CHAPTER 3

Class Inequality

Karl Marx

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The idea of civil society has been integral to democracy since its modern beginnings. It’s an organic idea, in the sense that there aren’t clear boundaries indicating what’s included or excluded and the emphasis changes according to whom you read. Nevertheless, there were few, if any, thinkers at the dawn of modern democracy that didn’t see civil society as a necessary institutional sphere for the success of the democratic experiment that began most notably in France and the United States. In some ways, its organic nature is appropriate because democracy as originally conceived is organic as well, expanding as the ideas of freedom and equality move through the ever-changing landscape of society. However, don’t let the indefiniteness of the idea lull you into thinking you can discount it: Without civil society, democracy would surely die. This institutional sphere was so important to the people who framed democracy in the United States that it finds its place in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution: The freedom of speech, press, and assembly are vital to civil society, as are the freedom from state-sponsored religion and the right to redress the government.

One of the people whose work is still seen as essential for any discussion of civil society is Alexis de Tocqueville and his study of early American democracy (1835–1840/2002). Jeffrey Alexander (2006), a contemporary sociologist, summarizes Tocqueville’s understanding: “It included the capitalist market and its institutions, but it also denoted what Tocqueville called voluntary religion . . . private and public associations and organizations, and virtually every form of cooperative social relationship that created bonds of trust” (p. 24, emphasis added). I want to call your attention to the part in italics—originally, capitalism was seen as an important element in civil society; it was supposed to be the way through which men and women could achieve their own social standing. The interesting thing about this is that, generally speaking, capitalism is no longer seen as part of civil society. In fact, it is often specifically excluded “for the reason that free markets, by reducing all decisions to the calculation of self-interest, weaken the bonds of loyalty, friendship, and trust upon which civil society depends” (Eberly, 2000, p. 8).

Beginning a chapter about Karl Marx with a discussion of democracy may seem a bit odd, but I hope that you’re beginning to see why I’ve done it. Marx’s systematic analysis marked the separation of capitalism from civil society. The power of Marx’s critique was less about the economic system and more about the effects of capitalism on people’s thinking and awareness of the world. Democracy requires critical thinking and insightful awareness—Marx wants us to consider the possibility that capitalism may in fact dull those attributes. There is no doubt that capitalism has brought tremendous benefits. More people are materially better off than ever before in human history, and we’ve benefited from the improvements in technology and medical care spurred by capitalist motivation. Yet, capitalism has a dark side as well, one that may reach down into the very soul of humankind, at least from Marx’s perspective.
The Sociological Imagination of Karl Marx

The political, economic, and intellectual contexts of the world into which Marx was born were decidedly different from those of Herbert Spencer. You remember that Spencer’s world was one that appeared to be set on a glorious upward path of social evolution. England was in her political heyday, the boundaries of the empire stretched around the globe, and Pax Britannica ruled. Economically, Britain was at the forefront of the Industrial Revolution, and the intellectual community in London was pushing the boundaries of the known sciences. During Spencer’s lifetime, Great Britain was leading Western Europe in the modernization of the world. Marx’s Germany, however, was quite a bit different.
Marx’s Life

Karl Marx was born to a German Jewish family on May 5, 1818, in Trier. Karl’s father, Heinrich Marx, came from a family where the men usually became rabbis. In fact, Heinrich was the first to receive a secular education and espouse Christianity, though the conversion was socially motivated because of the oppression of Jews. Marx’s father practiced law and was an avid reader of Leibniz and Kant, which is undoubtedly where the young Marx was first exposed to these philosophers.

The Marx family lived next to the home of Baron Johann Ludwig von Westphalen. Westphalen was a government official and Prussian aristocrat who befriended the family and specifically took young Marx under his wing. Undoubtedly, Westphalen had a profound influence on Marx—Karl eventually married his daughter, Baroness Johanna Bertha Julie “Jenny” von Westphalen—but perhaps the most important effect was that Westphalen introduced Marx to the ideas of Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), whom we first met in Chapter 1. Marx undoubtedly began thinking about socialism in response to Saint-Simon’s writings. Marx’s work is a kind of economic determinism that gives central place to the economy. Saint-Simon makes the same sort of argument: “Society . . . is based entirely on industry. Industry is the sole guarantee of its existence” (as cited in Normano, 1932, p. 8). Thus, under socialism, the economy is publicly controlled to bring the greatest good to the greatest number of people, and the state shifts from controlling people to directing things. Marx’s collaborator, Friedrich Engels (1880/1978a), tells us that this Marxian idea “that economic conditions are the basis of political institutions” was based on Saint-Simon’s work (p. 689). Engels intimates that the idea of class antagonisms also stems from Saint-Simon, though he spoke of “idlers” and “workers” and missed the true meaning of the proletariat under capitalism (p. 685). In addition, Marx’s view of history as being driven by class conflict was also inspired by Saint-Simon who “wanted to found a science of progress which by studying the past would give men a sure guide for working out the future” (MacIver, 1922, p. 239).

Marx continued his education first at the University of Bonn, then at the University of Berlin, finally completing his PhD in philosophy at the University of Jena in 1841. His Berlin years were in some ways his most formative. There he came in contact with the ideas of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) and the New Hegelians. In a letter to his father, dated November 10, 1837, Marx (1978c) talked about his interest in Hegel and said that during a recent illness, “I got to know Hegel from beginning to end, together with most of his disciples” (p. 8). We’ll hear more about Hegel in a bit.

While in Berlin, Marx also became a member of a “Doctor’s Club.” These clubs were made up of professors and intellectuals who would endlessly debate philosophical points well into the night over mugs of beer (they met in Berlin’s beer cellars). Marx also sought academic employment but had very little luck. He began working for a radical newspaper and within a short period of time, became its editor. The articles that Marx wrote gained quite a bit of attention, especially from the
In Paris, Marx became acquainted with the works of reformist thinkers who had been suppressed in Germany and began his close friendship and collaboration with Friedrich Engels (1820–1895). Engels was the son of a wealthy German businessman and was significant in Marx's life for a few reasons. First, it was through Engels that Marx learned firsthand of the abuses of industrialized capitalism, most notably child labor and the impoverished working class. As the son of a well-to-do capitalist, and someone who later managed several of his family’s businesses, Engels knew the economic system from the inside out. Note that Marx didn’t actually learn of the abuses of capitalism from his German experience; most of his concerns originated with Engels. Engels sent Marx various articles depicting the deplorable conditions, and in 1844, Engels published his first book: *Conditions of the Working Class in England* (1844/2009). Engels also provided and arranged for a good deal of financial support for Marx, especially during his London years. Engels and Marx shared an interest in Hegel and association with the Young Hegelians, though the two didn’t meet in Germany. Marx and Engels worked together for nearly 40 years and coauthored *The Communist Manifesto* in 1847 (1848/1978). After Marx’s death, Engels finished the last two volumes of *Das Kapital—Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Marx, 1867/1977)—a massive work analyzing the historical development, political-economic roots, and practices of capitalism.

Engels was a significant scholar in his own right and published several pieces. One of the most interesting is *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884/1978a). In it, he analyzed the historical development of monogamy. Engels argued that monogamous marriage originated “to bequeath this wealth to this man’s children and to no one else’s” (p. 745). In monogamy, Engels saw the beginnings of class oppression. Because it was based upon the unequal control of material wealth, monogamous marriage contained within it the “embryo” form of “all the antagonisms which later develop on a wide scale within society and its state” (p. 737). True to this understanding of marriage, Engels never married his lifelong partner, Mary Burns, who was instrumental in introducing Engels to the working class neighborhoods in London.

Marx was kicked out of Paris. In fact, he was banned from France by the prime minister, Francois Guizot, in 1845, and spent the next few years in Brussels. It was there that Marx first became associated with the Communist League, who, in 1847, commissioned Marx and Engels to write *The Communist Manifesto*. The publication of the Manifesto in 1848 was timely, as a wave of revolutions swept around the globe that year. This wave began in January with the Italian states. In February, a much bloodier and more significant revolution hit France; Germany was engulfed in March; and the wave soon hit most of Europe and extended as far as Brazil.
Surprisingly, neither Britain nor the United States was much affected. There were several causes for this wave of revolution: Europe had suffered through a number of famines in the preceding years; the Industrial Revolution created both increasing prosperity and misery; and there were a number of ideological belief systems—such as democracy, nationalism, liberalism, and socialism—that had gained widespread audiences through the popular press. As you can well imagine, Marx was ecstatic. He returned to Germany, took the editorship of a radical paper, and attempted to trigger a tsunami of social change.

However, it was not to be. The wave of revolutions was effectively put down within a year, and few if any reforms resulted. Marx and Engels went into exile in London. Both thought the exile would be short, fully expecting the revolutions to build again; both were wrong. Marx labored in London for the next 13 years, spending most of his days researching in the British Museum from 10 AM to 7 PM. Most of that work formed the basis of Das Kapital.

Things began to pick up again for Marx in 1863. That was the year that a group of French labor leaders came to London to discuss the possibility of forming an international worker’s union. The next year, the men met again, this time to hammer out the particulars of the organization, which became known as the International Workingmen’s Association, or simply The First International. Soon after its inception, Marx took control of the organization and delivered the inaugural address. In it, he recalled the wait since the 1848 revolutions and connected it to the basic antagonism of capitalism: capitalists prosper—workers suffer: “It is a great fact that the misery of the working masses has not diminished from 1848 to 1864, and yet this period is unrivalled for the development of its industry and growth of its commerce” (Marx, 1864/1978f, p. 512). His conclusion echoes both the 1848 Communist Manifesto and Marx’s expectation for the immediate future: “Proletarians of all countries, Unite!” (p. 539). Marx’s hope lasted 7 years.

The beginning of the death knell came from France. After France’s defeat in the Franco–Prussian War (1870–1871), the working class took control of Paris. They formed the Paris Commune, the first government by and for the working class. This new government lasted 3 short months, from March to May of 1871. After 8 days of fighting, the Army of Versailles brought down the Commune. As a result of the battle and its aftermath, 30,000 Commune members were slaughtered and 38,000 arrested. In an address given just days after the fall, Marx (1891/1978a) said the Commune “will be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class” (p. 652). In an attempt to preserve the First International, Marx moved its headquarters to the United States. The move, however, was unsuccessful, and the International disbanded in 1876.

Marx never recovered his revolutionary flame and suffered from illness for the rest of his life. His wife died in 1881, and one of his remaining daughters (the Marx family lost four children in infancy) a year later. Marx died in 1883. At his graveside, Engels (1883/1978c) said, “On the 14th of March, at a quarter to three in the afternoon, the greatest living thinker ceased to think. He had been left alone for scarcely two minutes, and when we came back we found him in his armchair, peacefully gone to sleep—but forever” (p. 681).
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Marx’s Social World

Marx’s birthplace, Trier, is one of the oldest cities in Germany. From 883 CE until the French occupation in 1807, Trier was the seat of the Archbishop and Elector of the Holy Roman Empire. Napoleon controlled Germany from 1807 to 1813, during which time feudalism was officially brought to a close, the government opened to common citizens, and Jews were given political standing. These reforms were short lived, however. After Napoleon’s defeat, the Vienna Congress repartitioned Germany into a loose affiliation of 39 states. “Prejudice and discrimination [of Jews] remained firmly entrenched in German society and intensified in the postwar years” (Kitchen, 2006, p. 47).

While serfdom and feudalism were officially ended in the early 1800s, it took until 1823 to go into effect. This is one of the reasons why the Industrial Revolution didn’t have much of an impact in Germany until decades after Britain. In addition, each territory and state practiced protectionism with high tariffs and duties, which slowed the development of a market economy. Similarly, Germany lacked the transportation infrastructure needed to facilitate trade, markets, and demand, which generally push for industrialization. This slowdown of industrialization affected two key indicators: textiles (by 1846, only 2.2 percent of the textile looms were run by machine) and the production of iron (by 1837 less than 10 percent came from coke-fired furnaces). Thus, for much of the nineteenth century, the German economy was largely agricultural, and its people suffered through at least three major famines.

The Enlightenment, too, was different in Germany from how it was in Britain or France. While it’s difficult to set a definite date, we won’t be far off by saying that generally the Enlightenment as a whole began with the work of British philosophers Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), who first posed the problem of social order and argued for individual natural rights and equality, and John Locke (1632–1704), who is considered the father of liberalism. France had its own outstanding figures, such as Voltaire (1694–1778) and Montesquieu (1689–1755); more importantly, it was in France where the ideas of enlightenment were collectively pulled together in the Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts, an encyclopedia of the Enlightenment literature published in France between 1751 and 1772. Generally speaking, the British and French Enlightenments argued for the supremacy of human reason in the search for timeless truths based in empiricism.

