

[See this page in the course material.](#)

Learning Outcomes

- Describe the conflict theory view of society
- Explain Karl Marx's concepts of class and alienation

Conflict theory looks at society as a competition for limited resources among groups and individuals who have unequal amounts of power. This perspective is a macro-level approach most identified with the writings of German philosopher and sociologist Karl Marx (1818–1883), who saw society as being made up of individuals in different social classes who must compete for social, material, and political resources such as food and housing, employment, education, and leisure time. Social institutions like government, education, and religion reflect this competition in their inherent inequalities and help maintain (perhaps unwittingly) the unequal social structure.

Karl Marx and Conflict Theory

Karl Marx is certainly among the most significant social thinkers in recent history. While there are many critics of his work, it is still widely respected and influential. For Marx, society's constructions were predicated upon the idea of "base and superstructure." This term refers to the idea that a society's economic character forms its base, upon which rests the cultural and social institutions, the superstructure. For Marx, it is the base (economy) that determines what a society will be like.

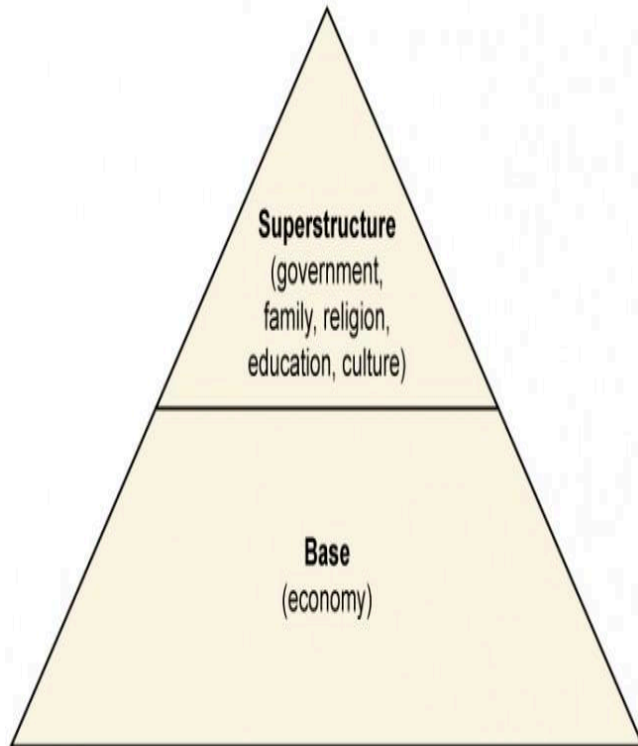


Figure 1. Karl Marx asserted that all elements of a society's structure depend on its economic structure.

Additionally, Marx saw conflict in society as the primary means of change. Economically, he saw conflict existing between the owners of the means of production—the **bourgeoisie**—and the laborers, called the **proletariat**.

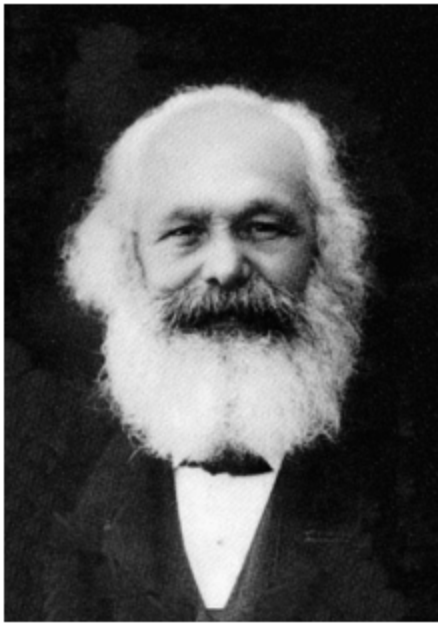
Marx maintained that these conflicts appeared consistently throughout history during times of social revolution. These revolutions, or “class antagonisms” as he called them, were a result of one class dominating another. Most recently, with the end of feudalism, a new revolutionary class he called the bourgeoisie dominated the laboring masses that he called the proletariat. The bourgeoisie were revolutionary in the sense that they represented a radical change in the structure of society. In Marx’s words, “Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other—Bourgeoisie and Proletariat” (Marx and Engels 1848).

In the mid-nineteenth century, as industrialization was booming, bourgeois industrial employers, the “owners of the means of production” in Marx’s terms, became more and more exploitative toward the working class proletariat. The large manufacturers of steel were particularly ruthless, and their facilities were popularly dubbed “dark satanic mills” based on a poem by William

Blake. Marx's frequent co-author and friend, Friedrich Engels, wrote *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* (1844), which described the horrid conditions.

Such is the Old Town of Manchester, and on re-reading my description, I am forced to admit that instead of being exaggerated, it is far from black enough to convey a true impression of the filth, ruin, and uninhabitableness, the defiance of all considerations of cleanliness, ventilation, and health which characterise the construction of this single district, containing at least twenty to thirty thousand inhabitants. And such a district exists in the heart of the second city of England, the first manufacturing city of the world.

Add to that the long hours, the use of child labor, and exposure to extreme temperatures and toxic chemicals, and it is no wonder that Marx and Engels referred to capitalism, which is a way of organizing an economy so that the things that are used to make and transport products (such as land, oil, factories, ships, etc.) are owned by profit-seeking individuals and companies rather than by the government, as the "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie."



