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## ***Sociological Theory: Cultural Aspects of Marxist Theory and the Development of Neo-Marxism***

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By Damian E M Milton

### **Reification**

This is the process by which social actors come to believe that humanely created social institutions are natural, universal and absolute. As a result these institutions are actually given the power to 'achieve' these characteristics. Hence, functionalism to a Marxist is just an illusion, which gains reality and only seeks to constrain us as individuals! These ideas give rise to the bigger idea that social institutions are beyond our control and unchangeable – even though they may be hundreds of years out of date! This argument states that the theories of functionalists and the 'new right' become self-fulfilling prophecies, as they 'reify' the institutions that they try to explain the existence of.

### **Alienation**

This is how capitalist relations limit individuals from fulfilling their true potential (If anyone has come across the psychology of Maslow's hierarchy of needs – it bears a striking resemblance to Marxist theory of the basic needs for survival and human potential!). This process takes on 4 parts:

- Alienation from productive activity.

Workers do not work to satisfy their own needs, but those of the capitalists. They may be given no idea of how their labour works for the company. Instead they are exploited for profits in a complex system Marx called the 'surplus value of labour' (see earlier).

- Alienation from the product of their labour

Workers do not own the end product of their labour.

- Alienation from fellow workers

Workers are often forced into outright competition with one another. A case of divide and rule?

- Alienation from one's own human potential

"Workers are reduced to the work of inhuman machines, consciousness numbed, and emotional links to other people and the products of their labour severed." – Karl Marx

## **Ideology and False Class-Consciousness**

As mentioned earlier, Marx was interested in how an individual / society creates and maintains an 'Ideology' (set of ideas). Marx believed that the bourgeoisie, who owned the means of production, also had power, ownership and control of mental production (Ideology). Therefore, the Proletariat can only consume the cultural and ideological products created by the bourgeoisie (e.g. a corporate newspaper). As the material interests of the two groups differ, this creates a conflict of interests in real terms. However, the ruling bourgeois group use cultural products in order to keep the Proletariat from rebelling, keeping the Proletariat from realising their own best interests (to rebel in revolution and take control of the means of production). This process of the production of 'ruling class ideology' creates a 'false class-consciousness' (a lack of awareness of real material interests of one's class position) in the proletarian worker. This view is summed up in the quote below:

"The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time, its ruling intellectual force. The class, which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production (*media, education*), so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas." (Karl Marx, 1845-6, *The German Ideology*)

'Ruling class ideology' has been theorised by both structuralist and humanist Marxists (see below). The structuralist Louis Althusser argued that education and the media (as well as the family!) were part of the 'ideological state apparatus' – these institutions run on the power of ruling class ideology and the false consciousness of the workers. Once this breaks down, he argued, the state brings out coercive measures to keep the people under control – the police, the army etc.

## **The Development of Neo-Marxism**

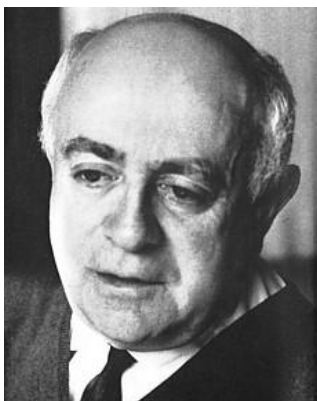
After Marx's death many authors and researchers became inspired by his work. Yet Marx left a legacy of many books and thus his theories were open to interpretation. The perspective within sociology that grew out of these writings as well as various political movements became known as Marxism and often Neo-Marxism (Neo meaning 'new'). However, a split started to form between two rival groups of Marxist thinking. Firstly, the group of Marxists who concentrated on his later works and followed a structural analysis of society as a whole. They concentrated on large scale social processes, especially economics. This type of Marxism was known as 'Structural Marxism' and became particularly popular in France in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (as well as the Soviet Union and China), a good example being Louis Althusser (see above). However, a group of theorists started to criticise the structural approach and became known as 'Post-structuralists' (post meaning

after). These theorists were headed by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. The theories of the post-structuralists laid the foundation of what became the perspective of 'Post-Modernism' (*covered later*).



