CHAPTER 2

Karl Marx

Chapter Outline

Introduction

Marx began his most famous work, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Marx and Engels 1848/1948), with the following line: "There is a spectre haunting Europe, the spectre of communism." It might be said that the same ghost is haunting our understanding of Marx. It is difficult to separate the ideas of Marx from the political movements that they inspired. Nevertheless, as Tom Rockmore (2002:96) tells us, we must try "to free Marx from Marxism."

For many, Marx has become more of an icon than a thinker deserving of serious study. The symbolism of his name tends to muddle understanding of his ideas. Marx is the only theorist we will study who has had political movements and social systems named after him. He is probably the only theorist your friends and family have strong opinions about. He is often criticized, as well as praised, by people who have never actually read his work. Even among his followers, Marx's ideas frequently are reduced to slogans such as "the opium of the people" and "the dictatorship of proletariat," but the role of these slogans in Marx's encompassing theory often is ignored.

There are many reasons for this lack of understanding of Marx's social theory, the main one being that Marx never really completed his social theory. He planned, early in his career, to publish separate works on economics, law, morals, politics, and

so forth, and then "in a special work, to present them once again as a connected whole, to show the relationship between the parts" (Marx, 1932/1964:280). He never did this final work and never even completed his separate work on economics. Instead, much of his time was taken up by study, journalism, political activity, and a series of minor intellectual and political arguments with friends and adversaries.

In addition, although Marx could write clear and inspiring prose, especially in his political tracts, he often preferred a vocabulary that relied on complex philosophical traditions, and he made these terms even more difficult to understand by implicitly redefining them for his own use. Vilfredo Pareto made the classic critique of Marx by comparing his words to a fable about bats. When someone said they were birds, the bats would cry, "No, we are mice." When someone said they were mice, they protested that they were birds. Whatever interpretation one makes of Marx, others can offer alternative interpretations. For example, some stress Marx's early work on human potential and tend to discount his political economy (see, for example, Ollman, 1976; Wallimann, 1981; Wartenberg, 1982). Others stress Marx's later work on the economic structures of society and see that work as distinct from his early, largely philosophical work on human nature (see Althusser, 1969; Gandy, 1979; McMurty, 1978).[1] A recent interpreter of Marx made the following comment, which applies equally to this chapter: "Virtually every paragraph in this chapter could be accompanied by three concise paragraphs describing why other readers of Marx, erudite and influential, think that this paragraph is wrong, in emphasis or substance" (R. Miller, 1991:105). And, of course, the differing interpretations have political consequences, making any disagreement extremely contentious.[2]

Despite these problems, Marx's theories have produced one of sociology's most productive and significant research programs. When Marx died in 1883, the eleven mourners at his funeral seemed to belie what Engels said in his eulogy: "His name and work will endure through the ages." Nevertheless, Engels seems to have been right. His ideas have been so influential that even one of his critics admitted that, in a sense, "we are all Marxists now" (P. Singer, 1980:1). As Hannah Arendt (2002:274) wrote, if Marx seems to be forgotten, it is not "because Marx's thought and the methods he introduced have been abandoned, but rather because they have become so axiomatic that their origin is no longer remembered."

It is for these reasons that a return to Marx has proven so productive to those working in sociology. Thinking about Marx helps to clarify what sociology and, indeed, our society have taken for granted. Rediscoveries and reinterpretation of Marx have often renewed sociology and opened up a fresh perspective on such issues as alienation, globalization, and the environment (Foster, 2000).

Despite differing interpretations, there is general agreement that Marx's main interest was in the historical basis of inequality, especially the unique form that it takes under capitalism. However, Marx's approach is different from many of the theories that we will examine. For Marx, a theory about how society works would be partial, because

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[1] The approach here is based on the premise that there is no discontinuity or contradiction between Marx's early work on human potential and his later work on the structures of capitalist society—that his early ideas continue, at least implicitly, in his later work even though these ideas were certainly modified by his study of the economic structures of capitalism.

[2] In Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union, there was no problem about the "correct" interpretation of Marx. Stalin himself provided the interpretation and brutally eliminated all those, such as Leon Trotsky, who disagreed.

what he mainly sought was a theory about how to change society. Marx's theory, then, is an analysis of inequality under capitalism and how to change it.

As capitalism has come to dominate the globe and the most significant communist alternatives have disappeared, some might argue that Marx's theories have lost their relevance. However, once we realize that Marx provides an analysis of capitalism, we can see that his theories are more relevant now than ever (McLennan, 2001:43). Marx provides a diagnosis of capitalism that is able to reveal its tendencies to crises, point out its perennial inequalities, and, if nothing else, demand that capitalism live up to its own promises. The example of Marx makes an important point about theory. Even when their particular predictions are disproved—even though the proletariat revolution that Marx believed to be imminent did not come about—theories still hold a value as an alternative to our current society. Theories may not tell us what will happen, but they can argue for what should happen and help us develop a plan for carrying out the change that the theory envisions or for resisting the change that the theory predicts.

The Dialectic

Vladimir Lenin (1972:180) said that no one can fully understand Marx's work without a prior understanding of the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel. We can only hope that this is not true, because Hegel was one of the most purposefully difficult philosophers ever to have written. Nevertheless, we must understand some of Hegel in order to appreciate the central Marxian conception of the dialectic.

The idea of a dialectical philosophy had been around for centuries (Gadamer, 1989). Its basic idea is the centrality of contradiction. While most philosophies, and indeed common sense, treat contradictions as mistakes, a dialectical philosophy believes that contradictions exist in reality and that the most appropriate way to understand reality is to study the development of those contradictions. Hegel used the idea of contradiction to understand historical change. According to Hegel, historical change has been driven by the contradictory understandings that are the essence of reality, by our attempts to resolve the contradictions, and by the new contradictions that develop.

Marx also accepted the centrality of contradictions to historical change. We see this in such well-known formulations as the "contradictions of capitalism" and "class contradictions." However, unlike Hegel, Marx did not believe that these contradictions could be worked out in our understanding, that is, in our minds. Instead, for Marx these are real, existing contradictions (Wilde, 1991:277). For Marx, such contradictions are resolved not by the philosopher sitting in an armchair but by a life-and-death struggle that changes the social world. This was a crucial transformation because it allowed Marx to move the dialectic out of the realm of philosophy and into the realm of a study of social relations grounded in the material world. It is this focus that makes Marx's work so relevant to sociology, even though the dialectical approach is very different from the mode of thinking used by most sociologists. The dialectic leads to an interest in the conflicts and contradictions among various levels of social reality, rather than to the more traditional sociological interest in the ways these various levels mesh neatly into a cohesive whole.

For example, one of the contradictions within capitalism is the relationship between the workers and the capitalists who own the factories and other means of production with which the work is done. The capitalist must exploit the workers in order to make a profit from the workers' labor. The workers, in contradiction to the capitalists, want to keep at least some of the profit for themselves. Marx believed that this contradiction was at the heart of capitalism, and that it would grow worse as capitalists drove more and more people to become workers by forcing small firms out of business and as competition between the capitalists forced them to further exploit the workers to make a profit. As capitalism expands, the number of workers exploited, as well as the degree of exploitation, increases. This contradiction can be resolved not through philosophy but only through social change. The tendency for the level of exploitation to escalate leads to more and more resistance by the workers. Resistance begets more exploitation and oppression, and the likely result is a confrontation between the two classes (Boswell and Dixon, 1993).

Dialectical Method

Marx's focus on real, existing contradictions led to a particular method for studying social phenomena that has also come to be called "dialectical" (T. Ball, 1991; Friedrichs, 1972; Ollman, 1976; L. Schneider, 1971; Starosta, 2008).

Fact and Value

In dialectical analysis, social values are not separable from social facts. Many sociologists believe that their values can and must be separated from their study of facts about the social world. The dialectical thinker believes that it is not only impossible to keep values out of the study of the social world but also undesirable, because to do so would produce a dispassionate, inhuman sociology that has little to offer to people in search of answers to the problems they confront. Facts and values are inevitably intertwined, with the result that the study of social phenomena is value-laden. Thus to Marx it was impossible and, even if possible, undesirable to be dispassionate in his analysis of capitalist society. But Marx's emotional involvement in what he was studying did not mean that his observations were inaccurate. It could even be argued that Marx's passionate views on these issues gave him unparalleled insight into the nature of capitalist society. A less passionate student might have delved less deeply into the dynamics of the system. In fact, research into the work of scientists indicates that the idea of a dispassionate scientist is largely a myth and that the very best scientists are the ones who are most passionate about, and committed to, their ideas (Mitroff, 1974).

Reciprocal Relations

The dialectical method of analysis does not see a simple, one-way, cause-and-effect relationship among the various parts of the social world. For the dialectical thinker, social influences never simply flow in one direction as they often do for cause-and-effect thinkers. To the dialectician, one factor may have an effect on another, but it is just as likely

that the latter will have a simultaneous effect on the former. For example, the increasing exploitation of the workers by the capitalist may cause the workers to become increasingly dissatisfied and more militant, but the increasing militancy of the proletariat may well cause the capitalists to react by becoming even more exploitative in order to crush the resistance of the workers. This kind of thinking does not mean that the dialectician never considers causal relationships in the social world. It does mean that when dialectical thinkers talk about causality, they are always attuned to reciprocal relationships among social factors as well as to the dialectical totality of social life in which they are embedded.

Past, Present, Future

Dialecticians are interested not only in the relationships of social phenomena in the contemporary world but also in the relationship of those contemporary realities to both past (Bauman, 1976:81) and future social phenomena. This has two distinct implications for a dialectical sociology. First, it means that dialectical sociologists are concerned with studying the historical roots of the contemporary world as Marx (1857–1858/1964) did in his study of the sources of modern capitalism. In fact, dialectical thinkers are very critical of modern sociology for its failure to do much historical research. A good example of Marx's thinking in this regard is found in the following famous quotation from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte:*

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.
>
> (Marx, 1852/1970:15)

Second, many dialectical thinkers are attuned to current social trends in order to understand the possible future directions of society. This interest in future possibilities is one of the main reasons dialectical sociology is inherently political. It is interested in encouraging practical activities that would bring new possibilities into existence. However, dialecticians believe that the nature of this future world can be discerned only through a careful study of the contemporary world. It is their view that the sources of the future exist in the present.

