

Sociological Theory I

Week 3. Marx: Early Writings and Historical Materialism

1. Summarize Marx's notion of the alienation of labor as found in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Tucker, pp. 66-81). How does Marx's conception of alienation differ from that found in non-Marxist sociology? Is Marx's concept of alienation a purely critical or polemical category, or does it offer guidance for the development of explanatory social theory? Would it be possible (or fruitful) to operationalize Marx's concept of alienation for purposes of empirical research? Explain.

2. Marxism is sometimes criticized as a one-sided "economic determinism" that reduces all social life to economic causes and treats human beings not as true subjects, but as the totally determined products of their material conditions. Judging from Marx's statements in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Tucker, pp. 4-5) and Marx and Engels' statements in the *German Ideology* (Tucker, pp. 154-155), do you think such criticisms are well founded? Compare these texts with Engels' letters on historical materialism written during the 1890s (Tucker, pp. 760-768). Do you think Engels' letters are consistent with the earlier statements? Is he merely clarifying their earlier views or actually modifying them? Do Engels' letters provide a satisfactory defense against the charge of economic determinism?

3. Little (pp. 99-100) says that "If a functional explanation is to be regarded as explanatory, ... it is necessary to have some idea of the causal mechanisms that establish and preserve the functional relationship. ... To explain a phenomenon it is not sufficient to demonstrate that it has consequences that are beneficial for the economy or for the interests of a particular class. Rather it is necessary to provide an account of the micropathways by which the needs of the economy or the interests of a powerful class are imposed on other social phenomena to elicit beneficial consequences." Later, he comments that "Crucially important for the adequacy of materialist explanations is the answer to the question of what mechanisms establish the linkage between the economic structure and the evolution of the various superstructural elements" (p. 122). Critically evaluate Marx's historical materialism and, in particular, his thesis of the dominance of the economic structure over the political and ideological superstructure in terms of these criteria of explanatory adequacy.

4. In the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels write that "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it" (Tucker, p. 172). Citing concrete examples, defend, criticize, or discuss the applicability/limits of this theory of social consciousness.

5. What explanation does Engels give for male domination in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (Tucker, pp. 734-759)? What changes does he see as contributing to equality between the sexes? How realistic of an assessment do you think Engels' ideas provide for contemporary forms of gender inequality and of the strategies that have been proposed to overcome them?