



Consider the following questions for a moment:

Is inequality a good thing?

And good for whom? This is a philosophical rather than an empirical question—not is inequality inevitable, but is it good? Some measure of inequality is almost universal; inequalities occur everywhere. Is this because inequality is inevitable, or is it just a universal hindrance (perhaps like prejudice, intolerance, ethnocentrism, and violence)?

Is inequality necessary to motivate people?

Or can they be motivated by other factors, such as a love of the common good or the intrinsic interest of a particular vocation? Note that not everyone, even among today's supposedly highly materialistic college students, chooses the most lucrative profession. Volunteerism seems to be gaining in importance rather than disappearing among college students and recent graduates. Except for maybe on a few truly awful days, I would not be eager to stop teaching sociology and start emptying wastebaskets at my university, even if the compensation for the two jobs were equal. What is it that motivates human beings?

Inequality by what criteria?

If we seek equality, what does that mean? Do we seek equality of opportunities or equality of outcomes? Is the issue one of process? Is inequality acceptable as long as fair competition and equal access exist? In many ways, this might be the American ideal. Would you eliminate inheritance and family advantages for the sake of fairness? What would be valid criteria for equality? Would education be a criterion? Note that this implies that education is a sacrifice to be compensated and not an opportunity and privilege in its own right. Would talent be a criterion? Does it matter how talent is employed? For instance, should talented teachers be compensated as well as talented basketball players, or better? Think about this one carefully, for talent is not a completely benign criterion. Unless they are social Darwinists, most people would not want to see people with severe physical or mental limitations left destitute.

How much inequality is necessary?

Should societies seek to magnify or minimize differences among individuals and groups? Is the issue of inequality a matter of degree? In such a view,

the problem is not with inequality but with gross inequality. If so, should there be limits on inequality? And at which end of the spectrum? Would you propose a limit on how poor someone can be? Would you propose a limit on how rich someone can be? Rewarding individuals according to talent raises the issue of magnifying versus minimizing human differences. Currently, we tend to magnify differences greatly. It is not uncommon for the CEO of a major firm to garner 100 times the income of a factory worker in that firm. Although the CEO may be very talented and very hardworking, it is hard to imagine that he (or, rarely, she) is 100 times as clever, intelligent, or insightful as the workers, and he cannot work 100 times as much, as that would far exceed the number of hours in a week. Human differences are smaller than we sometimes imagine. Let's assume that we use IQ, an arguably flawed measure, as our criterion. Normal IQ ranges from about 80 (below 80, people have intellectual disabilities and might need special provision) to 160 (this is well into the genius range). If everyone were to receive \$500 of annual income per IQ point, then the least mentally adept workers would receive \$40,000 and the handful of geniuses would receive \$80,000—not much of a spread compared with the realities of modern societies. In compensation, should societies magnify or minimize human differences in ability?

The Historical Debate

The prior questions posed are as current as the latest debate in the U.S. Congress and as ancient as the earliest civilization. They have dogged thinkers throughout the entirety of human history—that is, as long as we have been committing thought to writing and as long as we have had sharply stratified societies. Some of the earliest writings that have survived consist of rules of order and justice. Attempts to bring these together—that is, to answer the question of what constitutes a just social order—have been sharply divided from the beginning. In his study of the sweep of inequality across human societies, Gerhard Lenski (1966) divides the responses to this question into the “conservative thesis” and the “radical antithesis.” The conservative thesis is the argument that inequality is a part of the natural or divine order of things. It cannot—indeed should not—be changed. Although this view has dominated history, it has been challenged by a counterargument, an antithesis, almost from the very beginning. The radical antithesis is that equality is the natural or divine order of things; inequality, in this view, is a usurpation of privilege and should be abolished or at least greatly reduced.

