

Much of this chapter is devoted to the theories of Karl Marx and Max Weber because of their influence and importance. The strength of their theories is attested by their endurance. Many of the basic notions that Marx and Weber presented in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remain vibrant and continue to be applied and debated by contemporary social scientists. Following an exploration of Marx's and Weber's ideas regarding social inequality, a few theories with more contemporary roots are presented.

It is important to consider at the outset that even though they may seem hopelessly at odds, different theoretical views of social inequality are not necessarily "either-ors." It is not a question of which theory is correct and which is incorrect. Theoretical explanations may overlap one another in some ways, and each may simply focus more sharply on one or more specific aspects of inequality.

Marx's Theory of Social Inequality

To call Marx one of the founding fathers of modern social science, as many have, would not be overstating his significance. Though he lived and wrote in the middle and latter nineteenth century, his theories remain relevant and form part of the foundation not only of contemporary sociology but also of the other social sciences. So sweeping was the range of his thought that few areas of social life were untouched by his analysis. As a result, Marx would be hard to categorize in the context of modern-day academic disciplines. Sociology, political science, and economics can each claim a Marxian tradition. Indeed, it has often been remarked that all social science since Marx's time has, in one form or another, involved a response to his ideas. This is surely true in the case of stratification and inequality. Others before Marx had dealt with issues of social class, but Marx gave these issues a primary place in social analysis and offered related ideas and concepts that today remain basic points of inquiry in studying social inequality.

It is not possible in just a few pages to attempt a detailed examination of Marx's contribution to the study of social inequality. Many scholars have devoted their entire careers to such a task and have compiled literally thousands of volumes containing analyses, critiques, defenses, and refutations of his works. In fact, one of the difficulties in any study of Marx is this extremely wide range of interpretations. French sociologist Raymond Aron reminded us that "if only there were not so many millions of Marxists, there would be no question at all about what Marx's leading ideas are or what is central to his thought" (1968:145). We might take comfort in knowing that the dilemma is not new in our era. The many different interpretations and applications of his work, even in his own time, prompted Marx to declare that he was "not a Marxist" (Lewis, 1972:9).

One factor that has contributed to the proliferation of interpretations of Marx is the rather unsystematic manner in which his writings were presented. Friedrich Engels, a wealthy factory owner, was a close working associate of

Marx and organized much of Marx's work, in the process supplementing it with ideas of his own. Furthermore, Marx's extremely broad scope of social analysis has undoubtedly helped to open the door to conflicting views of his thought.

As well as an explanation of inequality in societies, Marx's work encompassed a sweeping theory of sociohistorical change, a full explanation of the capitalist economic system, and a Utopian vision. Each of these units of thought is, of course, essentially interrelated and cannot be considered independently. Furthermore, within the context of the Marxian perspective—Marx saw societies as *total*—one cannot isolate any single aspect of society. The specific elements can be understood only in relation to the whole. What is of paramount importance to the study of inequality, however, is how Marx's analysis addresses the two key theoretical issues: Why is there inequality? and Is inequality inevitable?

The Economic Foundation

Fundamental to the Marxian theory of inequality is the pivotal role of a society's economic institutional structure. The predominance of economic institutions is so overwhelming, in Marx's estimation, that they are the determinants of the entire system of society. He saw the dynamics of society originating in economic, or productive, activity—securing food, shelter, and all the other necessities: "Life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing, and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself" (Marx in Tucker, 1972:120).

It is out of this economic reality, the process by which people fulfill their material needs, that a society's culture arises—its various structures of law, religion, education, and politics and the belief systems attached to these structures. In short, the manner in which people organize to produce their needs and the relations that develop out of those activities determine all other aspects of social life.

This system of production by which people provide for their material existence is the society's economic foundation or, as Marx put it, the **mode of production**. As the economic foundation changes, so do people's ideas, but it is fundamental that the former impel the latter. In a famous passage Marx explained this process:

The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. (Marx and Engels, 1968:182)

The idea of economic reality, how people solve the problem of survival, is, then, the basic starting point for understanding the nature of power and inequality in societies.

The primacy of the economic mode cannot be overemphasized. For Marx, the central fact of all human history is the necessity for societies, in every

epoch, to provide the necessary goods and materials for sustenance. How do people in society organize in order to provide these things? That is the fundamental question with which any societal analysis must begin. To understand social inequality, then, one must look not to the dominant philosophy of a historical period but to the dominant economic form. It is this *historical materialism* that is the cornerstone of Marxian thought.

Economic Base and Superstructure Whatever form the economic base, or substructure, takes requires a whole superstructure of noneconomic activity and thought. This superstructure of noneconomic institutions—the family, religion, education, the state—necessarily reflects the foundation on which it is raised. The economic activity of an agrarian society, for example, is centered on the land. What the society produces for survival derives primarily from the soil, and most people will engage in occupations that relate to agriculture: farming, maintaining agricultural tools, and so on. To complement this mode of production, a set of noneconomic institutions will develop that helps sustain an agrarian economic system. The family will be large in order to provide as many hands as possible to work the land; religious rites will coincide with planting and harvesting times; the legal system will be concerned primarily with the ownership rights and inheritance of land; and the political system will be designed to protect the economic and social interests of those who own the land and the tools with which it is worked.

