1.2E: Class Conflict and Marx

Learning Objectives

- Relate Marx’s concept of class to his view of historical change

Marx, one of the principle architects of modern social science, believed that history was made up of stages driven by class conflict. Famously, Marx wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” Class struggle pushed society from one stage to the next, in a dialectical process. In each stage, an ownership class controls the means of production while a lower class provides labor for production. The two classes come into conflict and that conflict leads to social change. For example, in the feudal stage, feudal lords owned the land used to produce agricultural goods, while serfs provided the labor to plant, raise, and harvest crops. When the serfs rose up and overthrew the feudal lords, the feudal stage ended and ushered in a new stage: capitalism.

Means of Production, Relations of Production

According to Marx, the way society is organized depends on the current means of production and who owns them. The means of production include things that are necessary to produce material goods, such as land and natural resources. They also include technology, such as tools or machines, that people use to produce things. The means of production in any given society may change as technology advances. In feudal society, means of production might have included simple tools like a shovel and hoe. Today, the means of production include advanced technology, such as microchips and robots.

At different stages in history, different groups have controlled the means of production. In feudal times, feudal lords owned the land and tools used for production. Today, large corporations own many of the means of production. Different stages have different relations of production, or different forms of social relationships that people must enter into as they...
acquire and use the means of production. Throughout history, the relations of production have taken a variety of forms—slavery, feudalism, capitalism—in which employees enter into a contract with an employer to provide labor in exchange for a wage.

Modes of Production

Together, the means of production and the relations of production compose a particular period’s mode of production. Marx distinguished different historical eras in terms of their different modes of production. He believed that the mode of production was the defining element of any period in history, and he called this economic structure the base of that society. By contrast, he believed that the ideas and culture of a given stage were derived from the mode of production. He referred to ideas and culture as the “superstructure,” which grew up from the more fundamental economic “base.” Because of his focus on the economic base over culture and ideas, Marx is often referred to as an economic determinist.

In Marx’s dialectic, the class conflict in each stage necessarily leads to the development of the next stage.

Marx was less interested in explaining the stable organization of any given historical stage than in explaining how society changed from one stage to the next. Marx believed that the class conflict present in any stage would necessarily lead to class struggle and, eventually, to the end of that stage and the beginning of the next. Feudalism ended with class struggle between serfs and lords, and gave rise to a new stage, capitalism.

Instabilities in Capitalism

Marx’s work focused largely on explaining the inherent instabilities present in capitalism and predicting its eventual fall and transition to socialism. Marx argued that capitalism was unstable and prone to periodic crises. Marx believed that economic growth would be punctuated by increasingly severe crises as capitalism went through cycles of growth, collapse, and more growth. Moreover, he believed that in the long-term this process would necessarily enrich and empower the capitalist class, while at the same time it would impoverish the poorer laboring class, which he referred to as the proletariat.

Eventually, the proletariat would become class conscious—aware that their seemingly individual problems were created by an economic system that disadvantaged all those who did not own the means of production. Once the proletariat developed a class consciousness, Marx believed, they would rise up and seize the means of production, overthrowing the capitalist mode of production, and bringing about a socialist society. Marx believed that the socialist system established after the proletariat revolution would encourage social relations that would benefit everyone equally, abolish the exploitative capitalist, ending their exclusive ownership of the means of production, and introduce a system of production less vulnerable to cyclical crises. For Marx, this eventual uprising was inevitable, given the inherent structural contradictions in capitalism and the inevitability of class conflict.
Marx’s Communist Manifesto Illustrated by Cartoons: The Communist Manifesto gives an overview of Marx’s theory of class conflict and embraces his position that sociologists should also be publicly active social critics. In this video, the test of the manifesto is illustrated with cartoon clips that demonstrate the deep and enduring legacy of Marx’s philosophy for modern culture.

Key Points

- Marx sees society evolving through stages. He focuses on dialectical class conflict to control the means of production as the driving force behind social evolution.
- According to Marx, society evolves through different modes of production in which the upper class controls the means of production and the lower class is forced to provide labor.
- In Marx’s dialectic, the class conflict in each stage necessarily leads to the development of the next stage (for example, feudalism leads to capitalism).
- Marx was especially critical of capitalism and foresaw a communist revolution.
- Marx predicted that class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat would lead to capitalism’s downfall.
- According to Marx, under capitalism, workers (the proletariat) must alienate their labor.
- The bourgeoisie try to preserve capitalism by promoting ideologies and false consciousness that keep workers from revolting.
- Marx’s understanding of history is called historical materialism because it focuses on history and material (versus ideas).

Key Terms

- bourgeoisie: The capitalist class.
- proletariat: the working class or lower class
- false consciousness: A faulty understanding of the true character of social processes due to ideology.
- dialectical: Of, relating to, or of the nature of logical argumentation.