The German Enlightenment can be dated to the work of Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716), who published his Discourse on Metaphysics in 1686 and Monadology in 1714 (both included in Leibniz, 1714/1992). Leibniz was a mathematician and philosopher whose philosophy moved completely away from empiricism. He argued that the universe is made up of “monads,” which are in some sense like spiritual atoms. Monads are solitary bits of existence that do not bind together and that contain preprogrammed instructions that create the best of all possible universes. Monads aren’t necessarily small like atoms; both God and the individual human are complete monads. The important thing to see here is that Leibniz’s philosophy is metaphysical; he argued that reason should be applied to understanding what is in back of empirical phenomena.
Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is probably the best known and most influential of German Enlightenment thinkers. Like Leibniz, Kant argued for a more metaphysical understanding of the universe. One of the problems that English and French thinkers faced was that the mechanistic, law-bound approach left little room for the human soul or spirit. If all empirical phenomena can be reduced to natural law, then human consciousness is nothing more than chemical reactions among bits of brain matter. To solve this issue, Kant argued that the mind has intrinsic categories and ideas that are used to order our experience of the empirical world. In other words, the mind isn’t a blank slate upon which experience writes itself; rather, humans are born with mental structures already in place. Though Kant argued that there is an objective, empirical world “out there,” he also asserted that raw empiricism isn’t possible because what we see is prefigured by our minds. Humans therefore can never grasp the thing-in-itself because the mind imposes its ideas upon material reality. The German Enlightenment, then, had a strong base in mysticism and was concerned with preserving the metaphysical existence of human nature and reason.

Marx was structurally an outsider. He was born a Jew in a nation that would become known for its persecution of Jews. This outsider status haunted Marx throughout most of his life and certainly during his formative years. This position was exacerbated by the fact that during the early part of Marx’s life, Germany was fragmented into various political and economic territories. Political tensions thus ran high. While these tensions undoubtedly inspired Marx, they also created a situation ripe for his estrangement from his homeland. Marx saw and experienced firsthand the ways in which elite groups could use governments for their own ends. His voice was silenced, which undoubtedly sensitized him to the political use of ideology. Marx also saw where Germany was heading, thanks to his friend Engels. Engels knew from experience the abuses of industrial capitalism; it was from Engels that Marx learned what an entrenched capitalist system could do.

Marx was strongly influenced by the metaphysical or spiritual bent of the German Enlightenment. It is likely this intellectual context affected Marx’s sociological imagination more than any other. The zeitgeist, the spirit of the age, into which Marx was born was decidedly different from that of either Comte or Spencer. He thus had a different sense about him, a distinct way of seeing the world. Rather than the raw empiricism and brute-force hope found in Comte and Spencer, German intellectuals were concerned with preserving the metaphysical existence of humanity while building in the use of reason to undergird faith. Where English and French intellectuals were busy separating church and state, German philosophers were finding ways of melding modern government with traditional faith. Marx came out of this environment with powerful ideas about human nature, ideology, and a concern for ideology’s expression in religion.

**Marx’s Intellectual World**

We’ve already spent a good deal of time considering the sources of Marx’s sociological imagination. But to truly understand this “greatest living thinker,” we have
to delve deeper into the intellectual world in which Marx lived. Unlike Spencer, Marx was a true intellectual in the sense that he spent years of his life immersed in books and philosophical arguments. Marx’s theory is thus deeply embedded in philosophical concerns—most of them, as you would guess from the unique qualities of the German Enlightenment, revolve around metaphysics.

The simplest (and most simplistic) way of understanding *metaphysics* is to take the word literally. The suffix “meta” means with or after. Metaphysics thus refers to that which is alongside of or after the physical. So, imagine the universe ends in flames, burning away all planets, stars, and matter itself; whatever is left over would be metaphysical. It should be clear that the only animal that could even think of such a thing is the human being. We’re the only ones that ask the question, “What is the meaning of life?” It appears that all other animals take life as it is; humans, on the other hand, need to have things mean something. We humans have long been convinced that we have something other than a purely physical existence. You could call it the spirit, soul, or mind, but for most of our history, we have thought there’s something other than or added to pure physicality for us. That idea, of course, is in back of every religion; and it also forms the beginning point for philosophy.

The important thing I want you to see here is that almost everything that Marx talks about is based upon or comes back to these sorts of transcendent issues. He is very concerned about human nature, for example. Marx didn’t just say that capitalism is unfair to the working class; he argued that capitalism perverts or destroys human nature. To say something like that, Marx had to have a clear idea of what human nature is in the first place. I’m sure you’ve heard the terms *false consciousness* and *ideology*. The only way to have false consciousness is to first assume a true consciousness. The word *ideology* simply means the study of ideas, but in Marx’s hands, it becomes the study of false ideas, and to talk about that, Marx must first assume what real ideas are. All of these foundational ideas are deeply philosophical, and all speak of something other than simple physical existence.

That doesn’t mean that Marx isn’t concerned about physical existence; he is. In fact, it is his primary concern, but he’s concerned about material existence because of his metaphysical base. The way Marx connects our material existence to such things as consciousness is utterly unique and stunning in its elegance. In order to see such things in Marx, we’ll have to look at the ideas of Hegel, whom I briefly mentioned previously, as well as those of Ludwig Andreas von Feuerbach (1804–1872) and Adam Smith (1723–1790). Please take the time to work through the ideas that follow. If you do, the rest of Marx will be a breeze, comparatively speaking, anyway.

**Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel**

Like Kant, Hegel was an idealist, but he criticized Kant’s approach. Kant left the human being divided in two ways. First, because the mind has and uses built-in categories to understand the world, we can never truly know the thing-in-itself. We
can never directly know the world of physical objects because our mind gets in the way. Second, Kant set reason and passion against each other. While reason is good and possible, the “disease of the soul,” human passions, stood in the way. Thus, while Kant elevated the mind above pure materialism, he left us isolated and in struggle.

There are several intertwined philosophical issues that have concerned sociology since its inception, most notably epistemology (the study of knowledge) and ontology (the study of existence). Materialism and idealism are two philosophical schools that are concerned with these questions. Materialism makes the argument that the only thing that exists is physical matter. Our knowledge, then, is based on intrinsic characteristics of material objects and the way they impact the brain. As you would expect, idealism argues that ideas exist independently of material objects. This was basically Kant’s argument, and Hegel is seen as an absolute idealist. This split between idealism and materialism becomes really interesting when sociology gets involved. Marx and Durkheim both speak directly to the issue of existence and knowledge. Both argue for a material base to reality, but the “matter” in this case is society, not physical matter. In simple terms, Marx’s materialism is based in economic production, and Durkheim’s is founded in social morphology. More recently, sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (The Social Construction of Reality, 1966) argue for another approach: a phenomenological sociology of knowledge, which simply looks at how what we take to be “common knowledge” creates our sense of reality. This approach has become significant in recent sociological literature, with multiple works looking at the social construction of race, gender, and sexuality. The issues of epistemology and ontology continue in the sociology of science, postmodernism, poststructuralism, and so on.

Hegel began his argument with sense-certainty. Sense-certainty is pure experience apart from any language. Such a thing is difficult for us to imagine because we casually assume the reality of our experiences. Let’s take something mundane for example, like an apple. Imagine you have an apple in front of you. What do you see? If you say you see an “apple,” you’re not experiencing the thing-in-itself because “apple” is part of language. In fact, you would have to be able to get rid of all linguistic ideas associated with apple, such as “fruit,” “red,” “hard,” “crunchy,” ad infinitum in order to experience it with sense-certainty.

There’s an intrinsic problem with sense-certainty for humans, and we just experienced it: Sense-certainty has no meaning, nor can it be communicated. It is, in fact, not consciousness. This part is a little tricky, but it is imperative for understanding Marx. Consciousness is always awareness of something—it isn’t simple sense-certainty. With sense-certainty, an organism is in the experience; there’s no secondary awareness of the experience. The story of human history, then, is one where the mind evolved toward consciousness.
The easiest way for me to help you see what Hegel is talking about is to use the example of language. Imagine going to the zoo with your dog (if you don’t have one, imagine a dog as well). Now imagine that you and your dog are standing in front of the gorilla cage. How will your experience be different from your dog’s? Chances are very good that your dog will have sense-certainty about the other animal—she’ll probably bark her head off. You, however, will understand and make meaningful that imposing biological entity by recognizing it as a caged-in-the-zoo gorilla, and if you’ve taken particular classes, you may recognize it as a primate. But “primate” and “gorilla” don’t exist in the physical world; they are, as Kant would point out, categories of the mind.

However, there’s an intrinsic problem with consciousness. The problem is that once these categories are used, we take them as physical reality, but they aren’t. Here’s an easy example: Up until 2006, all astronomy textbooks taught that Pluto was a planet. So when you were in grade school, you and your teachers took Pluto’s planet status as physical reality. Of course, we now “know” that Pluto isn’t a planet; the problem, again, is that most will take that new category as physical reality. Humans make up categories and explanations, impose them on the material world, and then see their own creations as objective, material reality. This, in Hegel’s eyes, is considered alienation.

This problem of reification (making something real that isn’t) has been around since we started using language, but it became acute because of science. “Classic science is based on the belief that there exists a real external world whose properties are definite and independent of the observer who perceives them” (Hawking & Mlodinow, 2010, p. 43, emphasis added). This is where Kant comes in. Remember that Kant argued that categories and theories originate in the human mind, and we can thus never get to the thing-in-itself. Kant also argued that scientific laws, such as Newton’s law of gravity, likewise originate in the mind. Kant’s importance is that he systematically exposed the mind’s role in not only the perception but also the creation of material reality. Hegel sees Kant’s work as the beginning of self-consciousness, as we will see, which is the next step in his evolution of consciousness.
There are a couple of things to notice. First, Hegel is giving us a history of the mind or consciousness. The mind has historically evolved from sense-certainty to consciousness, and from consciousness to self-consciousness. For Hegel, history is nothing more and nothing less than the process of the mind and ultimately the universe becoming conscious. The second thing to notice is that Hegel isn’t simply mapping history; he is also giving us the dynamic in back of history—the movement principle, the reason things change.

The dynamic in back of the evolution of consciousness is dialectic in character. The word dialectic comes from the Greek word dialektikos, meaning discourse or discussion. Dialectic is different from debate because in a debate, each side is committed and seeks to win over the other; in a dialectic, there are opposing elements, but the goal is to reach resolution, not to win. The key to the dialectic is that the beginning state generates its own contradiction. Science might be a good example to consider in isolation. Notice that the preceding quote from physicists Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow talks about “classic science.” That implies that there is a new kind of science. Hawking and Mlodinow (2010) call this new science “model-dependent realism.” The only thing we need to know about model-dependent realism right now is that it rejects the fundamental assumption of empiricism upon which classic science was based. This means that classic and contemporary science contradict one another. How did science go from assuming empirical reality to rejecting it? The short answer is that science got there by working according to the scientific method. For example, modern physics started with Newton and then over time got to Einstein’s relativity by using scientific methods. It then moved from Einstein to quantum physics, and quantum physics to string theory in the same way. Science, then, produced its own contradictions that changed the very nature of science.

A dialectic is a theoretical concept that describes the intrinsic dynamic relations within a phenomenon. Dialectics contain different elements that are naturally antagonistic to or in tension with one another—this antagonism is what energizes and brings about change. Dialectics are cyclical in nature, with each new cycle bringing a different and generally unpredictable resolution. The resolution contains its own antagonistic elements, and the cycle continues (though Marx’s theory does resolve because of his assumptions about human nature). A goodly number of contemporary theorists continue to use this concept.

For Hegel, the dialectic is intrinsic to consciousness. Hegel assumed that the universe is meant to be conscious. As such, sense-certainty is a contradiction; it knows only the material world. That tension pushed for consciousness to evolve, and we became conscious through language, religion, and so forth. But this form of
consciousness—awareness of being in the world—isn’t perfect consciousness; it perceives a separation between the observer and observed. That separation is basic to classic science: The world is empirical, and humans can discover the empirical world. We can’t discover something if we are part of it; discovery implies separation. So the history of consciousness reached critical mass with classic science. Kant took the next step by telling us that the categories and explanations of the material world that we use exist first in the mind.

This step of Kant’s was the beginning of self-consciousness (awareness becoming aware of itself), and Hegel saw his work as perfecting the beginning that Kant instituted. Hegel is an absolute idealist; that is, he argued that self-consciousness is Absolute Truth. It’s the point to which the universe has been evolving since its inception. In self-consciousness, Hegel saw humanity moving toward the realization that there is nothing beyond consciousness, least of all the thing-in-itself. The “outer” material world is simply objectified spirit, not something fundamentally different from consciousness. Self-consciousness is becoming aware that consciousness is the final and ultimate reality. Self-consciousness is, in fact, the mind of God. It is vital that you don’t read “God” here as an entity separate from humanity and that you don’t posit God as existing before all things. Both those suppositions create separation, and with true self-consciousness there is no separation. All things exist within the mind of God, and individual consciousnesses are nothing more than the particularization of that universal mind. “The essence of spirit, then, is self-consciousness” (Hegel, 1830/1975, p. 51).

Hegel’s definition of self-consciousness is tricky for us because we normally assume that “self” refers to the individual person; but that’s not at all what Hegel has in mind. This “self” is the Universal Self, or more specifically, it’s the universe becoming aware of itself. Rather than seeing God and creation as separate, Hegel sees the universe as developing its own God-consciousness, with humanity as the instrument of this development. It’s important to see that at the “moment of creation,” consciousness and matter were both present; one cannot exist without the other, according to Hegel. Yet both were also undeveloped and so evolved. The Absolute Truth of the universe is that matter and consciousness are locked together dialectically, and history will cease to exist once this Truth is embraced.

