Background:
The readings this week are intended to introduce the class to several of the core concepts of Marxism. The focus is on the writings of the “young” Marx and Engels, up to and including *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). This is often referred to as Marx and Engels philosophical or humanist period, in contrast to their later scientific writings. It’s here that they formulate key concepts such as alienation, class struggle, the materialist concept of history, and the unity of theory and practice. These early texts are critical to understanding the core of Marxism before it went through various permutations, revisions, and eventual ossification in the authoritarian communist world of the past century. If Marxism is to be rejuvenated for our times, we must rediscover its roots in these early writings.

It’s often said that Marxism is a synthesis of German philosophy, French politics, and English economics. The dominant philosophical influence in Germany during this period was Hegelian idealism. In philosophical terms, idealism is a belief in the priority of mind (“spirit”, “ideals”, “God”) over matter and a view that history is determined by the development of ideas and consciousness. A detailed explanation of Hegel’s system is well beyond the scope of this introduction however a few key points may be helpful for better understanding the origin of Marxism.

First, the tendency of Hegel’s thought is to comprehend all possible antagonisms within the unity of a system which allows for conflict only as a motor of gradual progress towards a predetermined goal. The real and the rational are identical. On the political plane it reflects the reconciliation of critical thought with an unchanging reality. For Hegel, the State was the actuality of the ethical Idea. In this sense, Hegelian idealism became a crutch for conservatives who favored the political status quo of an oppressive monarchy. The reconciliation of idea and reality is the central motive of Hegel’s thought, whereas for Marx it is the transformation of reality that is central. More on that in a moment.

Also central to Hegel’s system was the dialectical method. Hegel’s dialectic was meant to conform to the actual structure of reality and was conceived as a process in which the logical subject unfolds itself into its component parts. For our purposes it is enough to say that Hegel’s dialectic breaks away from the formal logic of fixed categories \(a = a, a \neq b\) into a realm where the content and the method of enquiry coincide. The result of enquiry is to demonstrate that reality is not as it appears to empirical perception, but as it is revealed by philosophical reflection. Marx famously “stood Hegel’s dialectic on it’s head” as we shall see shortly.

The disintegration of Hegelianism went parallel with the gradual formation of a movement hostile to absolutism and religious orthodoxy of the German monarchy. After his death in 1831
Hegel’s followers drifted into incompatible positions which coincided with the emergence of radical democratic and socialist movements. It is within this context that a German philosopher named Ludwig Feuerbach broke the dominance of Hegel’s thought. Feuerbach expounded a materialist philosophy that shifted pure thought to sensory perception, from mind to man, together with nature as its basis. In philosophy, materialism holds that matter is the fundamental substance in nature, and that all things, including mental aspects and consciousness, are results of material interactions.

Feuerbach begins and ends as critic of religion and philosophical idealism. His contemplative materialism views humans in a generic way with an abstract naturalness which always remains the same. This leads to an ahistorical, static notion of “human being”. This humanistic and naturalistic rejection of Hegel had a strong influence on the young Marx. Despite this influence Marx was critical Feuerbach’s materialism, “For me Feuerbach’s aphorisms are only incorrect on one point, he refers too much to nature and too little to politics.” Marx soon detached himself from Feuerbach’s vague humanness of the world.

Readings:

What is the Real Marxist Tradition? (1983) Excerpts

Written by a British Marxist, this brief introduction summarizes much the information below and is good point of entry into this class. The author introduces many prominent historical socialists into the conversation but don’t let that distract you from his key concepts. We’ll learn more about Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, and Kautsky in later classes! While this is an excellent summary there are a couple points that I disagree with especially in light of the subsequent readings. See if there’s anything that strikes you as odd.

For A Ruthless Criticism, Letter to Ruge (1843)

In 1842 at the age of 24, Karl Marx went to work as a journalist at the Rheinische Zeitung newspaper based in Cologne. Contact with political and economic questions increasingly led Marx from the critique of religion to the critique of the State and the social relations of political-economy. The radical democratic views expressed by Marx and others led to the newspaper being censored, then shuttered, by German authorities in early 1843.

During 1843, Marx retreated to his private notebooks to settle accounts with Hegel and Feuerbach before moving to Paris in October of that year. He was to become co-editor of a new international journal, Deutsch-Französische Jahrbucher, with another young radical named Arnold Ruge. In a letter sent to Ruge in September of 1843 Marx lays out this plans for this new journal with youthful exuberance. In this letter we get a sense of the stifling political climate Marx was battling in Germany, as well as the uncertain future of reformist movements around him. Marx then arrives at the fundamental task at hand, “I am referring to ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be.”
The passages that follow demonstrate how far Marx had travelled in such a short period of time; from Hegel to Feuerbach to the beginnings of a new materialism focused on class antagonisms. Here Marx locates the terrain of practical human struggle in the political arena and directs his most pointed criticism in the direction of the State.

