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Marx's Materialism

This chapter will introduce the fundamental outlook of Marx's social analysis, which is his theory of materialism. Marx's materialist theory forms the basis for his explanations of how individuals interact within society and how societies develop and provides the ground for his critique of capitalism and his advocacy of communism. Marx's materialist conception of reality was a means for him to understand human engagement with the natural and social worlds. If we understand why Marx found a materialist conception of reality fundamentally correct, this can help us understand his conception of human history, his social theory, and his critique of capitalism.

This chapter will first consider Marx's materialism analytically. This will include an overview of the materialist basis of Marx's class theory. In light of his materialist theory, the second section will be an examination of Marx's conception of how individuals and society interact. Finally, Marx's method will be discussed.

An Overview of Marx's Theory of Materialism

The overarching theoretical assumption of Marx's social analysis is that humans are material beings and their social world should be understood as material in its actuality. To say this in another way, Marx has a **materialist** conception of the world and of human thought. In general, **materialism** is a theory that considers the entire existence of people and the universe as physical matter. In particular, a materialist theory holds that humans and their interactions are intrinsically organic, physical, and temporal. This means that all human activities and all human societies can be analyzed

according to humans' organic, physical, and temporal characteristics. Marx argues that if we attempt to determine human social organization along other lines (such as according to an ideal conception of social organization or according to religious ideas), this will lead us astray from the actual causal processes of social development.

Marx's theory of materialism was in response to the idealist theory of Hegel. Hegel's idealism held that humans are essentially self-conscious beings and that if we understand the self-consciousness of humans, we can understand what people are, what human history is, and what the ultimate end of human civilization is. Idealism is not a theory of how humans process impressions from the external world, nor is it a theory of how the human brain structures consciousness. Rather, idealism is a theory that holds that all the ideas one can have of oneself or of the world are intrinsic to the structure of our minds. This means, essentially, that the world as we know it is actually an idea whose origin is our mind and not the world. Thus, a political regime, social structure, or phase of human civilization is not the product of culture or technological development. Rather, these regimes, structures, or phases are the results of our mind revealing itself to itself. The act of discovery is to discover what we already know but have not yet realized.

As was briefly discussed earlier and will be discussed at great length in what follows, materialism holds that human existence is physical matter, the interaction of this physical matter, and the development of this matter by humans over time. Also, social institutions of people's lives are the result of previous social institutions, technological advances, and environmental conditions. Why certain societies develop is not because our mind is structured to produce that society. Rather, certain societies arise due to certain material factors: the kinds of social institutions present, the level of technological development, resources available, and contact with other societies. Materialism holds that social and physical factors, not the structure of our minds untouched by history, produce societal outcomes.

This section will consider the three characteristics—physical, organic, and temporal—of Marx's materialism in turn.

Theory of Materialism Characteristic 1: Physical

First, let us consider humans and their social world as essentially physical. We will deal with the organic and temporal characteristics next. If one neglects or does not attend to this irreducible aspect of humans then one considers humans in a manner that is incongruent with reality. One cannot conceptualize humans as being without physical form and having a physical existence. In addition, we cannot think of humans as existing outside of a

physical world. Not only do humans require the earth to live, but it would be incredibly abstract to think of humans not occupying space or specific physical environments: for example, forests, deserts, cities, or the sea. Marx notes the primacy of humans' physical existence: "The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature" (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 149).

This determination, while seeming mundane and obvious to contemporary readers, is actually a rebuttal and critique by Marx of the modern philosophic tradition beginning with Descartes. Descartes initiated the subjective and phenomenal turn within Western philosophy. He is famous for arguing that human self-consciousness is essentially what humans are and that other qualities of humans such as their physical form are less essential:

> I can infer correctly that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing. It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it. (Descartes, 1984, p. 54)

This consideration of the human self-consciousness as essentially what humans are was accepted and refined by the German idealists Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel. Thus, the importance that Marx attached to stressing the physical existence of humans is in response to his intellectual predecessors.

It can be noted that Marx wanted the physical existence of humans to be understood as an essential characteristic of what humans are instead of their abstracted self-consciousness (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 113). In addition, humans as physical objects are intrinsically interrelated to all other physical objects, in the sense that they can affect and be affected by other objects. Humans cannot be meaningfully described apart from their physical existence. Marx thought that describing humans in a way that Descartes or Hegel describes them runs the risk of misdiagnosing humans' social reality and the horizon of their political actions. Marx realized that the idea of humans as physical beings subject to physical laws means that humans are laboring beings. Humans can labor and alter the physical world according to physical laws (Marx, 1990, p. 1022).

Theory of Materialism Characteristic 2: Organic

Now, considering the organic characteristics of humans, which are determined by their biological existence, this existence must be taken into account when conceiving of humans. Marx thinks that humans, as organic biological creatures, intrinsically have needs, drives, impulses, and requirements due to their biological nature:

> *Man* is directly a *natural* being . . . *Hunger* is a natural *need;* it therefore needs a *nature* outside itself, an object outside itself, in order to satisfy itself, to be stilled. Hunger is an acknowledged need of my body for an *object* existing outside it, indispensable to its integration and to the expression of its essential being. (Marx & Engels, 1978, pp. 115–116)

This is once again obvious to contemporary readers, but in Marx's day, this was a radical break with the idealist and religious traditions of the time. Both traditions considered humans to be essentially spiritual and self-conscious beings, as opposed to worldly, needful animals.

Marx also wanted to stress that organic beings have certain abilities that are intrinsic to their biological makeup. This biological focus is developed by him throughout his life. Marx notes that humans have the biological ability to attempt to meet their biological needs and to accumulate knowledge and alter the natural world. This means that as a species, humans have a specific set of abilities (Marx & Engels, 1978, pp. 155–157). Marx was concerned that attempts to understand humans without taking their biological needs and abilities into account would result in a misdiagnosis of humans' political situation and prospects.