All of these institutions are shaped to fit the needs of an agrarian society; they would not accommodate an industrial mode of production. As a society's economic base changes, therefore, the form and content of its noneconomic institutions must also change. Marx thus explains societal change as the result of changes in the mode of production:

In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production, and in changing their mode of production, their manner of gaining a living, they change all their social relations. The windmill gives you society with the feudal lord, the steammill, society with the industrial capitalist.
(1920:119)

The Class Division

Marx's answer to the first key theoretical question—Why is there inequality?—follows from the core place of economic activity in a society: Inequality arises as a result of control of productive resources, those things that are necessary to supply the society's economic needs. Marx referred to these as the **means of production**. And the division of the society is relatively simple: One element of the population owns these basic resources, whereas the other owns no productive property and can offer only human labor in exchange for material needs. Thus, the latter is forced to work for the former. Although the workers are responsible for the production of economic wealth through their labor, it is the owning class that garners the bulk of the society's wealth.

A social class, for Marx, comprises those who stand in a common position with regard to the productive process. There are, then, essentially two classes in all societies: the owners of the means of production and the workers. All types of societies at different stages of human development and with different productive systems give rise to these two opposing classes, whether masters and slaves in slave societies or lords and serfs in feudal societies. In capitalist societies, these two classes are the **bourgeoisie**, or **capitalist class**, and the **proletariat**, or industrial working class.

The Hegemony of the Capitalist Class This two-part division of society into owners and workers produces gross inequality. Capitalists, the dominant class, receive the bulk of societal rewards, and workers get very little. The capitalist class is able to maintain its power as a result of the possession of three key assets: the means of production, control of the state, and control of ideas and values.

First, workers must submit to the rules established by the capitalists, because, in the end, they have no other choice. Without control of the means of production, they must sell their labor to the capitalists and must accept what the capitalists will pay. Workers do not get the full value of what they produce through their labor; they get only what the capitalist is prepared to pay them: enough to keep them alive and to make certain that they will return to work the next day. The remainder is taken by the capitalist as profit. Under these conditions, there is little likelihood that workers can save enough to eventually possess productive property and become capitalists themselves. Thus, Marx felt that any basic changes in the class structure could be realized only by a revolutionary movement that would divest the bourgeoisie of its control of the means of production.

Second, the capitalist class is a **ruling class** in the sense that it controls the state, that is, government. Marx's view of the state is neatly summarized in *The Communist Manifesto*: "The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" (Marx in Tucker, 1972:337). Thus, even if capitalists themselves may not be in key governing positions, they are represented by those who act in their interests. Political institutions and the actions of political leaders are outgrowths of the class structure and therefore function to protect the property and privileges of the bourgeoisie. Instead of Who governs the society? the more telling question is, Who owns and controls the means of production? Answering that question is tantamount to identifying those who dominate the state, that is, those who govern.

Third, control of ideas and values by the bourgeoisie is perhaps as important as control of the means of production and the state in assuring compliance with the social order of capitalist society. Marx asserted that "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" (Marx in Tucker, 1972:136). In this view, the rules and values of the sociopolitical

system are created, disseminated, and enforced by the dominant class and are ultimately accepted by the society as a whole.

The institutions of education, religion, and the state aid in socializing people to the dominant values. They are merely reflections of ruling-class interests. And by controlling the means of communication (the press and, in modern societies, electronic media), the capitalist class is able to stifle opposing ideas effectively. Lacking class consciousness—that is, being unaware of their own class interests—members of the proletariat regard the ideas of the ruling class as “natural.” The prevailing sociopolitical system is thus seen as just, fair, and working in the interests of all social classes, not simply the capitalists. Engels referred to this as **false consciousness**.

It is important to understand that Marx saw the breakdown of society into two opposing classes as a structural phenomenon. The class system is just that: a *system*. The personal identities of the capitalists or the workers are of no relevance. Whether they are good people or bad, kind and generous, or nasty and stingy is of no consequence. All are part of a system. In their role in this system, capitalists are obliged to exploit workers. To give their workers a share of their profits or to pay workers more in wages would only undercut their position vis-à-vis other capitalists and eventually force them out of business. They therefore have no choice but to pay their workers as little as necessary. To see capitalists as avaricious is to miss the point: They are simply doing what they are expected to do as capitalists. Workers likewise have no choice but to continue to work for less than their fair share of the product; it is the only way they can keep themselves and their families alive. So capitalists and workers come and go. A few workers may even eventually amass enough resources to become capitalists themselves. But this does not change the nature of the system. New capitalists will act like capitalists and exploit their workers. That is the system's logic.

