

# SOCI302/322

# PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL THEORY

## Session 7 Neo-Marxism

Lecturer: Dr. Dan-Bright S. Dzorgbo, UG  
Contact Information: [ddzorgbo@ug.edu.gh](mailto:ddzorgbo@ug.edu.gh)



# UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

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**School of Continuing and Distance Education**

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# Session Overview

- Marxism and the Question of Revolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Capitalism. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was no socialist revolution in capitalist societies such as Britain, Germany and France as Marx had predicted. Was Marx a false prophet or Marxism was not being understood or used well? What could be done to make the revolution possible
- Historical Materialism is one of the greatest and most influential set of ideas within the social science to have significantly impacted the course of world history. It formed the basis of the socialist revolution of 1917 in semi-feudal Russia which resulted in the creation of the former Soviet Union and later spread throughout Eastern Europe, South-East Asia, Cuba and have also inspired socialist revolutionary and nationalist actions and critical thinking in many parts of the Third World including Africa in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and only to some limited extent in this 21<sup>st</sup> century which is more dominated by bourgeois neo-liberal or capitalist ideology.

# Session Overview (cont'd)

- But what is interesting about Historical Materialism in this context is that its revolutionary potential as predicted by Marx was to be unleashed first in mature capitalist societies such as Britain, France and Germany—Western Europe. This is because these countries were truly capitalistic at the time Marx wrote and it is here that capitalism was creating or experiencing more problems or contradictions: polarization, homogenization, naked exploitation, pauperization, monopolization, alienation, etc. and so Marx predicted the proletariat would come to their senses and experience class consciousness and so become a **“class- for-themselves”** and overthrow these oppressive capitalist societies.

# Session Overview (cont'd)

- It was as if the workers would automatically be driven by their objective situation into action implying as if no human action or agency was needed to propel them. Vladimir Lenin's (the leader of the Bolshevik Revolution that created the Soviet Union) view was that the proletariat class is politically and intellectually unsophisticated and for that matter cannot engage in spontaneous revolution; they needed an elite group who understand the necessity for a revolution and are willing to lead them into revolutionary transformation of society, that is— the proletariat class needed a “vanguard party” and this was the party Lenin led which brought about state socialism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

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# Session Overview (cont'd)

- In Western Europe, however, Marx's prediction was not being fulfilled. Was Marx then a false prophet? Given this situation, by the 1920s some Marxist theorists began to despair about the possibility of the revolution occurring at all. Some reached the conclusion that the social ills of capitalist society that Marx and Engels pointed out were "corrected" through capitalists societies' ability to offer higher incomes to workers, to generate higher standard throughout the major western world which has benefited the workers also, the institutionalization and legitimization of trade unions to fight for workers, the development of social protection programmes or the Welfare State; the result of which is that workers were materially better off.
- This led to the development of **embourgeoisement thesis**—that is, workers were seen as becoming bourgeoisie or adopting bourgeois values— or **the affluent worker thesis**— and thus the distinction between bourgeoisie and proletariat classes had decomposed. These developments in 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism that Marx never foresaw led some Marxists to conclude that capitalism has won the day and there was no point pursuing an old discredited 19<sup>th</sup> century dream of equitable, planned and just society—socialism. These theorists most of whom were pessimistic about the revolutionary transformation of late capitalist societies and were content in providing critical analytical insight into the nature and functioning of these societies that made it impossible for the proletariat to fulfill their historic revolutionary mission. They are known as critical theorists or the Frankfurt school.

# Session Overview (cont'd)

## Goals and Objectives

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

- Explain Georg Lukcas' concept of reification
- Explain Antonio Gramsci idea of hegemony

# Session Topics

I have divided the sessions into two major topics:

- Topic One: Georg Lukcas and the concept of reification
- Topic Two: Antonio Gramsci and the concept of hegemony

# 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*. 3<sup>rd</sup> 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*. 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies.
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- Turner, Jonathan H. (1998). *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
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- Ritzer, George (2008). *Sociological Theory*. 8<sup>th</sup> 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*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.



# Topic One: Georg Lukcas and the concept of reification

- One important Marxist theoretician who lost faith in the revolutionary potential of the working class in Western Europe was Georg Lukacs (1885-1971). However, Lukacs took Lenin's view that the working class could only achieve revolution only if led by a "vanguard party". According to Lukacs, the working class could neither achieve a class consciousness (reach a state of a class-in-itself, i.e. ready to fight for itself) of their position in the capitalist social order nor of the need for means towards revolution without the leadership of a party in possession of the very theory which provided all these things. This theory is Marxism, but Marxism understood in the right way.
- In his book **History and Class Consciousness ([1923]1971)**, Lukacs re-interprets Marxism and considers it as a distinctive method—the dialectical method and its essence was the idea of "the totality", the socio-historical whole. What this means is that one can understand things at a certain level by breaking them into pieces, isolating them from one another and analyzing them. Lukas means that science has been breaking things into pieces and so we get to know things in terms of pieces. However, the real comprehensive understanding requires that we view the parts as parts of the whole, the totality as Lukacs calls it.