For example, if humans alter their natural world, this changes their needs. Humans as organic beings seek to satisfy their needs. One will have an incorrect understanding of potential social futures if one doesn't realize that humans will react to their changed circumstances. If one thinks that humans have fixed abilities or needs, as Marx found many orthodox social scientists of his day did, then society is changeless. And, even more important, any call for the change of society can be met with the rebuttal that the proposed changes are against human nature (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 172). A changeless human nature is a powerful intellectual weapon of reactionary politics. Marx notes this tendency in defenses of private property by capitalists:

> The selfish misconception that induces you to transform into eternal laws of nature and of reason, the social forms springing from your present mode of production and form of property . . . this misconception you share with every ruling class that has preceded you. What you see clearly in the case of ancient

> property, what you admit in the case of feudal property, you are of course forbidden to admit in the case of your own bourgeois form of property. (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 487)

Another aspect of humans as biological beings is that they are a social species. This means humans exist in groups as an evolved trait, as opposed to humans consciously deciding to exist in groups. Accordingly, humans cannot be accurately analyzed by the **social contract** method because it is an assumption of this method that humans choose to enter into a society. Whereas Marx finds that humans have always existed in societies, they never have chosen to form societies where none have previously existed:

> Production by an isolated individual outside society—a rare exception which may well occur when a civilized person in who the social forces are already dynamically present is cast by accident into the wilderness—is as much of an absurdity as in the development of language without individuals living *together* and talking to each other. (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 223)

When one analyzes humans, one must realize that they have always depended on each other for the satisfaction of their needs. This cooperative nature of humans is a result of the biology of *homo sapiens sapiens*. Humans require the assistance of other humans to survive at a basic level and require the assistance of other humans to acquire the current level of knowledge through learning.

Marx again has political reasons to be concerned with humans' social nature being ignored. If humans are not social animals then they have decided to come together. Thus, impoverishment or the powerlessness people who suffer from within society is not due to people being dominated or exploited by others. It is only due to their own shortcomings. Marx, in contrast, wants to argue that if humans are social animals then they can only be denied the ability to satisfy their needs if someone else prevents them. Simply put, the impoverishment or powerlessness that people suffer from within societies is due to them having been separated from the resources that they require to meet their needs. Marx calls this separation **alienation** and **primitive accumulation** (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 70 and p. 431). Alienation will be discussed in Chapter 3 and primitive accumulation will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Theory of Materialism Characteristic 3: Temporal

The third characteristic of Marx's materialist theory is that humans change over time. As humans acquire capacities, they are able to live in new

ways and understand new phenomena. In order to understand human social development, one must take humans' temporal existence into account. An important aspect of this temporal nature is that Marx also thinks that humans have no ideal form or special natural existence. Humans are always natural; they can never be unnatural. This means that humans are not supposed to be a certain way that they once were or will eventually become (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 148). Marx finds Feuerbach's philosophy to be indicative of this position (Marx & Engels, 1978, pp. 169–170).

In contrast to this idea, Marx finds that humans have certain needs, some of which change over time when human desires need to be fulfilled (Marx & Engels, 1978, pp. 156, 169–170). This means that Marx's materialism has a temporal element because humans alter themselves and the natural world over time (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 476). Thus, materialism is not the same as naturalism. Naturalism is an analysis of human beings that essentially reduces them to their biological capacities and requirements. Some versions of naturalism select a certain period in humans' social development or hypothesize an idealized time and argue that humans are essentially the characteristics of this actual or idealized time, whereas materialism is an analysis of human beings as biological beings that have the ability to alter the natural world and alter their capacities. Thus, in order to provide a materialist explanation of humans, one must identify a specific historical epoch that will be explained. For example, the types of mathematical analysis that humans could perform during the 5th, 17th, and 20th centuries are distinctly different. Another example, the possibility for individuals to own private property, is distinctly different for people in Prussia and England during the late 18th century (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 157).

Marx's temporal consideration of human beings moves beyond a critique of an idealized natural existence of humans. Rather, the capacities of humans to manipulate the natural world, learn about it, transmit these manipulations, and use them as knowledge form the ground for social development. Human history is thus the history of humans' accumulated capacities (Marx & Engels, 1978, pp. 4, 116–117). This ability of humans to learn and alter their world is a natural capacity. Humans utilize their capacities to satisfy their needs. This satisfaction of needs through learning and altering the world creates a feedback loop in which the first needs are satisfied by the creation of new needs: "the satisfaction of the first need (the action of satisfying, and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired) leads to new needs; and this creation of new needs is the first historical act" (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 156).

Additionally, it can be seen that the feedback process of societal development discussed in Chapter 1 is one version of the causal process of humans'

material existence. Simply put, we can understand that the three characteristics of Marx's materialism—physical, organic, and temporal—are also involved in a feedback process. This feedback process occurs because humans are a kind of animal that changes itself, the natural environment, and societies over time.

The Materialist Basis of Class

Class is a fundamental category of Marx's social analysis. A full discussion of class will be provided in Chapter 4. Here we will give an overview of the materialist basis of Marx's theory of class.

The class of a person is determined by that person's ownership of various amounts of the **productive forces**. The productive forces are composed of labor power and the means of production. The basic relationships of capitalism are demonstrated in Table 2.1.

