**SOC 3150: Classical Sociological Theory**  **Lecture 2: Historical Events Influencing the Classical theorists**

Today we will consider in more detail three major historical developments that lie behind the thought of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim:

1. Political changes brought about by the French Revolution;
2. Economic development leading to the growth of modern society/the emergence of capitalism; and
3. The rise of individualism.

Each of these, in their own ways, fragmented social life, segmented social institutions, accelerated social crises, and differentiated peoples and collectivities

**Political Change and the Revolution in France:**

In the 18th century, leading up to the 1780s, the last remnants of the 900 year feudal social order were breaking down. This was a total social/political/legal order with the following characteristics:

* Essentially rural
* Totally agricultural/focused on agricultural production
* With few towns/urban life
* Large tracts of land owned/managed by an aristocracy that used it for economic livelihood
* Estates were largely autonomous, with serfs working the land for a subsistence livelihood

Feudalism involved a complex system of obligations and customary rights linking the serf (peasant) and the lord (estate holder):

1. Economic obligations (corvee rights/lord’s right to compel unpaid labour on estate lands);
2. Subordination to the lord through legal/social distinctions;
3. The system of economic exactions (taxes, dues, and fees imposed on serfs by the lord);
4. A fixed social hierarchy and social distinctions backed up by legal and religious sanctions;

By 1780 France showed signs of economic distress and tenant farmers found it hard to maintain their livelihoods while paying excessive dues and taxes.

Eventually, poor crops, rising prices, and economic mismanagement resulted in a crisis calling for economic and political reform and creating antagonism between peasants and the aristocracy.

1787: revolutionary committee formed and demands made of the Estates General for human rights, equality and liberty.

1789: the revolutionary committee challenged the authority of the King. Estates General summoned, but the clergy shifted its sympathies to the peasants.

Much wrangling ensued, followed by riots and the storming of the Bastille.

1789: the new National Assembly drafted the Declaration of the Rights of Man: defining human rights and setting out demands for reform that resonate even today:

* all humans are born free and equal, with natural rights
* equal political rights
* law as the expression of the common interest
* elimination of the monarchy
* abolition of feudalism, feudal dues, corvee rights, and serfdom
* abolition of the church’s right to tithes
* an end to all feudal social distinctions
* questioning all forms of inequality and subordination
* the emergence of the “citizen” with social/political rights in relation to the state

**Economic Changes and the Development of Capitalism:**

Beginning in England, there was wide-sweeping economic development in the 18th-19th centuries that disrupted and transformed the economic and political structure of society from feudalism to capitalism

By the middle of the 16th century economic changes began to impact the feudal economy in four broad dimensions of change:

1. The gradual enclosure of estate lands, leading to the removal of peasants from their feudal holdings and the purchase/sale of private property;
2. The emergence of town economies which began to replace the rural, agrarian economy and facilitate capitalist/industrial development;
3. The decline in the power of trade guilds to contain capitalist expansion, leading to large-scale capitalist development; and
4. The wide-ranging economic /social effects of capitalist economies and their introduction of a system of exchange

By 1850, the transition from feudalism to capitalism was more or less complete:

* Peasants were transformed into a large class of landless labourers forced to seek a livelihood in the new industrial centres
* The serf had been transformed into the wage-labourer of a capitalist economy

**The Rise of Individualism:**

The above changes fostered reconsideration of the individual’s relation to society

Previous social thought:

- saw the maintenance of society as resting on the preservation of the powers of the church, the monarchy, and the state

- defined individuals merely as members of groups, groups

asserted collective rights over them, and the corresponding legal rights and social obligations defined a person’s place in society; and

- asserted that the rights and purposes of collective bodies

always exceeded the rights and purposes of individuals

Individualism=the process leading to the political, economic, and social separation of individuals from these larger social wholes

Two basic forces were involved in bringing these changes about:

1. The legal rights assigned to individuals after the French Revolution began to dissolve the proprietary powers inherent in corporate bodies;
2. All groups such as estates and guilds were abolished and their powers, rights, and prerogatives assigned as legal entitlements to individuals.

Essentially what had been corporate and collective in nature was suddenly re-centred on the individual

This was not without controversy:

* “Individualism” began to be used to designate themes of egoism and autonomy
* There was fear of the breakdown of social unity and of the dissolution of social order

By 1840 individualism was supported by an economic doctrine and then a political doctrine:

* Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776): promoted the individual pursuit of economic self-interest and private gain, which, he claimed, also benefitted society as a whole
* In turn, the functions of society/the state shrank to the role of protecting private rights of individuals to engage in the pursuit of economic gain

**Conclusion:**

The three developments above underlie many of the themes taken up in MWD’s explanatory perspectives on society in this course - without which they would be more difficult to understand

They also undergird two broad areas of investigation in sociological theory:

1. Its focus on the description of societies, past and present, and their historical development; and
2. The explanations of society and its constituent parts through a focus on values, social facts, and their interaction and development over time.