Class Conflict and Societal Change

Marx believed that classes become political groups in that individuals eventually recognize their common socioeconomic interests and are prepared to engage in struggle to protect and enhance them. It is this power struggle between opposing classes that produces social change. Class conflict, Marx explained, is a certainty in societies as long as private ownership of property is sanctioned, thereby enabling one class to control the productive process, the distribution of wealth, and the communication of ideas. But class conflict generates social change, eventually giving rise to a new mode of production and thereby creating a new ruling class. Thus the feudal system, with its ruling class of nobles and lords who owned the land, replaced the slave system. In the same way, feudalism gave way to capitalism, bringing to power a new ruling class of capitalist owners. In each case, irreversible historical and economic forces led to the change and to the ascendance of a new dominant class.

By this logic, then, capitalism will give way to a more advanced form of social and economic organization as the relations of capitalist society are no longer capable of supporting new productive forces. Just as capitalism replaced feudalism, the demise of capitalism and its replacement by a socialist productive system in which the means of production are collectively rather than privately owned would be an unavoidable future development, Marx felt. The momentum behind the passing of capitalism and the emergence of socialism is the conflict between capitalists and workers. Once the workers become conscious of their true class interests, they are transformed into a political group, a *klasse für sich* (literally, a "class for itself"), as Marx described it, prepared to engage in revolutionary confrontation with the bourgeoisie. And just as irresistible historical and economic forces previously favored the capitalist class in its conflict with the landowning class, they now favor the working class.

As to the nature of the revolutionary struggle, Marx was not certain. Advancing industrialization and increasing worker exploitation, he felt, would eventually propel such a movement. But the organizational details of the revolution were left to practitioners such as Lenin to clarify and carry out, well after the deaths of Marx in 1883 and Engels in 1895.

The nature of post-capitalist society was also left largely to speculation, and it is here that Marx was more a visionary than a social scientist. The broad outlines of post-capitalism, however, were well-formulated thoughts. Following the revolution, two stages were envisioned, ultimately climaxing in a classless society. The first phase, *socialism*, was seen as an indeterminate transitional period in which the workers would control the means of production. By this fact alone, power relations would be radically changed, bringing worker exploitation to an end. The state would necessarily still be present, but it would now be a proletarian state, which Marx called the *dictatorship of the proletariat*. The details of this workers' government were not made clear by either Marx or Engels, but, as noted, Lenin fashioned its actual working order, at least in the Soviet Union.

It is only with the total abolition of social classes that the final stage of post-capitalism—communism—would emerge. The classless society is manifestly Utopian, characterized by the complete socialization of the productive system, the end of all economic exploitation, and the appearance of individuals no longer impelled by acquisitive and individualistic values. It is at this point that the well-known dictum "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs" is fulfilled. With these conditions in place, the state withers away, since there are no more class interests to protect and no need to impose social controls.

In the end, then, Marx was optimistic about the possibilities for the elimination of inequality. Regarding the second key theoretical question, whether social inequality is inevitable, Marx answers a qualified "no." Although it would certainly be a long-term affair, the creation of a classless—and thus equitable—society was possible.

We should keep in mind that capitalism, to Marx, was a very beneficial productive system when compared with previous ones. It had created the technology and material abundance that made it possible for people to enter into a social condition in which poverty, both material and psychological, would no longer exist. But to make that condition a reality required the organization of society into a socialist productive system. Capitalism had had its place; indeed, it had been a necessary step in societal development. But its utility, Marx felt, was ended by the middle of the nineteenth century.

Marxian Theory in Summary

The essence of the Marxian theory of stratification and inequality can be distilled into a few simple premises.

- Reality consists of the constant production of basic life needs—food, clothing, shelter. Through work, people in society realize themselves, and it is around this productive process that history unfolds.
- Societies in different stages of social and technological development create different productive systems. Economic institutions (that is, the productive system) shape the general nature of beliefs and practices in all other areas of social life.
- In all societies, a class division evolves. Those who own or control the society's productive resources (the *means of production*) are inevitably in conflict with those who do not. In this conflict, the owning class controls key economic, political, and ideological institutions, all of which therefore reflect and protect its interests.
- Class struggle is a contest between these two primary and opposing classes, and it is here that the dynamic forces of society lie. Class struggle is the generator of societal change.
- All productive systems, with their attendant classes, give way to more advanced systems. This will occur with capitalism, too, as it gives way to socialism, wherein workers will control the means of production. Eventually, a communist society will emerge in which there will be no classes and thus no exploitation.

One might ask, Of what relevance is a theory constructed in the midnineteenth century to conditions and issues of our time? Many specific Marxian propositions are clearly not germane to contemporary societies. Others, however, have had lasting impact and remain meaningful.

The Failure of Marx's Vision

Although parts of it are pertinent to the whole course of human social development, Marx's analysis is concerned primarily with the structure and dynamics of capitalist industrial societies. It is in such societies that Marx