Arguments From the Ancients

Some of the earliest writings that survive consist of laws, codes, and royal inscriptions. It is perhaps not surprising that most of the ancient rulers, sitting at the pinnacles of their stratified societies, were conservative on the issue of inequality. Hammurabi, king of ancient Babylon around 1750 BCE, was one of the very first to set down a code of laws, a “constitution” for his kingdom. In one sense, Hammurabi was very progressive. Rather than

ruling by whim and arbitrary fiat, he set down a code of laws that specified the rights and duties of his subjects, along with the penalties they faced for infractions. But Hammurabi did not consider all his subjects to be created equal. His laws differed for a “Man,” essentially a title of nobility, and for the common man, who apparently did not possess full manhood status. (His laws tended to ignore women altogether, except as the property of their men.) For the same infraction, a common man might have had to pay with his life, whereas a Man would have had to pay only so many pieces of silver. Many modern American judicial reformers have noted that most of the people on prison death rows in the United States are poor and that the wealthy can secure the best lawyers with their “pieces of silver.” Corporate crimes are much more often punished with fines than with prison terms. The idea that laws apply differently to different classes of citizens is ancient, and in this, Hammurabi and his counselors were “conservatives.”

About the time that Hammurabi was formulating his laws, the Aryan invaders of India were establishing a caste system that formalized, and in some ways fossilized, a stratified society with fixed social positions. According to the Hindu laws of Manu, the different castes came from different parts of the body of the deity Vishnu. This image of parts of society as parts of a body would reemerge in medieval Europe as well as in early sociological descriptions. In India, the ruling Brahmin caste was said to have come from the Great Lord Vishnu’s head, whereas the lowly outcaste came from his feet. The laws of Manu stated,

But in order to protect this universe, He, the most resplendent one, assigned separate duties and occupations to those who sprang from his mouth, arms, thighs, and feet. (Lenski, 1966, p. 4)

Thus, each person is in an appropriate position according to his or her caste’s divine origins—teacher, soldier, cattle herder, lowly servant—“for the sake of the prosperity of the worlds.” We might note other origins of the castes as well: Those in the upper classes were largely descended from the conquerors, whereas those in the lower classes were mostly descended from the conquered.

The conservative thesis of an unchanging order of rulers and ruled, privileged and common, received one of its first recorded challenges in the writings of the Hebrew prophets. Often coming from outside the established religious system, these rough-edged oracles stood before kings and denounced not only the idolatry the rulers practiced but also their oppression of the poor.

As early as 1000 BCE, the prophet Nathan denounced King David’s adultery with Bathsheba, not for its sexual immorality (the king had many wives and “concubines,” or sexual servants) but because it robbed a poor man of his only wife. The prophet Micah denounced the wealthy of his day in strong language:

*They covet fields and seize them,
and houses, and take them.*

*They defraud a man of his home,
a fellow man of his inheritance.
Therefore, the Lord says:
I am planning disaster against this people,
from which you cannot save yourselves.*

(Micah 2:2–3, *New International Version*)

Likewise, the book of Isaiah is filled with prophetic challenges to religious hypocrisy amid the poverty of the times:

*Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please
And exploit all your workers . . .
Is not this the kind of fasting I [the Lord] have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?
Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?*

(Isaiah 58:3, 6–7, *New International Version*)

At times, the prophets were heeded, although more often they were scorned or killed. Yet their writings offer striking examples of the antiquity of the radical antithesis.

A radical contemporary of the Hebrew prophets was the Chinese philosopher Laozi (Lao-tzu). We know little of this elusive man, but the *Daodejing* (or *Tao-te Ching*, translated as *The Way*), a small book, is attributed to him; this work became the foundation of Daoism. Some of its lyrics sound surprisingly contemporary:

*When the courts are decked in splendor
weeds choke the fields
and the granaries are bare
When the gentry wears embroidered robes
hiding sharpened swords
gorge themselves on fancy foods
own more than they can ever use
They are the worst of brigands
They have surely lost the way.*

(Laozi, 1985 translation from *St. Martin's Press*)

Whatever else Laozi was, he was a radical. Yet Asian thinking concerning what constitutes a just social order was as divided as social thought on this subject in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Around 500 BCE, an Indian prince named Siddhartha Gautama, in spite of all his royal privilege and training in caste ideology, became miserable as he pondered the state of humanity and the misery of the poor. He fasted and meditated until he reached the enlightenment that earned him the title of the Buddha. He taught that liberation from suffering means giving up desire and that right living means moderation in all things, caring for all things, and the giving of alms. He asserted that the highest calling is the voluntary poverty of the monk. The prince had become a radical. His conservative counterpart was a Chinese bureaucrat and adviser, Kong Fuzi, known to Westerners as Confucius. Confucius believed in justice, duty, and order, but his just order was extremely hierarchical. Foremost was duty to the family and respect for elders, especially elder males or patriarchs. The emperor was the ultimate patriarch, a wise father figure who did what was right but also enjoyed unquestioned authority and privilege. According to Confucius, in a good society each individual knows his or her place and does not challenge the Way of Heaven. Confucius may have shared some ideas with his elder countryman Laozi, but for Confucius, the divine order was fundamentally conservative.