In order to understand how the classes in Table 2.1 are determined according to material relationships, it must be stressed that the **forces of production** (labor power and the means of production) are material. This means that what determines a person's class is whether they own labor power or a sufficient amount of the means of production. A person's labor

Table 2.1 Basic Classes of Capitalism

Class	Owns their own labor power?	Owns a sufficient amount of the means of production to provide subsistence through laboring?	Owns a sufficient amount of the means of production in order not to labor?
Worker—Proletarian	Yes	No	No
Independent Producer—Petite Bourgeoisie	Yes	Yes	No
Capitalist—Bourgeoisie	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Adapted from Cohen, G.A. *Karl Marx's Theory of History.* C1978, 2000. Princeton University Press, 2001 expanded ed. with new intro and chapters reprinted by Princeton University Press, p. 65, Table 1.

power is their physical and organic capacity to alter the natural world. The means of production are physical accumulations of resources produced by labor or natural raw material. An example of the former are machines and of the latter, coal or water.

As we can see, classes are determined by whether people own certain productive forces and what amount of these productive forces these people own. In capitalism, people own their own labor power and not another person's labor power. If you own another person's labor power then that person is a slave or a serf. These noncapitalist classes won't be dealt with here but will be considered in Chapter 4.

Within capitalism, people can own different amounts of the means of production. The meaningful amounts that they can own are less than a sufficient amount to provide subsistence, a sufficient amount for subsistence, or a sufficient amount not to labor. Subsistence means the amount of consumption required to live at the socially determined minimum. This socially determined minimum is different for different societies and for the same society at different times (Becker & Rayo, 2010, pp. 179–184; Freeman, 2010, pp. 135–142; Marx, 1968, p. 222). It is the amount of food, clothes, shelter, transportation, information access, education, and leisure activities that are considered basic in a given society at a given time.

My own society, the United States of the early 21st century, considers many subsistence items now to be basic that at one time were considered luxuries. Take for example powered transport, telephones, televisions, and computers. All of these items were once items that only a few people consumed. Now they are considered essential for people's lives. It is also important to note that the discussion here will talk of a person's subsistence, but all comments can apply to households with dependents. Therefore, in the discussion to follow, we will simply talk of individuals, but households are implied as well.

To own a sufficient amount of the means of production to provide for one's subsistence means that you can utilize the means of production that you own to provide goods and services for sale. The proceeds from these sales you can use to purchase items to live off at the socially acceptable minimum.

For example, let's say a person owns a set of tools they use to fix cars. If this person can sell enough car repair services and then buy the socially acceptable minimum subsistence, they own a sufficient amount of the means of production to provide for their subsistence.

Now consider another person who owns a set of tools for fixing cars but cannot sell enough car repair services to buy the socially acceptable minimum subsistence. They do not own a sufficient amount of the means of production to provide for their subsistence.

Finally, consider a third person who rents their tools out or hires people to use their tools to buy the socially acceptable minimum subsistence. They do own a sufficient amount of the means of production to provide for their subsistence without laboring.

It is important to point out that people own numerous items that could allow them to provide for their own subsistence through the sale of goods and services they create. People who own stoves, washing machines, or computers could sell baked goods, washed clothes, or computing services to others. Thus, ordinary consumption goods can and do become means of production. It is important to realize that it is not relevant for Marxian class analysis that you can sell pies baked in your kitchen. It is relevant if you can sell enough pies to provide for your own subsistence. Thus, it is relevant for Marxian class analysis that a person could quit their job and make enough money to provide for their subsistence utilizing the means of production they own.

Now on to the class designations, as demonstrated in Table 2.1. We can see that all the classes of capitalism can sell their labor power if they wish; they are free to do so. This is why Marx sometimes calls workers within capitalism free laborers. This is in contradistinction to serfs, who were not free to sell their labor to anyone they wished. The feudal lord had a claim on a portion of their labor and serfs were obligated to provide this labor when the lord wished.

If a person can sell their labor power but does not own enough of the means of production to provide for their own subsistence then this person is in the **working class**. They would be called a **worker**. Members of this class are also called **proletarians** in classical Marxian terminology. These persons must sell their labor power in order to have sufficient subsistence.

If a person can sell their labor power and does own enough means of production to provide for their own subsistence then this person is in the **independent producer class**. They would be called an **independent producer**. Members of this class are also called **petite bourgeoisie** in classical Marxian terminology. They do not have to sell their labor power to obtain subsistence, but they must labor using the means of production they do own to obtain subsistence.

If a person owns their own labor and does own enough means of production to provide for their own subsistence through hiring people to use it or renting it out then this person is in the **capitalist class**. They are called **capitalists** also called **bourgeoisie**, again in classical Marxian terminology. They neither have to sell their labor power to obtain subsistence nor have to labor with the means of production they own.

As we can see, the basic class distinctions of capitalism are all determined in relation to what amount of the means of production a person has access to.

This is why Marxian class distinction is considered materialist (Wright, 1986, pp. 106–108). In addition, Marxian classes do not require people to be aware of their classes to have their class position affect their lives. A person does not have to identify as working class to be in the situation to have to sell his labor power. Nor does a person have to identify as a capitalist in order to enjoy the option of not having to labor (Cohen, 2000, pp. 73–77).

Finally, Marxian class analysis is an attempt to understand the antagonistic nature of all class societies. Indeed, Marxian class analysis would conclude that class societies are fundamentally antagonistic, because class is determined according to exploitation. **Exploitation** means that one person gains at the expense of another. If the exploitative situation were changed, the exploiter would lose out while the exploited would gain (Wright, 1985, p. 65 and p. 72). As we shall see in Chapter 6, Marx attempts to demonstrate that capitalism is based on the exploitation of workers. This exploitation has a materialist basis. Workers are exploited because they do not own enough means of production to labor with to provide for themselves and their dependents. If they could, they could escape being exploited by capitalists.

