Karl Marx and Class Conflict

Karl Marx (1818–1883) not only influenced sociology but also left his mark on world history. Marx’s influence has been so great that even the Wall Street Journal, that staunch advocate of capitalism, has called him one of the three greatest modern thinkers (the other two being Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein).

Like Comte, Marx thought that people should try to change society. Marx, who came to England after being exiled from his native Germany for proposing revolution, believed that the engine of human history is class conflict. He said that the bourgeoisie (boo-shwa-zee) (the capitalists, those who own the means to produce wealth—capital, land, factories, and machines) are locked in conflict with the proletariat (the exploited workers, who do not own the means of production). This bitter struggle can end only when members of the working class unite in revolution and throw off their chains of bondage. The result will be a classless society, one free of exploitation, in which people will work according to their abilities and receive goods and services according to their needs (Marx and Engels 1848/1967).

Marxism is not the same as communism. Although Marx supported revolution as the only way that the workers could gain control of society, he did not develop the political system called communism. This is a later application of his ideas. Indeed, Marx himself felt disgusted when he heard debates about his insights into social life. After listening to some of the positions attributed to him, he shook his head and said, “I am not a Marxist” (Dobriner 1969b:222; Gitlin 1997:89).

Unlike Comte and Spencer, Marx did not think of himself as a sociologist. He spent years studying in the library of the British Museum in London, where he wrote widely on history, philosophy, and, of course, economics and political science. Because of his insights into the relationship between the social classes, especially the class struggle between the “haves” and the “have-nots,” many sociologists claim Marx as a significant early sociologist. He also introduced one of the major perspectives in sociology, conflict theory, which is discussed on pages 29–30.
Conflict Theory
Conflict theory provides a third perspective on social life. Unlike the functionalists, who view society as a harmonious whole, with its parts working together, conflict theorists stress that society is composed of groups that are competing with one another for scarce resources. Although alliances or cooperation may prevail on the surface, beneath that surface lies a struggle for power.

Karl Marx and Conflict Theory
Karl Marx, the founder of conflict theory, witnessed the Industrial Revolution that transformed Europe. He saw that peasants who had left the land to seek work in cities had to work for wages that provided barely enough to eat. Things were so bad that the average worker died at age 30, the average wealthy person at age 50 (Edgerton 1992:87). Shocked by this suffering and exploitation, Marx began to analyze society and history. As he did so, he developed conflict theory. He concluded that the key to human history is class conflict. In each society, some small group controls the means of production and exploits those who are not in control. In industrialized societies, the struggle is between the bourgeoisie, the small group of capitalists who own the means to produce wealth, and the proletariat, the mass of workers who are exploited by the bourgeoisie. The capitalists also control politics: If the workers rebel, the capitalists are able to call on the power of the state to subdue them.

When Marx made his observations, capitalism was in its infancy and workers were at the mercy of their employers. Workers had none of what we take for granted today—minimum wages, eight-hour days, coffee breaks, five-day work weeks, paid vacations and holidays, medical benefits, sick leave, unemployment compensation, Social Security, and, for union workers, the right to strike. Marx’s analysis reminds us that these benefits came not from generous hearts, but from workers forcing concessions from their employers.

Conflict Theory Today
Some conflict sociologists use conflict theory in a much broader sense than Marx did. They examine how conflict permeates every layer of society—whether that be a small group, an organization, a community, or the entire society. When people in a position of authority try to enforce conformity, which they must do, this creates resentment and resistance. The result is a constant struggle throughout society to determine who has authority and how far that authority goes (Turner 1978; Bartos and Wehr 2002).

Sociologist Lewis Coser (1913–2003) pointed out that conflict is most likely to develop among people who are in close relationships. These people have worked out ways to distribute responsibilities and privileges, power and rewards. Any change in this arrangement can lead to hurt feelings, bitterness, and conflict. Even in intimate relationships, then, people are in a constant balancing act, with conflict lying uneasily just beneath the surface.

Feminists and Conflict Theory
Just as Marx stressed conflict between capitalists and workers, many feminists stress a similar conflict between men and women. A primary focus is the historical, contemporary, and global inequalities of men and women—and how the traditional dominance by men can be overcome to bring about equality of the sexes. Feminists are not united by the conflict perspective, however. They tackle a variety of topics and use whatever theory applies. (Feminism is discussed in Chapter 11.)

Applying Conflict Theory
To explain why the U.S. divorce rate is high, conflict theorists focus on how men’s and women’s relationships have changed. For millennia, men dominated women. Women had few alternatives other than accepting their exploitation. Today, in contrast, with industrialization, women can meet their basic survival needs outside of marriage. Industrialization has also fostered a culture in which females participate in social worlds beyond the home. Consequently, with the ability to refuse to bear burdens that earlier generations accepted as inevitable, today’s women are much more likely to dissolve a marriage that becomes intolerable—or even unsatisfactory.
**Macro-level analysis** an examination of large-scale patterns of society

**Micro-level analysis** an examination of small-scale patterns of society

**Social interaction** what people do when they are in one another's presence

**Nonverbal interaction** communication without words through gestures, use of space, silence, and so on.

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**Table 1.1** Major Theoretical Perspectives in Sociology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>Usual Level of Analysis</th>
<th>Focus of Analysis</th>
<th>Key Terms</th>
<th>Applying the Perspective to the U.S. Divorce Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Interactionism</td>
<td>Microsociological: examines small-scale patterns of social interaction</td>
<td>Face-to-face interaction, how people use symbols to create social life</td>
<td>Symbols, Interaction, Meanings, Definitions</td>
<td>Industrialization and urbanization changed marital roles and led to a redefinition of love, marriage, children, and divorce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional Analysis</td>
<td>Macrosociological: examines large-scale patterns of society</td>
<td>Relationships among the parts of society; how these parts are functional (have beneficial consequences) or dysfunctional (have negative consequences)</td>
<td>Structure, Functions (manifest and latent), Dysfunctions, Equilibrium</td>
<td>As social change erodes the traditional functions of the family, family ties weaken, and the divorce rate increases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Theory</td>
<td>Macrosociological: examines large-scale patterns of society</td>
<td>The struggle for scarce resources by groups in a society; how the elites use their power to control the weaker groups</td>
<td>Inequality, Power, Conflict, Competition, Exploitation</td>
<td>When men control economic life, the divorce rate is low because women find few alternatives to a bad marriage. The high divorce rate reflects a shift in the balance of power between men and women.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**IN SUM**

The dominance of men over women was once considered natural and right. As women gained education and earnings, however, their willingness to accept men's domination diminished, and they strived for more power. One consequence has been a higher divorce rate as wives grew less inclined to put up with relationships that they defined as unfair. From the conflict perspective, then, our increase in divorce is not a sign that marriage has weakened, but, rather, a sign that women are making headway in their historical struggle with men.

**Levels of Analysis: Macro and Micro**

A major difference between these three theoretical perspectives is their level of analysis. Functionalists and conflict theorists focus on the **macro level**, that is, they examine large-scale patterns of society. In contrast, symbolic interactionists usually focus on the **micro level**, on **social interaction**—what people do when they are in one another's presence. These levels are summarized in Table 1.1 below.

To make this distinction between micro and macro levels clearer, let's return to the example of the homeless, with which we opened this chapter. To study homeless people, symbolic interactionists would focus on the micro level. They would analyze what homeless people do when they are in shelters and on the streets. They would also analyze their communications, both their talk and their **nonverbal interaction** (gestures, silence, use of space, and so on). The observations I made at the beginning of this chapter about the silence in the homeless shelter, for example, would be of interest to symbolic interactionists.