The teachings of both Confucius and the Buddha have had tremendous influence across much of Asia. The fact that social equality has not necessarily been any more common in Buddhist societies than in Confucian societies reminds us that leaders often alter the tenets of great thinkers to suit their own purposes. At the same time, many individuals have used religious tenets to challenge the existing order and repressive power. For example, Buddhist principles have inspired followers of the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet in his struggles against Chinese occupation, as well as followers of Nobel Prize winner Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in her struggles against the repressive military rulers of Myanmar (formerly known as Burma).

A century after Confucius and Lao-tzu, a similar debate in views took place between a great teacher and his star pupil. The professor was clearly a radical, but his protégé was to become a moderate conservative. They lived in ancient Athens, a democracy that gave voice to male citizens but was clearly divided into privileged men and cloistered women, free citizens and slaves, rich and poor. Plato, the radical, looked at his Athens and saw in it the picture of all the Greek city-states, and indeed all state societies:

For any state, however small, is in fact divided into two, one the state of the poor, the other of the rich; these are at war with one another.

(The Republic, *bk. 4*, translation by Benjamin Jowett)

No more succinct and vigorous statement of class struggle would come until the time of Karl Marx. Plato had a simple but compelling theory of social inequality: Whatever their commitments as citizens to the welfare of the state, all parents tend to be partial to their own children and to give them special advantages. This allows these children to prosper and in turn pass on even greater advantage to *their* children. In time, the divides separating

families become both large and fixed, resulting in a class of “noble” birth and a class of “common” birth. Plato’s solution to the inequality this causes was the communal raising of children, apart from their families—a children’s society of equals in which the only way individuals could excel would be through their own abilities. Plato was a communist. His ideas on forbidding family privilege must have seemed as radical in his age as the similar ideas of Marx and Engels did in the 19th century. They are also, however, the basis of the ideal of universal public education, which is gradually being embraced by the entire modern world. In his greatest work, *The Republic*, Plato envisioned his ideal state, one in which no inequalities exist except those based on personal talent and merit. In such a state, the wisest would rule as philosopher-kings, looking after the interests of all the people. They would have great power but no great wealth or privilege; presumably, they would be so wise and altruistic that they wouldn’t care about such things.

Plato never wielded much real political influence; he was probably too radical even for Athens. Yet one of his students certainly had influence. Aristotle rose from Plato’s tutelage to become what medieval scholars would call the sage of the ages, serving as tutor and adviser to the empire builder of the age, Alexander the Great. But Aristotle never advised Alexander to build his empire on the model of Plato’s *Republic*, for Aristotle believed in the same idea of a natural order of inequality that the Hindus and the Babylonians had before him:

It is clear that some men are by nature free and others slaves, and that for these latter slavery is both expedient and right.

(“*On Slavery*,” in *The Politics*, translation by Benjamin Jowett)

The sage of the ages was clearly a conservative. To be fair, Aristotle did not believe a society should be marked by extremes of wealth and poverty; rather, he recommended a golden mean between these extremes. For Aristotle, however, inequality was rooted in human nature. The Romans, who succeeded the Greeks in dominating the Mediterranean, built their empire on this Aristotelian view of the world, as had Alexander. Like many others, the Romans also gave their ideology of inequality a “racial” basis that could justify slavery. The influential Roman orator and counselor Cicero warned his friend Atticus: “Do not obtain your slaves from Britain because they are so stupid and so utterly incapable of being taught that they are not fit to form a part of the household of Athens.”

The Challenge From New Faiths

Roman ideals of order faced at least one memorable challenge. It came from a tradesman’s son and his followers in the remote province of Galilee. When they confronted the existing social order, Jesus, his brother, James, and especially his Greek biographer, Luke, sounded quite radical. Luke records Jesus as telling his followers, “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God,” while warning, “Woe to you that are rich, you have already received it all” (Luke 6:20, 6:24, *New International Version*).