Marx built his theory on these Hegelian ideas: human nature, reality, dialectical history, and consciousness. I’ll explain these in greater detail later, but let me give you a hint about the direction Marx will take using his own words. In explaining the sources of his theory, he credits Hegel with “a guiding thread for my studies. . . . It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (Marx, 1859/1978g, p. 4).
**Ludwig Andreas von Feuerbach**

Feuerbach was a member of the Young Hegelians, a group of young men who wanted to take Hegel’s ideas further. Hegel basically argued that his period of time was the dawn of a new age of spiritual enlightenment. In addition to Kant’s insights, Hegel also felt that the Lutheran Reformation was key to the evolution of consciousness. Luther proclaimed that each individual believer was responsible for her or his relationship with God. No outside authority (the Catholic Church) or intermediary (the priesthood) was necessary; an individual’s conscience in harmony with the Spirit of God is all that was needed. The Young Hegelians criticized Hegel for leaving even this brand of religion untouched.

Feuerbach argued that religion and God are nothing more than projections of human nature. This is where, Feuerbach contended, true alienation exists. Mankind created God in his own image and then worshiped God as if He were Other. Feuerbach also criticized Hegel for seeing the dialectic as spiritual. Feuerbach argued that material objects are not simply mental projections (as in Kant), and neither are they held within the mind of God (Hegel) and thus fundamentally spiritual. Rather, reality is material, and our consciousness of it is based on contemplation of the objective world.

Marx found much to agree with in Feuerbach. He agreed that the world is material and concurred with the alienating work of religion. Yet Marx takes Feuerbach further by arguing first that Feuerbach didn’t understand the true material basis of human existence. Humans aren’t generally concerned with purely material objects. Rather, the objective, material world in which humans live is a produced one, created through economic production. In this, Marx claimed, Feuerbach missed true human nature; he, like Hegel, was too focused on humans as individual entities. Marx contends that human nature is social: “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations” (Marx, 1888/1978h, p. 145). In addition, Feuerbach fell into the trap of philosophy, believing that abstract thought is an end in itself. Marx argued that after philosophizing, the “chief thing” still remains: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (p. 145). This is the source for the Marxian idea of *praxis*, practical engagement with the world.

**Adam Smith**

Hegel and Feuerbach informed the metaphysical background of Marx’s theory. Yet Marx is primarily concerned with material existence and for that portion of his theory, he drew on Adam Smith. Smith was a philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment and is considered the father of classic economics. His most important economic work was *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, which was the first systematic defense and explanation of free market capitalism. The first edition of the book sold out within 6 months of publication, and Smith’s theories began informing debates and policy decisions in Britain and the United States as early as a year after its publication.
Smith didn’t actually use the word *capitalism* in the book. Rather, he called it the system of perfect or natural liberty. Just as Hegel did with consciousness, Smith saw capitalism as the natural result of social evolution; its evolutionary purpose was to bring individual freedom. This economic system of perfect liberty was seen as part of the process of doing away with traditional systems of stratification, where one’s social position was determined by birth, and creating a system of merit (meritocracy) in which natural selection could work through competition in the marketplace. This relationship between capitalism and freedom not only set a goal for Smith’s work, but it motivated Marx’s writing as well. “The conception of capitalism as the period in history when freedom is finally established sets an intellectual agenda for Smith, just as the conception of capitalism as a way station toward freedom sets a different one for Marx” (Heilbroner, 1986, p. 9).

Smith argued that national mercantilism’s protective tariffs and gold-based economies were hindrances to the evolutionary move to capitalism. Rather than regulating imports and exports, the national economy will prosper as states remove market controls. Specifically, Smith argued that humans have a natural inclination to barter, to realize profit from the exchange of goods and services. This motivation is based on the “natural effort of every individual to better his own condition, when suffered to exert itself with freedom and security” (Smith, 1776/1937, p. 508). In bettering her or his own condition, the individual unintentionally helps everyone. The individual “neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it... [H]e intends only his own gain, and he is in this... led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention” (p. 421).

Marx argued that Smith’s idea of the *natural individual* was a myth. Generally speaking, the literature by philosophers and political economists of Smith’s time was filled with this notion of human nature as being innately individualistic. However, these writers missed the fact that the idea is historically specific: The
individual “appears as an ideal, whose existence they project into the past” (Marx, 1939–1941/1978e, p. 222). Marx contended that if we simply let history tell its tale, we’ll find that mankind is an intrinsically social animal. Economic production is thus socially based, not individually as Smith saw it. According to Marx, seeing isolated, individual productivity as leading society “is as much an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living together and talking to each other” (p. 223).

Smith also had a theory of value that informed Marx’s theorizing. Smith argued that the natural value of a commodity is determined by human labor, in terms of costs to both produce and acquire goods. To increase productivity and profit, labor must be divided, or the division of labor must increase. The division of labor is the process through which the work done to create a good is broken down into small increments. Smith uses the example of making a wooden pin that’s used to secure two pieces of wood together. A man working the trade by himself may make a pin a day. Smith observed that a small manufacturing firm that used 10 men to produce pins was able to produce 12 pounds of pins. Each person, then, “might be considered as making four thousand eight hundred pins in a day” (Smith, 1776/1937, p. 5).

Enduring Issues

At first glance, the division of labor doesn’t seem like an important question. Yet, in our book, Marx, Durkheim, and Simmel directly address this issue, and it is a key issue in understanding race and gender. In addition, the division of labor is an important concept in studying globalization. The division of labor is simply the way in which work is divided in any economy. It can vary from everyone doing similar tasks to each person having a specialized job. In previous epochs, labor was more holistic in the sense that the worker was invested in a product from beginning to end. One of the distinctive traits of modernity is the use of scientific management, or Fordism, to divide work up into the smallest manageable parts. Today the issue of the division of labor is global. The global division of labor impacts political relations (e.g., the United States is utterly dependent upon China for its steel) and individual job opportunities (e.g., moving the textile industry to developing nations took jobs away from thousands of people in North Carolina).

Marx pushed Smith’s idea further, first by including industrialization, which increased production even more dramatically, and by arguing that both the division of labor and industrialization increased workers’ alienation. This is a clear instance where we can see how Marx’s humanism determined his perspective. While capitalism may have economic benefits in terms of increased production and profit, it also takes a toll on the human spirit. Later on, we’ll also see how Marx extends our understanding of the division of labor to include the division between mental and material labor. That division, Marx argued, dramatically influences the kind of knowledge we create.
Smith also contrasted the natural value of a commodity with its market value. The law of supply and demand in the short run determines the market value of a product. If the market value is lower than the natural value, the market value will increase. On the other hand, if the market value is higher than the natural, other capitalists will begin producing the product to take advantage of the higher profits. This in turn drives prices down to their natural level. There is thus an “invisible hand” at work in price control as well. If left free, the market will always produce the best product for the least cost, according to Smith.

Marx used these ideas to make distinctions among exchange value, use value, and surplus value. Surplus value, the difference between a commodity’s use and exchange values, is the source of capitalist profit. Capitalists, then, are driven to increase surplus value at any cost. This motivation in the long run creates business cycles of overproduction, which for Marx is one of the primary dialectical contradictions of capitalism that will in the end generate socialism. Further, surplus value itself contains a contradiction: It is both the source of capitalist profit and workers’ negotiating power. For Marx, these contradictions are the invisible hand of the marketplace. Like Smith’s idea, these contradictions work as unseen mechanisms. Unlike Smith, however, Marx saw the collapse of capitalism as the outcome of this kind of invisible force. We’ll talk more about these issues in a bit. Now, I want to bring all these ideas together and give you a more cohesive description of Marx’s perspective.

Marx’s Sociological Imagination:
Critical Conflict Theory

The above section title implies that there is a non-critical conflict theory, and that’s true, though we usually refer to the two perspectives simply as conflict theory and critical theory. Marx is the foundational thinker in both those approaches. Conflict theory generally seeks to explain the social factors and processes that lead to conflict in society, as well as the results of conflict. Theorists and researchers in this camp usually take the classic science model of discovering the universal laws of human conflict. From this conflict perspective, the social factors that create inequality today are basically the same as the ones that stratified the Roman Empire. Moreover, this approach is nonevaluative; it isn’t necessarily oriented toward changing society.

Critical theory, on the other hand, isn’t as convinced of the existence of invariant laws, generally seeing social factors and processes as historically specific. So the power inequities in Roman society worked differently from those in today’s society. Critical theorists are also generally interested in how inequality influences people and knowledge. Critical theorists are more humanistic in this way, and conflict theorists are more scientific. Critical theory is evaluative, ethical, and very much interested in changing society.

Please be aware that I just made some very clear distinctions between the two approaches, whereas real life is usually messy. There are obviously people who see themselves as practicing humanistic science, for example. In fact, as the founder of
these ways of doing sociology, Marx is a prime example of someone who fits with both perspectives. So think of these as two poles on a continuum, with sociologists, political scientists, economists, and so forth doing work at different points along that line.

**Human Nature**

Marx argues that the unique thing about being human is that we create our world. All other animals live in a kind of symbiotic relationship with the physical environment that surrounds them. Zebras feed on the grass, and lions feed on the zebras; in the end, the grass feeds on both the zebras and the lions. The world of the lion, zebra, and grass is a naturally occurring world, but not so for the human world. Humans must create a world in which to live. They must in effect alter or destroy the natural setting and construct something new. The human survival mechanism is the ability to change the environment in a creative fashion in order to produce the necessities of life. Thus, when humans plow a field or build a skyscraper, there is something new in the environment that in turn acts as a mirror through which humans can come to see their own nature. Self-consciousness—our awareness of being human—comes about as we see human nature reflected back in what we’ve created. There is, then, an intimate connection between producer and product: The very existence of the product defines the nature of the producer.

The idea that there is an intrinsic connection between humans and their creations is sometimes difficult to grasp, so let me give you a small analogy. Imagine you are invited to a friend’s house for a dinner party, and they ask you to bring a cake. So, you look through your grandmother’s recipes and find the German chocolate cake she used to bake for family gatherings. You bake the cake using real German’s Sweet Chocolate, just like granny did, and you add a couple of your own ideas: a bit more vanilla and more pecans. After dinner, the cake is served with fresh brewed coffee. One of the guest’s exclaims, “This is the best German chocolate cake I have ever had!” A sense of pride and remembrance of your grandmother sweeps over you. You say “thank you” and pause for a moment to think about the last time your grandmother baked this cake for you, and perhaps you tell a story or two about her.

Now imagine a different scenario. You’re still invited for dinner and asked to bring a cake, except this time you stop off at the local grocery store and buy the German chocolate cake. The same thing happens after dinner: A guest exclaims, “This is the best German chocolate cake I have ever had!” Now how do you feel? Rather, what don’t you feel? You don’t feel pride and you don’t sense that intimate connection with your grandmother. At the first imagined dinner, the cake wasn’t simply a commodity, a product of the local grocery designed to gain profit. No, you were personally and intimately invested in the first cake, and you sensed a deep connection to your grandmother as well. And, you know what? Almost anyone would feel the exact same thing. This personal and emotional connection isn’t peculiar to you; it’s something common to us as humans.
I think you can see what Marx is trying to tell us. It is our nature as human beings to create; when we do, we invest a portion of nature in the creation and we see ourselves in it. More than that, our handiwork carries deep, meaningful social connections. That first cake carried a bit of you and your relationship with your grandmother, and when you shared the cake with others, they experienced a connection with you and you with them. Your grandmother was there, too. Now, imagine that every single product that you and others own has such a character—every creation carrying the same personal and social investments. Your world would be aglow with this creative, aesthetic force. This is the meaning of species-being.

Species-being is one of Karl Marx’s basic assumptions about human nature. The idea links the way humans as a species survive with human consciousness. According to Marx, every species is unique and defined by the way it exists as a biological organism. Humans exist and survive through creative production. Human consciousness, then, is created as people see the humanity in the world that has been economically produced. False consciousness and ideology increase as humans fail to perceive their intrinsic link to production.

Marx implies that human beings in their natural state live in a kind of immediate consciousness. Initially, human beings created everything in their world by hand. There weren’t supermarkets or malls. If they had a tool or a shirt, they had made it themselves, or they knew the person who did. Their entire world was intimately and socially connected. They saw themselves, their collective nature, purely in every product. Or, if they had bartered for something, then they saw an immediate social relationship with the person who had made the thing. When they looked into the world they had produced, they saw themselves; they saw a clear picture of themselves as being human (creative producers). They also saw intimate and immediate social relations with other people. The world that surrounded them was immediately and intimately human. They created, controlled, and understood themselves through the world that they had made.

Notice two very important implications of Marx’s species-being: Human beings by their nature are social, and they are altruistic. Marx’s vision of humanity is based on the importance of society in our species survival. We survive collectively and individually because of society. Through society, we create what is needed for survival; if it were not for society, the human animal would become extinct. We are not equipped to survive in any other manner. What this means, of course, is that we have a social nature—we are not individuals by nature.

Species-being also implies that we are altruistic. Altruism is defined as uncalculated commitment to others’ interests. Not only are we not individualistic by nature, but we are also not naturally selfish. If human survival is based on collective cooperation, then it would stand to reason that our most natural inclination would be
to serve the group and not the self. The idea of species-being is the reason why Marx believes in communism—it’s the closest economic system to our natural state. Further, Marx would argue that under conditions of modern capitalism, these attributes are not apparent in humans because we exist under compromising structures. It is capitalism that teaches us to be self-centered and self-serving.