No Inevitabilities

The dialectical view of the relationship between the present and the future need not imply that the future is determined by the present. Terence Ball (1991) describes Marx as a "political possibilist" rather than a "historical inevitabilist." Because social phenomena are constantly acting and reacting, the social world defies a simple, deterministic model. The future may be based on some contemporary model, but not inevitably.[3] Marx's historical studies showed him that people make choices but that these choices are limited. For instance, Marx believed that society was engaged in a class struggle and that people could choose to participate either in "the revolutionary reconstitution

[3] Marx did, however, occasionally discuss the inevitability of socialism.

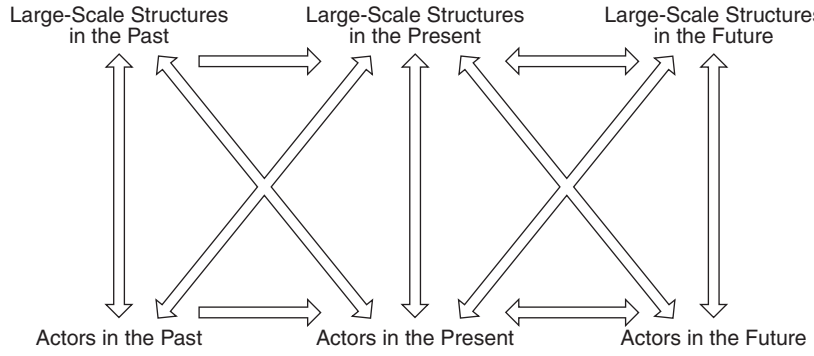

FIGURE 2.1 ***Schematic Representation of a Sociologically Relevant Dialectic***

of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes" (Marx and Engels 1848/1948). Marx hoped and believed that the future was to be found in communism, but he did not believe that the workers could simply wait passively for it to arrive. Communism would come only through their choices and struggles.

This disinclination to think deterministically is what makes the best-known model of the dialectic—thesis, antithesis, synthesis—inadequate for sociological use. This simple model implies that a social phenomenon will inevitably spawn an opposing form and that the clash between the two will inevitably lead to a new, synthetic social form. But in the real world, there are no inevitabilities. Furthermore, social phenomena are not easily divided into the simple thesis, antithesis, and synthesis categories adopted by some Marxists. The dialectician is interested in the study of real relationships rather than grand abstractions. It is this disinclination to deal in grand abstractions that led Marx away from Hegel and would lead him today to reject such a great oversimplification of the dialectic as thesis, antithesis, synthesis.

Actors and Structures

Dialectical thinkers are also interested in the dynamic relationship between actors and social structures. Marx was certainly attuned to the ongoing interplay among the major levels of social analysis. The heart of Marx's thought lies in the relationship between people and the large-scale structures they create (Lefebvre, 1968:8). On the one hand, these large-scale structures help people fulfill themselves; on the other, they represent a grave threat to humanity. But the dialectical method is even more complex than this, because, as we have already seen, the dialectician considers past, present, and future circumstances—both actors and structures. Figure 2.1 is a simplified schematic representation of this enormously complex and sophisticated perspective.

Human Potential

A good portion of this chapter will be devoted to a discussion of Marx's macrosociology, in particular his analysis of the macrostructures of capitalism. But before

we can analyze these topics, we need to begin with Marx's thoughts on the more microsociological aspects of social reality. Marx built his critical analysis of the contradictions of capitalist society on his premises about human potential, its relation to labor, and its potential for alienation under capitalism. He believed that there was a real contradiction between our human potential and the way that we must work in capitalist society.

Marx (1850/1964:64) wrote in an early work that human beings are an "ensemble of social relations." He indicates by this that our human potential is intertwined with our specific social relations and our institutional context. Therefore, human nature is not a static thing but varies historically and socially. To understand human potential, we need to understand social history, because human nature is shaped by the same dialectical contradictions that Marx believed shapes the history of society.

For Marx, a conception of human potential that does not take social and historical factors into account is wrong, but to take them into account is not the same as being without a conception of human nature. It simply complicates this conception. For Marx, there is a human potential in general, but what is more important is the way it is "modified in each historical epoch" (Marx, 1842/1977:609). When speaking of our general human potential, Marx often used the term *species being.* By this he meant the potentials and powers that are uniquely human and that distinguish humans from other species.

Some Marxists, such as Louis Althusser (1969:229), have contended that the mature Marx did not believe in human nature. There are certainly reasons to downplay human nature for someone interested in changing society. Ideas about human nature—such as our "natural" greed, our "natural" tendency to violence, our "natural" gender differences—have often been used to argue against any social change. Such conceptions of human nature are innately conservative. If our problems are due to human nature, we had better learn to just adapt instead of trying to change things.

Nevertheless, there is much evidence that Marx did have a notion of human nature (Geras, 1983). Indeed, it makes little sense to say there is no human nature. Even if we are like a blank chalkboard, the chalkboard must be made out of something and must have a nature such that chalk marks can show up on it. Some conception of human nature is part of any sociological theory. Our concept of human nature dictates how society can be sustained and how it can be changed, but most important for Marx's theory, it suggests how society *should* be changed. The real question is not whether we have a human nature, but what kind of nature it is—unchanging or open to historical processes (the use of the idea human potential here indicates that we think it is open):

> Unless we confront the idea, however dangerous, of our human nature and species being and get some understanding of them, we cannot know what it is we might be alienated from or what emancipation might mean. Nor can we determine which of our "slumbering powers" must be awakened to achieve emancipatory goals. A working definition of human nature, however tentative and insecure, is a necessary step in the search for real as opposed to fantastic alternatives. A conversation about our "species being" is desperately called for.
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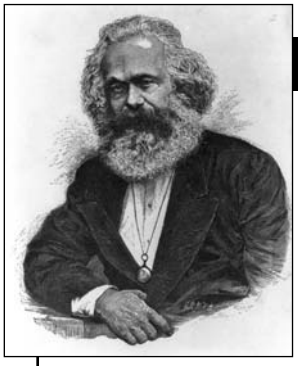
> (D. Harvey, 2000:207)



KARL MARX

A Biographical Sketch

Karl Marx was born in Trier, Prussia, on May 5, 1818 (Beilharz, 2005e). His father, a lawyer, provided the family with a fairly typical middle-class existence. Both parents were from rabbinical families, but for business reasons the father had converted to Lutheranism when Karl was very young. In 1841 Marx received his doctorate in philosophy from the University of Berlin, a school heavily influenced by Hegel and the Young Hegelians, supportive, yet critical, of their master. Marx's doctorate was a dry philosophical treatise, but it did anticipate many of his later ideas. After graduation he became a writer for a liberal-radical newspaper and within ten months had become its editor in chief. However, because of its political positions, the paper was closed shortly thereafter by the government. The early essays published in this period began to reflect a number of the positions that would guide Marx throughout his life. They were liberally sprinkled with democratic principles, humanism, and youthful idealism. He rejected the abstractness of Hegelian philosophy, the naive dreaming of utopian communists, and those activists who were urging what he considered to be premature political action. In rejecting these activists, Marx laid the groundwork for his own life's work:

> Practical attempts, even by the masses, can be answered with a cannon as soon as they become dangerous, but ideas that have overcome our intellect and conquered our conviction, ideas to which reason has riveted our conscience, are chains from which one cannot break loose without breaking one's heart; they are demons that one can only overcome by submitting to them.
>
> (Marx, 1842/1977:20)

Marx married in 1843 and soon thereafter was forced to leave Germany for the more liberal atmosphere of Paris. There he continued to grapple with the ideas of Hegel and his supporters, but he also encountered two new sets of ideas—French socialism and English political economy. It was the unique way in which he combined Hegelianism, socialism, and political economy that shaped his intellectual orientation. Also of great importance at this point was his meeting the man who was to become his lifelong friend, benefactor, and collaborator—Friedrich Engels (Carver, 1983). The son of a textile manufacturer, Engels had become a socialist critical of the conditions facing the working class. Much of Marx's compassion for the misery of the working class came from his exposure to Engels and his ideas. In 1844 Engels and Marx had a lengthy conversation in a famous café in Paris and laid the groundwork for a lifelong association. Of that conversation Engels said, "Our complete agreement in all theoretical fields became obvious . . . and our joint work dates from that time" (McLellan, 1973:131). In the following year, Engels published a notable work, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. During this period Marx wrote a number of abstruse works (many unpublished in his lifetime), including *The Holy Family* (1845/1956) and

The German Ideology (1845–1846/1970) (both coauthored with Engels), but he also produced *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1932/1964), which better foreshadowed his increasing preoccupation with the economic domain.

While Marx and Engels shared a theoretical orientation, there were many differences between the two men. Marx tended to be theoretical, a disorderly intellectual, and very oriented to his family. Engels was a practical thinker, a neat and tidy businessman, and a person who did not believe in the institution of the family. In spite of their differences, Marx and Engels forged a close union in which they collaborated on books and articles and worked together in radical organizations, and Engels even helped support Marx throughout the rest of his life so that Marx could devote himself to his intellectual and political endeavors.

In spite of the close association of the names of Marx and Engels, Engels made it clear that he was the junior partner:

> Marx could very well have done without me. What Marx accomplished I would not have achieved. Marx stood higher, saw farther, and took a wider and quicker view than the rest of us. Marx was a genius.
>
> (Engels, cited in McLellan, 1973:131–132)

In fact, many believe that Engels failed to understand many of the subtleties of Marx's work (C. Smith, 1997). After Marx's death, Engels became the leading spokesperson for Marxian theory and in various ways distorted and oversimplified it, although he remained faithful to the political perspective he had forged with Marx.

