

Be advised: With some minor changes, these are my actual lecture notes. As notes, they are not meant to be comprehensive, so you should not rely on them as a substitute for the lectures. Moreover, as notes, the writing and layout is very informal—e.g., I do not always use proper grammar and syntax, nor do I make an effort to catch every typographical error. Lastly, as notes, I often do not cite the sources from which some of the information comes.

Structuralism/Marxism lecture (for 1.29.03 and 2.03.03)

- **Marx's account of human nature:** Human consciousness is shaped through material practices ...this is basis for Marx's concept of materialism
- What is materialism? ...based on few simple premises
 - a. Production is **the key human activity**
 - We understand ourselves by seeing ourselves in things we have made
 - human survival depends on the ability to produce ... human progress depends on the ability to produce
 - b. Production is a **social process**
 - for the most part, we do not produce things in isolation or just for ourselves ... instead we produce for others, as others produce for us
 - as a social process, how production is organized also has an impact on how society is organized ...thus, if one occupies a privileged position in the system of production, one occupies a privileged position in society (and vice versa)
 - similarly, if the system of production is exploitative and oppressive, so too will be the social system ...conversely, if the system of production is based on equity and equality, so too will society ...
- Why *historical* materialism?

- based on the idea that human history is marked or defined by epoch-making shifts in the dominant mode of production ...the shift from feudalism to capitalism marked one such shift ...the shift from capitalism to socialism will mark another ...
- Marx also used the term historical materialism because he saw human societies as embedded in their own pasts ...what does this mean?
- in very simple sense, it means that history matters ...that things do not just happen and then disappear forever, but that the patterns, institutions, practices, etc. of the past all have impact on the present ...
- in this regard, we are all products of history to a significant degree ... perhaps best represented in Marx's famous quote: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past'
- important implication ... to Marx, history does not just happen, but is part of a single, non-repetitive process that obeys discernable laws ...historical laws are not the same as laws of physics or chemistry, but nonetheless have a clear and undeniable logic ...
- the logic pushes humankind down an irreversible path, which is marked by progress from a more primitive to higher stage ...in this view, capitalism is not all bad: it's certainly an improvement over feudalism, but it is not the ultimate achievement of humankind ...
- it's important to emphasize that Marx saw a lot of good in capitalism ... in fact, he not only saw the positive aspects of capitalism, but believed that all countries—in fact, the whole world—would first have to be capitalist before the next historical stage could be reached ... why?
- the basic reason: to achieve socialism, it would first be necessary to create the proper material basis for human society, which is what capitalism provided ... yet, while capitalism, is a tremendously productive economic mode of production, it has certain flaws that make it unsuitable as the ultimate foundation for human society ...
- **Marx's account of what's wrong with capitalism**
 - so, what's wrong with capitalism? according to Marx, there are several important and fundamentally insurmountable problems ...

- first, Capitalism alienates us from the social character of our labor ...how?
 - this is difficult question to answer simply, but goes to heart of Marxism ...
 - in brief: in capitalism, workers do not work to express themselves, to develop their interests, or to gain intrinsic satisfaction: work is essentially forced and, in work, people are subjected to the demands of others, the owners of capital
 - more than this, workers themselves do not own the products they produce; instead, the products—the fruits of their labor—are owned by their employers ...in effect, products become more valuable than the people who make them
 - the process of alienation, then, is dehumanizing and oppressive
 - in rich countries, the most negative aspects of this dehumanization have been at least temporarily overcome by increasing wages and allowing more leisure time ...on a global basis, however, alienation is growing stronger ...
 - in sum, under capitalism we are alienated from:
 - our products (which confront us as something alien, controlling us).
 - other people (they seem like competitors and adversaries).
 - the economy as a whole (which is a social product, but seems like an alien force that controls us).
- Capitalism also leads to the exploitation ...How?
 - to answer this question, important to understand that capitalist society is divided into two basic classes: the *bourgeoisie* [singular: a *bourgeois*]—those who own the means of production—and the *proletariat* [singular: a *proletarian*]—those who own only their own labor power
 - those who own the means of production possess the capacity to exploit those who sell their labor *power* ... to exploit, in this regard, means to pay workers less than what it costs to produce a given product ... in other words, owners extract the surplus value from the labor of the worker