In Chapter 1, I mentioned that the assumptions theorists make carry implications, though they aren’t always apparent. Here’s one place we can see this important point: Marx assumes that people are by nature social and inclined to naturally cooperate. This implies that in most cases, social structures are detrimental to people. In this way, Marx is against big government! And this is why Marx argues for communism: It is most in keeping with his view of human nature. What I want you to see here is the importance of thinking through the implications of an idea or theory. The Latin root of implication literally means to be entangled. Theoretical and critical thinking demand that we think through everything that comes packaged (entangled) with our ideas, concepts, and theories.

Marx’s theory of species-being also has implications for knowledge and consciousness. In the primitive society that we’ve been talking about, humans’ knowledge about the world was objective and real; they held ideas that were in perfect harmony with their own nature. According to Marx, human ideas and thought come about in the moment of solving the problem of survival. Humans survive because we creatively produce, and our clearest and truest ideas are grounded in this creative act. In species-being, people become truly conscious of themselves and their ideas. Material production, then, is supposed to be the conduit through which human nature is expressed; the product should act as a mirror that reflects back our own nature.

Let’s try an analogy to get at this extremely important issue. There are a limited number of ways you can know how you physically look (video, pictures, portraits, mirrors, and so forth). The function of each of these methods is to represent or reproduce our image with as little distortion as possible. But what if accurate representation was impossible? What if every medium changed your image in some way? We would have no true idea of how we physically look. All of our ideas would be false in some way. We would think we see ourselves, but we wouldn’t. Marx is making this kind of argument, but not about our physical appearance. Marx is concerned with something much more important and fundamental—our nature as humans. We think we see it, but we don’t.

We need to take this analogy one step further: Notice that with mirrors, pictures, and videos, there is a kind of correspondence between the representation and its reality. What I mean is that each of these media presents a visual image. In the case of our physical appearance, that’s what we want. Imagine if you asked someone how you looked, and the person played a CD for you. That wouldn’t make any sense,
would it? There would be no correspondence between the mode of representation and the initial presentation. This, too, is what Marx is telling us. If we want to know something about our human nature, if we want to see it represented to us, where should we look? What kind of medium would correspond to our nature? Marx is arguing that every species is defined by its method of survival or existence. Why are whales, lions, and hummingbirds all different? They are different because they have different ways of existing in the world. What makes human beings different from whales, lions, and hummingbirds? Humans have a different mode of existence. We creatively produce what we need—we are the only species that makes products.

So, where should we look to understand our nature? What is the medium that corresponds to the question? If we want to know how we look physically, we look toward visual images. But if we want to know about our nature, we must look to production and everything associated with it. Thus, according to Marx, production is the vehicle through which we can know human nature. However, Marx says that there is something wrong with the medium. Under present conditions (capitalism), it gives a distorted picture of who and what we are.

If we understand this notion of species-being, then almost everything else Marx says falls into place. To understand species-being is to understand alienation (being cut off from our true nature), ideology (ideas not grounded in creative production), and false consciousness (self-awareness that is grounded in anything other than creative production). We can also understand why Marx places such emphasis on the need for class consciousness in social change. This understanding of human nature is also why Marx is considered to be an economic determinist. The economy is the foundation upon which all other structures (superstructure) of human existence come into being and have relevance.

**History—The Material Dialectic**

When we think of history, most of us think about what’s written in books. That’s our history; it tells the story of what we’ve been through. Marx sees history in that way as well, but the characters in the story are different. Most of our histories are of events and people. (In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.) Marx would see that sort of history as focusing on secondary effects rather than the important issues. Imagine a newspaper story that told you that visibility was horrible in San Francisco yesterday. It was difficult to see for a quarter mile, and even being able to breathe properly was a challenge. Now imagine going to your local bookstore for coffee that same day. On your way to the coffee counter, you see a different newspaper covering the same story, only this time the headline reads, “San Francisco Destroyed by Largest Quake in History—City Burns in Aftermath.” You come to find out, the poor visibility and problems with breathing were due to the fire that resulted from the earthquake! That may sound like a silly example, because no newspaper would ever make that sort of mistake, but that is exactly the same sort of mistake we make in seeing history in terms of characters and events. When we focus on characters and events, we misrecognize what’s really going on. Just like the poor visibility of our first imaginary newspaper, characters and events are simply the effects of social structures moving and shaking beneath the surface.
Thus, accurate histories will chronicle the changing face of social structures. Those are the important issues of history, not “men and their moments.” The powerful story of history, for social historians and sociologists, concerns the structural forces that create those events and people. The fundamental question of such history is its driving force: What pushes for structural change? For Hegel, human history is driven by the tension that exists when the material world and consciousness are separate. That tension pushes movement forward to a resolution. For Marx, the defining feature of humanity is production, not ideas and concepts. In his view, Hegel’s analytical lens was misplaced. The dialectic is oriented around material production and not ideas. This is the material dialectic. Thus, the dynamics of the historical dialectic are to be found in the economic system, with each economic system inherently containing antagonistic elements (see Figure 3.1). As the antagonistic elements work themselves out, they form a new economic system.

Notice that the engine of progress according to the dialectic is tension or conflict. This is an important insight because Marx is sometimes seen as a warmonger, pushing for revolution. It’s true, he did support revolutionary efforts, but here we can see that it wasn’t simply a personal issue: Conflict is built into the dialectic—conflict is the driving force of history (from a Marxian point of view). We can think of this way of seeing society as an upheaval model. According to this perspective, society is not like an organism that gradually and peacefully becomes more complex in order to increase its survival chances, as in functionalism. Rather, society is filled with human beings who exercise power to oppress and coerce others. Periods of apparent peace are simply times when the powerful are able to dominate the populace in an efficient manner. But, according to this model, the suppressed will
become enabled and will eventually overthrow and change the system. Social change, then, occurs episodically and through social upheaval. In mapping out the past of the historical dialectic, Marx categorizes five different economic systems (means of production along with their relations of production): pre-class societies, Asiatic societies, ancient societies, feudal societies, and capitalist societies. Pre-class societies are like hunter-gatherer groups. These were small groups of people with a minimal division of labor (one that Marx termed the **natural division of labor**) and communal ownership of property (termed **primitive communism**). Asiatic societies were a special form in that they had particular problems to overcome due to their large populations. To solve these problems, there was a tendency to form systems of government that gave emperors absolute power. Ancient societies developed around large urban centers, such as Rome. Private property and slave labor came into existence, as well as significant class inequality. Ancient societies were replaced by feudal systems wherein the primary economic form was serf labor tied to the land of the aristocracy. Feudal systems were replaced by capitalist systems. Eventually, the capitalist system would be replaced by socialism and that, in turn, by communism. The specific dynamics that Marx says cause these shifts in economic systems are not important in our consideration right now. What is important to note is that Marx argues that social change occurs because of inherent contradictions in the economic structure.

### Hint

Marx is a structuralist (as are many sociologists). This means that change and stability happen because of social structures and **not individual people**. We can think of this using the analogy of the human body: Individuals are like biological cells that are relatively unimportant to the body as a whole. When working with structuralist theory, keep this in mind. In terms of causal force, the actions of social structures are important, not the actions of individuals. However, many sociologists are not structuralists. In this book, George Herbert Mead is a good example.

### Concepts and Theory: The Contradictions of Capitalism

Taking his cue from Hegel, Marx gives us a theory of humankind. He obviously has a theory of capitalism and class relations, but those issues are only meaningful in the broader context of his theory of humanity. Interestingly, this is true of religion as well. All religions are based upon an assumed human nature. For example, Christianity holds that all people are born in sin as a result of Adam's original sin. The implication of that assumption is that humans need salvation from the effects of sin—death—which has been provided by Christ. Hinduism, on the other hand, assumes that true human nature is spiritual—there is no difference between **atman** (the soul) and **Brahman** (God or Universal Spirit). The problem here isn't sin; the problem is that
people become attached to and desire the things of this world. The implication of this view of human nature is that people must detach from this physical realm and realize their true Godhood through meditation and reincarnation.

These are obvious simplifications, but I want you to see first the importance of making an assumption about human nature. Once made, the assumption influences everything else. I also want you to see that Marx’s intention is to liberate us so that we can become fully human, just as it is the intent of religion. Marx’s issue with religion isn’t gratuitous. From his perspective, religion misunderstands human nature and in doing so, offers false hope. Most people don’t understand this aspect of Marx and his theory and thus wrongly criticize the man. A well-known psychoanalyst of the twentieth century, Erich Fromm (1961), said that “Marx’s philosophy constitutes a spiritual existentialism in secular language” (p. 5).

Here are two theoretical hints for you. First, one of the most important aspects of critical thinking is implication—what something implies. Ideas or concepts always come intertwined with other ideas or concepts. I encourage you to always ask, “What are the implications of this?” The second hint is that while I say that Marx’s notion of human nature is an assumption, it’s an assumption based on a logical argument, and this is quite often the case with theorists. Thus, if you find that you disagree with an assumption like Marx’s, it isn’t sufficient to simply say, “I think he’s wrong.” To legitimately disagree, you must address his argument and present a reasoned account of your conclusion.

Marx builds his theory on his view of human nature. Our nature, like every other animal on the planet, is tied up with the way the species survives. According to Marx, humans survive through economic production. Borrowing from Hegel, Marx sees the history of economic forms developing through dialectical contradictions. In the case of capitalism, the system contains inherent contradictions that will eventually lead to its demise. The most important contradiction is overproduction. In order for us to understand that contradiction, we have to first think through the concepts of value, labor, exploitation, commodification, and class.

**Value and Exploitation**

One of the important issues confronting early political economists concerned the problem of **value**. We may have a product, such as a car, and that product has value. But from where does its value come? More importantly, why would anyone pay more for the car than it is worth? Well, you say, only a sucker
would pay more for a car than it is worth. Yet, as you’ll see, there is a way in which we all pay more for every commodity or economic good than it is worth. That was what struck the early economists as a strange problem in need of a solution.

Drawing on Adam Smith’s labor theory of value, Marx argues that every commodity has at least two different kinds of value: use-value and exchange-value. Use-value refers to the actual function that a product contains. This function gets used up as the product is used. Take a bottle of beer, for example. The use-value of a bottle of beer is its taste and alcoholic effect. As someone drinks the bottle, those functions are expended. Beer also has exchange-value that is distinct from use-value. Exchange-value refers to the rate of exchange one commodity bears when compared to other commodities. Let’s say I make a pair of shoes. Those shoes could be exchanged for 1 leather-bound book or 5 pounds of fish or 10 pounds of potatoes or 1 cord of oak wood, and so on.

This notion of exchange-value poses a question for us: What do the shoes, books, fish, and potatoes have in common that allow them to be exchanged? I could exchange my pair of shoes for the leather-bound book and then exchange the book for a keg of beer. The keg of beer might have a use-value for me, where the leather-bound book does not; nonetheless, they both have exchange-value. This train of exchange could be extended indefinitely with my never extracting any use-value from the products at all, which implies that exchange- and use-value are distinct. So, what is the common denominator that allows these different items to be exchanged? What is the source of exchange-value?

Adam Smith (1776/1937) and Marx both argue that the substance of all value is human labor: “Labour, therefore, is the real measure of the exchangeable value of all commodities” (p. 30, emphasis added). There is labor involved in the book, the fish, the shoes, the potatoes, and in fact everything that people deem worthy of being exchanged. It is labor, then, that creates exchange-value. If we stop and think for a moment about Marx’s idea of species-being, we can see why Smith’s notion appeals to him: The value of a product is the “humanness” it contains. But there is something else going on as well.

Capitalists pay less for the labor than its actual worth. I may receive $75.00 per day to work (determined by the cost of bare sustenance for the worker plus any social amenities deemed necessary), but I will produce $200.00 worth of goods or services. The necessary labor in this case is $75.00; it’s necessary because it provides a living for the worker. The amount of labor left over is what Marx calls surplus labor (in this case, $125.00). The difference between necessary labor and surplus labor is the level of exploitation. Different societies can have different levels of exploitation. For example, if we compare the situation of automobile workers in the United States with those in Mexico, we will see that the level of exploitation is higher in Mexico (which is why U.S. companies are moving so many jobs out of this country—labor is cheaper elsewhere). Surplus labor and exploitation are the places from which profit comes: “The rate of surplus-value is . . . an exact expression for the degree of exploitation . . . of the work by the capitalist” (Marx, 1867/1977, p. 326).
Capitalists are in business for only one reason: profit. By definition, then, capitalists are pushed to increase their profit margin and thus the level of surplus labor and the rate or level of exploitation. There are two main ways in which this can be done: through absolute and relative surplus labor. The capitalist can directly increase the amount of time work is performed by lengthening the workday, say from 10 to 12 hours. He or she can also remove the barriers between “work” and “home,” as is happening today as a result of increases in communication (computers) and transportation technologies. The product of this lengthening of work time is called absolute surplus labor. The other way a capitalist can increase the rate of exploitation is to reduce the amount of necessary labor time. The result of this move is called relative surplus labor. The most effective way this is done is through industrialization. With industrialization, the worker works the same number of hours, but his or her output is increased through the use of machinery. These two different kinds of surplus labor can get a bit confusing, so I’ve compared them in Figure 3.2.