# The concept of reification (cont'd)

- Lukacs was of the view that the nature and functioning of capitalist society denies this comprehensive understanding to most people.
- Scientific knowledge as practiced in capitalist society breaks things into pieces for easy understanding but in the end people lose sight of the wholeness of things.
- In addition, science denies the workers the ability to see how their own personal experiences fit together into the whole degrading logic of capitalist social order. They are prevented from understanding their position by what Lukacs call the process of “reification” and false consciousness.

# The concept of reification (cont'd)

- **Reification** is closely related to the concept of **alienation** which results from **fetishism of commodities** that develops in capitalism. Fetishism of commodities is the process by which commodities and the market for them are granted independent objective existence by actors in capitalist society such that actors lose sight of them that they are their creations.
- This concept is the basis of the development of Lukacs' concept of **alienation**. To be sure **alienation** is found in all types of society, but it reaches its extreme form under capitalism. Alienation is the separation of things from people who have created them and such separation is the essence of capitalist system of production. For example, in many traditional societies in Africa, alienation is low in the sense that people produce the things they need and consumed them directly. Think of the subsistence farming system or fishing system; the farmer or fisherman has control over his or her occupation and he or she is very close to his or her produce.

# The concept of reification (cont'd)

- In a modern capitalist society, however, factory workers own “nothing” except their labour power and have to work for the bourgeoisie for secure material existence; they thus actually create economic goods through their physical labour but the goods do not belong to them; they do not own them. They are alienated from the products of their labour. The separation of things from workers means that their capacity to identify with things they have created as their own creations is also accentuated.
- For example, because of increased division of labour and specialization in capitalist society, the products of workers are fragmented (i.e. a typical worker’s contribution to a finished products is small). Take the assembly plant for the manufacture of cars for example, workers are arranged that each makes a small contribution to the total car, so the worker does not see how the car is his creation. They think it is the creation of the car manufacturing company. Again in some companies too, the products of workers are often converted into other products by other companies so workers cannot directly identify that the goods in capitalist societies are their own creations. They begin to think of these things as alien to them and then give them an existence independent of their will and beyond human control.

# The concept of reification (cont'd)

- For example, we often to hear statements like “the stock market”, “the car market” or “the oil market” are not performing well”, “the international trade”, “market forces”, and begin to even think that the whole capitalist society is natural and we all must subject our lives to its dictates. In this situation workers lose sight of the fact that the capitalist social order has been the creation of humans. Remember that according to Historical Materialism, in their quest to secure economic production or provide for material existence, humans have changed the structure of society throughout history: they have created slave-owning society, changed it feudal society and later capitalist, why not change the capitalist society too? Capitalist society can also be changed, but has not been changed because workers have come to reify it, treating it as natural and God given and for that matter they must be at its mercy and endure all its ills.

# The concept of reification (cont'd)

- For example, in Ghana, many people reify society by statements such as “the system is not good”, “the system does not pay us well so we are not motivated to put in our best”, or “by the grace of God we are managing” “if God permits”, “prayers can change things” etc. The system they talk about is actually the creation of all Ghanaians. While there is nothing wrong with being religious (because religion provides psychological comfort in times of crisis, it provides a moral framework for individual behaviour, it serves as control mechanism, it is a source of social integration, it explains the inexplicable, etc.) some people simply seems to forget that inactions or laziness can contribute misery in life and the overall poverty of the country and because of false consciousness are unable to conceive how their actions and hard work can change their own destinies and deplorable social conditions in which most Ghanaians live. They simply resign to prevailing social conditions and look for miracles from God through pastors and “men and women of God”. They can be described as having reified their societal conditions and think that they cannot change their society.

# The concept of reification (cont'd)

- Reification according to Lukacs runs through both the capitalist system of production and throughout society.
- According to Lukacs, bourgeois scientific knowledge including all social science knowledge not inspired by Marxism are limited in or incapable of exposing the tendencies to reify society because they lack the dialectic method that Marxism possesses.
- For that matter it is necessary to examine critically the intellectual apparatus (i.e. the superstructure in Marxism) of capitalist society to understand the part it plays in reifying the system.