Review of Marx's Materialist Theory

In review, Marx's materialism can be described as being focused on the physical, organic, and temporal characteristics of humans and their societies. These characteristics are used by Marx to call into question the notion that capitalism is a social arrangement that is a timeless natural state of affairs for humans. If capitalism is neither natural nor timeless then it can change and it can be replaced with other kinds of social arrangements. In addition, Marx's categories of social analysis are shaped by his materialist perspective. Class is defined by Marx according to how much of the means of production are owned by people and not people's perception of their own class position.

Individuals and Society

The interrelation of individuals and society has been discussed in many contexts but not directly. This section will outline Marx's understanding of how individuals and society are interrelated.

Humans, Societies, and Information

Marx stressed on many occasions that humans are social animals and naturally exist within social groups. This is not a radical idea for

anthropologists and most sociologists. As we have already pointed out with the social contract doctrine discussed in Chapter 1, dominant schools of contemporary economics and some political scientists assume that society is a combination of individuals who have chosen to coexist. When evaluating behavior and preference selection, the social contract doctrine hypothesizes that individuals are the basic unit that must be examined. In the social contract view, people in groups do not demonstrate behavior or preference selection that are different or changed by being part of a group. In addition, there do not exist macrogroup phenomena that are different in their effects from the choices of the individual members. As will be discussed further in the next section, contemporary economics and political science often find all macrophenomena can be reduced to microbehaviors and micropreference selections. This conception of human action has been described as *Homo economicus*. Heap and colleagues (1992) provide a cogent explanation:

> In theories that use the model of *Homo economicus* extensively, most obviously neoclassical economic and rational choice accounts of politics, the emphasis is upon the way in which individual agents work out the consequences of their preferences over alternative outcomes in a context in which other individuals have different and conflicting preferences over those outcomes. The elaborated theories of markets and collective choice take individual preferences as given, and consider how preferences are aggregated within specified institutional arrangements. (pp. 62–63)

In contradistinction to this notion, Marx thinks that the behavior of individuals is determined by their natural needs and their social situation. Their preferences are shaped and dependent on other people's choices. They make selections based on current information, and their preferences are subject to change and altered as other people's preferences are satisfied and new information arises. Individuals' preferences are products of these societies and, in turn, their own preference selection alters how others' and future generations' preferences will be formed. Marx famously commented on this process as:

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 595)

Humans build the world together as societies and enable their individual members to become more than what they started as due to their collective efforts. The development of human civilization is not simply cooperation in

which all members benefit equally. Marx finds that human social organization can reproduce its norms and roles even in circumstances in which the outcomes for many of its individual members are not as advantageous as they could be. Since humans always exist in societies, we should not take nonadvantageous outcomes as always being the result of social breakdown. This idea that outcomes have to be advantageous for all members in order for a social order to be stable is an assumption indicative of the classical social contract theory. Marx thinks that societies change when a sufficient mass of their members' needs go unmet. These social changes punctuate stable periods that can be extremely long (on the scale of human social evolution).

The upshot of this is that the continuance of a society is not dependent on the satisfaction of individual preferences to the maximum degree possible. Rather, societies can exist at a level where many people's preferences are satisfied at less than a maximum degree and a few can have satisfaction levels that exceed the optimal level of satisfaction for a society. This means that societies can exist for long periods and appear stable even though exploitation and detriment to well-being is inherent in the social system.

Why exploitative societies are possible must be explained by Marx, since the social contract explanation appears false to him. An important difference between the social contract view and Marx's view of society is how they treat information. The social contract view usually assumes that the individual members of a society all have perfect information. All members know the gains and losses for all possible future states of affairs. Individuals do not have to guess other people's actions. They know how people will react in all situations. Thus, exploitation is impossible since the exploitative scenarios would be known by all and could be avoided.

The Marxian social view sees information as limited and incomplete. There are some circumstances in which people can have a better grasp of possibilities than in others. In most circumstances, people are obstructed by limited knowledge due to their inhibited access to others, inhibited access to communication, and inhibited access to education. This situation is sometimes called false consciousness by social scientists. It is possible for people to learn from one another and begin to gather information to gain an approximation of their situation (Marx & Engels, 1978, pp. 480–481, 608).

Marx finds that people do not live within conditions in which they always have perfect information. Nor does he seem to think that perfect information is possible, since people require science to explain their social world. Its underlying dynamics and regularities are not readily apparent (Marx, 1991, p. 956). Marx thinks that more or less information is possible. Two of the main causes for an increase in information are communication between people and the increased capacities of the means of production. In short,

people's preferences are formed and reformed by social development, in particular technological development. They are not given or unalterable.

Microfoundations and Macrophenomena

Social scientists have been interested in not only describing the conditions of social change but also trying to understand and explain how these social changes come about. These explanations are usually twofold: micro and macro. Macroexplanations attempt to explain social changes by the fluctuations of aggregates: the presence or absence of saving, the size of certain groups, climatic changes, or the change in political orders, to name a few. Macroexplanations thus attempt to correlate aggregates with aggregates, for example, hypothesizing the cause of a saving decline due to stagnating wages.

Microexplanations attempt to explain changes in aggregates through the actions of individuals such as preference orderings, norms, or psychological behaviors, to name a few. Thus, microexplanations attempt to demonstrate that macroaggregates are the result of individual actions. It is true in that social aggregates are composed of the actions of individuals. When a person doesn't save money, it is factored into the aggregate savings rate. It is possible for different individual behaviors to result in the same macrophenomena.

For example, lowered savings may be the result of changing preferences (consumption over saving), or it could be that people's living costs leave no remainder for savings. These are two different microexplanations that result in the same macrophenomenon. Different microexplanations will yield different policy choices. For example, if saving is low because it now represents people's preferences then a policy to increase saving must consider how to change preferences toward greater saving. Alternatively, if saving is low because people's wages are too low to save, then higher wages are required to bring about a policy goal of greater saving.