**Figure 3.2** Surplus Labor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Surplus Labor</th>
<th>Total Output</th>
<th>Workers’ Pay</th>
<th>Profit or Level of Exploitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>$200.00</td>
<td>Necessary Labor: $75.00</td>
<td>$125.00 or 63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute Surplus Labor (extended workday)</td>
<td>$300.00</td>
<td>Necessary Labor: $75.00</td>
<td>$225.00 or 75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative Surplus Labor (industrialization)</td>
<td>$350.00</td>
<td>Necessary Labor: $75.00</td>
<td>$275.00 or 91%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exploitation is a central concept in Marx’s theory of capitalism. It is the measurable difference between what a worker gets paid and the worth of the product produced—it is the source of capitalist profit. Exploitation also has the characteristic of giving workers leverage over capitalists. The dependency of capitalists upon exploitation for profit is what gives labor the power to negotiate and strike. Exploitation, then, is dialectical in nature.
The figure starts off with the type of surplus labor employed. Since there is always exploitation (you can't have capitalism without it), I've included a “base rate” for the purpose of comparison. Under this scheme, the worker has a total output of $200.00; he or she gets paid $75.00 of the $200.00 produced, which leaves a rate of exploitation of about 63%, or $125.00. The simplest way to increase profit, or the rate of exploitation, is to make the worker work longer hours or take on added responsibilities without raising pay (this happens in downsizing, for example). In our hypothetical case, the wage of $75.00 remains, but the profit margin (rate of exploitation) goes up to 75%. By automating production, the capitalist is able to extract more work from the worker, thus increasing the total output and the level of exploitation (91%). If this seems legitimate to us (“capitalists have a right to make a profit”), Marx would say that it is because we have bought into the capitalist ideology. We should also keep in mind that in their search for maintaining or increasing the rate of exploitation, capitalists in industrialized nations export their exploitation—they move jobs to less-developed countries.

**Industrialization, Markets, and Commodification**

As we’ve seen, capitalists are motivated to increase the level of surplus labor and exploitation, and the most efficient way to accomplish these goals is through industrialization. *Industrialization* is the process through which work moves from being performed directly by human hands to having the intermediate force of a machine. Industrialization increases the level of production (by increasing the level of relative surplus labor), which in turn expands the use of markets, because the more products we have, the more points of purchase (markets) we need. The relationships among industrialization, production, and markets are reciprocal so that they are mutually reinforcing. If a capitalist comes up with a new “labor-saving” machine, it will increase production, and increased production pushes for new or expanded markets in which to sell the product. These expanding markets also tend to push for increased production and industrialization. Likewise, if a new market opens up through political negotiations (like with Mexico or China, for the United States) or the invention of a new product, there will be a corresponding push for increased production and the search for new machinery.

An important point to note here is that capitalism, in order to feed the need for continuous capital accumulations, requires expanding markets—which implies that markets and their effects may be seen as part of the dialectic of capitalism. To increase profits, capitalists can expand their markets horizontally and vertically, in addition to increasing the level of surplus labor. In fact, profit margins would slip if capitalists did not expand their markets. For example, one of the main reasons CD players were offered for sale is that the market for cassette tape players bottomed out (and now there is a push for MP3 and newer technologies). Most people who were going to buy a cassette player had already done so, and the only time another would be purchased is for replacement. So, capitalists invented something new for us to buy so that their profit margin would be maintained.

In general, *markets* refer to an arena in which commodities are exchanged between buyers and sellers. For example, we talk about the grocery market and the
money market. These markets are defined by the products they offer and the social network involved. Markets in general have certain characteristics that have consequences for both commodities and people. They are inherently susceptible to expansion (particularly when driven by the capitalist need for profit), abstraction (so we can have markets on markets, like stock market futures or the buying and selling of home mortgage contracts), trade cycles (due to the previous two issues), and undesirable outputs (such as pollution). In addition, they are amoral (so they may be used to sell weapons or religion, or to grant access to health care).

The speed at which goods and services move through markets is largely dependent upon a generalized medium of exchange, something that can act as universal value. Barter is characterized by the exchange of products. The problem with bartering is that it slows down the exchange process because there is no general value system. For example, how much is a keg of beer worth in a barter system? We can’t really answer that question because the answer depends on what it is being exchanged for, who is doing the exchanging, what their needs are, where the exchange takes place, and so on. Because of the slowness of bartering, markets tend to push for more generalized means of exchange—such as money. Using money, we can give an answer to the keg question, and having such an answer speeds up the exchange process quite a bit. Marx argues that as markets expand and become more important in a society, and the use of money for equivalency becomes more universal, money becomes more and more the common denominator of all human relations. As Marx (1932/1978d) says,

By possessing the property of buying everything, by possessing the property of appropriating all objects, money is thus the object of eminent possession. The universality of its property is the omnipotence of its being. It therefore functions as the almighty being. Money is the pimp between man’s need and the object, between his life and his means of life. But that which mediates my life for me, also mediates the existence of other people for me. For me it is the other person. (p. 102)

Expanding markets create more and more commodities. The simple definition of commodity is an economic good. However, it’s vital to keep in mind that capitalist commodities are devoid of species-being. They reflect little if any humanity back to us. Whatever part of humanity commodities do contain is perverted—they contain the exploited, alienated nature of workers under capitalism. This perversion goes further. Remember the illustration of the cake? You had a personal investment in the cake. Thus, when your friends had some of the cake, they also experienced you and their friendship with you. In sharing the cake, you also shared your family life with them. True products—those created with species-being intact—thus contain not only human nature but also social relationships. Under capitalism, however, we don’t see or experience those social relationships. Worse, we are blind to the exploitive relationships that are in the commodity.

The concept of commodification describes the process through which more and more of the human life-world is turned into commodities. Commodification is thus a variable. So, instead of creatively producing the world as in species-being,
people increasingly buy (and sell) the world in which they live, and thus see the
human world in terms of money rather than human nature and social relations.
Because capitalists are driven to increase profits and thus markets, this process of
commodification becomes more and more a feature of human life. Think of a
farming family living in the United States around 1850 or so. They bought some of
what they needed, and they bartered for other things, but the family produced
much of their own necessities of life. Today, our world is composed of little else
than capitalist commodities.

Commodification is a theoretical idea in Marxian theory that expresses
the process through which material and nonmaterial goods are turned
into products for sale. Such commodities do not reflect true human
nature or social relations. Because commodities are created (nothing by
its nature is a commodity), because humans have the ability to create
subjectively felt needs, and because modern capitalism is defined by the endless pur-
suit of more capital, the process of commodification has no natural limit. Increasing
commodification is a result of industrialization and market expansion and directly
affects overproduction.

We have to add two more elements to this part of Marx’s theory. First, modern
capitalism is different from any previous type of capitalism. In terms of people
making things to sell and get profit, capitalism has been around for ages. Traditional
or old school capitalism was about getting money in order to live. Whatever profit
was made went to support people’s day-to-day existence. Modern capitalism is very
different. Capitalists use some of the profit to support their lifestyle, but the major-
ity of it is invested back into the business. The reason to invest the money (which is
now capital) is to make more money, which, in turn, is reinvested with the purpose
of making more money so that it can be invested as well. Thus, modern capitalism
is characterized by the endless pursuit of capital.

The second factor we need to add is human need. All living organisms, including
humans, have things they need to survive. We call these requisite needs. However,
unlike other animals, humans can create secondary needs—things we want but in
truth feel like needs. For example, the very first cell phone call was made on April
3, 1973. Obviously, most people didn’t even know about the call, let alone “need”
their own cell phone. It took 10 years to bring the cell phone to market. Very few
people actually wanted one because they cost about $3,500. It wasn’t until 1990,
after the price had come down considerably, that there were 1 million cell phone
users in the United States. Today, there are over 5 billion cell phones worldwide,
with a global population of 6.9 billion. Having a cell phone is now a necessity for
many—it’s one that you probably feel personally. “I need a cell phone.” Actually, I
need a smart phone so I can answer e-mail and keep up with Facebook and Twitter;
more than that, all my contacts are in there; my appointment calendar is in there;

...
and I need it for entertainment, songs, games, a camera—I’d be lost without it! This subjective need is so strong that parents now discipline their children by restricting cell phone use—children and teens feel punished if they can’t have their cell phone.

Human beings can create subjectively felt needs well beyond requisite needs. The amazing thing is that there doesn’t appear to be any boundary beyond which we can’t imagine new things to build and new needs to create. Thus, the potential for commodification is endless. There is no natural limit to the ability of humans to create new needs, and there isn’t anything in capitalism that will stem the endless pursuit of capital because that’s its defining feature.

Putting all this together brings us to capitalism’s first contradiction—overproduction. Here’s how it works: Modern capitalism is defined by the endless accumulation of capital. This drive pushes capitalists to create more and different kinds of commodities for us to buy. Happily, for the capitalists, the capacity of humans to create new needs is boundless. These two open-ended dynamics are supercharged in today’s society through added institutional support. Thus, “every person speculates on creating a new need in another, so as to drive him to a fresh sacrifice, to place him in a new dependence and to seduce him into a new mode of gratification” (Marx, 1932/1978d, p. 93).

In Marx’s theory, overproduction is one of the central contradictions of capitalism. Modern capitalism is defined by the endless pursuit of capital accumulation. This essential characteristic of capitalism, coupled with the human capacity to create endless needs, drives ever-expanding markets, commodification, and the use of technology to increase productive output, all of which lead to an overproduction of goods compared to the current demand and, thus, an economic downturn. Every cycle of expansion and downturn is deeper and more widespread. And because there are no natural limits within capitalism to capital accumulation and no limits to the potential for new human needs, these cycles continue until capitalism fails.

Concepts and Theory: Class Revolution

Overproduction sets up a dynamic that will eventually lead to the destruction of capitalism. Remember, this is a dialectical issue: Contradictions intrinsic to capitalism (expanding markets, accumulation of capital, incessant commodification, expansive human needs) bring repeated economic crises. The United States, for instance, has gone through 33 economic cycles since 1854 (National Bureau of Economic Research, n.d.). Marx argues that each cycle will deepen and be more difficult to resolve. At some point, the cycling crises become so bad that capitalism simply can’t sustain its business, and it collapses. As you would expect, there are other dynamics at work that go along with the rounds of economic downturns. The most important of those dynamics concerns class.
Class and Class Structure

For Marx, *class* involves two issues: the means and relations of production. The *means of production* refers to the methods and materials that we use to produce commodities. On a small scale, we might think of the air hammers, nails, wood, concrete mixers, and so forth that we use to produce a house. Inherent within any means of production are the *relations of production*: in this case, the contractor, subcontractor, carpenter, financier, buyer, and so on. In the U.S. economy, we organize the work of building a house through a contracting system. The person who wants the house built has to contract with a licensed builder who in turn hires different kinds of workers (day laborers, carpenters, foremen, etc.). The actual social connections that are created through particular methods of production are what Marx wants us to see in the concept of the relations of production.

Marx uses the term *class* in the broadest or most basic sense. But to understand its significance, we should understand it historically. The word *class* first came into the English language in the seventeenth century (see Williams, 1983, pp. 60–69). At that time, it had reference mainly to education; our uses of *classic* and *classical* are examples. The modern use of the term *class* came into existence between 1770 and 1840 and was specifically linked to capitalism (originally termed *economic individualism*). Since Marx, the social disciplines have been concerned with how class structures inequality. The central question here is, how is class structured in such a way as to prevent upward mobility? One of the more interesting ideas in contemporary theory for the structuring of class is Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* (see *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, 1979/1984). In *habitus*, class is structured physically in the body; class then is expressed and re-created in the tastes and practices that are part of the human body.

Of course, Marx has something much bigger in mind than our example. In classic feudalism, for instance, people formed communities around a designated piece of land and a central manor for provision and security. At the heart of this local arrangement was a noble who had been granted the land from the king in return for political support and military service. At the bottom of the community was the serf. The serf lived on and from the land and was granted protection by the noble in return for service. Feudalism was a political and economic system that centered on land—land ownership was the primary means of production. People were related to the land through oaths of homage and *fealty* (the fidelity of a feudal tenant to his lord). These relations functioned somewhat like family roles and spelled out normative obligations and rights. The point here, of course, is that the way people related to each other under feudalism was determined by that economic system and was quite different from the way we relate to one another under capitalism.
For Marx, human history is the history of class struggles. Marx identifies several different types of classes, such as the feudal nobility, the bourgeoisie, the petite bourgeoisie, the proletariat, the peasantry, the subproletariat, and so on. As long as these classes have existed, they have been antagonistic toward each other. Under capitalism, however, two factors create a unique class system.

First, capitalism lifts economic work out of all other institutional forms. Under capitalism, the relationships we have with people in the economy are seen as distinctly different from religious, family, or political relations. As we saw with Spencer, these relationships overlapped for most of our history. For example, in agriculturally based societies, family and work coincided. Fathers worked at home, and all family members contributed to the work that was done. Capitalism lifted this work away from the farm, where work and workers were embedded in family, and placed it in urban-based factories. Capitalist industrialization thus disembedded work from family and other social relations. Contemporary gender theorists point out that this movement created separate spheres of home and work, each controlled by a specific gender. As I noted in the introduction, Marx and Engels were among the first to theorize about gender inequality—we’ll look more closely at their theory in the chapter dedicated to gender (Chapter 7).