# Topic Two: Antonio Gramsci & the concept of hegemony

- Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) an Italian has also re-read Marx and provides another window for examining superstructural phenomena in modern capitalist society.
- Imprisoned by the fascist government in Italy during the 1920s for his political views, Gramsci focuses his analysis on how the bourgeoisie have come to dominate society through the cultural and intellectual leadership they exercise in society, other than through the control they exert over economic and political power as orthodox Marxism would want to believe.
- Gramsci is providing insight into the power that one group [bourgeoisie] exerts over another [the proletariat], not by means of physical coercive power but as intellectual and moral power, given wide-ranging consent to a system, in this case, the capitalist system.
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# The concept of hegemony (cont'd)

- He uses the term **Hegemony** for this situation. The relationships that develop in this context are then labeled **hegemonic**, which he sees as pedagogical, that is teaching relationships. Thus he argues that the control of workers is subtly exercised through the church, the school, the media, workers' associations, etc.
- This is the means through which the bourgeoisie perpetrate false consciousness in the workers. In order for the workers class to achieve power, it is necessary for them to achieve hegemonic power and that should be the main task of education in the broadest sense of that term. To Gramsci, this is the only means by which the working class can free itself from exploitative capitalist system.
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# The concept of hegemony (cont'd)

- In Marxism we are told that the economically dominant class bourgeoisie also control politics in capitalist society. The bourgeoisie has economic power and by virtue of this exercises control indirectly over those who control the state and government apparatus. We see a manifestation of this relationship clearly, for example, in the state or government's policies that favour the bourgeoisies and their businesses in many western nations. In many African countries we see this situation expressed in favorable investment codes for foreign investments—in the operations of multinational corporations in the mining and oil sectors of the economies, where the interest of the proletariat or workers, and the environments of communities are polluted, but governments are lackadaisical attitude towards the implementation of environmental laws. This is mainly because the state in a modern society depends very much on taxes these business (corporate taxes) pay to it for its own reproduction and activities.
- So if for example, there is dispute between management (i.e. capital) and workers (labour) in a mining sector, the state is more likely to penalize the workers by siding with the views and interests of management. The state can deploy the police or the military to muzzle the workers and thus ensure that the interests of the capitalists prevail. This would be the Marxist interpretation of the alliance between the bourgeoisie and the state or government.

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- This is mainly because the state in a modern society depends very much on taxes these business (corporate taxes) pay to it for its own reproduction and activities. So if for example, there is dispute between management (i.e. capital) and workers (labour) in a mining sector, the state is more likely to penalize the workers by siding with the views and interests of management. The state can deploy the police or the military to muzzle the workers and thus ensure that the interests of the capitalists prevail. This would be the Marxist interpretation of the alliance between the bourgeoisie and the state or government.

# The concept of hegemony (cont'd)

- However, from what we have said about Gramsci's view above, he is saying that this Marxist conception and interpretation is too restricted and not adequate for understanding the dominance that the bourgeois class exercise under late capitalism. Gramsci is trying to stretch Marxism for us to understand how dominance works in our time.
- To be sure the bourgeoisie is dominant because they control the means of production, (albeit still subtly) but for Gramsci they have also extended their control more strategically and effectively through the means of intellectual production and communication—through the mass media, schools or simply the cultural industry. Gramsci seems to be suggesting that there has now seen to be a consensus on capitalist values in society through the works of the bourgeoisie. There seems to be a “Neo-Marxist functionalist” interpretation of how shared norms and values create cohesion in society. Gramsci's argument is that the capitalist class rules because it has produced ideas and values which promote its interests and strengthens its position, it has been able to spread these ideas through all levels of society and has successfully indoctrinated the working class to accept them as correct and valuable. For example, America is a truly capitalist society with the least social welfare facilities when compared with other western nations.
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# The concept of hegemony (cont'd)

- In America, capitalist class has hegemonized its rule and dominance by such statements such as American dream, America is a land of opportunity, land of freedom, etc. which are spread throughout society whereas we can say that the capitalist system has rather enslaved people to work hard under and under extreme conditions and simply engage in consumerism thinking that the more material things they acquire the happier they are.
- Gramsci rejects the orthodox Marxist view that the economic base would determine the course of social development. To him, to suppose that the tensions and contradictions of the capitalists economy or the working out of the economic laws of capitalism would inevitably drive workers into revolutionary action is to adopt a defeatist and fatalistic attitude. To him that would not work, rather people have to be educated to see that action is needed to change the capitalist system. It is people who make things happen, who make history and not the “iron law of history”. People must bring about socialism, they must be encouraged to challenge and overcome the hegemony of bourgeois ideas. Accordingly, criticism of the cultural apparatus of the capitalist society, i.e. the dominant cultural ideas and values through the “right” education is important for promoting the Marxist revolutionary project.

# Session Summary

In this session we have examined:

- Georg Lukcas' concept of reification and
  
- Antonio Gramsci's and the concept of hegemony