

BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY
Department of Sociology

Sociology 141a
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MARX AND FREUD

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."
The man replied, "Things as they are
are changed upon the blue guitar."

Wallace Stevens

The Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways: the point is to *change* it.

Karl Marx

The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. It may be that in this respect precisely the present time deserves a special interest. Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man [sic]. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety. And now it is to be expected that the other one of the two 'Heavenly Powers,' eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary. But who can foresee with what success and with what result?

Sigmund Freud

The author...begs [the readers] not to react too quickly to their first impulses of criticism and dislike by rejecting [this material]. Psycho-analysis brings forward so much that is new, and among it so much that contradicts traditional opinions and wounds deeply-rooted feelings, that it is bound at first to provoke denial. A reader who suspends his[/her] judgment and allows psycho-analysis as a whole to make its impression on him[/her] will perhaps become open to a conviction that even this undesired novelty is worth knowing and is indispensable for anyone who wishes to understand the mind and human life.

Sigmund Freud

[Reread this paragraph, substituting "Marxian analysis" for "psycho-analysis."]

<p>We shall require a new manner of thinking if mankind [sic] is to survive. Albert Einstein</p>
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The Perspective of the Course

People tend to accept changes in paradigms--the models by which we understand how things are organized and work—slowly and, if at all, with much pain. Challenges to accepted ways of interpreting the world (e.g., the earth is flat, humans are the culmination of the six days of divine creation, rain dances can end droughts) are almost always met with suspicion, disbelief, hostility, and sometimes death. (Consider, e.g., how questioning of their basic paradigms have been met from time to time by the Catholic Church, Orthodox Judaism, the erstwhile Soviet government, the United States government, “free market” ideologists, and other guardians of official ways of explaining the world.)

It is difficult enough for new scientific paradigms to be accepted (Copernicus, Darwin, the germ theory of disease, cosmology). Harder still is entertaining the possibility of paradigm shift in efforts to account for human behavior. There are deep political and emotional investments in believing certain “truths” about society and “human nature,” and few people welcome the prospect that those are “truths” rather than Truths. Even at universities, which consecrate the search for truth no matter what, the same resistances to paradigm challenge can be found as at other institutions and on the street.

Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud have done more to shake confidence in accepted explanations of self, society, and their interrelations than have any other (all other?) thinkers of the past several centuries. The work of each is original, striking, provocative, troubling, sometimes erroneous, and profound. Despite the current fashionable rejection of most of the innovations of both, they seem ever on the minds of serious thinkers. Much of contemporary social science is either exploration of the meanings and implications of their systems or elaborate efforts to refute them.

Marx is radical in his sociology and conservative in his social psychology. Freud is radical in his social psychology and conservative in his sociology. Each attempts to discover not only explanations for human suffering but practices for reducing it. It is surely the action implications of their systems (revolutionary political movements for Marx; psychoanalysis as therapy for Freud) as much as their content that bother their detractors and nearly anyone new to them. And for good reason. With whatever errors and limits, if Marx is right concerning the structure of domination in societies, and if Freud is right about dynamics of internal and external oppression, then society as it is so far is not merely where suffering happens, it is in complex ways its multifaceted context and cause.

It can be argued that the study of the work of these two thinkers is essential to a liberal arts education. Their writings are best approached skeptically and also in a spirit of inquiry open enough to challenge paradigms and to take that endeavor seriously, really and fully seriously. Both are best encountered the way Coleridge urged poetry be approached: with a “willing suspension of disbelief.”

Both Marx and Freud are out of fashion now. Entire nations and an empire that *claimed* to organize itself according to Marxian propositions have recently, formally failed. At the same time, most recent liberation movements in our society as well as conservative opposition to them have

declared psychoanalytic thinking reactionary, irrelevant, sexist, erroneous, or all of the above.

To make matters even more complicated, the ideas of Marx and Freud are widely regarded as irreconcilable. Although at certain points that is certainly true, it is the thesis of this course that each thinker's system is in very powerful, insightful ways an enhancement of and complement to the other.