(a)



(b)

Figure 2. Karl Marx (left) and Friedrich Engels (right) analyzed differences in social power between "have" and "have-not" groups. (Photo (a) courtesy of Wikimedia Commons; Photo (b) courtesy of George Lester/Wikimedia Commons)

For Marx, how we labor defines who we are. Historically, and in spite of the persistent efforts of one class to dominate another, Marx argued that some element of common humanity still existed in pre-industrial, smaller-scale modes of productions such as guild communities and

workshops. In these workplaces, there was at least some connection between the worker and the product, whose creation was partially governed by seasonal cycles and by the rise and fall of the sun, just as in earlier agricultural societies. But with the bourgeois revolution and the rise of industrialization and capitalism, the worker now labored for wages alone. His relationship to his labor was no longer of a human nature, but was instead based on artificial, inorganic conditions.

Marx described modern society in terms of alienation. **Alienation** refers to the condition in which the individual is isolated and divorced from his or her society, work, or sense of self. Marx defined four specific types of alienation.

1. *Alienation from the product of one's labor.* An industrial worker does not have the opportunity to relate to the product he labors on. Instead of training for years as a watchmaker, an unskilled worker can get a job at a watch factory pressing buttons to seal watch pieces together. The worker does not care if he is making watches or cars, simply that the job exists. In the same way, a worker may not even know or care what product to which he is contributing. A worker on a Ford assembly line may spend all day installing windows on car doors without ever seeing the rest of the car.
2. *Alienation from the process of one's labor.* A worker does not control the conditions of her job because she does not own the means of production (i.e., the factory and its tools and raw materials). If a person is hired to work in a fast food restaurant, she is expected to make the food the way she is taught. All ingredients must be combined in a particular order and in a particular quantity; there is no room for creativity or change. An employee at Burger King cannot decide to change the spices used on the fries in the same way that an employee on a Ford assembly line cannot decide to place a car's headlights in a different position. Everything is decided by the factory-owning bourgeoisie who then dictate orders to the laborers.
3. *Alienation from others.* Workers compete, rather than cooperate. Employees vie for time slots, bonuses, and job security. Even when a worker clocks out at night and goes home, the competition does not end. As Marx and Engels described this dynamic in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), "No sooner is the exploitation of the laborer by the manufacturer, so far at an end, that he receives his wages in cash, than he is set upon by the other portion of the bourgeoisie, the landlord, the shopkeeper, the pawnbroker."
4. *Alienation from one's self.* A final outcome of industrialization is a loss of connectivity between a worker and her occupation. Because there is nothing that ties a worker to her labor, there is no longer a sense of self. Instead of being able to take pride in an identity such as being a watchmaker, automobile builder, or chef, a person is simply a cog in the machine.



Figure 3. An assembly line worker installs car parts with the aid of complex machinery. Has technology made this type of labor more or less alienating? (Photo courtesy of Carol Highsmith/Wikimedia Commons)

Taken as a whole, then, alienation in modern society means that an individual has no control over his life. But why, then, does the modern working class not rise up and rebel? (Indeed, Marx predicted that this would be the ultimate outcome and would result in the collapse of capitalism.)

Another idea that Marx developed is the concept of **false consciousness**. False consciousness is a condition in which the beliefs, ideals, or ideology of a person are not in the person's own best interest. In fact, it is the ideology of the dominant class (here, the bourgeois capitalists) that is imposed upon the proletariat. Ideas such as the emphasis of competition over cooperation, or of hard work being its own reward, clearly benefit the owners of the means of production. Therefore, workers are less likely to question their place in society or to assume individual responsibility for existing conditions.

In order for society to overcome false consciousness, Marx proposed that it be replaced with **class consciousness**, the awareness of one's rank in society. He thought it was crucial that workers recognize their real relationship to, and political distance from, the means of production. Instead of existing as a "class in itself," the proletariat must become a "class for itself" in order to effect social change, meaning that instead of just being an inert stratum of society, the class

could advocate for social improvements (Marx and Engels 1848). Only once society entered this state of political consciousness would it be ready for a social revolution.

WAtch It

Review Marx's ideas about alienation and the four types of alienation in the following video.



[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

Further Research

One of the most influential pieces of political writing in modern history was Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Visit ["Manifesto of the Communist Party" on Marxists.org](#) to read the original document that spurred revolutions around the world.

Think It Over

- Think of the ways workers are alienated from the product and process of their jobs. How can these concepts be applied to students and their educations?
- Use Marx's argument to explain a current social event such as the Occupy movement. Does his theory hold up under modern scrutiny?

Try It

According to Marx, the _____ own the means of production in a society.

vassals

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

When Karl Marx said workers experience alienation, he meant that workers

move from one geographical location to another.

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

Glossary

alienation: an individual's isolation from his society, his work, and his sense of self
bourgeoisie: the owners of the means of production in a society
capitalism: a way of organizing an economy so that the things that are used to make and transport products (such as land, oil, factories, ships, etc.) are owned by profit-seeking individuals and companies rather than by the government
class consciousness: the lack of awareness of one's rank in society and relationship to the means of production
false consciousness: a person's beliefs and ideology that are in conflict with her best interests
proletariat: the laborers in a society

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