Week 1: Alienation and the Young Marx

Questions

• 'The main difficulty with Marx's account of alienation is that it depends on a wholly implausible account of human nature.' Discuss.
• Outline and assess Marx's account of human nature.
• How plausible is Marx's denial that alienation is an inevitable feature of all industrial societies?
• What is the species-being and is it plausible that capitalism alienates the worker from it?
• Can the concept of alienation provide a convincing and exhaustive critique of capitalism?

Core Reading


Marx. On the Jewish Question, 1843 (MECW 3).

Marx. Comments on James Mill, 1844 (MECW 3).

Marx. The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, 1844 (MECW 3).

Supplementary Reading


Marx. Contribution to the Critique Of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, 1843, and Introduction 1844 (MECW 3).


Week 2: Historical Materialism

Questions

• ‘Readings of Marx’s theory of history that give primacy to technological development are unable to make sense of the role of class struggle in that theory.’ Discuss.
• How successfully does the theory of historical materialism explain the actual progression of history?
• If contract and property rights, and the modern state, are necessary conditions for capitalist relations of production, how can they be determined by the economic base?
• ‘The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life’. What are the main problems arising out of this formulation of historical materialism?

Core Reading


Supplementary Reading


Engels, Letters to C. Schmidt, and J. Bloch, 1890 (MECW 49, pp.6-9, 33-37).


Lukes, Steven, ‘Can the Base be Distinguished from the Superstructure?’, in Miller, David and Larry Siedentop (eds), The Nature of Political Theory (Oxford, 1983).

Marx. Letter to Annenkov, 28 Dec 1846, (MECW 38, p.95).

Marx. The Poverty of Philosophy, 1847, (MECW 6).


Marx. *Letter to the Editors, Otechestvenniye Zapiski*, 1877, (MECW 24, pp. 196-201) or *Letter to Mikhailovskii*


**Week 3: Classes**

**Questions**

- Why, if at all, is class a more important category for explaining conflict and historical change than other social cleavages such as race, gender and religion?
- Can women be adequately included in Marx’s account of class and class analysis?
- ‘Neo-Marxist attempts to adapt Marx’s class theory to fit the realities of advanced capitalism succeed only in abandoning that which was distinctively Marxist.’ Do you agree?
- How can Marxists explain the weakness of class consciousness in late twentieth century capitalist societies?
- Does Marx give a satisfactory account of the process by which a class ‘an sich’ becomes a class ‘für sich’?

**Core Reading**


**Supplementary Reading**


Marx, *The Class Struggles in France*, 1850 (MECW 10).


**Week 4: The State**

**Questions**

- Is Marx and Engels’ characterization of the capitalist state as simply the ‘executive committee of the whole bourgeoisie’ plausible?
- ‘Marx’s utopian belief that the state could wither away in a socialist society is a consequence of his misunderstanding of the role of the state in capitalist society.’ Discuss.
- Why did Marx think that the dictatorship of the proletariat would be the final form of state power, after which it would wither away?
- If the state ‘withers away’ in socialist society does this make Marx an anarchist?

**Core Reading**


**Supplementary Reading**


Marx. Contribution to the Critique Of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, 1843 (MECW 3).


Engels, The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State 1884 (MECW 26).


Week 5: Marx’s Economic Theory

Questions

• What may be said for and against the labour theory of value?
• Is the labour theory of value necessary for Marx’s conception of exploitation, and broader critique of capitalism?
• What is the significance of Marx’s distinction between labour and labour power?
• If we abandon the labour theory of value, can we salvage anything of worth in Marx’s economic theory?

Core Reading


Supplementary Reading


Marx, Value, Price and Profit, 1865 (MECW 20).


Marx, Letter To Dr. Kagelmann, 11 July 1868 (MECW 43 pp. 67-9).


Week 6: Utopian and Scientific Socialism

Questions

• Is Engels’ distinction between utopian and scientific socialism defensible?
• Outline and assess Marx’s critique of ‘utopian socialism’.
• Is Marx’s account of communism ‘utopian’?
• Was Marx’s opposition to utopian socialism always ‘total and unwavering’?
• Do Marx and Engels have any intellectual debts to utopian socialism?
• Why was Marx reluctant to discuss in detail the nature of communist society?

Core Reading


Supplementary Reading


Week 7: The Revolutionary Transition to Socialism – Lenin and Luxemburg

Questions

• Does Lenin’s conception of the vanguard party follow from Marx and Engels’ account of revolution?
• Was Lenin a democrat, or did he lay the seeds for Stalin’s bureaucratization of the Soviet Union?
• How far do Lenin and Luxemburg differ in their views on spontaneity and organization in the workers’ movement?
• Does Lenin or Luxemburg have the better claim to being closer to Marx conception of revolution?

Core Reading

Lenin, Vladimir I. What is to Be Done?, 1903, (LCW 5, LSW).


See also Stuart White’s lectures on WebLearn: https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/portal/hierarchy/socsci/politics/students/undergraduat/reading_list

Supplementary Reading


Luxemburg, Rosa. Social Reform or Revolution? In The Rosa Luxemburg Reader.


Week 8: Gramsci – Ideology and Hegemony
Questions

- Is Gramsci’s conception of the ‘modern prince’ at all different from Lenin’s theory of the party?
- How much does Gramsci’s theory of hegemony add to Marx’s account of ideology?
- ‘Between the economic structure of the state with its legislation and its coercion stands civil society; and the latter must be radically transformed’. (Gramsci). How great is the contrast between this theory and Marx’s own?
- How useful is the concept of hegemony for understanding the resilience of capitalist society and for revolutionary action against it?

Core Reading


Supplementary Reading


Consent”), and both chapters by Showstack Sassoon (“Hegemony, war of position and political intervention” and “Passive revolution and the politics of reform”).