Because some of his writings had upset the Prussian government, the French government (at the request of the Prussians) expelled Marx in 1845, and he moved to Brussels. His radicalism was growing, and he had become an active member of the international revolutionary movement. He also associated with the Communist League and was asked to write a document (with Engels) expounding its aims and beliefs. The result was the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 (1848/1948), a work that was characterized by ringing political slogans (for example, "Working men of all countries, unite!").

In 1849 Marx moved to London, and, in light of the failure of the political revolutions of 1848, he began to withdraw from active revolutionary activity and to move into more serious and detailed research on the workings of the capitalist system. In 1852, he began his famous studies in the British Museum of the working conditions in capitalism. These studies ultimately resulted in the three volumes of *Capital,* the first of which was published in 1867; the other two were published posthumously. He lived in poverty during these years, barely managing to survive on a small income from his writings and the support of Engels. In 1864 Marx became reinvolved in political activity by joining the International, an international movement of workers. He soon gained preeminence within the movement and devoted a number of years to it. He began to gain fame both as a leader of the International and as the author of *Capital.* But the disintegration of the International by 1876, the failure of various revolutionary movements, and personal illness took their toll on Marx. His wife died in 1881, a daughter in 1882, and Marx himself on March 14, 1883.

Labor

For Marx, species being and human potential are intimately related to labor:

> Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material reactions between himself and Nature . . . .By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway . . . .We presuppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour process we get a result that existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realizes a purpose.
>
> (Marx, 1867/1967:177–178)

We see in that quotation many important parts of Marx's view of the relation between labor and human nature. First, what distinguishes us from other animals—our species being—is that our labor creates something in reality that previously existed only in our imagination. Our production reflects our purpose. Marx calls this process in which we create external objects out of our internal thoughts *objectification.* Second, this labor is material (Sayers, 2007). It works with the more material aspects of nature (e.g., raising fruits and vegetables, cutting down trees for wood) in order to satisfy our material needs. Finally, Marx believed that this labor does not just transform the material aspects of nature but also transforms us, including our needs, our consciousness, and our human nature. Labor is thus at the same time (1) the objectification of our purpose, (2) the establishment of an essential relation between human need and the material objects of our need, and (3) the transformation of our human nature.

Marx's use of the term *labor* is not restricted to economic activities; it encompasses all productive actions that transform the material aspects of nature in accordance with our purpose. Whatever is created through this free purposive activity is both an expression of our human nature and a transformation of it.

As we will see below, the process of labor has been changed under capitalism, making it difficult for us to understand Marx's conception, but we get close to Marx's concept when we think of the creative activity of an artist. Artwork is a representation of the thought of the artist. In Marx's terms, artwork is an objectivation of the artist. However, it is also true that the process of creating the art changes the artist. Through the process of producing the art, the artist's ideas about the art change, or the artist may become aware of a new vision that needs objectivation. In addition, the completed artwork can take on a new meaning for the artist and transform the artist's conceptions of that particular work or of art in general.

Labor, even artistic labor, is in response to a need, and the transformation that labor entails also transforms our needs. The satisfaction of our needs can lead to the creation of new needs (Marx and Engels, 1845–1846/1970:43). For example, the production of cars to satisfy our need for long-distance transportation led to a new

need for highways. Even more significantly, although few people thought they needed cars when cars were first invented, now most people feel that they need them. A similar change has occurred with the computer. Whereas a generation ago few thought they needed a personal computer, now many people need one, as well as all of the software and peripherals that go with it.

We labor in response to our needs, but the labor itself transforms our needs, which can lead to new forms of productive activity. According to Marx, this transformation of our needs through labor is the engine of human history.

> Not only do the objective conditions change in the act of production . . . but the producers change, too, in that they bring out new qualities in themselves, develop themselves in production, transform themselves, develop new powers and ideas, new modes of intercourse, new needs and new language.
>
> (Marx, 1857–1858/1974:494).

Labor, for Marx, is the development of our truly human powers and potentials. By transforming material reality to fit our purpose, we also transform ourselves. Furthermore, labor is a social activity. Work involves others, directly in joint productions, or because others provide us with the necessary tools or raw materials for our work, or because they enjoy the fruits of our labor. Labor does not transform only the individual human; it also transforms society. Indeed, for Marx, the emergence of a human as an individual depends on a society. Marx wrote, "Man is in the most literal sense of the word a *zoon politikon,* not only a social animal, but an animal which can develop into an individual only in society" (1857–1858/1964:84). In addition, Marx tells us that this transformation includes even our consciousness: "Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all" (Marx and Engels, 1845–1846/1970:51). Consequently, the transformation of the individual through labor and the transformation of society are not separable.

Alienation

Although Marx believed that there is an inherent relation between labor and human nature, he thought that this relation is perverted by capitalism. He calls this perverted relation *alienation* (Beilharz, 2005a; Cooper, 1991; Meisenhelder, 1991). The present discussion of Marx's concept of human nature and of alienation is derived mainly from Marx's early work. In his later work on the nature of capitalist society, he shied away from such a heavily philosophical term as *alienation,* yet alienation remained one of his main concerns (Barbalet, 1983:95).

Marx analyzed the peculiar form that our relation to our own labor has taken under capitalism. We no longer see our labor as an expression of our purpose. There is no objectivation. Instead, we labor in accordance with the purpose of the capitalist who hires and pays us. Rather than being an end in itself—an expression of human capabilities—labor in capitalism is reduced to being a means to an end: earning money (Marx, 1932/1964:173). Because our labor is not our own, it no longer transforms us. Instead we are alienated from our labor and therefore alienated from our true human nature.

Although it is the individual who feels alienated in capitalist society, Marx's basic analytic concern was with the structures of capitalism that cause this alienation (Israel, 1971). Marx uses the concept of alienation to reveal the devastating effect of capitalist production on human beings and on society. Of crucial significance here is the two-class system in which capitalists employ workers (and thereby own workers' labor time) and capitalists own the means of production (tools and raw materials) as well as the ultimate products. To survive, workers are forced to sell their labor time to capitalists. These structures, especially the division of labor, are the sociological basis of alienation.

> First, the fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labor therefore is not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it.
>
> (Marx, 1850/1964:72)

As a result, people feel freely active only in their animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating. In the essentially human process of labor, they no longer feel themselves to be anything but animals. What is animal becomes human, and what is human becomes animal. Certainly eating, drinking, procreating, and so on are human functions, but when separated from the sphere of all other human activity and turned into sole and ultimate ends, they become animal functions.

Alienation can be seen as having four basic components.

1. Workers in capitalist society are alienated from their *productive activity.* They do not produce objects according to their own ideas or to directly satisfy their own needs. Instead, workers work for capitalists, who pay them a subsistence wage in return for the right to use them in any way they see fit. Because productive activity belongs to the capitalists, and because they decide what is to be done with it, we can say that workers are alienated from that activity. Furthermore, many workers who perform highly specialized tasks have little sense of their role in the total production process. For example, automobile assembly-line workers who tighten a few bolts on an engine may have little feel for how their labor contributes to the production of the entire car. They do not objectivate their ideas, and they are not transformed by the labor in any meaningful way. Instead of being a process that is satisfying in and of itself, productive activity in capitalism is reduced, Marx argued, to an often boring and stultifying means to the fulfillment of the only end that really matters in capitalism: earning enough money to survive.

2. Workers in capitalist society are alienated not only from productive activities but also from the object of those activities—the *product.* The product of their labor belongs not to the workers but to the capitalists, who may use it in any way they wish because it is the capitalists' private property. Marx (1932/1964:117) tells us, "Private property is thus the product, the result, the necessary consequence of alienated labour." The capitalist will use his or her ownership in order to sell the product for a profit.

If workers wish to own the product of their own labor, they must buy it like anyone else. No matter how desperate the workers' needs, they cannot use the products of their own labor to satisfy their needs. Even workers in a bakery can starve if they don't have the money to buy the bread that they make. Because of this peculiar relation, things that we buy—that are made by others—seem to us to be more an expression of ourselves than do the things we make at our jobs. People's personalities are judged more by the cars they drive, the clothes they wear, the gadgets they use—none of which they have made—than by what they actually produce in their daily work, which appears to be an arbitrary and accidental means for making money in order to buy things.

3. Workers in capitalist society are alienated from their *fellow workers.* Marx's assumption was that people basically need and want to work cooperatively in order to appropriate from nature what they require to survive. But in capitalism this cooperation is disrupted, and people, often strangers, are forced to work side by side for the capitalist. Even if the workers on the assembly line are close friends, the nature of the technology makes for a great deal of isolation. Here is the way one worker describes his social situation on the assembly line:

> You can work next to a guy for months without even knowing his name. One thing, you're too busy to talk. Can't hear . . . .You have to holler in his ear. They got these little guys coming around in white shirts and if they see you runnin' your mouth, they say, "This guy needs more work." Man, he's got no time to talk.
>
> (Terkel, 1974:165)

Of course, much the same is true in the newest version of the assembly line: the office cubicle. But in this social situation, workers experience something worse than simple isolation. Workers often are forced into outright competition, and sometimes conflict, with one another. To extract maximum productivity and to prevent the development of cooperative relationships, the capitalist pits one worker against another to see who can produce more, work more quickly, or please the boss more. The workers who succeed are given a few extra rewards; those who fail are discarded. In either case, considerable hostility is generated among the workers toward their peers. This is useful to the capitalists because it tends to deflect hostility that otherwise would be aimed at them. The isolation and the interpersonal hostility tend to alienate workers in capitalism from their fellow workers.

4. Workers in capitalist society are alienated from their own *human potential.* Instead of being a source of transformation and fulfillment of our human nature, the workplace is where we feel least human, least ourselves. Individuals perform less and less like human beings as they are reduced in their work to functioning like machines. Even smiles and greetings are programmed and scripted. Consciousness is numbed and, ultimately, destroyed as relations with other humans and with nature are progressively controlled. The result is a mass of people unable to express their essential human qualities, a mass of alienated workers.

