**SOC 3150: Classical Sociological Theory**

**Lecture 1: Marx, Weber, and Durkheim: Why Bother?**

Why are the works of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim (MWD) important?

Four topics to consider:

(1) The development of sociological ideas;

(2) The birth of the ‘modern’

(3) As theorists of modernity; and

(4) Relevance to the contemporary world.

**The Development of Sociological ideas:**

- MWD, despite claims, are not the ‘founding fathers’ of sociology.

-Some sociological ideas can be traced to the ancient Greeks.

- However, the Enlightenment (17th-18th Centuries) set the stage in the works of Descartes, Rousseau, and Kant.

- Enlightenment vision: both the human mind and society were rational and akin to nature - ordered and governed by laws understandable by the application of reason and the scientific method.

- Science/reason could guide humanity toward positive change/social progress over traditional forms of power and authority.

- Society increasingly became the subject of inquiry:

- Montesquieu (sought structure/consistency in human behavior)

- Scottish Moralists (focused on historical study of civil society)

- Saint-Simon (looked at transition from feudal/consumptive society to modern productive one)

- Comte (sought to establish sociology as a positive science)

- All laid the intellectual foundations later built upon by MWD.

**The Birth of the Modern:**

- Such changes in the European intellectual climate reflected vast social, political, and economic changes in the early modern period.

- The French Revolution (1789) and American Revolution (1776) undermined traditional forms of power/authority and emphasized individual over collective rights.

- The Industrial Revolution dramatically increased productive power, spread wage-labour, intensified the division of labour, transformed the rural economy, and accelerated urbanization.

- These vast changes both encouraged theoretical curiosity and caused concern over the passing of the ‘traditional’ ways of life:

e.g. Ferdinand Tonnies:

*Gemeinschaft* (community) vs. *Gesellschaft* (society/association)

- MWD become important here as:

- each helped map out the central concerns/parameters of sociology

- each marked it off form other disciplines asking the same questions (e.g. what are the conditions behind emergence of

modern society? What is the role of the individual in society?)

- we are still dealing with many of the same questions today.

**MWD as Theorists of Modernity:**

- MWD’s enduring influence is their theoretical elaboration of the characteristics of Western industrial capitalist societies resulting from the above changes

- In contrast to the Enlightenment’s faith in reason and progress, they articulated modern society’s dark underside: the human costs of its industrial achievements (e.g. exploitative wage labour, alienation, bureaucracy).

-Marx, a revolutionary, emphasised how the social organization of capitalist society was inherently exploitative and alienating.

- Durkheim questioned how society could still be held together given the increasingly complex division of labour and *anomie* (normlessness) that resulted

- Weber emphasized how rationality led to bureaucratic forms of social organization with often irrational outcomes that undermine Enlightenment ideals.

**MWD and the Contemporary World:**

- Much of what MWD wrote still has great contemporary relevance:

- Marx’s discussions of the exploitative and alienating nature of capitalism remain powerful critiques of society today (e.g. social inequality, low wage offshore workers in developing countries)

- Weber’s discussion of the irrationality of rationality in

bureaucracies resonates with anyone in large, impersonal organizations

- Durkheim’s questions about how society hangs together remain important in societies changing as rapidly as ours.

- MWD help us to understand, in different ways, our relationships to modern society (e.g. do we begin with individual actions or collective constructs, or the tension between them?)

- Modern sociology everywhere shows their influence:

* Weber is seen as the central influence on organizational and interpretive sociology
* Durkheim is viewed as a key influence on functionalism, anthropology, the sociology of crime and religion
* Marx left his mark on a vast range of disciplines, intellectual pursuits, and political activities

- Yet not everything MWD wrote is as topical or relevant today as others. The world has changed, and while sometimes MWD are clearly a good place to start, other times they are at best an inspiration for further work.

- Also, while they dealt with many of the ‘big questions’ and were less constrained by academic specializations as we are today, their work must still be seen as reflective of their time (i.e. they were White, middle-class men, Eurocentric, and gender-blind).

- Thus, while there is much of value in the work of MWD, we must nevertheless keep these caveats in mind.