

SOCI302/322
PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL THEORY

Session 6 –Marxism

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Session Overview

Introduction

This session deals with a new sociological perspective known as conflict theory. This session begins by presenting the ideas of Karl Marx which are regarded simply as Marxism. As you will see, the views of Marx are totally different from those of his peers: the other founders of sociology. Whereas his peers were stressing society's institutions working to make society coherent and orderly, Marx was seeing society as riddled with tension, antagonism, class conflict and to him if society appears to us as orderly, harmonious and integrated it is mainly because some minor but powerful class of people, the rich (the bourgeoisie, to put in Marx's own words) are able to have their interests prevail and to dominate the rest usually the majority, the poor and the have-nots (the proletariat), in society.

The need for a revolution to end social injustice, oppression, deprivation is advocated by Karl Marx. For Marx, inequality, exploitation and class conflict come about in society as a result of social arrangements that derive from material production system prevailing. They are not natural, they are created by humans and thus can change and must be changed to create a better society where there would be no more inequality and exploitation. Marx therefore is a conflict sociologist and fighter for social justice.

Session Overview (Cont'd)

Conflict is more or less a theory that is opposed to that claims of structural functionalism. Where structural functionalism sees society as well-integrated, conflict theory sees society as full of conflict between the rich and the poor. It developed as a result of the writings of Karl Marx.

But conflict theory has gone beyond Marx's writings and today it is very extensive and complex. Some sociologists albeit a minority have remained faithful to Marx's writings and continue to see modern capitalist societies as Marx saw them. Others have drawn inspirations from Marx's writings and have developed new ideas as to interpret the modern world that is qualitatively distinct from Marx's own. This session and session 7 & 8 following explain all these intellectual developments.

Session Overview

Goals and Objectives

At the end of the session, the student will be able to:

- Explain Historical Materialism
- Explain what Marx means by society is divided into substructure and superstructure
- Explain concepts such as Economic Determinism, Knowledge Production in capitalist society,
- Discover the workings of the state in capitalist society according to Marx's perspective

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in this session are as follows:

- Historical Materialism
- Substructure and superstructure
- Economic Determinism,
- Knowledge Production in capitalist society,
- State in capitalist society

Reading List

- Calhoun, Craig, Joseph Gerteis, James Moody, Seven Pfaff, and Idermohan Virk (2002). *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
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- Cuff E. C., W. W. Sharrock & D. W. Francis (1990), *Perspectives in Sociology*. 3rd Edition. London: Unwin Hyman
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- Edles, Laura Desfor and Scott Appelrouth (2010). *Sociological Theory in the contemporary era: Text and readings*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Sage
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- Farganis, James. (2011). *Readings in Social Theory: The Classic Tradition to Post-Modernism*. 6th Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies.
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- Turner, Jonathan H. (1998). *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. 6th Edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
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- Ritzer, George (2008). *Sociological Theory*. 8th Edition or any newer or earlier editions. New York: McGraw Hill.
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- Wallace, Ruth A. and Alison Wolf (1995) *Contemporary Sociological Theory: Continuing the Classical Tradition*. 4th Edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Topic One: Historical Materialism

- Historical Materialism reflects the basic tenets of Marx and Engels' view of historical development of society. It is economic forces not ideas as the philosopher Hegel would want us to believe or the ideas or actions of political leaders such as kings and queens, Napoleon, Caesar, Nelson and the like that are the forces behind historical change, social life and human development.
- Historical Materialism sees history as progressive and the motor of social change is conflict and tensions that inhere in the economic institution of society where individuals enter into relationships to produce for their material existence.
- Engels sums it up in (Socialism: Utopian and Scientific) it “designate[s] that view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggle of these classes against one another” .
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Historical Materialism (cont'd)

- The term “materialism” is a philosophical concept that sees the *external* world as real, governed by its own laws of causes and effects and independent of human consciousness. It contrasts with “idealism” which sees the external world, both natural and social, as ultimately determined by men’s ideas and consciousness of it.
- Idealism was developed in the 19th century by two German philosophers Schelling and Hegel.
- Metaphysics: the forces of attraction and repulsion (for Schelling) or a dialectic of logical contradictions (for Hegel) results in the developing forms of natural and social worlds. Hegel proclaimed that ideas were the dominant force of history and historical transformation of societies was the result of the progressive unfolding of reason or ideas.
- Marx stood “Hegel on his head” when he declared that it was not ideas that determine historical development but the economic facts of life, not least man’s need to produce food, shelter and water to satisfy the material needs. As Engels reiterates it:
 - **The simple fact [is] that human beings must have food, drink, clothing and shelter first of all, before they can interest themselves in politics, science, art, religion and the like. This implies that the production of**
 - **the immediate materials means of subsistence, and consequently the degree of economic development of a given people and epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, the art, and even religious ideas are built. It implies that these latter must be explained out of the former, whereas the former have usually been explained as issuing from the latter (Engels’ speech at the graveside of Marx, 12 March 1883).**
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Historical Materialism (cont'd)

- The basic meaning of the above statement is that material production is the first major activity of humankind and the economy (the substructure) is the foundation upon which rest the other social institutions: the family, religion, politics, the art, the legal system and other belief systems (the superstructure).
- Marx writes that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their being that determines their consciousness”. That is people are what they, their understanding of and their thinking about society is the result of their position in the economy—the substructure of society.
- Within the **substructure** lie **relations of production** and **forces of production**. By **forces of production** Marx is referring to how the production of goods is done in society, the type of technology, the methods and tools or equipment and labour used, land, raw materials, factories, etc. By **relations of production** Marx is referring to the social relationships found in production, that is the nature of economic roles permitted by the state of development of the forces of production and further the relationships that exist between these roles, more specifically the relations of production that exist between the owners of the means of production and the workers See a diagrammatic representation of Marx’s idea about the **substructure** and **superstructure** of society.