Alienation is an example of the sort of contradiction that Marx's dialectical approach focused on. There is a real contradiction between human nature, which is defined and transformed by labor, and the actual social conditions of labor under

capitalism. What Marx wanted to stress is that this contradiction cannot be resolved merely in thought. We are not any less alienated because we identify with our employer or with the things that our wages can purchase. Indeed, these things are a symptom of our alienation, which can be resolved only through real social change.

The Structures of Capitalist Society

In Europe in Marx's time, industrialization was increasing. People were being forced to leave agricultural and artisan trades and to work in factories where conditions were often harsh. By the 1840s, when Marx was entering his most productive period, Europe was experiencing a widespread sense of social crisis (Seigel, 1978:106). In 1848 a series of revolts swept across Europe (soon after the publication of Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto*). The effects of industrialization and the political implications of industrialization were especially apparent in the mostly rural states collectively referred to as Germany.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, cheap manufactured goods from England and France began to force out of business the less efficient manufacturers in Germany. In response, the political leaders of the German states imposed capitalism on their still mainly feudal societies. The resulting poverty, dislocation, and alienation were particularly evident because of the rapidity of the change.

Marx's analysis of alienation was a response to the economic, social, and political changes that Marx saw going on around him. He did not view alienation as a philosophical problem. He wanted to understand what changes would be needed to create a society in which human potential could be adequately expressed. Marx's important insight was that the capitalist economic system is the primary cause of alienation. Marx's work on human nature and alienation led him to a critique of capitalist society and to a political program oriented to overcoming the structures of capitalism so that people could express their essential humanity (Mészáros, 1970).

Capitalism is an economic system in which great numbers of workers who own little produce commodities for the profit of small numbers of capitalists who own all of the following: the commodities, the means of producing the commodities, and the labor time of the workers, which they purchase through wages (H. Wolf, 2005b). One of Marx's central insights is that capitalism is much more than an economic system. It is also a system of power. The secret of capitalism is that political powers have been transformed into economic relations (Wood, 1995). Capitalists seldom need to use brute force. Capitalists are able to coerce workers through their power to dismiss workers and close plants. Capitalism, therefore, is not simply an economic system; it is also a political system, a mode of exercising power, and a process for exploiting workers.

In a capitalist system, the economy seems to be a natural force. People are laid off, wages are reduced, and factories are closed because of "the economy." We do not see these events as the outcomes of social or political decisions. Links between human suffering and the economic structures are deemed irrelevant or trivial.

For example, you might read in the newspaper that the Federal Reserve Board of the United States has raised interest rates. A reason often given for this action is that the economy is "overheated," which is to say that there is the possibility of inflation. Raising interest rates does indeed "cool off?" the economy. How does it do so? It puts some people out of work. As a result, workers become afraid to demand higher wages, which might get passed on as higher prices, which might lead to additional interest-rate increases and to still more workers losing their jobs. Thus, inflation is averted. By raising interest rates, the Federal Reserve Board adopts a policy that helps capitalists and hurts workers. This decision, however, usually is presented as a purely economic one. Marx would say that it is a political decision that favors capitalists at the expense of workers.

Marx's aim is to make the social and political structures of the economy clearer by revealing "the economic law of motion of modern society" (quoted in Ollman, 1976:168). Furthermore, Marx intends to reveal the internal contradictions that he hopes will inevitably transform capitalism.

Commodities

The basis of all of Marx's work on social structures, and the place in which that work is most clearly tied to his views on human potential, is his analysis of commodities, or products of labor intended primarily for exchange. As Georg Lukács (1922/1968:83) put it, "The problem of commodities is . . . the central, structural problem of capitalist society." By starting with the commodity, Marx is able to reveal the nature of capitalism.

Marx's view of the commodity was rooted in his materialist orientation, with its focus on the productive activities of actors. As we saw earlier, it was Marx's view that in their interactions with nature and with other actors, people produce the objects that they need in order to survive. These objects are produced for personal use or for use by others in the immediate environment. Such uses are what Marx called the commodity's *use value.* However, in capitalism this process takes on a new and dangerous form. Instead of producing for themselves or for their immediate associates, the actors produce for someone else (the capitalist). The products have *exchange value;* that is, instead of being used immediately, they are exchanged in the market for money or for other objects.

Use value is connected to the intimate relation between human needs and the actual objects that can satisfy those needs. It is difficult to compare the use values of different things. Bread has the use value of satisfying hunger; shoes have the use value of protecting our feet. It is difficult to say that one has more use value than the other. They are *qualitatively* different. Furthermore, use value is tied to the physical properties of a commodity. Shoes cannot satisfy our hunger and bread cannot protect our feet because they are physically different kinds of objects. In the process of exchange, however, different commodities are compared to one another. One pair of shoes can be exchanged for six loaves of bread. Or if the medium of exchange is money, as is common, a pair of shoes can be worth six times as much money as a loaf of bread. Exchange values are *quantitatively* different. One can say that a pair of shoes has more exchange value than a loaf of bread. Furthermore, exchange value is separate from the physical

property of the commodity. Only things that can be eaten can have the use value of satisfying hunger, but any type of thing can have the exchange value of a dollar.

Fetishism of Commodities

Commodities are the products of human labor, but they can become separated from the needs and purposes of their creators. Because exchange value floats free from the actual commodity and seems to exist in a realm separate from any human use, we are led to believe that these objects and the market for them have independent existences. In fully developed capitalism, this belief becomes reality as the objects and their markets actually become real, independent phenomena. The commodity takes on an independent, almost mystical external reality (Marx, 1867/1967:35). Marx called this process the *fetishism of commodities* (Dant, 1996; Sherlock, 1997). Marx did not mean that commodities take on sexual meanings, for he wrote before Freud gave the term *fetish* this twist. Marx was alluding to the ways in which the practitioners of some religions, such as the Zunis, carve figures and then worship them. By fetish, Marx meant a thing that we ourselves make and then worship as if it were a god.

In capitalism, the products that we make, their values, and the economy that consists of our exchanges all seem to take on lives of their own, separate from any human needs or decisions. Even our own labor—the thing that, according to Marx, makes us truly human—becomes a commodity that is bought and sold. Our labor acquires an exchange value that is separate from us. It is turned into an abstract thing and used by the capitalist to make the objects that come to dominate us. Hence, commodities are the source of the alienation discussed above. Even the labor of self-employed commodity producers is alienated, because they must produce for the market instead of to achieve their own purposes and satisfy their own needs.

Thus, the economy takes on a function that Marx believed only actors could perform: the production of value. For Marx, the true value of a thing comes from the fact that labor produces it and someone needs it. A commodity's true value represents human social relations. In contrast, in capitalism, Marx tells us, "A definite social relation between men . . . assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (1867/1967:72). Granting reality to commodities and to the market, the individual in capitalism progressively loses control over them. A commodity, therefore, is "a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor: because the relations of the producers to the sum total of their own labor is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labor" (Marx, 1867/1967:72).

Think, for example, of the cup of coffee that you might have bought before sitting down to read this text. In that simple transaction, you entered into a relationship with hundreds of others: the waitperson, the owner of the coffee shop, the people working at the roaster, the importer, the truck driver, dockworkers, all the people on the ship that brought the beans, the coffee plantation owner, the pickers, and so on. In addition, you supported a particular trading relation between countries, a particular form of government in the grower's country that has been historically shaped by the coffee trade, a particular

relation between the plantation owner and the worker, and many other social relations. You did all this by exchanging money for a cup of coffee. In the relation between those objects—money and coffee—lies hidden all those social relations.

Marx's discussion of commodities and their fetishism takes us from the level of the individual actor to the level of large-scale social structures. The fetishism of commodities imparts to the economy an independent, objective reality that is external to, and coercive of, the actor. Looked at in this way, the fetishism of commodities is translated into the concept of *reification* (Lukács, 1922/1968; Sherlock, 1997). Reification can be thought of as "thingification," or the process of coming to believe that humanly created social forms are natural, universal, and absolute things. As a result of reification, social forms do acquire those characteristics. The concept of reification implies that people believe that social structures are beyond their control and unchangeable. Reification occurs when this belief becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Then structures actually do acquire the character people endowed them with. People become mesmerized by the seeming objectivity and authority of the economy. People lose their jobs, make career choices, or move across the country because of the economy. According to Marx, however, the economy is not an objective, natural thing. It is a form of domination, and decisions about interest rates and layoffs are political decisions that tend to benefit one group over another.

People reify the whole range of social relationships and social structures. Just as people reify commodities and other economic phenomena (for example, the division of labor [Rattansi, 1982; Wallimann, 1981]), they also reify religious (Barbalet, 1983:147), political, and organizational structures. Marx made a similar point in reference to the state: "And out of this very contradiction between the individual and . . . the community the latter takes an independent form as the State, divorced from the real interests of individual and community" (cited in Bender, 1970:176). Capitalism is made up of particular types of social relations that tend to take forms that appear to be and eventually are independent of the actual people involved. As Moishe Postone (1993:4) tells us, "The result is a new, increasingly abstract form of social domination—one that subjects people to impersonal structural imperatives and constraints that cannot be adequately grasped in terms of concrete domination (e.g., personal or group domination)."

Capital, Capitalists, and the Proletariat

Marx found the heart of capitalist society within the commodity. A society dominated by objects whose main value is exchange produces certain categories of people. The two main types that concerned Marx were the proletariat and the capitalist. Let us start with the proletariat.

Workers who sell their labor and do not own their own means of production are members of the proletariat. They do not own their own tools or their factories. Marx (1867/1967:714–715) believed that proletarians would eventually lose their own skills as they increasingly serviced machines that had their skills built into them. Because members of the proletariat produce only for exchange, they are also consumers. Because they don't have the means to produce for their own needs, they must use their wages to buy what they need. Consequently, proletarians are completely dependent on their wages in order to live. This makes the proletariat dependent on those who pay the wages.

