**SOC 3150: Classical Sociological Theory**

**Lecture 4: Karl Marx: Introduction to Historical Materialism**

Today we introduce Marx’s ideas about historical materialism, as developed in *The German Ideology* (1846).

Criticism of German idealism: Marx was critical of German idealistic philosophy because:

* he felt that the answer to social inequality/ human hardship lay not in abstract forces of the development of consciousness (Hegel), but in concrete material conditions where one class dominates another
* it was necessary instead to focus on the real conditions of human existence, especially those related to the satisfaction of basic economic needs

*The German Ideology:*

* Written while Marx lived in Brussels (1845-46)
* Written jointly by Marx and Engels
* Contains the most substantive discussion of Marx’s materialist theory of history
* Had two aims:

1. to criticize German idealist philosophers for

promoting the illusion that political change comes about when ‘true ideas’ replace prevailing ones (i.e. doing nothing); and

1. to develop and expound the materialist theory of history in opposition to Hegelian philosophy.

* We will focus on the latter today

**The Materialist Theory of History:**

Marx stated 3 basic propositions to guide the materialist perspective:

1. Humans must be able to obtain food, shelter, and clothing to live (i.e. meet basic needs);
2. Humans differ from animals to the extent that they produce the means to satisfy these needs (i.e. have a conscious relation with nature); and
3. How humans produce depends on what they find in nature and what they must produce to survive (i.e. how they live tends to coincide with what and how they produce)

On these premises, Marx took up the task of understanding historical and social processes from the standpoint of human economic activity.

In order to understand Marx’s analysis of the various stages of historical development, four key concepts are central:

1. Means of Production;
2. Relations of Production;
3. Mode of production; and
4. Forces of Production

**Means of Production:**

At every stage of human history, means of production include productive forces such as land, animals, tools, machinery, and so on necessary to produce the things needed for their survival (food, shelter, clothing).

Means of production = anything in the external world used to produce material needs and maintain existence.

Historically, one class of persons in a given society has owned or monopolized the means of production.

This leads to both the division between owners and non-owners and to dominant and subordinate classes.

**Relations of Production:**

This denotes the connection between the way a society produces and the social roles allotted to individuals in production.

Marx believed the roles individuals assume in production are directly related to the system of social class as ownership tends to be concentrated in one class.

Non-owners are compelled to enter into relations of production to satisfy their economic needs/become subordinated to owning class and are compelled to maintain them. Thus:

* non-owners produce for others who do not produce for them;
* the livelihoods of non-owners depend on their relations with their superiors;
* the dominant classes have direct rights over the economic product of the producers;
* the owners always receive more from the production process than the producers; and
* non-owners are subject to the authority of their superiors.

Relations of production tend to govern the way non-owners use the means of production to satisfy their material needs and create a livelihood. Simultaneously, non-owners are unable to freely produce the means of their existence as they do not have unobstructed access to the means of production (e.g. feudalism).

Relations of production created 3 central elements rendering them key to the materialist theory of history:

1. Their ability to be transformed into relations of domination;
2. Their ability to become physical and economic fetters for one class and an economic advantage for the other; and
3. Their ability to be backed up by coercive sanctions, legitimated by the political and legal structure of society.

Relations of production tend to appear in all societies, but manifest themselves in different forms at different stages of economic development . Yet, they always seem to coincide with the ways societies produce (e.g. master and slave, lord and serf, capitalist and wage-labourer).

**Mode of Production & Forces of Production:**

Social relations are closely bound up with productive forces

In acquiring new productive forces, humans change the mode of production, and in changing their mode of production they change their way of earning a living and all of their social relations.

Forces (means) + relations of production = mode of production

Forces (in the technological sense) only have capacities to be put to work, and can only be put into operation when people enter into relations of production

Relations of production are always about how the forces of production are to be used in order to produce, and one idea stemming from this is that one class is the proprietor over these forces, the other being subject to them.

Two key conditions:

* the right of proprietors to control the labour of the producer;
* the right of proprietors to control the products of the labourer (e.g. slavery)

The mode of production can determine the system of social relations arising from it (e.g. feudal subsistence agriculture produces economic relations between lord and serf that govern how means of production are used). The economic base directly shapes the system of social relations

Marx thought the division of society into owners/non-owners of the means of production was a law of historical development

He divided history into 3 essential stages: ancient, feudal, and capitalist. Each has 3 central tendencies:

* a perpetuation of the division of society into classes, in which one class is dominant over another;
* a tendency to perpetuate economic, political, and social inequality; and
* unequal social relations supported by religion, law, and the political structure.