Jesus warned that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, and he told at least one wealthy man who wanted to follow him to first give all his money to the poor. Jesus was fond of reminding his listeners that God has chosen the lowest outcasts to be rich in faith and that, in a time to come, those who are last will be first. As leader of the early church, his brother, James, seems to have encouraged this same approach:

Has not God chosen those who are poor . . . ? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?

(James 2:5–6, *New International Version*)

It is not surprising that Jesus and most of his early followers did not win the praise and favor of the rulers, whether political or religious, of the time. Jesus and his followers practiced communal sharing and challenged the existing order; they were radicals. At least one of Jesus's followers, however, appears to have favored a more moderate approach. Lenski (1966) calls the apostle Paul a conservative. Some of Paul's ideas on the divine order, in fact, sound quite radical. He wrote to one of his churches, "For before God there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave nor free" (Galatians 3:28, *New International Version*). Yet Paul, a Greek-speaking Jew who was born to some privilege as a Roman citizen, encouraged his followers to accommodate and support the existing order. He told them they should pray for rulers rather than denouncing them because rulers are God's instruments for keeping the peace. It was this Paul, the conservative, rather than the man who worked alongside women and slaves, who would come to be most cited by the established Christian church. It is perhaps not surprising that once the church became an official institution in the empire, with its own access to power and privilege, the most conservative passages of Paul's view of order—such as "Slaves obey your masters"—would become the key tenets. Still, throughout the period of early Christianity there were those, such as the Desert Fathers, who clung to the more neglected passages, such as "You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matthew 6:24, *New International Version*) and abandoned all luxury to live harsh lives in remote regions.

In the early seventh century, a new prophetic voice emerged in the desert. A minor merchant and sometime shepherd, Muhammad, called followers to a life of devotion to Allah, the one true God. His was a message of religious reform more than social reform. Still his ideas of a brotherhood—and sisterhood, for he seemed to endorse the Christian idea that men and women are equal before God even if in different social roles—of believers who are servants of God alone had important social implications. The city of Mecca had become a center of international trade and finance, but with it came a new business ethic of wealth and advancement in place of the tribal communal values. Muhammad believed that if his people were to honor the one God of justice and righteousness, they would need to overcome religious idolatry and also the greed and egotism of the new markets (Armstrong, 1993).

The rulers and powerful merchants of Mecca soon saw the threat, and Muhammad was driven from the city. The Qur'an, Muhammad's great revelation, describes a theocracy obedient to Allah and, like the earliest times of ancient Israel, without kings. At the same time, as in the writings attributed to the apostle Paul, the Qur'an accepts much of the social pattern of the ancient world but with new sensitivities: Slavery is acceptable, but Muslims should not enslave other Muslims; women are encouraged in traditional domestic roles and great modesty but are also to be treated with great respect; the poor and the needy are assumed to continue, but all Muslims must give alms, a required donation, to the poor. Shrewd business practices, including the charging of interest on loans, are traditionally forbidden. This tension between radical and conservative Christianity continued throughout the Middle Ages, just as the tension between radical and conservative philosophies tugged back and forth across Asia. The dominant view of medieval theology was decidedly conservative. In the 12th century, John of Salisbury revived the image of the body—now the body of Christ—to explain social inequality: The prince is the head, the senate the heart, the soldiers and officials the hands, and the common people the feet, and so they rightfully work in the soil.

Yet throughout this time, there were always opposing voices, which, although they rarely swayed powerful popes, kings, or emperors, did draw their own followings. St. Francis, born to considerable wealth in Assisi, Italy, gave away his inheritance to live a life of wandering poverty, preaching a gospel for the poor. He was beloved by poor villagers in Italy and argued for persuasion over conquest during the Crusades. The Roman Catholic Church came close to excommunicating him, but instead, it eventually embraced his devotion, even if not all parts of his lifestyle. Less able to stay within the bounds of official authority, the followers of Peter Waldo lived communally in the mountains of Italy, denounced the wealth of the church, and were eventually severely repressed. They were simply too radical, not just in their lifestyle, as Francis was, but in their social demands, for the church to accept them.