Those who pay the wages are the capitalists. Capitalists are those who own the means of production. Before we can fully understand capitalists, we must first understand capital itself (H. Wolf, 2005a). Capital is money that produces more money, capital is money that is invested rather than being used to satisfy human needs or desires. This distinction becomes clearer when we look at what Marx considered to be "the starting-point of capital" (1867/1967:146): the *circulation of commodities.* Marx discussed two types of circulation of commodities. One type of circulation is characteristic of capital: Money → Commodities → (a larger sum of) Money (M_1-C-M_2). The other type is not: Commodities → Money → Commodities (C_1-M-C_2).

In a noncapitalist circulation of commodities, the circuit C_1-M-C_2 predominates. An example of C_1-M-C_2 would be a fisherman who sells his catch (C_1) and then uses the money (M) to buy bread (C_2). The primary goal of exchange in noncapitalist circulation is a commodity that one can use and enjoy.

In a capitalist circulation of commodities (M_1-C-M_2), the primary goal is to produce more money. Commodities are purchased in order to generate profit, not necessarily for use. In the capitalist circuit, referred to by Marx as "buying in order to sell" (1867/1967:147), the individual actor buys a commodity with money and in turn exchanges the commodity for presumably more money. For example, a store owner would buy (M_1) the fish (C) in order to sell them for more money (M_2). To further increase profits, the store owner might buy the boat and fishing equipment and pay the fisherman a wage. The goal of this circuit is not the consumption of the use value, as it is in the simple circulation of commodities. The goal is more money. The particular properties of the commodity used to make money are irrelevant. The commodity can be fish or it can be labor. Also, the real needs and desires of human beings are irrelevant; all that matters is what will produce more money.

Capital is money that produces more money, but Marx tells us it is more than that: it is also a particular social relation. Money becomes capital only because of a social relation between, on the one hand, the proletariat, which does the work and must purchase the product, and, on the other hand, those who have invested the money. The capacity of capital to generate profit appears "as a power endowed by Nature—a productive power that is immanent in Capital" (1867/1967:333); but, according to Marx, it is a relation of power. Capital cannot increase except by exploiting those who actually do the work. The workers are exploited by a system, and the irony is that the system is produced through the workers' own labor. The capitalist system is the social structure that emerges from that exploitive relationship.

Capitalists are those who live off the profit of capital. They are the beneficiaries of the proletariat's exploitation. Within the idea of capital is contained a social relation between those who own the means of production and those whose wage labor is exploited.

Exploitation

For Marx, exploitation and domination reflect more than an accidentally unequal distribution of wealth and power. *Exploitation* is a necessary part of the capitalist economy. All societies have exploitation, but what is peculiar in capitalism is that the

exploitation is accomplished by the impersonal and "objective" economic system. It seems to be less a matter of power and more a matter of economists' charts and figures. Furthermore, the coercion is rarely naked force and is instead the worker's own needs, which can now be satisfied only through wage labor. Dripping irony, Marx describes the freedom of this wage labor:

> For the conversion of his money into capital . . . the owner of money must meet in the market with the free labourer, free in the double sense, that as a free man he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that on the other hand he has no other commodity for sale, is short of everything necessary for the realization of his labour-power.
>
> (Marx, 1867/1967:169)

Workers appear to be "free laborers," entering into free contracts with capitalists. But Marx believed that the workers must accept the terms the capitalists offer them, because the workers can no longer produce for their own needs. This is especially true because capitalism usually creates what Marx referred to as a *reserve army* of the unemployed. If a worker does not want to do a job at the wage the capitalist offers, someone else in the reserve army of the unemployed will. This, for example, is what Barbara Ehrenreich discovered is the purpose of many of the want ads for low-paying jobs:

> Only later will I realize that the want ads are not a reliable measure of the actual jobs available at any particular time. They are . . . the employers' insurance policy against the relentless turnover of the low-wage workforce. Most of the big hotels run ads almost continually if only to build a supply of applicants to replace the current workers as they drift away or are fired.
>
> (Ehrenreich, 2001:15)

The capitalists pay the workers less than the value that the workers produce and keep the rest for themselves. This *practice* leads us to Marx's central concept of *surplus value,* which is defined as the difference between the value of the product when it is sold and the value of the elements consumed in the formation of that product (including the worker's labor). The capitalists can use this profit for private consumption, but doing so would not lead to the expansion of capitalism. Rather, capitalists expand their enterprises by converting profit into a base for the creation of still more surplus value.

It should be stressed that surplus value is not simply an economic concept. Surplus value, like capital, is a particular social relation and a form of domination, because labor is the real source of surplus value. "The rate of surplus-value is therefore an exact expression for the degree of exploitation of labor-power by capital, or of the laborer by the capitalist" (Marx, 1867/1967:218). This observation points to one of Marx's more colorful metaphors: "Capital is dead labor, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks" (1867/1967:233).

Marx (1857–1858/1974:414) makes one other important point about capital: "Capital exists and can only exist as many capitals." What he means is that capitalism is always driven by incessant competition. Capitalists may seem to be in control, but even they are driven by the constant competition between capitals. The capitalist is driven to make more profit in order to accumulate and invest more capital. The capitalist who does not do this will be outcompeted by others who do. "As such, he shares with the miser an absolute drive towards self-enrichment. But what appears in the

miser as the mania of an individual is in the capitalist the effect of a social mechanism in which he is merely a cog" (Marx, 1867/1967:739).

The desire for more profit and more surplus value for expansion pushes capitalism toward what Marx called the *general law of capitalist accumulation.* Capitalists seek to exploit workers as much as possible: "The constant tendency of capital is to force the cost of labor back towards . . . zero" (Marx, 1867/1967:600). Marx basically argued that the structure and the ethos of capitalism push capitalists in the direction of the accumulation of more and more capital. Given Marx's view that labor is the source of value, capitalists are led to intensify the exploitation of the proletariat, thereby driving class conflict.

Class Conflict

Marx often used the term *class* in his writings, but he never systematically defined what he meant (So and Suwarsono, 1990:35). He usually is taken to have meant a group of people in similar situations with respect to their control of the means of production. This, however, is not a complete description of the way Marx used the term. *Class,* for Marx, was always defined in terms of its potential for conflict. Individuals form a class insofar as they are in a common conflict with others over the surplus value. In capitalism there is an inherent conflict of interest between those who hire wage laborers and those whose labor is turned into surplus value. It is this inherent conflict that produces classes (Ollman, 1976).

Because class is defined by the potential for conflict, it is a theoretical and historically variant concept. A theory about where potential conflict exists in a society is required before identifying a class.[4] Richard Miller (1991:99) tells us that "there is no rule that could, in principle, be used to sort out people in a society into classes without studying the actual interactions among economic processes on the one hand and between political and cultural processes on the other."

For Marx, a class truly exists only when people become aware of their conflicting relation to other classes. Without this awareness, they only constitute what Marx called a class *in itself.* When they become aware of the conflict, they become a true class, a class *for itself.*

In capitalism, Marx's analysis discovered two primary classes: bourgeoisie and proletariat.[5] Bourgeoisie is Marx's name for capitalists in the modern economy. The bourgeoisie owns the means of production and employs wage labor. The conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is another example of a real material contradiction. This contradiction grows out of the previously mentioned contradiction between labor and capitalism. None of these contradictions can be resolved except by changing the capitalist structure. In fact, until that change occurs, the contradiction will only become worse. Society will be increasingly polarized into these two great opposing classes.

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[4] Marx did acknowledge that class conflict often is affected by other forms of stratification, such as ethnic, racial, gender, and religious; however, he did not accept that these could be primary.

[5] Although his theoretical work looked mainly at these two classes, his historical studies examined a number of different class formations. Most significant are the petty bourgeois—small shopkeepers employing at most a few workers—and the lumpenproletariat—the proletariat who readily sell out to the capitalists. For Marx, these other classes can be understood only in terms of the primary relationship between bourgeoisie and proletariat.

Competition with megastores and franchise chains will shut down many small, independent businesses; mechanization will replace skilled artisans; and even some capitalists will be squeezed out through attempts to establish monopolies, for example, by means of mergers. All these displaced people will be forced down into the ranks of the proletariat. Marx called this inevitable increase in the proletariat *proletarianization.*

In addition, because capitalists have already reduced the workers to laboring machines performing a series of simple operations, mechanization becomes increasingly easy. As mechanization proceeds, more and more people are put out of work and fall from the proletariat into the industrial reserve army. In the end, Marx foresaw a situation in which society would be characterized by a tiny number of exploitative capitalists and a huge mass of proletarians and members of the industrial reserve army. By reducing so many people to this condition, capitalism creates the masses that will lead to its own overthrow. The increased centralization of factory work, as well as the shared suffering, increases the possibility of an organized resistance to capitalism. Furthermore, the international linking of factories and markets encourages workers to be aware of more than their own local interests. This awareness is likely to lead to revolution.

The capitalists, of course, seek to forestall this revolution. For example, they sponsor colonial adventures with the objective of shifting at least some of the burden of exploitation from the home front to the colonies. However, in Marx's view (1867/1967:10), these efforts are doomed to failure because the capitalist is as much controlled by the laws of the capitalist economy as are the workers. Capitalists are under competitive pressure from one another, forcing each to try to reduce labor costs and intensify exploitation—even though this intensified exploitation will increase the likelihood of revolution and therefore contribute to the capitalists' demise. Even good-hearted capitalists will be forced to further exploit their workers in order to compete: "The law of capitalist accumulation, metamorphosed by economists into pretended law of nature, in reality merely states that the very nature of accumulation excludes every diminution in the degree of exploitation" (Marx, 1867/1967:582).

Though not a Marxist, Robert Reich, a former U.S. secretary of labor, echoes Marx's analysis that it is not the evil of individual capitalists but the capitalist system itself that explains the increasing layoffs in America and the movement of manufacturing to take advantage of cheaper overseas labor:

> It's tempting to conclude from all this that enterprises are becoming colder-hearted, and executives more ruthless—and to blame it on an ethic of unbridled greed that seems to have taken hold in recent years and appears to be increasing. But this conclusion would be inaccurate. The underlying cause isn't a change in the American character. It is to be found in the increasing ease by which buyers and investors can get better deals, and the competitive pressure this imposes on all enterprises.
>
> (Reich, 2000:71)

Whether they want to or not, capitalists must move their factories where labor is cheaper; they must exploit workers. A capitalist who does not will not be able to compete with capitalists who do.