“As far as real life is concerned, it is precisely the political state – in all its modern forms – which, even where it is not yet consciously imbued with socialist demands, contains the demands of reason. And the political state does not stop there. Everywhere it assumes that reason has been realised. But precisely because of that it everywhere becomes involved in the contradiction between its ideal function and its real prerequisites.”

These prerequisites of the State are quickly understood as being the establishment and defense of private property and thus a class hierarchy hostile to democracy and freedom.

Marx rails against the dogmatic formulas and utopian blueprints present in the socialist movement at that time. The goal of the new journal will be the self-clarification (critical philosophy) based on the analysis of ongoing struggles. It’s here that Marx first expresses the idea of a specific historical mission of the proletariat and the interpretation of revolution not as a violation of history but as a fulfillment of its innate tendency. This represents a clear break with the arbitrary constructed ideal of utopian socialism.

“We develop new principles for the world out of the world’s own principles. We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for, and consciousness is something that it has to acquire, even if it does not want to. The reform of consciousness consists only in making the world aware of its own consciousness, in awakening it out of its dream about itself, in explaining to it the meaning of its own actions... It will then become evident that the world has long dreamed of possessing something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality.”

**Theses on Feuerbach (1845)**

The Theses on Feuerbach are eleven short propositions written in the spring of 1845 that went unpublished until 1888. Concerning the Theses, Engels writes in the foreword to his Ludwig Feuerbach, “they are notes for later elaboration, jotted down quickly, definitely not intended for publication, but invaluable as the first document in which the seed of genius of the new view of the world is set down.” The Theses have also been described as “the few lightning flashes that represent a major event in philosophy, breaking the night of an idealist past by glimpsing at the new world through the discovery of an unknown continent of knowledge.” The Theses contain the most trenchant formulation of Marx’s objections to Feuerbach’s materialism as well as his own new alternative.

In The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx’s own materialism had already advanced to the point where human history was understood as a changing ensemble of social relationships that are antagonistic in class terms. The historically formative role of human labor is identified by Marx. Humans interact with one another and with nature to shape their
surroundings and sustain their existence. Here the relationship between human beings does not remain an abstract anthropological one at all, as it does in Feuerbach, instead the critique of human self-alienation (transferred from religion to the State) already penetrates to the economic heart of the alienation process. The respective class-based methods of production and exchange based on the division of labor, particularly the capitalist ones, are located as the source of this alienation.

Theses 5, 1, & 3 deal with perception and activity and culminate in a rejection of Feuerbach’s purely contemplative theory of knowledge in favor of a practical one. For Marx, perception is itself a component of mankind’s practical relationship to the world, so that an object is not simply “given” by indifferent nature but is a humanized object conditioned by human needs and efforts. Thesis 3 is especially informative as it locates human consciousness inside the external world which it helps to form. “Circumstances are in fact changed by men, and the educator must himself be educated.” Here Marx is struggling both against a mechanistic materialism that results in a fatalism devoid of human agency and an idealist contingency where circumstances can be changed by human willpower irrespective of objective material conditions.

Theses 4, 6, 7, 9, & 10 deal with self-alienation, its real cause, and a new materialism that rejects this self-alienation. Feuerbach localizes his abstract “humanness” but only in such a way as to allow it to be inherent in the single individual, free of society, without social history. Marx, however, criticizes precisely this abstract above mere individuals, and in fact defines human existence as ‘ensemble of social conditions’. Marx advocates for a real humanism that can only be present in a new “human society” that has as its goal the removal of self-alienation. A class barrier is finally noted in Thesis 9, the same barrier which blocked Feuerbach’s revolutionary activity now blocks history and society in his anthropology. Thus Marx leads us from general-ideal man, via mere individuals, to the ground of real humanity and possible humanness of a socialist society free of alienation.

Theses 2 & 8 are the theory-practice group which assert that truth is not a theory relationship alone, but a definite theory-practice relationship. Thesis 2 sets thought above sensory perception, with and in which it merely commences. The cognitive function of practice does not merely signify that the success of an activity confirms the accuracy of our knowledge, nor that practical life expresses the range and purpose of human interests; it means also that truth is itself the reality and power of thought, i.e. that those ideas are true which reject self-alienation and confirm our basic human nature.

The famous Thesis 11 is etched on Marx’s tombstone in Highgate Cemetery in London. “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.” This formula expresses in a nutshell the viewpoint of a “practical philosophy” as opposed to the contemplative attitude of Hegel or Feuerbach. To understand the world does not mean considering it from the outside, judging it morally or explaining it scientifically; it means society understanding itself, an act in which the subject changes the object by the very fact of understanding it. This can only come about when the subject and object coincide, when the
difference between “the educator and the educated” disappears, and then thought itself
becomes a revolutionary act, the self-recognition of a fully human existence. Marx’s
dialectic is the unity of theory and practice, a new philosophy of praxis.

**Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859)**

Marx’s later writings are almost exclusively concerned with understanding human history in
terms of systemic processes, based on modes of production (broadly speaking, the ways in
which societies are organized to employ labor and technology powers to interact with their
material surroundings). In this piece we have Marx looking back on his formative years and
providing a famous, pithy summation of the materialist conception of history (aka historical
materialism).

> "In the social production of their life, [humans] enter into definite relations that are indispensable
and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of
development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production
constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and
political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The
mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in
general. It is not the consciousness of [humans] that determines their being, but, on the contrary,
their social being that determines their consciousness."

In short, we must enter into social relations with others in order to produce the conditions that
sustain ourselves and our tribes, clans, families, etc. The type of relationship will roughly
correspond to a multitude of economic conditions in society including, but not limited to,
technological progress. The sum total of all the various social relations creates a dominant
economic system or "base" (i.e. capitalism, feudalism, etc). The economic system gives rise to a
society with dominant political-ideological “superstructures” (State, legal system, religion, etc.)
through which human consciousness takes on corresponding norms, customs, and values.

Neither the contents of consciousness nor consciousness in general is involved (though Marx
certainly conceived of consciousness itself as "a social product"). What we have is a recognition
of the fact that societal rules (organized in accordance with ruling-class projects) become
individual vocabularies of thought and action. Simply to speak of “buying shoes” assumes
markets and commodity production. This does not mean that such socially given vocabularies
directly determine what one thinks, just the general and routine cognitive channels along which
one normally travels. As stated in *The German Ideology* (1845), Marx's conception of history

> "rests on the exposition of the real process of production, starting out from the simple material
production of life, and on the comprehension of the form of intercourse connected with and
created by this mode of production . . .From this starting-point, it explains all the different
theoretical productions and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, ethics, etc., and traces
their origin and growth, by which means the matter can of course be displayed as a totality (and
consequently, also the reciprocal action of these various sides on one another)"
The reciprocal action of all aspects of human activity reveals mankind as producing the conditions that produce themselves. Human ideas modify, through praxis, the very existential substratum of ideas themselves; history is the unfolding of mankind shaping its world, both the continuation of "traditional activity in completely changed circumstances and (the modification of) the old circumstances with a completely changed activity."

Marx's own "dialectic" of history involved revealing that while all hitherto existing societies had manifested a unity of opposed forces (the symbiotic antagonism of classes),

"The capitalist relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production—antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but of one arising from the social conditions of life of the individuals; at the same time the productive forces developing in the womb of capitalist society create the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism. This social formation brings, therefore, the prehistory of human society to a close."

Each new form of social order in human prehistory develops through the contradictions (antagonisms between collectively organized interests and felt needs, tensions between perceptions of actuality and ideas of potentiality, etc.) which produce negative, transcendent social forces that can shatter the old set of socioeconomic arrangements but maintain and further develop its material and cultural heritage along qualitatively different lines. Finally, with the communist phase, the absolute development possible in human prehistory (capitalistic civilization) has given way to its ultimate negation, the higher synthesis of human existence.

The base-superstructure paradigm has been frequently misinterpreted as a rigid separation between two spheres or as implying the superstructure is mere reflection of the economic base. Marxism is not an economic determinism, nor does it guarantee the victory of the proletariat. There is no "inevitability" in human dialectic—only interception. Marx's "iron laws" working towards "inevitable results" belong to specific models with stringent conditions (part of Marx's method of successive approximations prior to organization and action). In his concrete analyses of socioeconomic practice, Marx spoke only of tendential laws, even spelling out the contrary conditions necessary to negate them. Marx believed that dialectics should deal not with the mental world of ideas but with the material world, the world of production and other economic activity. For Marx, dialectics is not a formula for generating predetermined outcomes, but is a method for the empirical study of social processes in terms of interrelations, development, and transformation.

The Communist Manifesto (1848)

Marx and Engels wrote the Manifesto during the European revolutions of 1848 in an effort to set forth a new socialist program based on the class struggle of the proletariat. It's their first propagandistic text intended for a general audience. The Manifesto weaves together multiple concepts such as class struggle, alienation, and dialectical-historical materialism to address a specific revolutionary moment. The text has lost none of its rhetorical power. Rather than sum it up here see if you can locate some of the above concepts interspersed throughout the text.
Study Questions (Don’t worry there won’t be any quizzes!)

1. Molyneux states that Marxism is not a dogma. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
2. Does Marxism have any essential or immutable tenets? If so, what are they?
3. In the Molyneux essay several prominent socialists state that Marxism is best understood as a “method”. How would you describe or characterize this method? What is the “object” of this method (i.e. what is it analyzing or acting on?)
4. What is the difference between “idealism” and “materialism”? How might an idealist explain the election of Donald Trump? How would a materialist analysis differ?
5. Does adopting a Marx’s materialist perspective limit the role of human agency in shaping the world? Why or Why not?