

# POLI 342: MODERN WESTERN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Session 11– . KARL MARX (PART 1)

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2014/2015 – 2016/2017

# Session Overview

Welcome to session 11: Karl Marx Part 1. Karl Marx was born in 1818 in the ancient city of Trier, Prussia. Marx's father was a prosperous lawyer, a Jew who converted to Lutheranism to advance his career at a time when unbaptized Jews did not have full rights of citizenship. Marx studied law at the University of Bonn. When he entered the University of Berlin, he switched to studying philosophy. He obtained the PhD from the University of Jena, with specialization in ancient Greek natural philosophy. Following the death of his father in 1838, after an unsuccessful attempt at becoming a lecturer he tried journalism and became editor of the *Rhenish Gazette*, a liberal newspaper in Cologne but the paper ran afoul of government censors and was subsequently closed down in 1843. Marx then married Jenny von Westphalen, the daughter of a wealthy industrialist, and moved to France. There he encountered another German, Friedrich Engels, with whom he took up an interest in economics and class struggle. In this session, our attention is on the background of Karl Marx, an examination of key terms he used, historical materialism, alienation and the labour theory of value. I wish you well in this session.

# Session outline

This session covers the following topics:

- The Background of Karl Marx
- Some Key Terms used Marx
- Historical materialism and Alienation
- Labour Theory of Value



## TOPIC ONE

# The Background of Karl Marx

# Life and Works

- Karl Marx was born in 1818 in the ancient city of Trier, Prussia.
- Marx's father was a prosperous lawyer and a Jew.
- Marx studied law at the University of Bonn and later at Berlin, where he switched to studying philosophy.
- He moved again to the University of Jena, where he wrote a doctoral dissertation on ancient Greek natural philosophy.
- After the death of his father in 1838, Marx attempted to find a job as lecturer but ran into difficulties and instead tried journalism and became editor of the *Rhenish Gazette*.
- Marx then married Jenny von Westphalen, the daughter of a wealthy industrialist, and moved to the more politically hospitable atmosphere of France.
- He encountered another German émigré, Friedrich Engels.

# Life and Works (cont'd)

- One of Marx's most important intellectual influences was the George Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831).
- Hegel influenced Marx in his characterization of the modern age.
- Hegel once famously declared that “man is not at home in the world”.
- Although he was attracted to socialism, Marx was dissatisfied with the quality of socialist thought that he encountered in France, such as that of the utopian Socialist Saint-Simon (1760–1825).
- Engels and Marx produced works such as *The German Ideology* (1846) and *The Communist Manifesto* (1848)

# Life and Works (cont'd)

- While in London, Marx participated in the growing international workers' movement.
- In 1867, he published the first volume of *Capital (Das Kapital)*, a treatise on economics
- Many see the recent collapse of the Soviet Union as an end to the international appeal of Marxism as revolutionary political movement.
- Marx's ideas continue to stimulate and engage thinkers in a variety of fields, including political theory, history, and literary criticism.



TOIC TWO

Some Key Terms used Marx



# Mode of Production

- Marx used the term *mode of production* to refer to the specific organization of economic production in a given society.
- A mode of production includes the *means of production* used by a given society, such as factories and other facilities, machines, and raw materials.
- It also includes labor and the organization of the labor force.

# Relations of Production

- The term *relations of production* refers to the relationship between those who own the means of production (capitalist or bourgeoisie) and those who do not or the proletariat).
- According to Marx, history evolves through the interaction between the mode of production and the relations of production.
- The mode of production constantly evolves toward a realization of its fullest productive capacity
- This evolution creates antagonisms between owners and workers.