Marx usually did not blame individual members of the bourgeoisie for their actions; he saw these actions as largely determined by the logic of the capitalist system. This is consistent with his view that actors in capitalism generally are devoid

of creative independence.[6] However, the developmental process inherent in capitalism provides the conditions necessary for the ultimate reemergence of such creative action and, with it, the overthrow of the capitalist system. The logic of the capitalist system is forcing the capitalists to produce more exploited proletarians, and these are the very people who will bring an end to capitalism through their revolt. "What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, is, above all, its own gravediggers" (Marx and Engels, 1848/1948).

It is not only the ultimate proletariat revolution that Marx sees as caused by the underlying contradictions of capitalism, but also many of the various personal and social crises that beset modern society. On the personal side, we have already discussed some of the facets of the alienation that Marx believed was at the root of the feeling of meaninglessness in so many people's lives. At the economic level, Marx predicted a series of booms and depressions as capitalists overproduced or laid off workers in their attempts to increase their profits. At the political level, Marx predicted the increasing inability of a civil society to discuss and solve social problems. Instead we would see the growth of a state whose only purposes are the protection of the capitalists' private property and an occasional brutal intervention when economic coercion by the capitalists fails.

Capitalism as a Good Thing

Despite his focus on the inevitable crises of capitalism and his portrayal of it as a system of domination and exploitation, Marx saw capitalism as primarily a good thing. Certainly, Marx did not want to return to the traditional values of precapitalism. Past generations were just as exploited; the only difference is that the old exploitation was not veiled behind an economic system. The birth of capitalism opened up new possibilities for the freedom of the workers. Notwithstanding its exploitation, the capitalist system provides the possibility for freedom from the traditions that bound all previous societies. Even if the worker is not yet truly free, the promise is there. Similarly, as the most powerful economic system ever developed, capitalism holds the promise of freedom from hunger and from other forms of material deprivation. It was from the viewpoint of these promises that Marx criticized capitalism.

In addition, Marx believed that capitalism is the root cause of the defining characteristics of the modern age. Modernity's constant change and propensity to challenge all accepted traditions are driven by the inherent competition of capitalism, which pushes capitalists to continuously revolutionize the means of production and transform society:

> Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.
>
> (Marx and Engels, 1848/1948:11)

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[6] Marx might be seen as an exception to his own theory. He does acknowledge that it is possible for some individuals among the bourgeoisie to lay aside their class characteristics and adopt a communist consciousness (Marx and Engels, 1845–1846/1970:69).

Capitalism has been a truly revolutionary force. It has created a global society; it has introduced unrelenting technological change; it has overthrown the traditional world. But now, Marx believed, it must be overthrown. Capitalism's role is finished, and it is time for the new stage of communism to begin.

Materialist Conception of History

Marx was able to criticize capitalism from the perspective of its future because of his belief that history would follow a predictable course. This belief was based on his materialist conception of history (often simply shortened to the term *historical materialism* [Vandenberghe, 2005]). The general claim of Marx's historical materialism is that the way in which people provide for their material needs determines or, in general, conditions the relations that people have with each other, their social institutions, and even their prevalent ideas.[7]

Because of the importance of the way in which people provide for their material needs, this, along with the resultant economic relations, is often referred to as the *base*. Noneconomic relations, other social institutions, and prevalent ideas are referred to as the *superstructure.* It should be noted that Marx's view of history does not envision a straightforward trend in which the superstructure simply comes into line with the base. Human history is set into motion by the attempt to satisfy needs, but as noted above, these needs themselves are historically changing. Consequently, advances in the satisfaction of needs tend to produce more needs so that human needs are both the motivating foundation and the result of the economic base.

The following quotation is one of Marx's best summaries of his materialist conception of history:

> In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will. These relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, which is the real foundation on top of which arises a legal and political superstructure to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production in society come in conflict with the existing relations of production or—what is but a legal expression of the same thing—with the property relations within which they had been at work before. From forms of development of the forces of production these relations turn into their fetters. Then occurs a period of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.
>
> (Marx, 1859/1970:20–21)

[7] Antonio (2000:119–120) distinguishes between a hard and a soft material determinism. "Although hard determinist passages exist in Marx's texts, he suggested much more often a complex, historically contingent materialism, which ought not to be reduced to 'technological determinism' (i.e., social change arises from technical change) or to 'reflection theory' (i.e., ideas are mere emanations of material reality)."

The place to start in that quotation is with the "material forces of production." These are the actual tools, machinery, factories, and so forth used to satisfy human needs. The "relations of production" are the kinds of associations that people have with each other in satisfying their needs.

Marx's theory holds that a society will tend to adopt the system of social relations that best facilitates the employment and development of its productive powers. Therefore, the relations of production correspond to the state of the material forces of production. For example, certain stages of low technology correspond to social relations characterized by a few large landowners and a large number of serfs who work the land in return for a share of the produce. The higher technology of capitalism corresponds to a few capitalists who are able to invest in the expensive machinery and factories and a large number of wage workers. As Marx succinctly, if somewhat simplistically, puts it, "the hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the capitalist" (Marx, 1847/1963:95). Marx adds that these relations between people also can be expressed as property relations: the capitalist owns the means of production, and the wage laborer does not.

Capitalist economies foster unique relations between people and create certain expectations, obligations, and duties. For example, wage laborers must show a certain deference to capitalists if they want to keep their jobs. For Marx, what was important about these relations of production was their propensity to class conflict, but it is also possible to see the effect of the relations of production in family and personal relations. The socialization necessary to produce the "good" male worker also produces a certain type of husband. Similarly, early capitalism's requirement that the man leave the home to work all day led to a definition of the mother as the primary caretaker of the children. Hence, changes in the forces of production led to deep changes in the family structure. These changes too can be seen as relations of production.

Marx is never quite clear about where the relations of production leave off and the superstructure starts. However, he clearly felt that some relations and forms of "social consciousness" play only a supporting role in the material means of production. Marx predicted that although these elements of the superstructure are not directly involved, they tend to take a form that will support the relations of production.

Marx's view of history was a dynamic one, and he therefore believed that the forces of production will change to better provide for material needs. For example, this is what happened with the advent of capitalism, when technological changes made factories possible. However, before capitalism could actually occur, there had to be changes in society, changes in the relations of production. Factories, capitalists, and wage laborers were not compatible with feudal relations. The feudal lords, who derived their wealth solely from the ownership of land and who felt a moral obligation to provide for their serfs, had to be replaced by capitalists who derived their wealth from capital and who felt no moral obligation to wage laborers. Similarly, the serf's feeling of personal loyalty to the lord had to be replaced by proletarians' willingness to sell their labor to whoever will pay. The old relations of production were in conflict with the new forces of production.

A revolution is often required to change the relations of production. The main source of revolution is the material contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production. However, revolution also results from another contradiction: between exploiters and the exploited. According to Marx, this contradiction, which

has always existed, leads to revolutionary change when the exploited line up in support of a change in the relations of production that favors changes occurring in the forces of production. Marx did not believe that all workers' revolts could be effective, only those in support of a change in the forces of production. An effective revolution, according to Marx, will cause the supporting relations, institutions, and prevalent ideas to change so that they validate the new relations of production.

Cultural Aspects of Capitalist Society

In addition to his focus on the material structures of capitalism, Marx also theorized about its cultural aspects.

Ideology

Not only do the existing relations of production tend to prevent changes necessary for the development of the forces of production, but similarly, the supporting relations, institutions, and, in particular, prevalent ideas also tend to prevent these changes. Marx called prevalent ideas that perform this function *ideologies.* As with many terms, Marx is not always precise in his use of the word *ideology.* He seems to use it to indicate two related sorts of ideas.

First, *ideology* refers to ideas that naturally emerge out of everyday life in capitalism but, because of the nature of capitalism, reflect reality in an inverted manner (Larrain, 1979). To explain this meaning of the term, Marx used the metaphor of a camera obscura, which employs an optical quirk to show a real image reflected upside down. This is the type of ideology represented by the fetishism of commodities or by money. Even though we know that money is nothing but a piece of paper that has value only because of underlying social relations, in our daily lives we treat money as though it had inherent value. Instead of our seeing that we give money its value, it often seems that money gives us our value.

This first type of ideology is vulnerable to disruption because it is based on underlying material contradictions. Human value is not really dependent on money, and we often meet people who are living proof of that contradiction. In fact, it is at this level that we usually become aware of the material contradictions that Marx believed will drive capitalism to the next phase. We become aware, for example, that the economy is not an objective, independent system, but a political sphere. We become aware that our labor is not just another commodity and that its sale for wages produces alienation. Or if we don't become aware of the underlying truth, we at least become aware of the disruption because of a blatantly political move in the economic system or our own feeling of alienation. It is in addressing these disruptions that Marx's second use of *ideology* is relevant.

When disruptions occur and the underlying material contradictions are revealed, or are in danger of being revealed, the second type of ideology will emerge. Here Marx uses the term *ideology* to refer to systems of ruling ideas that attempt once again to hide the contradictions that are at the heart of the capitalist system. In most cases, they do this in one of three ways: (1) They lead to the creation of subsystems of ideas—a religion, a philosophy, a literature, a legal system—that makes the

contradictions appear to be coherent. (2) They explain away those experiences that reveal the contradictions, usually as personal problems or individual idiosyncrasies. Or (3) they present the capitalist contradiction as really being a contradiction in human nature and therefore one that cannot be fixed by social change.