Marx explained macrophenomena through correlation with other macrophenomena: epochal social change from one mode of production to another is due to the arising of new classes that supplant the old classes. Additionally, macrophenomena can be identified as the various interests of these different classes, such as the interests of capitalists in having private property law enforced. Marx does not stop at the macro level. He identifies the microbehaviors of new classes in respect to the old classes. In addition, he discusses the behaviors of different actors in respect to various determinations of behavior such as nationality, history, religion, and their class interests (Marx, 1990, pp. 739–742; Marx & Engels, 1978, pp. 612–613).

Marx does not wish to reduce all explanation to microphenomena indicative of the *homo economicus* conception. Individuals do make history but

not as they please. The formation of individual preferences is subject to macroevents. In deriving an explanation of why an event has occurred, one can ultimately identify the preference sets of the responsible actors. These preference sets in turn have been created by preceding macrophenomena. Marx's analysis of why the French peasantry supported and elected Louis Napoleon in 1848 (which resulted in his *coup d'état* and establishment of himself as emperor) was based on the preferences of the French peasantry for a strong leader. This preference was formed when Napoleon Bonaparte (the uncle of the latter-day Louis Napoleon) legally consolidated French peasants' rights to use their land won during the French Revolution of the 1790s. In addition, the welfare of the peasants had been in decline since the French Revolution due to competition with capitalist landowners. Explaining the success of the eventual *coup d'état* of Louis Napoleon by a microexplanation of French peasants' preferences does not explain how those preferences were formed by the French Revolution and the dynamics of capitalist competition, both of which are macrophenomena (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 608). Engels approximates the matter as such in a letter:

> According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this, neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence, if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure: political forms of the class struggle and its results, to wit: constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and then even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas, also exercise their influence upon the course of historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amid all the endless host of accidents (that is, of things and events, whose inner connection is so remote or so impossible of proof that we can regard it as non-existent, as negligible) the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary. Otherwise the application of the theory to any period of history one chose would be easier than the solution of a simple equation of the first degree. (Marx & Engels, 1978, pp. 760–761)

Can one conclude that Marx and Engels considered there not to be a simple set of microphenomena that can be utilized as the building blocks to any explanation? Yes, but with an important caveat. Marx lists human impulse or drive and the requirements of life as micropsychological behaviors

(Marx & Engels, 1978, pp. 115, 155–157). These microbehaviors are subject to historical reformation. Marx's theory of materialism has three characteristics: physical, organic, *and* temporal. The use of humans' physical and organic capacities over time allows for the alteration and expansion of the people's needs. Providing explanations for events based on the original material microbehaviors of humans is only sufficient for explaining the ultimate causal factors for the possibility of human social development. As we have already noted, Marx is very critical of people pointing at the microbehaviors of a current period and declaring these to be the natural and unalterable behaviors of humans. Human behaviors, other than the general drive to fulfill their needs, change over time.

Class Relations

Class is the major relationship Marx utilizes to understand the relationship between individuals and society. The material basis of class has been discussed previously, but now we can focus on how class relationships structure societies and how individuals are formed by class actions and interests and how people form themselves into classes.

As has already been noted, Marxian class relationships are determined by people's control over amounts of the productive forces. Ownership of different amounts of the productive forces establishes a structural determination of people's interest. People who own similar amounts of the productive forces are grouped into classes. People who own meaningfully different amounts of the productive forces are grouped into exploiters, exploited, or neither exploiter nor exploited.

Within capitalism, people own their own labor power. Thus, only different amounts of the means of production can be owned. Those who do not own enough of the means of production to employ themselves are workers. They must work for another to provide subsistence for themselves and their dependents. Those who own enough of the means of production to employ themselves are independent producers. Those who own enough of the means of production to employ others are capitalists.

Classes form dependent relationships because of exploitation. Within capitalism, capitalists are dependent on exploiting workers to maintain their class position as capitalists. Workers are dependent on being allowed to work for capitalists and are thereby exploited. If capitalists did not exploit workers, they would not receive surplus value. If capitalists do not receive surplus value from exploitation, they cannot reproduce themselves as capitalists. Exploitation occurs when workers are not paid the full value of their expended labor power. If they were paid their full value then the

surplus value created by workers would be kept by the workers. If this occurred, capitalists would not receive any income through the employment of workers. In order for capitalists to be capitalists and to stay capitalists, they must exploit workers. If capitalists cannot and/or did not exploit workers, they would have to labor to provide for their subsistence. The details of exploitation and surplus-value extraction are described in Chapter 6 on Marx's economics.

Class societies reproduce themselves through exploitation. This means that for capitalism to exist, individual capitalists must continually exploit individual workers. If exploitation did not occur, this would result in a new form of society. If all people owned amounts of the means of production as private property and everyone worked for themselves, no exploitation would occur. This would be an independent producer society.

If society had no classes, this would be communism according to Marx. There would be no exploitation because all individuals in that society would own the means of production as public property. The difference between communism and an independent producer society is that within communism, no one can lose public ownership of the means of production. All individuals own the means of production as public property as long as their society stays communist, whereas in an independent producer society, people could conceivably lose portions or all of the property they own. If this were the case, they would become workers and would have to sell their labor power. Exploitation would then occur. By contrast, in communism, exploitation is not possible since people cannot lose ownership of public property.

