

CONTEMPORARY MARXIST THEORY

Week 2. The Origins of Western Marxism

1. Listed below are eight basic points of disagreement between "revisionists" like Eduard Bernstein and the "orthodox" Marxists of the Second International. Choose any one of these points and cite a contemporary theoretical or political issue that illustrates the continuing relevance of the revisionism debate. For the issue cited, present a defense of the revisionist, the orthodox Marxist, or some third position.

ORTHODOX MARXISM

- a. a dialectical conception of change through contradiction
- b. Marxism conceived as a deterministic science demonstrating the inevitability of socialism
- c. systematic theory is necessary in order to see beyond immediate events and appearances
- d. capitalism is tending toward breakdown through a sequence of deepening economic crises
- e. predicts proletarianization of intermediate classes and a tendency toward class polarization
- f. socialism to be constructed only after the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism
- g. parliamentary politics engaged in mainly as a means of furthering extra-parliamentary struggle
- h. the state is an institution of capitalist domination which must be smashed and replaced by proletarian political institutions

REVISIONISM

- a. an organic and evolutionary conception of change
- b. emphasis on the subjective, ethical, voluntarist aspects of the struggle for socialism
- c. an empiricist scepticism toward abstraction, deductive reasoning, and grand theory
- d. capitalism is tending toward increasing stability through greater organization
- e. sees a growing middle class and improvement in the condition of the proletariat
- f. the construction of socialist institutions to begin as enclaves within capitalism
- g. parliamentary politics as the primary tactic; extra-parliamentary struggle only as a means of defending access to parliamentary arena
- h. the state is potentially democratic and an appropriate vehicle for organizing working-class power

2. Explain what Georg Lukacs' means by "reification" and give examples of areas where Lukacs thinks that reification is prevalent. Compare Lukacs' concept of reification with Marx's concept of "commodity fetishism" and Max Weber's concept of "rationalization." How does Lukacs explain the pervasiveness of reification in capitalist society? How might Lukacs' concept of reification be applied in a critical analysis of some aspect of contemporary American society?

3. Explain what Gramsci means by "hegemony." How is hegemony established and how can it be transformed or overturned? What are the implications of Gramsci's analysis of hegemony for the struggle to transform capitalist society? How does Gramsci's concept of hegemony point to an alternative (non-orthodox) reading of some central tenets of Marxist theory?

4. The desire to understand the absence or failure of proletarian revolution in Western Europe in the early 20th century was the driving question for the development of what came to be called "Western Marxism." What answers to this question are suggested in the work of Bernstein, Lukacs, and Gramsci? What are the similarities and differences between their answers? Which do you find more persuasive and why?