

## Sociology 621 Lecture 2 & 3. Outline

### FOUNDATIONAL THESES FOR A SOCIOLOGICAL MARIXM

September 8 & 10, 2003

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#### The Foundational Observation & Fundamental Insight:

***The Foundational Observation:***

*The world in which we live involves a juxtaposition of extraordinary productivity, affluence and enhanced potentials for human creativity and fulfillment along with continuing human misery and thwarted lives.*

***The Fundamental Insight:***

*Capitalism systematically generates unnecessary suffering, unnecessary deficits in the realization of human potentials – “unnecessary” in the specific sense that with a sufficiently profound change in socioeconomic relations these deficits could be eliminated.*

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## I. Conditions for Human Flourishing

### Thesis 1. The material conditions for Human Flourishing thesis

Human flourishing increases, all other things considered, when:

- (a) The material necessities of life are securely met;
- (b) The amount of time people must spend in toilsome labor in order to provide for the necessities of life decreases;
- (c) People have real control over their own life activities.

Let us call these the *basic needs* condition, the *freedom from toil* (or free time) condition and the *autonomy* (or self-determination) condition for human flourishing.

### Thesis 2. Material possibility thesis

As the productive capacity of society increases, it becomes *materially possible* to increasingly satisfy the basic needs, free time and autonomy conditions for human flourishing for an ever-greater proportion of the population. Universalized human flourishing becomes materially possible when very high levels of productivity are reached.

**Thesis 3. The social conditions for universalizing human flourishing**

Under conditions in which the *material possibility* for universalizing human flourishing exist, the *social* conditions for realizing this potential include:

- (a) *Highly egalitarian forms of economic distribution* so that basic needs are universally provided and toilsome labor is minimized for everyone.
- (b) *Deep forms of empowered democratic participation* so that the potential erosion of universalized conditions of human flourishing can be countered by effective political action
- (c) *Extensive forms of solidaristic community*, so that the problem that incentives for those with skills and talents might undermine egalitarianism can be minimized.

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**II. The diagnosis and critique of capitalism****Thesis 4. Capitalism's Progressiveness thesis**

Capitalism generates some of the conditions for universalizing human flourishing:

- (a) It spurs the development of the forces of production in ways that systematically increase the productivity of the economy, thus advancing the possibility for universalizing the material conditions for flourishing.
- (b) In uneven ways it fosters institutions of individual rights and the rule of law, thus advancing the possibilities for democratic governance.
- (c) Through commodification of labor markets it erodes ascriptive privileges and identities, thus advancing the possibility for extensive forms of solidaristic community.

**Thesis 5. Capitalism's obstruction of flourishing thesis**

Capitalism blocks the realization of universalized human flourishing by:

- (a) Generating massive levels of inequality in the levels of toilsome labor and material conditions of life.
- (b) Constraining autonomy over activities through private property rights within production.
- (c) Biasing the use of productivity growth towards intensified consumerism over liberated time.
- (d) Undermining the deepening of democratic participation and empowerment through concentrations of private economic power deployed both in markets and in politics.
- (e) Fostering competitive, individualistic, self-interested forms of collective activity and thus weakening the salience of solidaristic community.

**Thesis 6. Anti-capitalism thesis**

To realize the potential for universalizing human flourishing generated within capitalism requires challenging and transforming capitalism.

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### **III. Historical Possibility Theses: the problem of dynamics & strategies of social change**

#### **Alternative I: Classical Historical Materialism as a Theory of the Future**

##### **Thesis 7. The long-term nonsustainability of capitalism thesis**

In the long-run capitalism is an unsustainable social order. Its internal dynamics (laws of motion) will eventually destroy the conditions of its own reproducibility.

##### **Thesis 8. The intensification of anticapitalist class struggle thesis**

The dynamics of capitalist development systematically tend to:

- (1) increase the proportion of the population – the working class – whose interests are pervasively hurt by capitalism, while at the same time
- (2) increase the collective capacity of the working class to challenge capitalism.

The result is an intensification of class struggle directed against capitalism.

##### **Thesis 9. The revolutionary transformation thesis.**

Since capitalism becomes increasingly unsustainable (thesis 7) while the class forces arrayed against capitalism become increasingly numerous and capable of challenging capitalism (thesis 8), eventually the social forces arrayed against capitalism will be sufficiently strong and capitalism itself sufficiently weak that capitalism can be overthrown.

##### **Thesis 10. The transition to socialism thesis**

Given the ultimate nonsustainability of capitalism (thesis 7), and the interests and capacities of the social actors arrayed against capitalism (thesis 8), in the aftermath of the destruction of capitalism through intensified class struggle (thesis 9), socialism, defined as a society in which the working class collectively controls the system of production, is its most likely successor (or in an even stronger version of the thesis: its *inevitable* successor).

##### **Thesis 11. The Communism Destination Thesis**

The dynamics of socialist development tendentially leads to a strengthening of community solidarity and a progressive erosion of material inequalities so that eventually classes and the state will “wither away”, resulting in the emergence of a communist society governed by the distributional principle “to each according to need, from each according to ability”

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**Alternative II:  
Sociological Marxism as a theory of the contradictory reproduction of capitalism**

**Thesis 12. The social reproduction of capitalism thesis**

By virtue of (a) the exploitative conflict-generating character of capitalist class relations, and (b) the negative social and economic externalities of capitalist market competition, capitalism is an inherently unstable form of social relations and thus requires active institutional arrangements for its reproduction.

**Thesis 13. The contradictions of capitalism thesis**

By virtue of the dynamics of capitalist society, the institutional solutions to the problems of social reproduction of capitalism at any point in time have a systematic tendency to erode and become less functional over time.

**Thesis 14. Institutional Crisis and Renovation thesis**

Because of the continual need for institutions of social reproduction (thesis 12) and the tendency for the reproductive capacity of given institutional arrangements to erode over time (thesis 13), institutions of social reproduction in capitalist societies will tend to be periodically renovated in the face of social disruption and crisis.

**Thesis 15. Non-inevitability of Functional Optimality thesis.**

The institutions of social reproduction that are constructed out of contradictions and crises need not be optimal for the functioning of capitalism or the interests of capital. The actual form of these institutional solutions and the extent to which they intensify or mute the inegalitarian, exploitative and oppressive logics of capitalism depends upon the balance of class (and other) social forces

**Thesis 16. The Real Utopias Thesis**

The historical trajectory of capitalist development does not create an immanent necessity of emancipatory transformation, but nevertheless the contradictory functioning of capitalism opens up the possibility for emancipatory futures. The realization of that possibility depends upon struggles within capitalism to create and advance institutional spaces for radical egalitarian redistributions of material conditions, deepened democratic forms of governance, and solidaristic communities.