

Marx/Critical Theory Primer

As a supplement to the in-class presentations to start our second topic I offer the following short primer to help ensure that we are keeping our terms straight as we move forward with critical theory and social media.

Marxism

Karl Marx lived from 1818 to 1883 and so he saw first-hand the effects of the industrial revolution on the people around him. This *must* be remembered when talking about Marx and his ideas because his thoughts---what we now think of as *Marxism*---are meant to apply directly to this situation. Marx did not anticipate some important changes that have happened since the 1800s and some of his predictions have not come to pass (most notably there has not been a global revolution) but this does not mean that his ideas are to be disregarded. On the contrary some of his ideas continue to promote challenges and change related to freedom and justice.

Industrial Revolution

This was a period of rapid industrialization brought about in large part by the intersection of steam power, automation of textile manufacturing, and metallurgy. Marx saw the following consequences of this:

1. Consolidation of productive assets in large firms
2. Displacement of small craftspeople, agricultural labourers
3. Competition for urban manufacturing jobs

These, in turn, resulted in the following:

1. Subsistence wages
2. Long hours
3. Dangerous conditions
4. Child labour

Class Conflict

Marx saw that there were two groups that arose from the industrial revolution:

- Bourgeoisie. Those who owned (typically through inheritance) the capital (materials and production facilities) and who hired others to work for them.
- Proletariat. Those who owned basically nothing, had no education, no real life options, and who were hired to work by the Bourgeoisie for subsistence wages.

It is this set-up/state of affairs that Marx referred to as "Capitalism". **"Capitalism" as used**

today is not the same thing as what Marx meant by the term.

Marx believed that as capitalism took hold around the globe that the proletariat population of the world would rise up and overthrow the bourgeoisie, taking ownership and control of the means of production and ending, once and for all, the class conflict that had existed through time previously (capitalism was just the most recent flavour).

While there are governments that are labelled as communist/Marxist none of them really are since they amount to the continued existence of a heavy divide between those who have power and everybody else.

Exploitation and Oppression

The central wrongs that Marx sees in capitalism are the exploitation and oppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. It is important to know what these terms mean, as follows:

- Exploitation. Taking advantage of power differences within a situation to acquire things that would not otherwise be available. The bourgeoisie exploit the proletariat by setting terms on waged labour that give the owners of capital profits that do not represent their efforts in production.
- Oppression. Unjustly coercing someone or denying them the freedoms to which they are entitled. Capitalism as a whole is oppressive because it does not allow the proletariat to have options outside the subsistence wages being offered (starving yourself and your family is not seen as a legitimate option).

It gets worse when the influence the bourgeoisie have on governments and policy creation is taken into account.

Alienation & Species Being

Compared to what work looked like *before the industrial revolution* Marx thought that the character of work had changed:

“The work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack that is required of him.” (Communist Manifesto, 192)

“The more his product is shaped, the more misshapen the worker; the more civilized his object, the more barbarous the worker; the more powerful the work, the more powerless the worker; the more intelligent the work, the duller the worker” (Estranged Labour, 176).

This change in character was the result of the separation of the worker from:

1. Her product. Workers do not have control/ownership of what they produce, receiving only a wage, which is not enough to purchase even a significant portion of the output of

their labour.

2. The process of production. Workers do not have the ability to directly influence the means or method of production since it is set by the owners of the capital.
3. Her "species being". See below.
4. Other people. By working long hours in menial jobs for a subsistence wage people do not have the opportunity to have meaningful interaction with other people. For Marx being social meant collaborating with others around ideas.

The separation from these four things is *alienation*.

"Species being" amounts to the things that each individual creature is best set up to enjoy doing as a function of their psychology. He isn't speaking about species in a strictly biological sense (not every animal of type X will like the same things) but in a general sense. The species being for a chicken will involve scratching up the ground, being with other chickens, having protected places to lay eggs, etc.

According to Marx the species being for humans is doing creative, challenging, collaborative work. *If* Marx is right, capitalism doesn't just deprive us of something that it would be nice to have, it deprives us of one of the most centrally important things we can have given the way we are.

Ideology

Marx thought that beliefs and values were "ideological" when they served to underpin the current economic system. So, notions about fairness, how much property it is ok to have, the place of people of type X, effort vs return, etc. are all ideological. Such beliefs are not necessary beyond their support for the current status quo and, thus, the bourgeoisie.

Historical Materialism

The philosopher Hegel held that it was ideas that determined economic structures. Marx is sometimes said to have "turned Hegel on his head" by asserting that it is the opposite that is true: economic structures determine ideas. This is a big picture idea that shares a lot in common with McLuhan's claim that "The medium is the message".

"The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist" -- Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*

Under historical materialism it is the *base*, the production technology and ownership structure that it enables, that determines the *superstructure*, the government, laws, and ethical and political views (all part of the ideology). Marx believed that the revolution that he predicted would result in the first state of affairs that did not lead one group of people to oppress and exploit another. Why? Capitalism would result in such efficient technology and such disparity of wealth that not only would the workers overthrow the capitalists (they would have no other choice) but after they did so the capital in the world would be enough to support communist

society and whatever it looked like (Marx didn't say much about this).

With this in mind it must be noted that capitalism is *necessary* for communism to take place and be successful. Any attempt at revolution too soon and the capacity and efficiencies of the means of production would not be there to support communist society after the revolution.