**SOC 3150: Classical Sociological Theory**

**Lecture 3: Karl Marx Introduction:**

**Theory of Political economy and Alienation**

Background:

* Karl Marx born 1818 in Trier, Germany. His father was a lawyer and his family came from a long line of Rabbis. However, his father had embraced the Enlightenment
* He grew up in a bourgeois household where, despite his father’s subservience to government authority, his intellectual nature had a strong influence on the young Marx, as did his neighbour Ludwig von Westphalen.
* At 17, Marx registered at the faculty of law at the University of Bonn, later transferring to Berlin. While there, he became involved with a group of radical intellectual youth steeped in the thought of Hegel.
* He also became involved in early socialist circles, becoming a writer, and soon, editor of a radical newspaper that often criticized social conditions. He developed a reputation as a leading radical publicist
* He married his wife, Jenny von Westphalen, in 1843, a few months later moving to Paris.
* From 1843-1845 Marx lived in Paris, the center of social, political, and artistic activity and gathering place of radicals and revolutionaries from all over Europe.
* While there, he studied reformist and socialist theories unavailable in Germany (e.g. Proudhon), the British political economists (e.g. Smith, Ricardo), and met key radicals in person (e.g. Bakunin).
* Most importantly, it was at this time his friendship with Friedrich Engels began.
* Marx completed his conversion to socialism in the heady atmosphere of Paris, and began the steady stream of writing that defined his career as both a radical and a sociological theorist.

**The 1844 Paris Manuscripts:**

In the 1844 Manuscripts, Marx begins to flesh out two main areas:

1. His critique of the writings of the political economists; and
2. His theory of alienation

**Critique of Political Economy:**

Marx makes two main criticisms of the writings of the political economists:

1. Their assumption that the conditions of production characteristic of capitalism can be seen in all forms of economy (i.e. it is really the result of an historical process);
2. Their assumption that economic relations can be treated abstractly, independent of the mediating actions of human beings (i.e. every economic phenomenon is always simultaneously a social one).

Marx felt that it was because of these misconceptions that the political economists were able to obscure what was key to the capitalist mode of production: that it was founded on an antagonistic class division between the working class (proletariat) and the capitalist class (bourgeoisie).

**Alienation:**

Marx’s idea of alienation is premised on the idea that the more advanced capitalism becomes, the more impoverished workers become (i.e. they become ever cheaper commodities themselves)

The devaluation of the human world increases in direct relation with the increase in value of the world of things. The process of production and objectification becomes a loss and servitude to the object.

The alienation of the worker is founded upon the disparity between the increasing productive power of labour and the lack of control which the worker is able to exert over the objects he produces: what is embodied in the product of his labour is no longer his own.

This alienation of the worker from his product takes several forms:

1. The worker lacks control over the disposal of his products, since what he produces is appropriated by others, so that he does not benefit from it;
2. The worker is alienated in the task of work itself: it becomes a means to an end rather than an intrinsically satisfying end in itself;
3. Social ramifications: human relationships become reduced to operations of the market;
4. The reduction of human productive capacity to the level of adaptation to, rather than active mastery of nature. It alienates humans from their ‘species-being,” from the social ties which alone confer their ‘humanity’ on them (e.g. reduces them to the level of animals, insulates them from the finer things humans are capable of in society and culture).

All of these aspects of alienation are asymmetrical, focused throughout the class structure, but experienced in concentrated fashion by the working class.

**Final Thoughts:**

The 1844 Manuscripts are very much a set of preliminary notes instead of a finished work, but show the seeds of his future work.

Marx’s ideas about alienation suggest that, while capitalism has unleashed great productive possibilities for humankind that would be impossible under other form of social organization, its organization leads to the failure to realize these for most of the population.

At bottom, Marx sees a tension between the great, creative potential generated by a specific form of society (capitalism) and the frustrated realization of that potential.