The second unique feature of class under capitalism is that it tends to be structured around two positions—the bourgeoisie (owners) and the proletariat (workers). All other classes are pushed out of existence by the cycle of capitalist investment. Here’s how it works: As capitalists acquire capital, the demand for labor goes up (as the labor theory of value would predict). The increased demand for labor causes the labor pool, the number of unemployed, to shrink. As with any commodity, when demand is greater than the supply, the price goes up—in this case, that means wages increase. The increase in wages causes profits to go down. As profits go down, capitalists cut back production, which precipitates a crisis in the economy. The crisis causes more workers to be laid off and small businesses (the petite bourgeoisie) to fold. The larger capitalists buy out these small businesses, and the once small-scale capitalists become part of the working class. The result of this process being repeated over time is that the class of dependent workers increases, and capital is centralized into fewer and fewer hands. Thus, the existing capitalists accumulate additional capital, and the entire cycle starts again. “But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons—the modern working class—the proletariat” (Marx & Engels, 1848/1978, p. 478).

The bipolarization of conflict is a necessary step for Marx in the process of social change, and an important one for conflict theory as a whole. Overt and intense conflict are both dependent upon bipolarization. Crosscutting interests, that is, having more than one issue over which groups are in conflict, tend to pull resources (emotional and material) away from conflict. For example, during World War II, it was necessary for the various nations to coalesce into only two factions, the Axis and the Allied powers. So the United States became strange bedfellows with the Soviet Union in order to create large-scale, intense conflict. Note that each time the United States has engaged in a police action or war, attempts are made to align resources in as few camps as possible. This move isn’t simply a matter of world
opinion; rather, it is a structural necessity for violent and overt conflict. The lack of bipolarized conflict creates an arena of crosscutting interests that can drain resources and prevent the conflict from escalating and potentially resolving.

**Overproduction**

We’re now in a position to bring all these factors together. I’ve diagrammed these relationships in Figure 3.3. Note that the plus (+) signs indicate a positive relationship (both variables move in the same direction, either more or less), and the minus (–) signs indicate negative relationships (the variables go in opposite directions). Starting at the far left, the defining feature of modern capitalism (incessant accumulation of capital) is the primary dynamic. As capitalists invest, markets, industrialization, and employment all go up. Notice that all the arrows are double-headed, which means these all mutually influence one another. Industrialization, markets, and employment all produce profit that is then reinvested in those same three factors. Also notice that the possible limit of markets is linked to our ability to create our own needs. Markets and human “need” feed off each other. It’s also important to note that markets don’t simply expand; they can also become more abstract. Such markets are the ones associated with the speculation that has been endemic in the world stock markets.

The effects of these first five factors—capital, employment, industrialization, market expansion, and human “need”—continue to feed one another, creating ever-increasing levels of commodity production until a threshold is reached—overproduction—and there’s too much production for the current demand. When this happens, production is cut back, workers are laid off, and the economy slumps. Small businesses collapse, and capital is concentrated in fewer hands; capital is thus accumulated, and the failures of small businesses push toward the bipolarization of classes. With the renewed accumulation of capital, capitalists reinvest and the market picks back up, and the cycle starts again. However, each economic cycle is deeper than the previous, and the working class becomes larger and larger. In the end, Marx argues, this process of accumulation and overproduction will lead to the collapse of capitalism: “The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers” (Marx & Engels, 1848/1978, p. 483).

**Concepts and Theory: The Problem of Consciousness**

*We arrive at the result that man (the worker) feels himself to be freely active only in his animal functions—eating, drinking, and procreating, or at most also in his dwelling and in personal adornment—while in his human functions he is reduced to an animal. The animal becomes human and the human becomes animal.*

—Karl Marx (1932/1995, p. 99)
Figure 3.3 Overproduction Cycle

- Employment Level
  - Size of Working Class
  - Collapse of Smaller Businesses

- Level of Capital Accumulation
  - Level of Industrialization
    - Level of Commodity Production
      - Overproduction
        - Economic Recession
          - Collapse of Smaller Businesses

- Limitless Human “Need”
  - Level of Market Expansion and Abstraction

- Economic Recession
  - Overproduction
    - Level of Industrialization

- Level of Commodity Production
  - Level of Market Expansion and Abstraction
    - Limitless Human “Need”
As I’ve said, Marx is a structuralist. However, we misread Marx if we think that his concern with the economic structure is paramount. True, that is the structure where the primary dynamics work, but his concern is with the human condition, how those structural issues impact people at their most basic level. *Human consciousness*, the awareness that makes us unique in the animal world, comes out of our innate ability to economically produce, because that is the way our species exists (species-being). Consciousness is fundamental, but there’s more to our existence as humans than that. We know things. Humans are constantly trying to figure out the world. You’re in school so that you can learn a small portion of what humanity knows. Knowledge seems straightforward; however, it is anything but that in Marx’s hands. Marx tells us that what we know is a function of the society in which we live. Again, that seems straightforward: We know things today that the Athenians in ancient Greece didn’t know. Marx pushes this further, too, and tells us that our knowledge, value system, and political interests are based upon our class position and are powerfully influenced by our level of involvement with religion.

*Knowledge* is simply what we perceive to be factual. The *sociology of knowledge* is the study of how social factors and processes influence or determine what we think is true. There are two central questions. First, what is the relationship between social institutions and practices on the one hand and knowledge on the other? Second, how is knowledge legitimated or validated? Many of our classical theorists have something to say about this issue. Durkheim, for example, argues that the fundamental categories that people use to know things are determined by the way in which we organize society. Weber looks at how social diversity and specialization influence religious knowledge in particular. Marx is concerned with how capitalist elites create an ideology that legitimates their wealth and then present that ideology as universal. Two twentieth century thinkers stand out: Karl Mannheim and Robert Merton. Mannheim works from a Marxian position and argues that the concept of ideology is applicable to all knowledge, not just class-based knowledge (see Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, 1936). Robert Merton comes at this issue from a functionalist perspective and is most interested in how scientific practices and norms form the basis of scientific knowledge (see Merton, *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*, 1973).

### Alienation, Private Property, and Commodity Fetish

We often think of alienation as the subjective experience of a worker on an assembly line or at McDonald’s. This perception is partly true. To get a little better handle on it, however, let’s think about the differences between a gunsmith and a worker in a Remington plant. The gunsmith is a craftsman and would make every part of the gun by hand—all the metal work, all the woodwork, everything.
If you knew guns, you could tell the craftsman just by looking at the gun. It would bear the person’s mark because part of the craftsman was in the work. The gunsmith would take justifiable pride in the piece.

Compare that experience to the Remington plant worker. Perhaps she is the person who bolts the plastic end piece on the butt of the rifle, and she performs the task on rifle after rifle, day after day. It won’t take long until the work becomes mind numbing. It is repetitive and noncreative. Chances are, this worker won’t feel the pride of the craftsman but will instead experience disassociation and depression. We can see in this example some of the problems associated with a severe division of labor and overcontrol of the worker. There’s no ownership of the product or any pride as there is in craftsmanship. We can also see how the same issues would apply to the worker at McDonald’s. All of it is mind-numbing, depressive work, and much of it is the result of the work of scientific management.

Frederick Taylor was the man who applied the scientific method to labor. He was interested in finding the most efficient way to do a job. Efficiency here is defined in terms of the least amount of work for the greatest amount of output. Under this system, the worker becomes an object that is directly manipulated for efficiency and profit. Taylor would go out into the field and find the best worker. He and his team would then time the worker (this is the origin of time-management studies) and break the job down into its smallest parts. In the end, Taylorism created a high division of labor, assembly lines, and extremely large factories.

The problem with understanding these Remington and McDonald’s examples as alienation is that it focuses on the subjective experience of the worker. It implies that if we change the way we control workers—say, from Taylorism to Japanese management, as many American companies have—we’ve solved the problem of alienation. For Marx, that wouldn’t be the case. While alienation implies the subjective experience of the worker (depression and disassociation), it is more accurate to think of it as an objective state. So, workers under the Japanese system are not structurally less alienated because they are more broadly trained, are able to rotate jobs, work holistically, and have creative input. According to Marx, workers are alienated under all forms of capitalism, whether they feel it or not. Alienation is a structural condition, not a personal one. Workers are of course more likely to revolt if they experience alienation, but that is a different issue.

Alienation always exists when someone other than the worker owns the means of production and the product being produced. Having said that, we can note that Marx actually talks about four different kinds of alienation. Alienation in its most basic sense is separation from one’s own awareness of being human. We know we are human; Marx doesn’t mean to imply that we don’t have the idea of being human. What he means is that our idea is wrong or inaccurate. Recall Marx’s argument of species-being: That which makes us distinctly human is creative production, and we become aware of our humanity as our nature is clearly reflected back to us by the mirror of the produced world. At best, the image is distorted if we look to see our nature in the things we own. It’s the right place to look, but according to Marx, products should be the natural expression of species-being, and production should result in true consciousness. The commodity does not reflect humanity, and thus, everything about our commodities is wrong. At worst, the image is simply
false. Marx argues that if we look elsewhere for our definition and knowledge of human nature (such as using language, having emotions, possessing a soul, religion, rationality, free will, and so on), it is not founded on the essential human characteristic—free and creative production. Thus, the human we see is rooted in false consciousness.

Alienation is a concept in Marx’s theory of the effects of capitalism on consciousness and human nature and is based on the idea that there is an intrinsic connection between the producer and the product. The word alienation means to be separated from; it also implies that there is something that faces humans as an unknown or alien object. For Marx, there are four different kinds of alienation potentially affecting the worker: alienation from one’s own species-being, alienation from other social beings, alienation from the work process, and alienation from the product. Alienation also forms the basis of private property.

From this basic alienation (from one's species-being), three other forms are born: alienation from the work process, alienation from the product, and alienation from other people. In species-being, there is not only the idea of the relationship between consciousness and creative production, but also the notion that human beings are related to one another directly and intimately. We don’t create a human world individually; it is created collectively. Therefore, under conditions of species-being, humans are intimately and immediately connected to one another. The reflected world around them is the social, human world that they created. Imagine, if you can, a world of products that are all directly connected to human beings (not market forces, advertising, the drive for profit, and so forth). Either you made everything in that world, or you know who did. When you see a product, you see yourself or you see your neighbor or your neighbor’s friend. Thus, when we are alienated from our own species-being, because someone else controls the means and ends of production, we are estranged from other humans as well.

Moreover, we are alienated from the process of work and from the product. There is something essential in the work process, according to Marx. The kind of work we perform and how we perform that work determines the kind of person we are. Obviously, doctors are different from garbage collectors, but that isn’t what Marx has in mind. An individual’s humanity is rooted in the work process. When humans are cut off from controlling the means of production (the way in which work is performed and for what reason), then the labor process becomes alienated. There are three reasons for this alienated labor, which end in alienation from the product. First, when someone else owns the means of production, the work is external to the worker; that is, it is not a direct expression of his or her nature. So, rather than being an extension of the person’s inner being, work becomes something external and foreign. Second, work is forced. People don’t work because they want
to; they work because they have to—under capitalism, if you don’t work, you die. Concerning labor under capitalism Marx (1932/1995) says, “Its alien character is clearly shown by the fact that as soon as there is no physical or other compulsion it is avoided like the plague” (pp. 98–99). And third, when we do perform the work, the thing that we produce is not our own; it belongs to another person.

Further, alienation, according to Marx, is the origin of private property. It exists solely because we are cut off from our species-being; someone else owns the means and ends of production. Underlying markets and commodification—and capitalism—is the institution of private property. Marx criticizes the political economists of his day because they assumed the fact of private property without offering any explanation for it. These economists believed that private property was simply a natural part of the economic process. But for Marx, the source of private property was the crux of the problem. Based on species-being, Marx argues that private property emerged out of the alienation of labor.

**Private property is a distinctly modern, capitalist concept and a major idea in Marx’s theory of capitalism. For Marx, the quality of “private” property can only be understood through the idea of alienation. Private property can only exist when the worker is first alienated from his or her humanity (species-being).**

Marx also argues that there is a reciprocal influence of private property on the experience of alienation. As we have seen, Marx claims that private property is the result of alienated labor. Once private property exists, it can exert its own influence on the worker and it becomes “the realization of this alienation” (Marx, 1932/1995, p. 106). Workers then become controlled by private property. This notion is most clearly seen in what Marx describes as commodity fetish: Workers become infatuated with their own product as if it were an alien thing. It confronts them not as the work of their hands, but as a commodity—something alien to them that they must buy and appropriate.

Commodity fetish is a difficult notion, and it is hard to come up with an illustration. Workers create and produce the product, yet they don’t recognize their work or themselves in the product. So, as workers, we see the product outside of ourselves and we fall in love with it. We have to possess it, not realizing that it is ours already by its very nature. We think it, the object, will satisfy our needs, when what we need is to find ourselves in creative production and a socially connected world. We go from sterile object to sterile object, seeking satisfaction, because they all leave us empty. To use a science fiction example, it’s like a male scientist who creates a female robot, but then forgets he created it, falls in love with it, and tries to buy its affection through money. As I said, it is a difficult concept to illustrate because in this late stage of capitalism, our entire world and way of living are the examples. In commodity fetish, our perception of self-worth is linked with money and objects in a vicious cycle.
Moreover, in commodity fetish we fail to recognize—or in Marxian terms, we misrecognize—that there are sets of oppressive social relations behind both the perceived need for and the simple exchange of money for a commodity. We think that the value of the commodity is simply its intrinsic worth—that’s just how much a Calvin Klein jacket is worth—when, in fact, hidden labor relations and exploitation produce its value. We come to need these products in an alienated way: We think that owning the product will fulfill our needs. The need is produced through the commodification process, and in back of the exchange are relations of oppression. In this sense, the commodity becomes reified: It takes on a sense of reality that is not materially real at all.