The individual lives of people will be formed by the types of class relationships that exist in their society. Being in a class structures the material possibilities of a person's life. Within capitalism, a person's life is determined by the amount of the means of production they have control over. This includes the amount of public control that they have. For example, if we take two people in two different class positions in the same society, we can analyze how their lives will be affected by the amounts of the means of production they have control over. We will have a worker and an independent producer in this example, and the topic will be education. It will be taken for granted that people must pay for education in this example, that education is not publicly financed or publicly provided without a fee. The ease with which independent producers can receive education for themselves or their dependents is different from the ease with which workers achieve the same end. This is the case because the worker owns less of the means of production than the independent producer does. It will be easier for the independent producer to finance an education via a loan taken out

on the means of production they own. Individuals' lives are shaped by class relationships because class determines a person's material possibilities. The social institution of class shapes the life prospects of individuals.

Class Interests and Class Consciousness

As we have seen, class relationships form the material possibilities of individuals' lives. Marx is very interested in how people become aware of the material possibility to live a different kind of life. This is called **class consciousness**. In particular, people become class conscious when they realize what their interests are as a class. This means that what people think their interests are may not actually be best for them. This is the case because they do not correctly understand how the achievement of those interests will affect their future material possibilities.

For example, Marx definitely thinks it is in the workers' best interest to achieve a communist society. He believes that workers will have more material possibilities within communism than within capitalism. Workers may not be aware of the possibility of communism and its forecasted potential benefits. Rather, workers may be strong advocates of policies that benefit capitalists. Perhaps they are advocates of these policies because they wish to become capitalists or they believe that what is beneficial for capitalists is beneficial for workers. If this is the case, workers have not achieved class consciousness because they do not have a proper understanding of their interests. Their procapitalist position will lessen their future material possibilities. Marx thinks this is true because procapitalist policies will increase exploitation, thereby lessening workers' incomes and limiting their access to nonwage benefits.

Various studies have demonstrated that class position does affect a person's perception of his or her class interests. People who are working class favor proworker policies and capitalists dislike proworker policies (Wright, 1985, 1986). This has also been demonstrated in surveys that utilize non–Marxist class distinctions (Gilens, 1999, pp. 52–53). This is of particular interest to social scientists because it appears that **class position** can determine people's interests and their political intentions.

Class Antagonisms

Class interests can be antagonistic. This is especially the case in Marxian class theory since class is determined according to exploitation and control over the means of production. Exploitation is the exploiter gaining at the expense of the exploited. This does not mean that a society cannot become

wealthier overall. Marx notes that this can be the case (Marx & Engels, 1968, p. 222). A wealthy class society is still a class society. The interests of each of its members are, according to their class position, at odds with those of other classes.

In addition to interclass antagonisms, there are also intraclass antagonisms, which is conflict between the members of the same class (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 481). For example, capitalists are in competition with other capitalists for a market share of their particular products. Competition motivates capitalists to take risks in order to try to outcompete other capitalists. If they are successful, they face less competition. They then have to take less risky actions to maintain their position as capitalists. Additionally, capitalists may be in antagonistic relationships with capitalists from other branches of industry and commerce. Capitalists in manufacturing may want lower food prices so they can pay lower wages whereas agriculture capitalists want higher food prices so they can have higher revenues. These conflicts can occur between various industries: energy producers versus manufactures or finance versus heavy electrical industries.

In addition, capitalists can be antagonistic with capitalists from other countries for a market share and access to raw materials. Alternatively, capitalists who own multinational companies can be in conflict with national capitalists, with the former seeking lower tariffs and the latter seeking higher tariffs or other trade protections. Competition between capitalists can result in workers being forced to accept lower wages to facilitate competition or being subject to unemployment as their employers' businesses fail.

Workers are often in competition with one another for jobs since there is usually less than full unemployment. This intraworker competition can occur within a country or between the workers of different countries. Competition between workers is usually beneficial to capitalists since it fractures the working class. Capitalists utilize workers from discriminated-against groups such as people suffering from racial bias, women, or immigrants in order to put downward pressure on wages and increase the ranks of available workers. This makes unemployment a greater threat to all workers. Workers may focus on the race, ethnicity, nationality, or gender of these workers rather than on the benefits these divisions in the working class provides for capitalists (Baran & Sweezy, 1966, p. 263; Gomberg, 2007).

Societies can thus be shaped and their politics driven by intra- and interclass conflicts. The interests an individual has are influenced by their class position. This can bring about conflict within a society and between societies.

Class Alliances

Classes can form alliances with one another. This can even be the case for classes that are exploiter and exploited (Neuman, 2009, pp. 184–218). It is more common for classes to form alliances with other classes that are not the main source of exploitation or to form alliances only with a segment of a class. Class alliances could be formed between certain parts of the working class or between independent producers and capitalists. For example, professionals may form an alliance with capitalists to receive privileged treatment in the form of higher wages or protected employment. This privileged treatment could help mediate their affinity for other people who work for wages. Alternatively, independent producers may form an alliance with capitalists since they identify as capitalists. Additionally, workers and capitalists in developing countries may form alliances in order to obtain national sovereignty (Mandel, 1994, pp. 130–142).

Marx's Methodology

In the preface to the first edition of *Capital* (published in 1867), Marx states that "the ultimate aim of this work, [is] to lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society" (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 297). This aim can be understood as the general aim of most of Marx's work, from at least 1844 if not earlier. We can understand that Marx tried to discover the laws of motion for societies, which are the laws of societal development. Marx attempts to discover these laws of development through the utilization of abstraction and dialectics. To be specific, Marx arrives at abstracted categories through the use of dialectics. First, we will consider why abstraction is used by Marx. Second, we will examine his comments on dialectics. Third, we shall see which abstract categories are decided on by the use of dialectics. In addition, we will discuss Marx's materialism in light of his method.

