

# Marx and Class Conflict

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover Karl Marx and class conflict, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Karl Marx and Class Conflict
  - a. Bourgeoisie and Proletariat
  - b. M-C-M' and Exploitation in Capitalism
  - c. Alienation

## 1. KARL MARX AND CLASS CONFLICT

**Karl Marx** was very interested in **class conflict**, writing that class conflict was the "motor of history" in all societies. Class conflict was the catalyst that caused change in society and moved society forward, changing it. Marx theorized that every society was characterized by one conflict or another.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Class Conflict

Antagonism between social classes.



### PEOPLE TO KNOW

#### Karl Marx

Nineteenth century German philosopher who studied the economic and social consequences of the rise of industrial capitalism. Marx has had a profound impact on the development of many social science disciplines, including sociology. In particular, his work is often cited as the foundation of much of the conflict theoretical tradition in sociology.

#### 1a. Bourgeoisie and Proletariat

Being a German in the 1800s, the 19th century, he was especially interested in the class conflicts of industrial capitalism. He was able to see capitalism industrializing the society, and see capitalists attaining huge amounts of wealth at the expense of the workers and laborers who didn't have wealth. The only thing they could do was to go into the factory and work for the capitalist, so the capitalist could get money. There weren't any labor laws and regulations--children were working, and everyone was working long hours.

Marx witnessed all of this happening in the factory, and he viewed capitalism as an inherently exploitative

system. He thought it was fundamentally exploitative because the **means of production**--all of the inputs used to produce commodities, like the factory, machines, and the money to pay for these things--were owned by the **capitalist** class, known as the bourgeoisie, a French term.

On the other hand was the proletariat, or the laborers. The **proletariat** were those who only had their labor to sell. They didn't have any commodities or ownership of the means of production. They only had their bodies to sell to the capitalists, to use for labor in the factories.

Marx theorized that there is a social relationship between the capitalist and the laborer, grounded in the means of production, and differential ownership. The capitalist could therefore exploit the proletariat within the factory and produce wealth for themselves at the expense of the proletariat. This was the fundamental class conflict in industrial capitalism, Marx argued.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Means of Production

The raw materials, machines, inputs, and factories used in the act of commodity production.

##### Capitalist (Bourgeoisie)

Also known as the bourgeoisie, these people are the owners of the means of production.

##### Proletariat

Common laborers who do not own the means of production, only their labor.

#### 1b. M-C-M' and Exploitation in Capitalism

Marx theorized a formula to explain the fundamental exploitation in capitalism and the fundamental class conflict.

$$\text{M} - \text{C} - \text{M}'$$

Money      Commodity      More Money

This means that the capitalist, or the bourgeoisie, has some money up front, which they invest in the means of production and hire a commodity - labor inputs - and turn that input into greater wealth.

#### IN CONTEXT

Suppose a capitalist wants to produce computers. He's going to buy the land and build his factory. He's going to buy everything he needs to make the computers--all of the parts for the computers. He's going to buy some human labor to produce the computers. All of these items represent the commodities.

He buys the commodities (land, factory, parts, labor), then sells the commodities (computers) in a market with the hopes of producing more money--a greater amount of money, money prime--that is

then reinvested back into the process.

The laborers in the middle, whose labor is one of the commodities--are not getting their fair share of the profits. They're being exploited in the production process to aggrandize the wealth of the capitalist.

Marx theorized that this was going to lead to a revolution. Marx maintained that this was a horribly corrosive social system that could only last for so long before the proletariat would develop a revolutionary consciousness and aim their animosity at the capitalist for exploiting them and condemning them to this horrible life, simply because they didn't have the means of production. They would then overthrow the capitalists, igniting a socialist revolution and social change.

### 1c. Alienation

This chain of events fit nicely into Marx's scheme that class conflict was the motor of history. Class conflict is what drives change in society. In addition, Marx felt that this system produced **alienation** among the laborers because they were alienated from the products of their labor. Before capitalism, people were artisanal producers. They would go out and produce hammers, or butter, for example. They had a more direct contact--they owned their labor, without having to sell it to somebody, and therefore had more control over what they produced.

In capitalism, that paradigm changes. The laborers go into the factory where they work for a period of time, producing a certain commodity, and then they leave. They don't really have that product--it isn't theirs, it belongs to the capitalist.

Marx theorized that they were powerless relative to the capitalist, with respect to the products of their labor. They were alienated from their labor and even from each other, alienation being a feeling of estrangement and disassociation from something--their labor and the products of our labor--resulting from a situation of powerlessness.

Yet there never was a revolution in the Marxian sense, and it seems unlikely to happen, even though inequality in American society has increased dramatically since 1970.

## IN CONTEXT

Consider the 99% and 1% movement. This is a recognition of fundamental inequalities in society. Although it's not talked about in Marxist terms like means of production, bourgeoisie, and proletariat, it is a recognition of fundamental inequality nonetheless.

Real wages, meaning wages adjusted for inflation, the income that each person brings home at the end of the day, have stagnated. Real wages have flat lined since 1970. At the same time, a growing group at the top has been able to increase their wealth based upon new opportunities that have opened up with the globalization of the economy. People are recognizing the disparity between the 1% and the 99%. Much of the political discourse revolves around how to get jobs back to the middle class, and how to improve the middle class.

Simultaneously, the condition of the environment is worsening, and people are responding in kind. People are taking charge against their food being produced in industrial foods systems. Therefore we have a system that is getting more unequal, and it is harder to legitimize the existing status quo, given the inequality. There won't necessarily be a revolution, but people are recognizing the fundamental inequality, and pointing their finger at the system.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Alienation**

Separation from a group, activity, or society.



#### SUMMARY

Today you learned about **Karl Marx** and his theories on **class conflict**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Alienation**

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##### **Capitalist (Bourgeoisie)**

Also known as the bourgeoisie, these people are the owners of the means of production.

##### **Class Conflict**

Antagonism between social classes.

##### **Means of Production**

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##### **Proletariat**

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