Contemporary Marxists argue that the process of commodification affects every sphere of human existence and is the “central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects” (Lukács, 1922/1971, p. 83). Commodification translates all human activity and relations into objects that can be bought or sold. In this process, value is determined not by any intrinsic feature of the activity or the relations, but by the impersonal forces of markets, over which individuals have no control. In this expanded view of commodification, the objects and relations that will truly gratify human needs are hidden, and the commodified object is internalized and accepted as reality. So, for example, a young college woman may internalize the commodified image of thinness and create an eating disorder such as anorexia nervosa that rules her life and becomes unquestionably real. Commodification, then, results in a consciousness based on reified, false objects. It is difficult to think outside this commodified box. There is, in fact, a tendency to justify and rationalize our commodified selves and behaviors.

**False Consciousness and Religion**

Alienation, false consciousness, and ideology go hand in hand. In place of a true awareness of species-being comes false consciousness, a consciousness built on any foundation other than free and creative production. Humans in false consciousness thus come to think of themselves as being defined through the ability to have ideas, concepts, and abstract thought, rather than through production. When these ideas are brought together in some kind of system, Marx considers them to be ideology.
Ideas function as *ideology* when they are perceived as independent entities that transcend historical, economic relations: Ideologies contain beliefs that we hold to be true and right, regardless of the time or place (like the value of hard work and just reward). In the strictest Marxian sense, ideologies legitimate capitalist relations and blind workers to the effects of class. Ideologies prevent class consciousness from forming and thus hinder social change. More generally, the concept of ideology helps us see that all ideas are linked to social relationships, that “the intellectual point of view held and the social position occupied” correspond (Mannheim, 1936, p. 78).

In Marxian theory, *ideology* is any system of ideas that blinds us to the truth of economic relations. In a more general sense, ideology is any set of cultural practices (norms, values, and beliefs) that undergird and legitimate relations of power and prevent workers from seeing their oppression, which in turn inhibits the possibility of social change.

Though Marx sometimes appears to use the terms interchangeably, it is important to keep the distinction between false consciousness and ideology clear. Ideologies can change and vary. For example, the ideology of consumerism is quite different from the previous ideologies of the work ethic and frugality, yet they are all capitalist ideologies. The ideologies behind feminism are different from the beliefs behind the racial equality movement, yet from Marx’s position, both are ideologies that blind us to the true structure of inequality: class. However, false consciousness doesn’t vary. It is a state of being, somewhat like alienation in this aspect. We are by definition in a state of false consciousness because we are living outside of species-being. The very way through which we are aware of ourselves and the world around us is false or dysfunctional. The very method of our consciousness is fictitious.

Generally speaking, false consciousness and ideology are structurally connected to two social factors: religion and the division of labor. For Marx, *religion* is the archetypal form of ideology. Religion is based on an abstract idea, like God, and religion takes this abstract idea to be the way through which humans can come to know their true nature. For example, in the evangelical Christian faith, believers are exhorted to repent from not only their sinful ways, but also their sinful nature, and to be born again with a new nature—the true nature of humankind. Christians are thus encouraged to become Christ-like because they have been created in the image of God. Religion, then, reifies thought, according to Marx. It takes an abstract (God), treating it as if it is materially real, and it then replaces species-being with nonmaterally based ideas (becoming Christ-like). It is, for Marx, a never-ending reflexive loop of abstraction, with no basis in material reality whatsoever. Religion, like the commodity fetish, erroneously attributes reality and causation. We pour ourselves out, this time into a religious idea, and we misrecognize our own nature as that of God or devil.
It is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful the alien objective world becomes which he creates over-against himself, the poorer he himself—his inner world—becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself. (Marx, 1932/1978, p. 72)

There is also a second sense in which religion functions as ideology. Marx uses the term ideology as *apologia*, or a defense of one’s own ideas, opinions, or actions. In this kind of ideology, the orientation and beliefs of a single class, the elite, become generalized and seem to be applicable to all classes. Here, the issue is not so much reification as class consciousness. The problem in reification is that we accept something as real that isn’t. With ideology, the problem is that we are blinded to the oppression of the class system. This is in part what Marx means when he claims that religion is “the opium of the people.” As we have seen, Marx argues that because most people are cut off from the material means of production, they misrecognize their true class position and the actual class-based relationships, as well as the effects of class position. In the place of class consciousness, people accept an ideology. For Marx, religion is the handmaiden of the elite; it is a principal vehicle for transmitting and reproducing the capitalist ideology.

Thus, in the United States we tend to find a stronger belief in American ideological concepts (such as meritocracy, equal opportunity, work ethic, poverty as the result of laziness, free enterprise, and so on) among the religious (particularly among the traditional American denominations). We would also expect to see religious people being less concerned with the social foundations of inequality and more concerned with patience in this life and rewards in the next. These kinds of beliefs, according to Marx, dull the workers’ ability to institute social change and bring about real equality.

It is important to note that this is a function of religion in general, not just American religion. The Hindu caste system in India is another good example. There are five different castes in the system: *Brahmin* (priests and teachers), *Kshatriya* (rulers), *Vaishya* (merchants and farmers), *Shudra* (laborers and servants), and *Harijans* (polluted laborers, the outcastes). Position in these different castes is a result of birth; birth position is based on *karma* (action); and karma is based on *dharma* (duty). There is virtually no social mobility among the castes. People are taught to accept their position in life and perform the duty (dharma) that their caste dictates so that their actions (karma) will be morally good. This ideological structure generally prevents social change, as does the Christian ideology of seeking rewards in heavenly places.

For Marx, then, religion simultaneously represents the farthest reach of humanity’s misguided reification and functions to blind people to the underlying class conditions that produce their suffering. Yet Marx (1844/1978b) also recognizes that those sufferings are articulated in religion as the collective sigh of the oppressed:

*Religious* suffering is at the same time an *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people. (p. 54)
Marx thus recognizes that religion also gives an outlet to suffering. He feels that religion places a “halo” around the “veil of tears” that is present in the human world. The tears are there because of the suffering that humans experience when they don’t live communally and cooperatively. Marx’s antagonism toward religion, then, is not directed at religion and God per se, but at “the illusory happiness of men” that religion promises (p. 54).

Most, if not all, of Marx’s writings on religion were in response to already existing critiques (mostly from Georg Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach). Marx (1844/1978b), then, takes the point of view that “the criticism of religion has largely been completed” (p. 53). What Marx is doing is critiquing the criticism. He is responding to already established ideas about religion and not necessarily to religion itself. What Marx wants to do is to push us to see that the real issue isn’t religion; rather, it is the material, class-based life of human beings that leads to actual human suffering.

Marx also sees ideology and alienation as structurally facilitated by the division of labor (how the duties are assigned in any society). Marx talks about several different kinds of division of labor. The most primitive form of separation of work is the natural division of labor. The natural division was based upon the individual’s natural abilities and desires. People did not work at something for which they were ill suited, nor did they have to work as individuals in order to survive. Within the natural division of labor, survival is a group matter, not an individual concern. Marx claims that the only time this ever existed was in pre-class societies. When individuals within a society began to accumulate goods and exercise power, the forced division of labor replaced the natural division. With the forced division, individual people must work in order to survive (sell their labor), and they are forced to work at jobs they neither enjoy nor have the natural gifts to perform. The forced division of labor and the commodification of labor characterize capitalism.

For Marx, there are two major ways in which labor is divided: natural or forced, and material or mental. Natural and forced both generally refer to material labor. A natural division of labor is one where each works the job she or he desires; under forced division, people must work to survive. The forced division of labor is a basic premise of capitalism. Marx is also critical of mental and material labor being divided: Knowledge divorced from practice can only be some form of ideology.

This primary division of labor historically becomes extended when mental labor (such as that performed by professors, priests, and philosophers) is divided from material labor (workers). When this happens, reification, ideology, and alienation reach new heights. As we’ve seen, Marx argues that people have true consciousness only under conditions of species-being. Anytime people are removed from controlling the product or the production process, there will be some level of false consciousness and ideology. Even so, workers who actually produce a material good are
in some way connected to the production process. However, with the separation of mental from material labor, even this tenuous relationship to species-being is cut off. Thus, the knowledge created by those involved with mental labor is radically cut off from what makes us human (species-being). As a result, everything produced by professors, priests, philosophers, and so on has some reified ideological component and is generally controlled by the elite.

**Class Consciousness**

So far, we have seen that capitalism increases the levels of industrialization, exploitation, market-driven forces like commodification, false consciousness, ideology, and reification, and it tends to bifurcate the class structure. On the other hand, Marx also argues that these factors have dialectical effects and will thus push capitalism inexorably toward social change. Conflict and social change begin with a change in the way we are aware of our world. It begins with *class consciousness*.

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**Class consciousness** is a concept from Marx’s theory of capitalism. It is the subjective awareness that class determines life chances and group interests. With class consciousness, a class moves from a class *in itself* to a class *for itself*, a shift from a structured position to a political one. Class consciousness is one of the prerequisites to social change in Marxian theory, and it varies in direct accordance with the levels of worker communication, exploitation, and alienation.

Marx notes that classes exist objectively, whether we are aware of them or not. He refers to this as a “class in itself,” that is, an aggregate of people who have a common relationship to the means of production. But classes can also exist subjectively, as a “class *for itself.*” It is the latter that is produced through class consciousness. Class consciousness has two parts: (1) the subjective awareness that experiences of deprivation are determined by structured class relations and not individual talent, and (2) the effort and the group identity that come from such awareness.

*Industrialization* has two main lines of effects when it comes to class consciousness. First, it tends to increase exploitation and alienation. We’ve talked about both of these already, but remember that these are primarily objective states for Marx. In other words, these aren’t necessarily subjectively felt—alienation isn’t chiefly a feeling of being psychologically disenfranchised; it is the state of being cut off from species-being. Humans can be further alienated and exploited, and machines do a good job of that. What happens at this point in Marx’s scheme is that these objective states can produce a sense (or feeling) of belonging to a group that is disenfranchised, that is, class consciousness.
As you can see from Figure 3.4, industrialization has positive relationships with both exploitation and alienation. As capitalists employ machinery to aid in labor, the objective levels of alienation and exploitation increase. As the objective levels increase, so does the probability that workers will subjectively experience them, thus aiding in the production of class consciousness. Keep in mind that industrialization is a variable, which means that it can increase (as in when robots do the work that humans once did on the assembly line—there is a human controlling that robot, but far, far removed from the labor of production) or decrease (as when “cottage industries” spring up in an economy).

The second area of effect is an increase in the level of worker communication. Worker communication is a positive function of education and ecological concentration. Using machines—and then more complex machines—requires increasing levels of technical knowledge. A crude but clear example is the different kinds of knowledge needed to use a horse and plow compared to a modern tractor. Increasing the use of technology in general requires an increase in the education level of the worker. (This relationship is clearly seen in today’s computer-driven U.S. labor market.)

In addition, higher levels of industrialization generally increase the level of worker concentration. Moving workers from small guild shops to large-scale machine shops or assembly lines made interaction among these workers possible in a way never before achievable, particularly during break and lunch periods when

![Figure 3.4 The Production of Class Consciousness](image-url)
hundreds of workers can gather in a single room. Economies of scale tend to increase this concentration of the workforce as well. So, for a long time in the United States, we saw ever-bigger factories being built and larger and larger office buildings (like the Sears Tower and World Trade Center—and it is significant that terrorists saw the World Trade Center as representative of American society). These two processes, education and ecological concentration, work together to increase the level of communication among workers. These processes are supplemented through greater levels of communication and transportation technologies. Marx argues that communication and transportation would help class consciousness spread from city to city.

So, in general, class consciousness comes about as workers communicate with each other about the problems associated with being a member of the working class (like not being able to afford medication). The key to Marx’s thinking here is to keep in mind that these things come about due to structural changes that result simply from the way capitalism works. Capitalists are driven to increase profits. As a result, they use industrialization, which sets in motion a whole series of processes that tend to increase the class consciousness of the workers. Class consciousness increases the probability of social change. As workers share their grievances with one another, they begin to doubt the legitimacy of the distribution of scarce resources, which in turn increases the level of overt conflict. As class inequality and the level of bipolarization increase, the violence of the conflict will tend to increase, which in turn brings about deeper levels of social change.

However, class consciousness has been difficult to achieve. There are a number of reasons given as to why this is true, but many Marxian approaches focus on the relationships among a triad of actors: the state, the elite, and workers. Marx argues that as a result of the rise of class consciousness, and other factors such as the business cycle, workers would unite and act through labor unions to bring about change. Some of the work of the unions would be violent, but it would eventually lead to a successful social movement. In the end, the labor movement would bring about socialism.

