii) the transformation of almost everything into a commodity exchanged on the market; (iv) a complex, hierarchical division of labor under which workers are supervised.

(d = 2 points) Explain what Marx means by the concepts of "base" and "superstructure" and give three examples of social institutions or practices that Marx includes in the superstructure. Base refers to the mode of production by which the society satisfies its material needs. Superstructure refers to the political, cultural, and intellectual institutions of society and the forms of social consciousness associated with them. Examples of superstructure institutions include the state, legal system, religion, schooling, mass media, sports, and others.

(e = 2 points) How does Marx understand the causal relationship between the base and the superstructure? The causal relationship is basically one in which the economic base determines the superstructure such that the latter institutions are compatible with and help to maintain or reproduce the dominant economic institutions.

3. (a = 2 points) Define the two main classes that Marx sees as central to the capitalist mode of production (the proletariat and bourgeoisie). The proletariat owns no means of production and is forced to 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.

(b = 2 points) Explain how and why Marx conceptualizes the relationship between them as one of exploitation. Marx interprets this as a relationship of surplus extraction in which the bourgeoisie appropriates unpaid labor from the proletariat in the form of profits.

(c = 2 points) Give two examples of strategies by which Marx believes the bourgeoisie has tried to increase the rate of exploitation. Possibilities include: (i) increasing the length of the work day; (ii) speeding up the pace of work; (iii) mechanizing production; (iv) substituting cheaper labor.

(d = 2 points) Give two examples of the kinds of strategies that the proletariat has used to try and limit its exploitation by the bourgeoisie. Possibilities include (i) organizing trade unions; (ii) organizing socialist or labor political parties; (iii) pressing for laws prohibiting child labor, limiting the length of the working day/week, establishing a minimum wage, providing unemployment insurance, welfare assistance, etc.; (iv) mobilizing to overthrow the capitalist system.

(e = 2 points) What does Marx mean by the “reserve army of labor” and how do changes in the reserve army of labor affect the balance of power between capitalists and workers? The reserve army refers to the pool of unemployed or underemployed workers whose desperate need for jobs has a dampening effect on wages and forces employed workers to make concessions to keep their jobs. The expansion of the reserve army increases the competition for jobs and weakens the bargaining position of workers, whereas the contraction of the reserve army improves the bargaining position of workers and often forces concessions on the part of capitalists.

4. (a = 5 points) Explain what Marx means by the concept of “ideology” and give one example. Ideology is a belief or form of consciousness that mystifies social relations, promotes acceptance of the status quo, and prevents people from understanding or addressing the causes of their oppression. Examples would include any belief that tends to (i) deny exploitation or oppression, (ii) offers moral justification for social inequities, (iii) denies the possibility of change to address those inequities; or (iv) offers false or symbolic solutions to social problems.

(b = 5 points) Why, according to Marx, do the dominant beliefs of society tend to favor the interests of the ruling 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.) through which those dominant beliefs are created and disseminated.

5. (a = 4 points) How does Marx understand the basic function of the state in capitalist society? The state functions in the interests of the ruling (capitalist) class, and to stabilize or defend capitalist relations of production.

(b = 6 points) Give three examples of state activities that illustrate Marx’s theory about the types of functions the state performs in a capitalist society. Possibilities include: (i) a legal system that protects capitalists’ property rights; (ii) using police to suppress worker dissent or laws to block unionization; (iii) promoting pro-capitalist ideologies like nationalism, free enterprise, etc.; (iv) training workers at public expense; (v) providing subsidies and tax breaks to increase corporate profits; (vi) using fiscal and monetary policy to stabilize economic downturns; (vii) using the military to dominate foreign markets and secure vital resources like oil; (viii) as a last resort, buying off worker discontent with minor concessions (jobs or welfare programs) that capitalists themselves might oppose.

6. (a = 6 points) What does Marx mean by underconsumption (overproduction) as a force that contributes to periodic economic crises in capitalism, and what does he see as the root cause of underconsumption? Underconsumption refers to capitalism’s tendency to produce more output of goods and services than buyers can be found to purchase. Underconsumption is rooted in the contradiction between each individual capitalist’s interest in reducing the wages of his/her workers, even though this constrains consumer demand, which is necessary if capitalists as a whole are to realize profits through the sale of their products.

(b = 4 points) Give two examples of things that might serve to mitigate or postpone tendencies toward economic crisis due to underconsumption. Some possibilities: (i) increased state spending (e.g. on infrastructure or war) to absorb excess production; (ii) expanding debt and credit to enable buyers to spend more; (iii) exporting surplus goods to foreign markets; (iv) anything that increases workers’ wages or purchasing power.