- why can the owner do this? simply because the owner occupies a more powerful position in system of production ... a worker who does not work starves, while an owner can simply hire more workers ...
- important to understand that the owner does not do this purely out of greed ...in a capitalist system, owners must behave a certain way in order to ensure the survival of their business ... why?
- because another imperative in capitalism is the need for profit: capitalists must accumulate capital to stay in business ... and how is capital accumulated? Several ways — (1) stepping up the intensity of work, so that with same labor power and machinery, more goods are produced (i.e., increasing productivity), and (2) the other is by keeping the costs of production (including or especially wages paid to workers) as low as possible relative to the value that is produced
- **Marx's conclusion: capitalism exploits the majority of people, and alienates all people from their social nature**
 - Then how does capitalism survive?
 - from our previous discussion, you know that the material foundation of capitalism is based on particular division of labor ...one extremely important implication of this division is that those who own the means of production also control most other aspects of the social structure (or the superstructure)
 - e.g., owners control the instruments of coercion: the police, courts, prisons, etc. ... indeed, they control the entire apparatus of the state (to Marx, the state was merely the instrument or tool of the ruling class)
 - More importantly, those who control the material structure or base, also have the capacity to shape the **consciousness** of all members of society, in a way that supports the status quo.
 - in other words, all dominant ideas, cultural products, philosophy, religion, economics, history, laws, morals, etc. are designed to advance the interests of the ruling class.
 - consider some ideas, beliefs, values of capitalism:
 - We're all equal as citizens (even if economic disparities make this patently untrue)

- You freely chose to work at Subway (even if you'd rather be working for a Wall Street Investment bank or not working at all)
 - Your boss deserves to earn more than you (even if you think he's an idiot)
 - If you work hard you can be the boss someday
 - CEOs work harder than janitors and that's why they get paid more
 - Bill Gates deserves to make a million times more than you
 - If you work hard you might be the next Bill Gates
 - The meek will inherit the earth
- most of these ideas, beliefs, values are embedded into our consciousness, but most are essentially untrue ... then why do we believe in them? simply because our belief keeps us from rising up in revolution ...
- But, according to Marx, all was not lost ...
- return to Marx's **historical materialism**:
 - History has a direction, and moves through necessary stages
 - History is moved along by material forces
 - The next part: **History is moved by the interplay of productive forces and relations** ... the forces and relations of production interact *dialectically* (which means that that two contradictory forces come together, react, and create a synthesis)
 - The dialectic of history: each stage of society develops until it reaches its limits; it then breaks down because of its own internal dynamic.
 - **in the case of capitalism, the logic is as follows:**
 - Capitalism broke down feudalism—the previous form of society. Commerce, like acid, destroyed the complex traditions and practices of feudalism.
 - Capitalism created its own "gravediggers": the proletariat.
 - There is a continual increase in exploitation
 - There is a clearer and clearer delineation of classes
 - Workers become like an 'army'
 - Capitalism brings workers together, teaches them to co-operate for a common purpose, teaches them to obey orders, gives them a common enemy

- Eventually, however, workers develop class consciousness ...once this occurs, all bets are off ... the power of owners is no match for power of billions of workers acting as one ...
- **this will lead to communist revolution:**
 - Starts with isolated strikes, boycotts, demonstrations, and riots.
 - Proletariat fight each other.
 - Becomes a unified revolutionary movement aimed at overthrowing the ruling class and seizing state power.
 - Workers become the new ruling class, governing in their own interests.
 - Abolish private property
 - Abolition of inheritance and private ownership of land
 - heavy progressive income tax
 - state ownership of the means of production.
 - Rapid increase in productive forces
- **Full communism**
 - 'Withering away of the state' (Engels)
 - Transparent form of social unity
 - End of alienation
 - Possibility of full individual self-realisation
 - Open and democratic