Marx sees two of the actors in the triad working in collusion. He argues that under capitalism, the state is basically an arm of the elite. It is controlled by capitalists and functions with capitalist interests in mind. Many of the top governing officials come from the same social background as the bourgeoisie. A good example of this in the United States is the Bush family. Of course, electing a member of the capitalist elite to high public office not only prejudices the state toward capitalist interests, but it is also an indicator of how ideologically bound a populace is.

In addition, as C. W. Mills (1956) argues, the elite tend to cross over, with military men (in 1956) serving on corporate boards and as high-placed political appointees, and CEOs functioning as political advisees and cabinet members, and so on. A notable example of these kinds of interconnections is Charles Erwin Wilson, president of General Motors from 1941 to 1953. He was appointed secretary of defense under President Dwight D. Eisenhower and famously said, “what was good for our country was good for General Motors, and vice versa” (Time, 1957).
In response to the demands of labor unions, certain concessions were ultimately granted to the working and middle classes. Work hours were reduced and health care provided, and so forth. Capitalists working together with a capitalist-privileging state granted those concessions. Thus, even when allowances are granted, they may function in the long run to keep the system intact by maintaining the capitalists’ position, silencing the workers, and preventing class consciousness from adequately forming.

The state is also active in the production of ideology. Marx’s idea of the state isn’t clearly defined. In other words, where the state begins and ends under capitalist democracy is hard to say. The state functions through many other institutions, such as public schools, and its ideology is propagated through such institutions, not only through such direct means as the forced pledge of allegiance in the United States but also through indirect control measures like specific funding initiatives. A good deal of the state’s ideology is, of course, capitalist ideology. As a result, the worker is faced with a fairly cohesive ideology coming from various sources. This dominant ideology creates a backdrop of taken-for-grantedness about the way the world works, against which it is difficult to create class consciousness.

The movement of capitalist exploitation across national boundaries, which we mentioned before, accentuates the “trickle-down” effect of capitalism in such countries as the United States. Because workers in other countries are being exploited, the workers in the United States can be paid an inflated wage (inflated from the capitalists’ point of view). This is functional for capitalism in that it provides a collection of buyers for the world’s goods and services. Moving work out from the United States and making it the world’s marketplace also changes the kind of ideology or culture that is needed. There is a movement from worker identities to consumer identities in such economies.

In addition, capitalists use this world labor market to pit workers against one another. While wages are certainly higher due to exported exploitation, workers are also aware that their jobs are in jeopardy as work is moved out of the country. Capitalism always requires a certain level of unemployment. The business cycle teaches us this—that zero unemployment means higher wages and lower profits. The world labor market makes available an extremely large pool of unemployed workers. So, workers in an advanced industrialized economy see themselves in competition with much cheaper labor. This global competition also hinders class consciousness by shifting the worker’s focus of attention away from the owners and onto the foreign labor market. In other words, a globalized division of labor pits worker against worker in competition for scarce jobs. This competition is particularly threatening for workers in advanced capitalist countries, like the United States, because the foreign workers’ wage is so much lower. These threatened workers, then, will be inclined to see their economic problems in terms of global, political issues rather than as class issues.

Further, the workers divide themselves over issues other than class. We do not tend to see ourselves through class-based identities, which Marx would argue is the identity that determines our life chances; rather, we see ourselves through racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual preference identities. Marxists would argue that the culture of diversity and victimhood is part of the ideology that blinds our eyes to true social inequality, thus preventing class consciousness.
Thinking About Modernity and Postmodernity

Marx has a very clear notion of modernity, though he doesn’t actually use this term. As we’ve seen, Marx argues that society in general evolves and changes due to variations in the economic system. The means of production determines the relations of production (or the social relations). As noted earlier, Marx named five different economic societies: pre-class societies, Asiatic societies, ancient societies, feudal societies, and capitalist societies. Societies that contain the capitalist dynamics that we have been talking about are, of course, modern. We would expect, then, for a Marxian view of postmodernity to argue that something has changed the basic configuration of capitalism. Interestingly, we will find as we move through each of our theorists that many of the postmodern thinkers we will consider have some relation to Marxian theory. For now, though, I want us to focus on the central issue for Marx: the means of production.

Machines of Production and Consciousness

Fredric Jameson (1984b) argues that modern capitalism has gone through three distinct phases, each linked to a particular kind of technology. Early market capitalism was distinguished by steam-driven machinery; steam and combustion engines characterized mid-monopoly capitalism; and late multinational capitalism is associated with nuclear power and electronic machines. The important Marxian issue here is the relationship between the mode of production and consciousness. As we have seen, Marx argues that consciousness is explicitly tied to production. Human production is supposed to act as a mirror that reflects our nature. Thus, the way in which production is performed is critically important.

This idea is not as extreme as it might appear. Think about digging in your garden. If you use a shovel and hoe to dig the earth, and you bend down and plant the seeds by hand, you will find that you’ll notice things about the earth, yourself, and your work. You will smell the loam of the earth; you’ll feel the consistency of the soil in your hands and on your knees as you kneel; you’ll sense the soil, water, and seed as they mix together; and when the plants sprout, you will see your sweat and toil reflected in the ground and new life. But if you use a tractor, it won’t be the same; further, if you use a computer to guide the tractor as it plows, plants, and harvests, you will be utterly removed from the smells, tastes, and feel of earth, sun, water, and the human body.

Let me give you another illustrative example. The aesthetics of airplane mechanics are generally different from those of symphony conductors. Part of the difference is undoubtedly due to psychological dispositions, but the majority of the differences are due to the kind of work they do. Constantly working on real machines, getting your hands dirty and banged up, and having to exert physical strength and mechanical ingenuity all day, gives a person a particular perspective and cultural disposition. Likewise, for a symphony conductor, interpreting a musical score and working to present that interpretation through an orchestra gives the conductor a certain perspective and disposition as well. We become what we do.
Consequently, there are significant social and individual effects when the general means of production change in a society.

**Machines of Reproduction and Schizophrenic Culture**

Jameson (1984b) argues that human reality and consciousness were non-problematically represented by the aesthetic of the machine in earlier phases of capitalism. In other words, workers could touch and see the machines that were used to create products. Although alienated, they were still connected to the production process and could, most importantly, also experience the alienating process through their senses. But in postindustrial societies, through multinational capitalism, workers are using machines less and less. Even if they are in a manufacturing sector, the machines are more and more controlled through computers. Those people not in manufacturing today, like the rising service class, use machines of reproduction (movie cameras, video, tape recorders, computers, and so forth) rather than production. Because the machines of late capitalism reproduce knowledge rather than produce it, and because reproduction is always focused more on the medium than the message, Jameson argues that the link from production to signification (culture and meaning) has broken down. Jameson characterizes this breakdown as the schizophrenia of culture and argues that our culture is filled with “free-floating signifiers.”

Let’s back up a minute and try and understand what Jameson is saying. What he and Marx are telling us is that there is, or was, a chain of real relationships from the material world to the human world of ideas. At one time, our ideas and the language we used were embedded in the physical world. Let’s use our garden example again, but place it in a horticultural society (one that lives by planting and growing food). If you are working in that group, your knowledge of farming is firsthand and real. You know how to grow food, and the food is there for you when it is done growing. When you talk about growing, the language you use is firsthand, objective, and real. But if we put an owner between the product and the person, there is a break in that continuity. If we insert a tractor and even more equipment in the chain, there are still more breaks in the signification chain. Further, if instead of production equipment, we use machines of reproduction, then there isn’t any objective reference for the signification chain at all. Machines of reproduction don’t produce anything; they only reproduce images or text about something else.

Jameson (1984b) argues that the schizophrenic nature of culture and the immense size and complexity of the networks of power and control in multinational capitalism produce three distinct features of the postmodern era. One, the cultural system is now dominated by image rather than actual signed reality. These media images, or *simulacrum* (identical copies of something that never existed), have no depth of meaning; meaning is fleeting and fragmented. Two, there is a consequent weakening of any sense of either social or personal biographic history. In other words, it is becoming increasingly difficult for us to create and maintain consistent narratives about our national or personal identities. And three, postmodern culture is emotionally flat. The further culture is removed from actual social and physical reality, the harder it is to invest culture with strong emotion.

Besides offering us the provocative idea of postmodernity, these ventures into postmodern theory also give us an opportunity to see how a theorist’s perspective
can be used. In other words, it is very possible that a theory can be Marxian but not exactly what Marx himself might say. The theorist's perspective can be used apart from his or her explicit theory. That's what Jameson does with Marx. Jameson ends up saying that culture is set loose from its economic base and can have independent effects. This isn't something that Marx himself said. Nevertheless, Jameson's theory is Marxian because it originates in a Marxian perspective.

Summary

- Marx's perspective is created through two central ideas: species-being and the material dialectic. Species-being refers to the unique way in which humans survive as a species—we creatively produce all that we need. The material dialectic is the primary mechanism through which history progresses. There are internal contradictions within every economic system that push society to form new economic systems. The dialectic continues until communism is reached, because for Marx, communism is a system that is in harmony with species-being.

- The means and relations of production characterize every economic system. The means of production in capitalism is owned by the bourgeoisie and generally consists of commodification, industrial production, private property, markets, and money. One of the unique features of capitalism is that it will swallow up all other classes save two: the bourgeoisie and proletariat. This bifurcation of class structure will, in turn, set the stage for class consciousness and economic revolution.

- Capitalism affects every area of human existence. Through it, individuals are alienated from each aspect of species-being and creative production. The work process, the product, other people, and even their own inner being confront the worker as alien objects. As a result, humankind misrecognizes the truth and falls victim to commodity fetish, ideology, and false consciousness. However, because capitalism contains dialectical elements, it will also produce the necessary ingredient for economic revolution: class consciousness. Class consciousness is the result of workers becoming aware that their fate in life is determined primarily by class position. This awareness comes as alienation and exploitation reach high levels and as workers communicate with one another through increasing levels of education, worker concentration in the factory and city, and communication and transportation technologies.

- Jameson's argument concerning postmodernity is based on Marx's theory of consciousness: Human consciousness is materially based; that is, because of species-being, there is a direct relationship between the method of production and the ideas we have about ourselves and the way we perceive the world. In primitive communism, we had direct and objective knowledge of the world and ourselves. Under early capitalism, we suffered from false consciousness and ideology, but this knowledge was still materially grounded in that we were connected to machines of production. In that state, we could have come to a real sense of alienation and class consciousness. However, in
postmodernity, the economy is shifting from machines of production to machines of reproduction. With machines of production, there was a connection between culture and the material world. With machines of reproduction, that connection is broken. As a result, cultural signs and symbols are cut loose from their moorings and lose any grounded sense of meaning or reality. From a Marxian point of view, this shift from machines of production to reproduction, from materially grounded ideas to free-floating signifiers, contributes to the prevention of class consciousness.

LEARNING MORE—PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

For a primary source for Marx, it is best to start off with a reader. Here's my favorite:


There are many good secondary sources for Marx. The following are a few of the good ones to start with:


SEEING THE SOCIAL WORLD (KNOWING THE THEORY)

- Write a 500-word synopsis of Marx's sociological imagination, making certain to include not only how he sees the world (perspective) but also how that perspective came about (history, social structures, and biography).

- After reading and understanding this chapter, you should be able to define the following terms theoretically and explain their theoretical importance to Marx's theory: species-being, idealism, materialism, dualisms, material dialectic, use-value, exchange-value, labor theory of value, industrialization, markets, commodification, the means and relations of production, class bipolarization, exploitation, surplus value, commodification, overproduction, alienation, private property, commodity fetish, ideology, false consciousness, religion, class consciousness.
After reading and understanding this chapter, you should be able to answer the following questions (remember to answer them theoretically):

1. Explain human nature through the idea of species-being and how it affects Marx’s theory.
2. Define dialectical processes, and analyze the structural dialectics of capitalism.
3. Explain how overproduction occurs and its effects on capitalism.
4. Explain Marx’s theory of religion and ideology.
5. Explain how class consciousness develops.

Engaging the Social World (using the theory)

- Apply the idea of exploitation to current economic relations. What has been happening to the U.S. industrial base? What do you suppose this implies about global capitalism?
- Explain how industrialization, markets, and commodification are intrinsically expansive in capitalism, and apply this dynamic to understanding contemporary capitalism and your or your family’s buying patterns.
- Using Google or your favorite search engine, do a search for “job loss.” Look for sites that give statistics for the number of jobs lost in the past 5 years or so (this can be a national or regional number). How would Marx’s theory explain this?
- Get a sense about the frequency and uses of plastic surgery in the United States. You can do this by watching “makeover” programs on TV, or by doing web searches, or by reading through popular magazines, or in any number of ways. How can we understand the popularity and uses of plastic surgery using Marx’s theory? (Hint: Think of commodification and commodity fetish.) Can you think of other areas of our life for which we can use the same analysis?

Weaving the Threads (building theory)

There are central themes in classical theory. As we proceed through our discussions of the different theorists, it is a good idea to pay attention to these themes and see how the theorists add to or modify them. In the end, we should have a clear and well-informed idea of the central dynamics in sociological theory. Thinking about Marx’s theory, answer the following questions:

1. What is the fundamental structure of inequality in society? How is inequality perpetuated (in other words, how is it structured)?
2. How does social change occur? Under what conditions is conflict likely to take place?
3. What is religion? What function does religion have in society?
4. What is the purpose of the state? How is it related to other social structures? Where does power reside?