Abstraction

Marx finds that abstraction must be utilized in social science:

> to the successful analysis of much more composite and complex forms, there has been at least an approximation. Why? Because the body, as an organic whole, is more easy of study than are the cells of that body. In the analysis of economic forms, moreover, neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both. (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 295)

Marx realizes that society cannot be analyzed as a body can, where we can identify and account for all of its parts. Society cannot be dissected after death or observed in a habitat. Rather, theories must be formulated that designate concepts that provide an abstract model of social reality. It is only through the utilization of an abstract model that social science can provide an approximation of its object of study.

Today, social science has developed statistical and other mathematical models to approximate the social world. Marx utilized the available statistical data of his own day, which is nowhere near as detailed as the data available to the current social scientist. Additionally, he lived in a time before the development of many of the statistical methods used today. These current methods take mathematical constructs as models of the actual world. Social scientists thus utilize formal models to understand empirical reality. Marx thought that an excellent place to begin would be to analyze the most advanced capitalist country of the day, which was England. England could be used as a stand-in for a formal model of capitalism. Marx could thus understand the processes of capitalist development by observing the most developed specimen:

> The physicist either observes physical phenomena where they occur in their most typical form and most free from disturbing influence, or, wherever possible, he makes experiments under conditions that assure the occurrence of the phenomenon in its normality. In this work [*Capital*] I have to examine the capitalist mode of production, and the conditions of production and exchange corresponding to that mode. Up to the present time, their classic ground is England. That is the reason why England is used as the chief illustration in the development of my theoretical ideas. (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 295)

Capitalism in Marx's day was becoming the common social system of the entire world. But the varieties of capitalism that existed were almost endless. Capitalism existed in democracies, monarchies, frontier societies, ancient nations, and colonial outposts. All of these kinds of capitalism were different, but they were all linked by the accumulation forces of capital. How to discuss capitalism in general, or where to begin, with such a wealth of data? Marx chose to abstract from the myriad forms of capitalism and examine what he found to be the most developed capitalist economy, which was England. Abstraction from reality allows theories to be constructed and social forces systematized. It is the essential work of all social science.

Dialectics

Marx selects what he finds to be the best object for his analysis and gives the reasons for it. How does Marx arrive at abstract categories to develop

an explanation of this best object of analysis? This is where dialectics comes into play. Dialectics is an ancient form of analysis and presentation. It has been used by many authors in various ways. Some considered dialectics to be a discussion of a topic to arrive at truth (Plato, 1968, p. 211). Others considered it to be a method for the reconstruction of the development of ideas (Hegel, 1977, p. 51; 1991, p. 60). What is common to all understandings of dialectics is that it is an attempt to understand the objects being studied either through a developmental process of inquiry and/or through the abstract presentation of the object in its analytical components. Marx utilizes dialectics as a means of inquiry and a means of presentation.

Many of Marx's works use dialectics as a means of presenting an object of analysis. This is how Marx decides on which abstract categories will be utilized in his arguments. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx gives an overview of the dialectical process of concept determination:

> It seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics, with e.g. the population, which is the foundation and the subject of the entire social act of production. However, on close examination this proves false. The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn are an empty phrase if I am not familiar with the elements on which they rest. E.g., wage labor, capital, etc. These latter in turn presuppose exchange, division of labor, prices, etc. For example, capital is nothing without wage labor, without value, money, price, etc. Thus, if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception of the whole, and I would then by means of further determination, move analytically toward ever more simple concepts, from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstraction until I had arrived at the simplest determinations. From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations. (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 237)

This quotation demonstrates Marx's method of inquiry. First, the method is a process of abstracting from the whole and analyzing its simplest determinations. Second, it is a process of examining these parts and then reconstructing them into their original relationships. Finally, the object of inquiry can now be explained according to its causal relationships.

We have already discussed the most basic elements of Marx's method of social analysis: the material characteristics of human social reality. Marx arrived at these elements by observing a whole phenomenon such as production and analyzing this phenomenon into its simple determinations.

After this was done, Marx could reconstruct a given phenomenon and explain its operation and his expectations for further development. In the following chapters, we will consider various abstract categories Marx utilized.

Marx would begin with an object of inquiry, such as the commodity or the worker. He would then go on to list a series of simple determinations of that object. Marx does not present the dialectic of inquiry in his works. He presents the reconstruction of simple determinations and explains how these determinations produce a social whole. For example, in the next chapter on alienation, we will consider the "Estranged Labour" essay by Marx. He begins with a presentation of the economic world, discussing competition, property, labor, capital, and other appearances. He then focuses in on the condition of the worker in which "the worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range" (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 71). Marx takes his object of inquiry to be the impoverishment of the worker while at the same time societal wealth increases. He then develops a set of simple determinations that he thinks provide the causal factors for the occurrence of poverty while the general wealth of society increases. In brief, Marx notes the separation of workers from control of the means of production causes certain objects and people to become antagonistic to the worker. The result of these antagonisms is that the workers' own labor enriches others but does not enrich the workers themselves. Marx concludes that the worker is in a condition of alienation.

Another example is Marx's analysis of class. Confronted with the market relations of individuals within capitalism, it appears as if all people are on equal footing. Each person can buy and sell as their purse and their preferences allow. But Marx wonders why this supposed equality of the marketplace results in inequalities of wealth and the detriments of unemployment, poverty, and squalor. Why do class distinctions emerge from a supposedly equality-preserving activity? First, Marx considers people from a different perspective than their market exchanges. He looks to see from where their income is derived, which for most people is the selling of their labor. When Marx looks at the selling of labor, he finds that the value at which people sell their labor is less than the value they create in production. Also, Marx finds that the surplus value that does not go to workers is absorbed by capitalists. He realizes that this exploited labor value is the basis not only for inequality of wealth and the detriments of poverty, unemployment, and squalor, it is also the lifeblood of capitalism. Marx discovers that without exploited labor value, capitalists have no incomes; if they have no incomes then they can't invest; and if they can't invest then the whole system of

social reproduction can't function. Marx discovers that the simple determinant of exploitation is the keystone to the overall functioning of capitalism. His dialectal abstraction breaks down the different class outcomes of capitalism into simple parts, and then he reconstructs the system with exploited labor value as the casual mechanism of class interconnection and social reproduction.