Eventually, other groups broke from the Roman Catholic Church. The theology of the Protestant reformers may have seemed radical to their times, but most of their social philosophy was not. Martin Luther's call for a priesthood of all believers had radical implications that would alter northern Europe. Yet Luther welcomed the protection of German princes, and when peasants rose in revolt, Luther denounced their rage. Likewise, many of the Calvinists of the Netherlands and of Scotland were emerging middle-class entrepreneurs who would alter the social structures of their societies. Yet Calvin, like Luther, took his cues on social order from Paul, endorsing respect for rulers and sanctioned authorities and disdaining social upheaval. Sociologist Max Weber (1905/1997) saw in the ethics of the Protestant reformers the beginnings of the demise of old medieval divisions between nobility and peasantry. But Weber believed, theirs was the new spirit of capitalism that also embraced inequality—as long as it was “earned” by hard work and reinvested for more profit rather than squandered in personal excess. One group differed from this pattern: the so-called Anabaptists of what became known as the radical reformation. They rejected church hierarchies in favor of a brotherhood of believers committed to humility, simplicity, and nonviolence. Even though as pacifists the members of this group posed no

threat of armed rebellion, both Roman Catholic authorities and many of the other reformers bitterly repressed them. Disputes erupted over baptism, but it may also have been that the Anabaptists' vision was simply too radical. The successors to these early radicals include the Mennonites and the Brethren as well as the simple-living Amish and the communal Hutterites. Others who have reclaimed some of the same ideals have included the Society of Friends (Quakers), the first American group to denounce slavery vigorously, and other brotherhoods and sisterhoods such as the Shakers, who exulted in communal simplicity in the now famous hymn that includes these lines:

'Tis the gift to be simple,

'Tis the gift to be free,

'Tis the gift to come down

Where we ought to be.

Radical thinking reached England by the 17th century, also in religious context. The Levelers were so called for their desire to equalize, or “level,” society. Their leaders argued that control by a landed elite was neither godly nor English. Sang the Leveler priest John Ball:

When Adam delved and Eve span

Who then was the gentleman?

Gerrard Winstanley argued that social inequality had been imposed on the English by their Norman conquerors, whose descendants still oppressed the British commoner. Jailed and repressed, the group's membership declined over time, but the ideas of the Levelers influenced others. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, preached social order and respect for authority. But he also preached to the poorest segments of society and took great interest in their welfare as well as their conversion. Other evangelical reformers came in his wake, also challenging social divisions. Among them was William Wilberforce, who led the drive to abolish slavery and British participation in the slave trade in addition to seeking reforms in prisons, debtors' prisons, and orphanages. These were reformers rather than true radicals, although they must have seemed radical to others in their times.

As with Christianity, Islam's teachings eventually became wedded to powerful kingdoms, empires, and sultanates. Between 1500 and the end of WWI, a dominant power broker in the Middle East was the Ottoman Empire. It often embraced cultural and religious pluralism, sometimes more readily than its European neighbors, but over time became evermore socially, politically, and religiously conservative. The Middle Eastern states that replaced it with French and British direction under their “mandates” have often continued to be socially and politically restrictive, with limited access to wealth and power. In recent years, the Shari'a law of the Qur'an is sometimes evoked to endorse traditional social roles, particularly for women, even as in parts of the Muslim world a renewed, more devout Islam and Shari'a law is used as a platform for challenging social structures marked by huge gaps between ruling elites and poor masses (see Kuran, 2004). Groups such as Hamas and

the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood have been denounced by their opponents for embracing terrorist tactics, but they may evoke support from a disenfranchised populace as champions of a true Islamic “brotherhood” against the interests of the rich and powerful.

The Social Contract

By the 18th century in Europe, however, the arguments for social change tended to draw less on the Bible than on a new understanding of a social contract that included the rights of all. The emphasis was on political rather than economic reform, so legal rights were the prime concern. John Locke, who was English, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was French, argued that rulers’ political authority comes from the consent of the governed rather than from divine right. These thinkers’ ideas for reform ultimately had radical implications. They became the basis of the 1776 American Declaration of Independence and of the 1789 U.S. Constitution, with its Bill of Rights. They were also the foundation of the subsequent French Revolution, with its more radical cry of “Liberty, fraternity, and equality!”