In general, members of the ruling class create this second type of ideology. For example, Marx refers to bourgeois economists who present the commodity form as natural and universal. Or he criticizes bourgeois philosophers, such as Hegel, for pretending that material contradictions can be resolved by changing how we think. However, even the proletariat can create this type of ideology. People who have given up the hope of actually changing society need such ideologies. But no matter who creates them, these ideologies always benefit the ruling class by hiding the contradictions that would lead to social change.

Freedom, Equality, and Ideology

For an example of ideology, we will look at Marx's ideas about the bourgeois conception of equality and freedom. According to Marx, our particular ideas of equality and freedom emerge out of capitalism. Although we take our belief in freedom and equality to be an obvious thing, any historical study will demonstrate that it is not. Most societies would have considered the idea that all people are essentially equal as absurd. For most cultures throughout history, slavery seemed quite natural. Now, under capitalism, we believe quite the opposite: inequality is absurd, and slavery is unnatural.

Marx thought that this change in our ideas could be traced to the everyday practices of capitalism. The act of exchange, which is the basis of capitalism, presupposes the equality of the people in the exchange, just as it presupposes the equality of the commodities in the exchange. For the commodities, the particular qualitative differences of their use values are hidden by their exchange value. In other words, apples and oranges are made equal by reducing them to their monetary value. The same thing happens to the differences between the people involved in the exchange. Most exchanges in advanced capitalism involve people who never meet and don't know each other. We don't care who grew the apples and oranges we buy. This anonymity and indifference constitutes a kind of equality.

Furthermore, freedom is assumed in this exchange, since any of the partners to the exchange are presumed to be free to exchange or not as they see fit. The very idea of capitalist exchange means that commodities are not taken by force but are freely traded. This is also true of the exchange of labor time for wages. It is assumed that the worker or the employer is free to enter into the exchange and free to terminate it. Marx (1857–1858/1974:245) concludes that "equality and freedom are not only respected in exchange which is based on exchange values, but the exchange of exchange values is the real productive basis of all equality and freedom." Nevertheless, Marx believed that capitalist practices result in an inverted view of freedom. It seems that we are free; but in fact, it is capital that is free and we who are enslaved.

According to Marx, freedom is the ability to have control over your own labor and its products. Although individuals may seem free under capitalism, they are not. Under previous social forms, people were directly dominated by others and so were aware of their unfreedom. Under capitalism, people are dominated by capitalist

relations that seem objective and natural and therefore are not perceived as a form of domination. Marx (1857–1858/1974:652) decries "the insipidity of the view that free competition is the ultimate development of human freedom. . . . This kind of individual freedom is therefore at the same time the most complete suspension of all individual freedom, and the most complete subjugation of individuality under social conditions which assume the form of objective powers."

Because the capitalist owns the means of production, the exchange of wages for labor time cannot be free. The proletariat must work in order to live, but the capitalist has the choice to hire others from the reserve army of labor, or to mechanize, or to let the factory sit idle until the workers become desperate enough to "freely" accept the capitalist's wages. The worker is neither free nor equal to the capitalist.

Hence, we see that the first level of the ideology of freedom and equality emerges from the practices of exchange in capitalism, but that our ideas are inverted and do not represent real freedom and equality. It is capital that is freely and equally exchanged; it is capital that is accepted without prejudice; it is capital that is able to do as it wishes, not us. This first type of ideology is easily disrupted, and our awareness of this disruption drives capitalism to the next phase. Despite the ideology of equality and freedom, few workers feel equal to their employers; few feel free in their jobs. This is why the second type of ideology is necessary. These disruptions somehow must be explained away or made to look inevitable.

This is especially true with the ideology of equality and freedom, because these ideas are among the most threatening to capitalism. They are another example of how capitalism creates its own gravediggers. Older forms of unfreedom and inequality were clearly tied to people, and there was hope, therefore, of becoming free and equal by changing the hearts of the people who oppressed us. When we become aware of the source of unfreedom and inequality under capitalism, we begin to realize that capitalism itself must be changed. Ideologies therefore must be created to protect the capitalist system, and one way in which they do this is by portraying inequality as equality and unfreedom as freedom.

Marx believed that the capitalist system is inherently unequal. The capitalists automatically benefit more from the capitalist system, while the workers are automatically disadvantaged. Under capitalism, those who own the means of production, those with capital, make money from their money. Under capitalism, capital begets more capital—that is, investments give a return—and as we saw above, Marx believed that this was derived from the exploitation of the workers. Not only are the workers automatically exploited, they also bear the burden of unemployment due to technological changes, geographical shifts, and other economic dislocations, all of which benefit the capitalist. The rule of capitalism is reflected in the common saying that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer. Constantly increasing inequality is built into the capitalist system.

Any attempt toward a more equal society must take into account this automatic propensity of the capitalist system to increased inequality. Nevertheless, attempts to make the capitalist system more equal often are portrayed as forms of inequality. From the Marxist viewpoint these attempts would be the second form of ideology. For example, ideologues promote a "flat tax" which taxes the rich and the poor at the same rate. They argue that because the rate is the same for rich and poor, it is equal.

They ignore the fact that a graduated tax rate may be just compensation for the built-in inequality of capitalism. They create an ideology by portraying the obvious inequalities of the capitalist system as inevitable or as being due to the laziness of the poor. In this way, inequality is portrayed as equality, and the freedom of the rich to keep the fruits of exploitation trumps the freedom of the workers.

We see in this example not only the two types of ideology but also another instance of how Marx thought that capitalism is a good thing. The ideas of freedom and equality emerge from capitalism itself, and it is these ideas that drive us toward the dissolution of capitalism, toward communism.

Religion

Marx also sees religion as an ideology. He famously refers to religion as the opiate of the people, but it is worthwhile to look at the entire quotation:

> Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and also the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people.
>
> (Marx, 1843/1970)

Marx believed that religion, like all ideology, reflects a truth but that this truth is inverted. Because people cannot see that their distress and oppression are produced by the capitalist system, their distress and oppression are given a religious form. Marx clearly says that he is not against religion per se, but against a system that requires the illusions of religion.

This religious form is vulnerable to disruption and therefore is always liable to become the basis of a revolutionary movement. We do indeed see that religious movements have often been in the forefront of opposition to capitalism (for example, liberation theology). Nevertheless, Marx felt that religion is especially amenable to becoming the second form of ideology by portraying the injustice of capitalism as a test for the faithful and pushing any revolutionary change off into the afterlife. In this way, the cry of the oppressed is used to further oppression.

Marx's Economics: A Case Study

This chapter is devoted to an analysis of Marx's sociology, but of course it is his economics for which he is far better known. Although we have touched on a number of aspects of Marx's economics, we have not dealt with it in a coherent fashion. In this section, we look at Marx's economics, not as economics per se but rather as an exemplification of his sociological theory (Mazlish, 1984).[8] There is much more to Marxian economics, but this is the most relevant way to deal with it in a book devoted to sociological theory.

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[8] *One* way of looking at Marx's economic theory (for example, the labor theory of value) is as a specific application of his more general sociological theory. This stands in contrast to G. A. Cohen's (1978) work, in which his overriding concern is the underlying *economic* theory in Marx's work. Although Cohen sees the "economic" and the "social" as being interchangeable in Marx's work, he clearly implies that Marx's economic theory is the more general.

A starting point for Marxian economics is in the concepts, previously touched on, of use value and exchange value. People have always created use values; that is, they have always produced things that directly satisfy their wants. A *use value* is defined qualitatively; that is, something either is or is not useful. An *exchange value*, however, is defined quantitatively, not qualitatively. It is defined by the amount of labor needed to appropriate useful qualities. Whereas use values are produced to satisfy one's own needs, exchange values are produced to be exchanged for values of another use. Whereas the production of use values is a natural human expression, the existence of exchange values sets in motion a process by which humanity is distorted. The entire edifice of capitalism, including commodities, the market, money, and so forth, is erected on the basis of exchange values.

To Marx, the basic source of any value was the amount of socially necessary labor-time needed to produce an article under the normal conditions of production and with the average degree of skill and intensity of the time. This is the well-known *labor theory of value*. Although it is clear that labor lies at the base of use value, this fact grows progressively less clear as we move to exchange values, commodities, the market, and capitalism. To put it another way, "The determination of the magnitude of value by labor-time is therefore a secret, hidden under the apparent fluctuations in relative values of commodities" (Marx, 1867/1967:75). Labor, as the source of all value, is a secret in capitalism that allows the capitalists to exploit the workers.

According to Peter Worsley, Marx "put at the heart of his sociology—as no other sociology does—the theme of exploitation" (1982:115). The capitalists pay the workers *less* than the value the workers produce and keep the rest for themselves. The workers are not aware of this exploitation, and often, neither are the capitalists. The capitalists believe that this extra value is derived from their own cleverness, their capital investment, their manipulation of the market, and so on. Marx stated that "so long as trade is good, the capitalist is too much absorbed in money grubbing to take notice of this gratuitous gift of labor" (1867/1967:207). In sum, Marx said:

> The capitalist does not know that the normal price of labor also includes a definite quantity of unpaid labor, and that this very unpaid labor is the normal source of his gain. The category, surplus labor-time, does not exist at all for him, since it is included in the normal working-day, which he thinks he has paid for in the day's wages.
>
> (Marx, 1867/1967:550)

This leads us to Marx's central concept of *surplus value*. This is defined as the difference between the value of the product when it is sold and the value of the elements consumed in the formation of that product. Although means of production (raw materials and tools, the value of which comes from the labor involved in extracting or producing them) are consumed in the production process, it is labor that is the real source of surplus value. "The rate of surplus-value is therefore an exact expression for the degree of exploitation of labor-power by capital, or of the laborer by the capitalist" (Marx, 1867/1967:218). This points to one of Marx's more colorful metaphors: "Capital is dead labor, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks" (1867/1967:233).

The surplus derived from this process is used by the capitalists to pay for such things as rent to landowners and interest to banks. But the most important derivation from it is profit. The capitalists can use this profit for private consumption, but that would not lead to the expansion of capitalism. Rather they expand their enterprise by converting it into a base for the creation of still more surplus value.