Method and Materialism

Now that we have looked at Marx's method, we can consider two classic statements of Marx's materialism in light of it. First is a passage from *The German Ideology*:

> We must begin by stating the first premise of all human existence and therefore, of all history, the premise, namely, that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to "make history." But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life. (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 156)

Human activity is essentially material activity, the fabrication of the natural world into items that maintain people's organic requirements. What is of importance here is that Marx begins not with the fundamental material aspects of human existence. That is the simplest determination. Rather, what is important is that Marx begins with the object of inquiry, which is history. Marx is interested in human history, but how does one begin to discuss such an object? There are numerous types of histories: social, natural, military, class, biography, and so on. In addition, there are numerous topics: immigration, national, international, ancient, regional, women, segregation, and the like. At the ground of it, people must be able to make history for it to be history for us. Thus, people must be alive in order to act in their world and create social reality. This leads Marx to the simple determination that humans as material beings and their material needs are at the basis of action and, accordingly, the ground of what becomes history. As we saw in this chapter and will see again throughout this book, Marx analyzes objects of inquiry into their simplest determinations. These simplest determinations will be the material parts and activities that form theories that are attempts at explaining the totality of human social reality.

Next we will consider part of the classic historical materialist statement from the preface of the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*:

> The general result at which I arrived and which, once won, served as a guiding thread for my studies, can be briefly formulated as follows: In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 4)

In this passage, we see the material productive forces as a definitive causal force. This is a simple determination that is a result of Marx's inquiry. The starting point of his inquiry, the whole object under examination, is the social production of life. Now this object corresponds to countless social phenomena: family, work, state, community, nation, civil society, recreation, and the list could go on. Here Marx abstracts the totality of social life into **relations of production** and the material **productive forces**. Relations of production are classes and the productive forces are the means of production and labor power. These two simple determinations are in a causal relationship in which the productive forces determine the relations of production. Additionally, these relations of production can be considered the economic structure of society, another simple determination. Finally, the economic structure provides the foundation for legal and political notions, also simple determinations. What Marx has done here has been to analyze social life into the simple determinations of productive forces, production relations, economic structure, and legal and political notions. Now these objects are not only identified and analyzed, they are also constructed as a "totality of determinations and relations" and are no longer a "chaotic conception of a whole." Marx has hypothesized that the whole of social life can be abstracted into the simple determinations listed along with their determinate causal processes. Marx conjectures that political relationships are determined by the current economic structure, which is finally the product of material productive forces at a certain level of development.

When reading passages written by Marx, it is important to remember that he is always searching for underlying sources of social activity. The surface appearances of law, politics, or stated desires are always, in his thinking, determined by material objective factors that people have inherited. Marx wanted to find and explain how these inherited conditions have produced

the current social world. Also, he wanted to understand which dynamics can be harnessed by current social actors to produce a social world more in alignment with their need for self-development. Marx's method of abstracting the social totality into simple determinations and reconstructing these simple determinations in a relationship that explains the social totality is Marx seeking the material objective factors that structure social phenomena.

Conclusion

This chapter has covered a wide range of topics, but the unifying theme of all of them is Marx's materialist theory. Marx's materialist outlook is the result of his inheritance of Enlightenment values and theories. Marx's social scientific project is structured around his materialist critique of social contact theory and **German Idealism**. Marx's materialism conceives of humans as physical, organic, and temporal beings. This materialist outlook sets Marx's social theory decisively at odds with the theories of his intellectual predecessors.

Marx's new materialist outlook allows him to analyze the antagonisms and the longevity of exploitative social systems without utilizing the simple considerations of ignorance, personal failure, and automatic justification that he found indicative of orthodox social science. Humans do not have perfect knowledge of their social situation. They also have not chosen the rules of the society they are born into. People are inculcated by their societies and accept the values of their societies not only because they have little choice in doing so but also because their framework of knowledge is structured by the organization of the society they belong to. The longevity of exploitative relationships is understandable if humans accept and emulate their social organization.

Humans' capacity to learn and explore the natural and social world allows people to ask, "Why is our society structured in this way?" "Are the gains and losses for certain people in our society natural and inevitable?" There appears to be a threshold at which humans will begin to question and rebel against the rules and justifications that they have learned, accepted, and perhaps even defended (Marx & Engels, 1978, pp. 4–5). Humans are not simply learning machines in Marx's conception. Rather, Marx understands that humans will seek to understand their world and can reach the conclusion, as they have in the past, that there are better ways of organizing our social interactions and the distribution of gains and losses. The impetus for Marx's investigation into the possibility of social failure and the possibility for new social organizations is the conjectured propensity for people to seek satisfaction of their needs and expand their abilities.

Before considering Marx's examination of how capitalism limits people's ability to improve their lives, here are a few questions for further reflection on this chapter's content:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of using a materialist focus for social analysis?
- Does materialism still offer any insights for current social analysis?
- Can Marx's focus on development and change be seen as a genuine contribution to social science?
- Does Marx's understanding of individuals and society provide a useful basis for conducting social scientific research? Would it be more useful to attempt to explain all macrophenomena by the use of only microbehaviors and preferences?
- Does Marx's method actually allow him to grasp the reality of the social condition he analyzes?