Louis Althusser

Another group of Marxists were influenced by Marx's earlier work on human potential and cultural concepts such as Alienation and Ideology. This group tried to strengthen the theory of how the dialectic between economics and culture worked. This group were inspired by the 'Frankfurt School' of Marxists in the 1920's and 30's. This group of Marxists (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse) were German and of Jewish decent. These characteristics added to their views made them very unpopular with Hitler and the Nazi's and thus they fled to Britain and America. These theorists became increasingly aware of the power of propaganda and the mass media to shape ideology on both sides of the War. These theories were influenced by Interpretive sociology (*see future handouts*) that concentrated more on the role of the individual and the creation of culture. They became popular throughout Europe in the mid-twentieth century, particularly in Italy (Antonio Gramsci – see above) and in Britain (Westergaard and Resler, Paul Willis, Stuart Hall).



Theodore Adorno



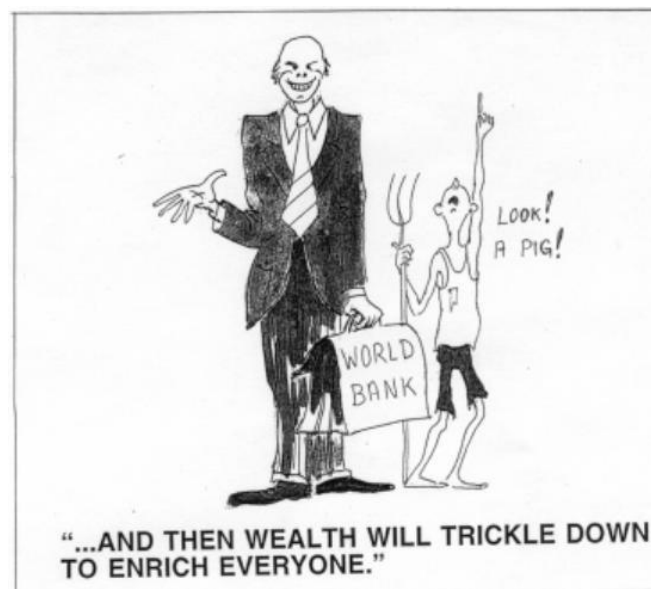
Antonio Gramsci

### So what went wrong with the communist manifesto?

Well, to begin with, Marx however clever he was could not have foreseen the radical changes that were to happen to the economic infrastructure of the entire world over the course of the twentieth century. The last century saw the biggest changes in the technological advances of the human race. It also saw by far the biggest population rise in human history, the result of which can still be analysed in Marxist terms. Some Marxists would argue we are now living in a period of global capitalism where the division of labour has taken on global proportions.

### Globalisation, Modernism and Post-Modernism

The post-modern criticism of Marxism comes down to one major sticking point. Marx is a Modernist. That is, he believes we are making progression and that people will become freer as time goes on. It is a 'meta-narrative' (or big story) that tries to explain everything in society. The post-modernists tend to argue that we are not moving logically towards a utopian society, but if anything we are a society spinning out of control. They often speak of an 'end of history' – in constant repetition and simulation of the past. Lastly, post-modernists want to do away with the grand or meta-narratives of the past. If anything it is the post-modernists who are the cynical ones, whilst Marx, believes in the emancipation of the human spirit!



Discussion point (What would a Marxist argue and why? What would a Functionalist argue?):

Question: Is it more morally wrong to rob a bank or to own one?

Revision Questions: What is meant by the following terms?

1. Reification
2. Ruling Class Ideology
3. False-Class Consciousness
4. Alienation from the Product of Labour
5. A Structural Marxist
6. A Humanist Marxist

Who originated the following terms and concepts?

1. Ideological State Apparatus

Can you think of any examples of how these theories can be applied?