Two great documents of reform were written in 1776. The first was the American Declaration, which includes Thomas Jefferson’s assertion that “all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these Rights, governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed.” It is true that the Declaration never mentions women, in the rhetorical custom of the time, and that Jefferson was attended by slaves as he wrote these sentences, although he personally wrestled with the issue of slavery and wanted to include a statement against it in the Declaration. He considered including a right to property in his list of rights but settled on the pursuit of happiness as a generally understood reference to free economic activity. In the same year, a more purely economic document came from a Scottish philosopher, Adam Smith, in his *Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Against the strong economic control wielded by kings of the time, Smith argued for unfettered free trade and commerce to meet the demands of consumers. If this was done, he asserted, the “invisible hand” of the market would balance competing individual demands to produce the greatest good for all. This idea ultimately had enormous influence, setting the basis for classical economics and what became known as Liberalism. Against a world ruled by wealth-amassing royal domains, Smith envisioned a world of free trade, free markets, and free competition among firms that is still at the heart of global capitalism. Both Jefferson and Smith believed that by limiting royal power they were setting the stage for nations of free, prosperous, and more equal citizens. Radical in their day, these ideas would be incorporated into a “reformed” conservative thesis in which companies, and ultimately corporations, instead of crowns would preserve order and the common good.

The primary emphasis on legal and political rights rather than economic rights and equity distinguished 18th-century thinkers from those who followed in the 19th century. Nineteenth-century socialists took up some of the earlier rallying cries but wanted to go beyond these “false revolutions”

to a new, more sweeping revolution that would utterly change the economic foundation of society. These were the true radicals (see Exhibit 2.1). The most exacting and prolific spokespersons for this movement were Karl Marx and his collaborator, Friedrich Engels.

Exhibit 2.1 The Great Debate	
Conservative Thesis	Radical Antithesis
Code of Hammurabi, 1400 BCE	
Hindu castes in Vedic society, 1500 to 500 BCE	
	Hebrew Prophets, 800 to 600 BCE
	Lao-tzu, 600 BCE
Confucius, 500 BCE	Buddha, 500 BCE
Aristotle, 350 BCE	Plato, 400 BCE
Apostle Paul, 60 CE	Jesus and James, 30 CE
	Desert Fathers, 100 CE
	Prophet Muhammad, 7th c.
Medieval theology, 8th c. to 15th c.	
John of Salisbury, 12th c.	
	St. Francis of Assisi, 13th c.
	Waldensians, 13th to 14th c.
Luther and Calvin, 16th c.	Anabaptist "Radical Reformers," 16th c. to 17th c.
Ottoman sultans, 14th to early 20th c.	
	Levelers (Gerrard Winstanley), 17th c.
Adam Smith, 18th c.	Locke and Rousseau, 18th c.
Gaetano Mosca, 19th c.	Karl Marx, 19th c.
Social Darwinism, early 20th c.	Max Weber, 19th c. to 20th c.
Functionalism, mid-to-late 20th c.	Conflict theory, mid-to-late 20th c.
Ayn Rand, objectivism, late 20th c.	Postmodernism, late 20th c. into 21st c.
Neoliberalism, rational choice, current	Critical theory, postcolonial theory, current
Tea Party and Libertarian doctrine, current	Occupy Wall Street and new movements, current

The Sociological Debate

Karl Marx and Class Conflict

The prolific collaboration between Marx and Engels around the middle of the 19th century marks the entrance of a clearly social science position into the great debate on inequality. Adam Smith laid the foundations for classical economics, but he was a philosopher who was still largely working in social philosophy. Likewise, John Locke was one of the founding thinkers in political science, but he was also a philosopher more interested in the exchange of ideas than in the examination of data. Marx, in contrast, although well trained in philosophy, called himself a political economist and was eager to draw on both historical-comparative and quantitative data to support his positions. The data at his disposal were not always the most accurate, but bureaucratic governments were increasingly making vital statistics available, and the vast library of the British museum was collecting the findings of investigations conducted in many disciplines. Together, these developments allowed Marx to enter the debate as a social scientist and make major contributions to political science, to economics, and, ultimately, to the emerging discipline that became known as sociology.

Marx's ideas are difficult to assess in part because of Marx's enormous influence. No other social scientist has ever come close to having his or her theories become the basis of whole societies with a combined population of more than a billion people. Herein lies the difficulty. With other theorists, it is possible to note both those elements of their work that have stood the test of time and those that have not. This is difficult in Marx's case because for much of the 20th century, he was so honored in the communist world that his ideas could not be questioned, and he was so vilified in parts of the noncommunist world that full and fair consideration of his ideas was impossible. The ideas behind the icon, both those that were amazingly accurate and those that were clearly inaccurate, are far more interesting than the stale debate between world powers that became the Cold War. The thaw in that war of words has created new interest in Marx just as the societies whose political structures bear his name are collapsing or abandoning their attachment to his ideas. Could it be, John Cassidy asks in a 1997 *New Yorker* article, that Marx, who was singularly wrong about the prospects for socialism, could have been absolutely right about the problems of capitalism?