# Capitalism

- Capitalism is a mode of production based on private ownership of the means of production.
- Capitalists produce commodities for the exchange market and to stay competitive must extract as much labor from the workers as possible at the lowest possible cost.
- The economic interest of the capitalist is to pay the worker as little as possible, in
- The workers, in turn, come to understand that their economic interest lies in preventing the capitalist from exploiting them in this way.
- The social relations of production are inherently antagonistic, giving rise to a class struggle



## TOPIC THREE

# Historical Materialism and Alienation

# Historical Materialism

- The writings of the German idealist philosopher Hegel had a profound impact on Marx
- Hegel elaborated a dialectical view of human consciousness as a process of evolution from simple to a complex categories of thought.
- According to Hegel, human thought has evolved from basic attempts to grasp the nature of objects to higher forms of abstract thought and self-awareness.
- History evolves through a similar dialectical process, whereby the contradictions of a given age give rise to a new age.

# Historical Materialism (cont'd)

- Marx developed a view of history similar to Hegel's, but the main difference between Marx and Hegel is that Hegel is an idealist and Marx is a materialist.
- Hegel believed that ideas are the primary mode in which human beings relate to the world and that history can be understood in terms of the ideas that define each successive historical age.
- Marx, on the other hand, believed that the fundamental truth about a particular society or period in history is how that society is organized to satisfy material needs.
- Hegel saw history as a succession of ideas and a working out of contradictions on a conceptual level
- Marx saw history as a succession of economic systems or modes of production.

# Alienation

- Marx argues that labor is central to a human being's self-conception and sense of well-being.
- By working on and transforming objective matter into sustenance, human beings meet the needs of existence and come to see themselves externalized in the world.
- Labor is as much an act of personal creation and a projection of one's identity as it is a means of survival.
- However, capitalism, deprives human beings of this essential source of self-worth and identity.

# Alienation (cont'd)

- The worker approaches work only as a means of survival and derives none of the other personal satisfactions of work because the products of his labor do not belong to him. These products are instead expropriated by capitalists and sold for profit.
- In capitalism, the worker, who is alienated or estranged from the products he creates, is also estranged from the process of production, which he regards only as a means of survival.



# Alienation (cont'd)

- Estranged from the production process, the worker is therefore also estranged from his or her own humanity.
- The worker is thus alienated from his or her “species being” —from what it is to be human.
- The capitalist mode of production alienates human beings from other human beings.
- Deprived of the satisfaction that comes with owning the product of one’s labor, the worker regards the capitalist as external and hostile.



## TOPIC FOUR

# Labour Theory of Value

# Commodity

- The labor theory of value states that the value of a commodity is determined by the amount of labor that went into producing it.
- Marx defines a *commodity* as an external object that satisfies wants or needs.
- Commodities have a *use-value* that consists of their capacity to satisfy such wants and needs.
- For the purposes of economic exchange, they have an *exchange-value*, their value in relation to other commodities on the market.

# Commodity (cont'd)

- Marx asserts that in order to determine the relative worth of extremely different commodities with different use-values, exchange-value, or monetary value, must be measurable in terms of a property common to all such commodities.
- The only thing that all commodities have in common is that they are a product of labor.
- The value of a commodity in a market represents the amount of labor that went into its production.

# Exploitation of Labour

- The labor theory is important in Marx's because it forms the foundation of Marx's notion of exploitation.
- In the simplest form of exchange, people produce commodities and sell them so that they can buy other commodities to satisfy their own needs and wants.
- In such exchanges, money is only the common medium that allows transactions to take place.
- Capitalists, in contrast, are motivated not by a need for commodities but by a desire to accumulate money.

# Exploitation of Labour (cont'd)

- Capitalists take advantage of their power to set wages and working hours to extract the greatest amount of labor from workers at the lowest possible cost, selling the products of the workers at a higher price than the capitalists paid for them.
- Rather than buy or sell products at their true exchange-value, as determined by the labor that went into making them, capitalists enrich themselves by extracting a “surplus-value” from their laborers—in other words, exploiting them.
- Marx pointed to the abject poverty of industrial workers in places like Manchester for proof of the destructive effects