The desire for more profit and more surplus value for expansion pushes capitalism toward what Marx called the *general law of capitalist accumulation*. The capitalists seek to exploit workers as much as possible: "The constant tendency of capital is to force the cost of labor back towards . . . zero" (Marx, 1867/1967:600). Marx basically argued that the structure and the ethos of capitalism push the capitalists in the direction of the accumulation of more and more capital. In order to do this, given Marx's view that labor is the source of value, the capitalists are led to intensify the exploitation of the proletariat. Ultimately, however, increased exploitation yields fewer and fewer gains; an upper limit of exploitation is reached. In addition, as this limit is approached, the government is forced by pressure from the working class to place restrictions on the actions of capitalists (for example, laws limiting the length of the workday). As a result of these restrictions, the capitalists must look for other devices, and a major one is the substitution of machines for people. This substitution is made relatively easy, because the capitalists already have reduced the workers to laboring machines performing a series of simple operations. This shift to capital-intensive production is, paradoxically, a cause of the declining rate of profit since it is labor (not machines) which is the ultimate source of profit.

As mechanization proceeds, more and more people are put out of work and fall from the proletariat to the "industrial reserve army." At the same time, heightening competition and the burgeoning costs of technology lead to a progressive decline in the number of capitalists. In the end, Marx foresaw a situation in which society would be characterized by a tiny number of exploitative capitalists and a huge mass of proletarians and members of the industrial reserve army. In these extreme circumstances, capitalism would be most vulnerable to revolution. As Marx put it, the expropriation of the masses by the capitalists would be replaced by "the expropriation of a few usurpers by the mass of people" (1867/1967:764). The capitalists, of course, seek to forestall their demise. For example, they sponsor colonial adventures with the objective of shifting at least some of the burden of exploitation from the home front to the colonies. However, in Marx's view these efforts are ultimately doomed to failure, and the capitalists will face rebellion at home and abroad.

The key point about the general law of capitalist accumulation is the degree to which actors, both capitalist and proletarian, are impelled by the structure and ethos of capitalism to do what they do. Marx usually did not blame individual capitalists for their actions; he saw these actions as largely determined by the logic of the capitalist system. This is consistent with his view that actors in capitalism generally are devoid of creative independence. However, the developmental process inherent in capitalism provides the conditions necessary for the ultimate reemergence of such creative action and, with it, the overthrow of the capitalist system.

Communism

Marx often wrote as though changes in the mode of production were inevitable, as in the quotation about the hand-mill giving you feudalism and the steam-mill giving you capitalism. Unless one wishes to find reasons for rejecting Marx's theories, it is probably best to interpret Marx's historical materialism as motivated by a desire to identify some predictable trends and to use these trends to discover the points where political action could be most effective. This is certainly the way that Marx used his theories in his concrete political and economic studies, such as *Class Struggles in France* (1850) and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1869). The truth of historical materialism, then, does not depend on the inevitability of its historical predictions, but on whether a focus on the way that we satisfy our material needs is the best way to reveal the opportunities for effective political intervention.

If the goal of Marx's materialist view of history was to predict those points where political action could be most effective, then it is his view of what changes will lead to the next stage that is most important. Marx thought that capitalism had developed its productive powers so that it was ready to enter a new mode of production, which he called *communism.* Most of his analysis dwelt on conflicts in the present that will lead to this new economic form.

Despite the importance to Marx of the future communist society, he spent surprisingly little time depicting what this world would be like. He refused to write "recipes for the kitchens of the future" (Marx, cited in T. Ball, 1991:139). The era in which Marx wrote was filled with talk of revolutions and new forms of society—of communism, socialism, anarchy, and many more now forgotten. Charismatic political leaders appeared on the historical stage and stirred audiences with their speeches. Marx, however, was intellectually opposed to painting utopian visions of the future. To Marx, the most important task was the critical analysis of contemporary capitalist society. He believed that such criticism would help bring down capitalism and create the conditions for the rise of a new socialist world. There would be time to construct communist society once capitalism was overcome. In general, however, Marx believed that communism would involve taking decisions about what is to be produced away from the reified economy that runs in the interests of the few capitalists and putting in its place some sort of social decision making that would allow the needs of the many to be taken into account.

Criticisms

Five problems in Marx's theory need to be discussed. The first is the problem of communism as it came to exist. The failure of communist societies and their turn to a more capitalistically oriented economy raise questions about the role of Marxian theory within sociology (Antonio, 2000; Aronson, 1995; Hudelson, 1993; Manuel, 1992). Marx's ideas seem to have been tried and to have failed. At one time, almost one-third of the world's population lived under states inspired by the ideas of Marx. Many of those formerly Marxist states have become capitalist, and even those (except perhaps for Cuba) that still claim to be Marxist manifest nothing but a highly bureaucratized form of capitalism.

Against this criticism, it could be argued that those states never truly followed Marxist precepts, and that it is unfair for critics to blame Marx for every misuse of his theory. However, those making the criticism claim that Marx himself insisted that Marxist theory should not be split from its actually existing practice. As Alvin Gouldner (1970:3) writes, "Having set out to change the world, rather than produce one more interpretation of it, Marxist theory must ultimately be weighed on the scales of history." If Marxism never works out in practice, then, for Marx, the theory would be useless at best and ideological at worst. Furthermore, it seems clear that Marx's lack of a theory regarding the problems of state bureaucracy has contributed to the failures of actually existing communism. Had he developed a complete theory of state bureaucracy, it is conceivable that Marx might have preferred the evils of capitalism.

The second problem is often referred to as the *missing emancipatory subject.* Critics say that although Marx's theory places the proletariat at the heart of the social change leading to communism, the proletariat has rarely assumed this leading position and often is among the groups that are most opposed to communism. This problem is compounded by the fact that intellectuals—for example, academic sociologists—have leapt into the gap left by the proletariat and substituted intellectual activity for class struggle. In addition, the intellectuals' disappointment at the proletariat's conservativism is transformed into a theory that emphasizes the role of ideology much more strongly than Marx did and that tends to see the "heroes" of the future revolution as manipulated dupes.

The third problem is the *missing dimension of gender.* One of the main points of Marx's theory is that labor becomes a commodity under capitalism, yet it is a historical fact that the commodifying of labor has happened less to women than to men. To a large degree, men's paid labor still depends on the *unpaid* labor of women, especially the all-important rearing of the next generation of workers. Sayer (1991) points out that the missing dimension of gender not only leaves a hole in Marx's analysis but also affects his primary argument that capitalism is defined by its growing dependence on wage labor, because the growth of wage labor has been dependent on the unpaid labor of women. Patriarchy may be an essential foundation for the emergence of capitalism, but Marx simply ignores it.

The fourth problem is that Marx saw the economy as driven almost solely by production, and he ignored the role of consumption. The focus on production led him to predict that concerns for efficiency and cost cutting would lead to proletarianization, increasing alienation, and deepening class conflict. It could be argued, however, that the central role of consumption in the modern economy encourages some creativity and entrepreneurship and that these provide at least some wage labor jobs that are not alienating. People who create new video games or direct movies or perform popular music are less alienated from their work, even though they are firmly entrenched in a capitalist system. Although there are only a few such jobs, their existence gives hope to the alienated masses, who can anticipate that they, or at least their children, might someday work in interesting and creative jobs.

Finally, some might point to Marx's uncritical acceptance of Western conceptions of progress as a problem. Marx believed that the engine of history is humanity's always improving exploitation of nature for its material needs. In addition, Marx thought that the essence of human nature is our ability to shape nature to our purposes. It may be that these assumptions are a root cause of many of our current and future ecological crises.

Summary

Marx presents a complex and still relevant analysis of the historical basis of inequality in capitalism and how to change it. Marx's theories are open to many interpretations, but this chapter tries to present an interpretation that makes his theories consistent with his actual historical studies.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the dialectical approach that Marx derived from Hegel and that shapes all of Marx's work. The important point here is that Marx believed that society is structured around contradictions that can be resolved only through actual social change. One of the primary contradictions that Marx looked at was between human potential (nature) and the conditions for labor in capitalism. For Marx, human nature is intimately tied to labor, which both expresses and transforms human potential. Under capitalism, our labor is sold as a commodity, and the commodifying of our labor leads to alienation from our productive activity, from the objects that we make, from our fellow workers, and even from ourselves.

Next the chapter presents Marx's analysis of capitalist society. We begin with the central concept of commodities and then look at the contradiction between their use value and their exchange value. In capitalism, the exchange value of commodities tends to predominate over their actual usefulness in satisfying human needs; therefore, commodities begin to appear to be separate from human labor and from human need and eventually appear to have power over humans. Marx called this the fetishism of commodities. This fetishism is a form of reification, and it affects more than just commodities; in particular, it affects the economic system, which begins to seem like an objective, nonpolitical force that determines our lives. Because of this reification we don't see that the very idea of capital contains a contradictory social relation between those who profit from their investments and those whose actual labor provides the surplus value that constitutes profit. In other words, the ability of capital to generate profit rests on the exploitation of the proletariat. This underlying contradiction leads to class conflict between the proletariat and bourgeoisie, which eventually will result in revolution because proletarianization will swell the ranks of the proletariat. This section concludes by stressing that despite his criticisms of capitalism, Marx believed that capitalism has been good and that his criticisms of it are from the perspective of its potential future.

Marx felt that he was able to take the view from capitalism's potential future because of his materialist conception of history. By focusing on the forces of production, Marx was able to predict historical trends that allowed him to identify where political action could be effective. Political action and even revolution are necessary because relations of production and ideology hold back the necessary development of the forces of production. In Marx's view these changes eventually will lead to a communist society.

We also offer a discussion of some of the most important nonmaterial (cultural) aspects of Marx's theory—especially ideology and religion—as well as some of his famous ideas on economics, especially the labor theory of value.

The chapter ends with some criticisms of Marx's theories. Despite their significance, these criticisms have contributed to the strength of the Marxist approach, even where the strengthening of some Marxist approaches has meant abandoning some of Marx's most strongly held positions.