**SOC 3150: Classical Sociological Theory**

**Lecture 6: Karl Marx: Relations of Production & Ideology**

Now that we have examined Marx’s ideas surrounding historical development, we move on to consider social structure and ideology

Marx asserts that there is a correspondence between:

1. The economic mode of production in a given historical period (the *base*); and
2. The forms of social consciousness (the *superstructure*).

The *base* consists of the productive forces/means of production (i.e. tools, machines, raw materials) and labour power (i.e. skills, knowledge, creativity of workers).

The *superstructure* consists of the various legal, political, religious, philosophical, and cultural processes and institutions of society.

Marx asserts that historical changes in the economic base determine historical changes in the superstructure/human consciousness.

This includes ideology.

**Ideology:**

Marx not only saw the existing economic base as something that held back progressive change, he saw the superstructure of institutions and ideas as doing so as well: ideology. He used the term in 2 ways:

1. Ideas that reflect everyday life in an inverted manner (e.g. money as the fetishism of commodities); and
2. Systems of ruling ideas that respond to disruptions of, or contradictions in, ruling ideas and attempt to hide them in 1 of 3 ways:
   1. by presenting a system of ideas (e.g. a religion, philosophy, literature, or legal system) that makes the contradictions appear coherent;
   2. by explaining away those experiences that reveal the contradictions, usually as personal problems or individual idiosyncrasies; or
   3. by presenting the capitalist contradiction as really being a contradiction in human nature, thus something that cannot be resolved by social change.

In general, Marx asserts that the ruling class create/promulgate this second type of ideology, hiding the contradictions that would lead to social change.

Marx and Engels developed their general theory of ideology between 1845-1846 in the first section of *The German Ideology*.

It was directed against the Young Hegelians who argued that ideas were manifestations of will and “spirit,” and that social and historical problems could be analyzed by looking at the role ideas played in social and political life.

Marx felt that this suggested abstract ideas were real forces with material existence, distorted and misrepresented empirical reality by turning it ‘upside down.’

Marx urged that when the real existence of human beings is understood only in terms of ideas and thoughts, that the more real and practical problems of individual lives get overlooked.

**The Building Blocks of Ideology:**

Marx put forward his theory of ideology for at least 2 reasons:

1. To show that ideas had a material origin and arose from practical activity, not the other way around; and
2. To show that he could provide a coherent link between ideas and material activity and break with the prior philosophical tradition of ideology as an abstract representation of the idea.

In order to understand his development of the argument, we consider four building blocks of ideology:

1. *The link between ideas and the material base of society* (i.e. necessary economic production gives rise to a system of ideas and beliefs which come to represent the productive relations that stand as conscious images in mental life);
2. *The relationship between the concept of ideology and a theory of perception* (i.e. ideology as an active filtering system of attitudes, conceptions, ideas, and beliefs capable of making circumstances appear upside down, inverting our perception of reality);
3. *The relationship between ideology and the dominant classes* (i.e. the class that presides over the means of material production controls the means of mental production, asserting that existing relations legitimately reflect the common interest); and
4. *The functions of ideology*:
   1. to conceal social contradictions emanating from class distinctions;
   2. to resolve the contradictions in favour of the dominant classes and their interests;
   3. to legitimate the system of domination by making the contradictions appear as if they were based on natural rather than social distinctions; and
   4. to make appearances take a form directly opposite to actual relations by making it appear as if economic exchange is the sole object and aim of social relations.

At bottom, the main function of ideology is to make class distinctions, specifically the material differences between classes, appear legitimate rather than contradictory. It manages these by:

1. Making them appear legitimate; and
2. Explaining away contradictions by assigning their causes to sources other than social inequalities and class differences.