Historical Materialism (cont'd)

- **Mode of production** is the economic system prevailing at any particular point in historical time.
- The evolution of human society, (i) primitive communal stage (ii) slave-owning state, (iii) feudal stage and (iv), capitalist societies. Marx argues that once society moved from the primitive communal stage two major antagonistic classes of people come to occupy centre stage in the production for material existence in a word— an oppressed class and an oppressor class: that is to the say, slave and slave-master/citizen (slave owning society), serf and lord (feudalism) and proletariat and bourgeoisie (capitalism) respectively.
- **“The history of all hitherto society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in common ruin of the contending forces”.**
- The idea of the dialectic process of thesis and anti-thesis generating opposition/contradiction leading to synthesis is captured in the idea that the oppressed and oppressor are in constant opposition/contradiction and this would be resolved through the creation of a synthesis—in this case a re-constitution of society and subsequent ruin of these contending classes.
- Class conflict is what transforms society from one stage to another. there would be a revolution that would lead to the liquidation of bourgeoisie and the capitalist system and subsequently a reconstitution of society into socialism and communism.
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- **Marx -“The philosophers have only interpreted the world...the point however is to change it”.**

Topic Two: Substructure & Superstructure

- Marx summarizes what is substructure and superstructure of society:
- **“In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will. These relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, which is the real foundation on top of which arises a legal and political superstructure to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production in society come in conflict with the existing relations of production or—what is but a legal expression of the same thing—with the property relations within which they had been at work before. From forms of development of the forces of production these relations turn into their fetters. Then occurs a period of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed”**
- The substructure is the economic institution only and the superstructure is the other social institutions and other belief systems of society

Topic Three: Economic Determinism

- Marx and Engels have provided us a model of society that indicates that society is made up of substructure (the economic institution) and superstructure (other social institutions except the economy).
- However, the interpretation of the working of this model and its consequences for revolutionary action has unfortunately led to one way understanding of Marxism—economic determinism—that is, the understanding that the economic base of society simply drives and determines the shape of the institutions and ideas in the rest of society.
- Although had Engels stated that no such simple, unilateral relation was intended and that the development of institutions and ideas was to some extent independent of the base, this claim is still lingers in the literature.
- Critics of Marx would always like to assert economic determinism. Weber is seen as one of earliest critics of Marx in this respect, with his Protestant Ethic thesis. According to Weber, cultural ideas or ideas in what Marx would call the superstructure of society particularly religious ideas are capable of transforming society, particularly its economy. The Protestant ethic's ideas of predestination and asceticism were indirectly responsible for capitalist development in the western world, Weber claimed.
- The importance of ideas in understanding the nature and functioning of the contemporary capitalist societies and the reasons why it is difficult for the proletariat to fulfill its revolutionary mission as predicted by Marx is also stressed by some Neo-Marxists—critical theorists— in recent years.

Topic Four: Knowledge Production in capitalist society

- To Marx's when one class controls the substructure, that is, the economy where the critical means of human existence is found, they have a great advantage to shape the ideas that are found in the institutions that makes up the superstructure.
- The ruling ideas are ideas that favour first and foremost the interest of the bourgeoisie or the economically dominant class.
- The superstructure is constructed in a way to hide as much as possible the exploitation and suffering that exist in the society. For example, the legal system or the constitution of the country would proclaim formally that everybody is equal before the law, but in practice the rich get **better justice** than the poor, or education is free, but the schools are not equal in human resources and infrastructural facilities, or political ideologies would proclaim the country is doing well, but only the rich are really doing **well**. All these ideas circulated in the superstructure are meant to hide the inequality, exploitation and suffering in the system so that workers would not rise up. Marx regards the superstructure as an ideological apparatus of society.
- Ideology in the Marxist context refers to the system of ideas that hide the contradictions in the capitalist system. In the capitalist system, the ideas upheld and defended in the family, education, religion, law and in the state's activities are all ideological because they are made to preserve the capitalist system—the status quo. Marx is of the view that those who control state and governmental machinery end up producing knowledge that pursuing first and foremost their interests and that of their allies—the bourgeoisies—who dominate the economy.

Topic Five: The State in capitalist society

- For Marx and Engels the state and knowledge production in capitalist society are intimately linked. In a capitalist society, the bourgeoisie dominates directly or indirectly the state apparatus. Because politics supports mostly the interests of the **haves** or the rich
- Marx defines the state as **the executive committee for managing the whole affairs of the bourgeoisie**. Marx and Engels are of the view that under communism, the state would wither away or be on the side of the proletariat or serve as mediator protecting the interests of whole society and not just one particular class.

Session Summary

In this session we have learnt that:

- Marxist conflict perspective draws on the work of Karl Marx
- There is conflict between owners of means of production and wage earners
- The struggle between social classes is the “engine” of historical change
- Conflict in society arises over competition for scarce resources and social change is an inevitable feature of society.
- Existing social arrangements in capitalist society means socio-economic political inequality among groups

Session Summary (cont'd)

In this session we have learnt to explained the following:

- The concept of Historical Materialism developed by Marx and Engels
- Substructure and superstructure
- Economic Determinism, Knowledge Production in capitalist society,
- Discovered the workings of the state in capitalist society and argue that the state is an ideological apparatus that supports first and foremost the interests of the rich people in society