We will read basic theoretical works by Marx and his co-worker Engels and by Freud. We will also read a psycho-analytic autobiography (Shields), a feminist revision of Freud (Miller), and a discussion of class and psychological aspects of consumerism in the United States (Schlosser).

Setup of the course

The class meets Tuesdays and Fridays 9:10-10:30. The class hours will combine lecture and discussion. An additional hour will be scheduled for discussion in small groups. Steady presence at all classes and discussion groups will make it possible to grapple with the broad range of issues raised in the course; i.e., regular attendance is required. Occasionally we will have guest speakers. We may have one or two evening meetings for speakers and/or videos.

Written work

One of our goals in this course is to have a conversation going among all of us—students, TAs, and professor. One way to do this is through written responses to readings and other course materials. Toward that end, we will ask you to work together in groups of two in writing short papers every other week or so.

Each paper should, staying close to the text and questions asked, demonstrate competence with the text and raise some issue, problem, question, insight, disturbance, etc. connected with the reading for that two week period. It also can include comments on class discussions that you feel moved to extend, criticize, etc. The last paper should include a summary discussion of how one relates so far to Marx and Freud and the claim that they interconnect.

1. It is well to learn to write succinctly. Practice getting to the point quickly and saying what you mean. The papers should be held to three pages, four at most.

2. If you find the reading difficult, summarizing it to get a hold of it can be useful. The point of this part of a response paper is to ask if your interpretation of what the author said makes sense to the reader. But do not limit the paper to this. We know you can write book reports. Response papers are meant to be much more than that. *Do not restate* what the author said in the author's terms. Quotations may be used to illustrate a point or ask a question, but do not repeat the author without interpreting in your words, and do not write a paper that is mostly quotations.

3. Remember that all reading is interpretation. We never focus on it all, we never

comprehend it all, and we do not know exactly what the author had in mind. Nor does that matter. What matters is what the reader makes of what is read.

4. Include your own questions about the reading, your own critical reactions, your own hesitations, reservations, etc. **And most important: your own insights.** Strive to make connections that the author and the reader may not have made. Strive to connect the reading with other reading, with central ideas and issues as they develop in the course, with your understanding of the world, and with your emotional, political, and intellectual reactions to what you see in society and in your life.

5. The premium in these papers is on showing the reader that you are grappling with the course materials, have opened yourself up to the possibility that there is something in them for you, and can think creatively with what we are studying. The premium also is on integrating what may seem like disparate materials and struggling to make sense of them in your thinking, in your reality as a citizen, and in your reality as a thinking, feeling, viable actor in society

6. In the response papers, you may work with class discussions, professors' and TAs' views, world events, whatever, but **always in the context of the readings.** I.e., no riffing from the top of your head on interesting things that may be relevant to the course but are not anchored in the texts. We are looking for **real struggle** with reading and other course materials.

A final paper intended to draw the course together will be due Wednesday, April 20.

Group project

Each discussion group will be asked, by the fourth week of the course, to select one video, novel, or social institution to examine, collectively, from both Marxian and Freudian perspectives. We will view the classic film *Citizen Kane* as an example of how art and institutions can be approached in this way. In the last four weeks of the course, each group will be asked to present as full an analysis as it can, in 20-30 minutes, of the work of art or institution chosen for analysis. Final papers can be done may include a portion that goes into further depth into the topic examined.

The point of this exercise is to study an area where both Marx and Freud can be applied in ways that reveal insights and problematics of that area **and also to explore in what ways Marxian and Freudian analyses can complement one another fruitfully.** In addition to works of art and institutions, possible themes, which would need to be based on suitable texts, could include racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, nationalism, and others that might occur to you. Other topics and forms are welcome if approved by the discussion leader and the professor. An alternative topic might be a critical look at Marx and Freud in attempts to come to terms with the complexities of their thinking and students' insights, learning, and misgivings about both thinkers' work.

Outside events

Wk 2, 1/21 & 24. **alienation, property, money**
Marx in Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, “Estranged Labor,” 70-81
(reread this) ; “Private Property and Communism,” 81-93; “The
Power of Money in Bourgeois Society,” 101-105.

**response paper on the readings of Wks 1 and 2. What central issues in Marx have emerged already? Where do you recognize them in your own lives?

Wk 3, 1/28 & 31. **commodities, use value and exchange value, fetishism**
Marx, from *Capital*, in Tucker, 302-317; 319-329.

Wk 4, 2/4 & 7. **institutions and history**
Marx, *The German Ideology*, in Tucker, 148-200.

**response paper on the readings of Wks 3 and 4. What does Marx mean by commodities and by ruling ideas? What are some of the ruling ideas that have affected you in your life? In what ways are commodities themselves ruling ideas? Briefly, where are you so far on Marx?

Wk 5, 2/11 & 14. **introduction to Freud: the psychology of errors**
Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, biog. sketch, ix-xx, and chs. 1-4.

Wk 6, 2/18 & 21 **dreams**
Introductory Lectures, chs. 5-9, 11-14.

Wk 7, 2/25 & 28. **sexuality and neurosis**
Introductory Lectures, chs. 16-20.

**response paper on the readings of Wks 5-7. What are Freud’s central ideas so far? Try to find examples from literature and/or daily life to illustrate them.

VACATION: 3/3-7.

Wk 8, 3/11 & 14. **neurosis and therapy**
Introductory Lectures, chs. 21-24.

Wk 9, 3/18 & 21. **neurosis and therapy (cont.)**
Introductory Lectures, chs. 25-28.

Wk 10, 3/25 & 28. **a psychoanalytic autobiography**
Mary Lou Shields, *Sea Run*.

**response paper on the readings of Wks 8-10. What does Freud mean by neurosis? How does he

explain it and treatment of it? How does Shields' story illustrate neurosis and its treatment?

Wk 11, 4/1 & 4. **personality and society**
Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

Wk 12, 4/8 & 11. **women and society**
Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*

**response paper on the readings of Wks 11 and 12. How do these books fit together? What in these works is offered to explain the nature of human suffering and possibilities for ameliorating it?

Wk 13, 4/16 (Wed) & 18. **Consumerism, social class, and psycho-development**
Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*

VACATION 4/17-24.

Wk 14, 4/29, last day of class Schlosser (cont.)

THE FINAL PAPER FOR THE COURSE IS DUE WEDNESDAY, APRIL 30 IN BOXES OUTSIDE THE PROFESSOR'S OFFICE.

Grading

The course assumes serious interest in its topic and does not assume any background in it or sociology. The premium is on understanding and working with the concepts and readings and on thinking creatively with them. It is assumed that real learning involves risk and re-thinking assumptions and familiar paradigms (with no preordained or "right" outcome) as well as learning new information. We will pay attention to such matters as involvement, keeping up with the reading, attendance, and participation in discussion sections. All students are encouraged to take active part in the larger class, but we respect that some people are reluctant to do so.

A--mastery of readings, concepts, and exercises; full participation, engagement, *risk-taking, and growth*; grappling with the course and coming to your own insights about its issues, its implications, its relation to yourself.

B--clear understanding of course materials and conscientious participation but little evidence of risk-taking and growth or grappling with the course toward one's own insights. Not full or steady participation.

C--fuzzy, incomplete, lethargic relationship with course materials, minimal involvement of self in course, little risk-taking and growth, no insights of one's own, sporadic participation.

D—same as C but moreso.

E—trying to wing it by leaning too much on others' understanding, not writing papers fully germane to the readings and central concepts of the course, rare participation, etc.

To pass the course, the student must do all written work, attend the 3 outside events, come to class, and take part in discussion sections. All written work must be backed up on discs. Computers crashing, etc. are not acceptable excuses for not completing work.

Students with special needs

If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see the professor immediately.