Marx believed that he was writing not just a history of capitalism but a history of civilization itself. Like most German philosophy students of his day, he had been greatly influenced by the philosopher Hegel, who held an interesting idea about ideas. One view of how new ideas develop is that they grow as new thinkers come along and extend and refine old ideas. Hegel's view was different. He asserted that someone puts out an idea, and then, someone else as likely as not comes along and says, "No, you're wrong." Ideas are not like a growing plant; rather, they come from vigorous debate. Hegel called the debate between an assertion, or thesis, and its opposite, or antithesis, a **dialectic**, and he believed that the dialectic is the driving force in the history of ideas. A thesis is offered and becomes the dominant view until it is challenged by an antithesis. A debate ensues, and out of this comes a synthesis, a blending of ideas. Once accepted, this synthesis becomes the new thesis, and the process repeats.

We have just examined, in very Hegelian fashion, a dialectic on inequality between a conservative thesis and a radical antithesis. Hegel would be pleased. Marx, however, would want to change the terms of the debate. He once wrote that he was going to turn Hegel on his head. What Marx meant was that he accepted Hegel's dialectic (the battle between opposing positions), but Marx believed that the real dialectic was not the struggle between ideas but the struggle between economic classes. In Marx's view, history is driven by material circumstances and economic relations, not by abstract ideas. Ideology, a system of ideas, directs people's behavior, but this ideology is created by the ruling classes to justify their position. In Marx's phrase, "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (see McLellan, 1988, p. 15). People can, however, come to reject those ideas when they become aware of their oppression or when the system itself is on the verge of collapse, and this, according to Marx, is the great dialectic. All history, Marx asserted, is the history of class struggle.

Marx looked at the tumultuous state of Europe in the midst of the Industrial Revolution (and many impending or threatening social revolutions) and contended that the basis of any society is its mode of production, the way it secures its livelihood. The concept of the mode of production has two components, one physical and one human. The physical component includes the means of production, essentially the technology of the time. Marx described the human component by using his key phrase the **social relations of production**, which refers to the positions of groups of people, social classes, in the economic process. These groups can take many forms, but essentially, Marx believed, there are two classes: those who control the means of production, the rulers, and those who work the means of production, the ruled. Every society needs both, but the tension between them, the class conflict, always brings the existing societal order down to be replaced by something new. This new society has its new rulers, who need and create, or "call out," a new class of the ruled. And the process repeats.

Marx called the first stage in this great struggle *primitive communism*. He drew on the sketchy anthropology of his day to envision a time when fairly equal bands and tribes existed in societies where the main social institution of production was the family. This harmonious state was destroyed by the introduction of the great evil: private property. It was Marx's collaborator and frequent coauthor, Engels, who suggested how this might have begun. Engels speculated that men began to treat their wives and children as their property. Men ruled and women served, and so the first class division was begun with property, patriarchy, and gender conflict. Some of Engels's description of this process rests on shaky anthropological ground, but nonetheless, he laid a foundation for a feminist view of the origins of social inequality.

The expansion of private property and, eventually, private landholding created the great ancient empires, such as Plato's Greece and Cicero's Rome. These were based on new and growing divisions between town and country and between emerging social classes but most notably between property-owning citizens and slaves. The collapse of these empires gave rise to medieval feudalism and two great classes: landowning nobles and land-working peasants. Other classes helped bolster the position of the ruling nobility: Through the church, the clergy provided the justifying ideology, and knights and soldiers provided the might of coercion for the unconvinced. Amid growing struggles between nobles

and peasants, a small new class gained prominence, that of capitalist merchants. The members of this new group, whom Marx called the **bourgeoisie**, were radical in their destruction of the old feudal order but ultimately conservative as they came to power as the new ruling elite. The basis of their wealth was not the land but urban production. As this became urban industrial production, they had at their disposal a new means of wealth, and they created a new subservient class—their workers, the **proletariat**. The urban industrial proletariat, factory and mill workers, were the new oppressed, with “nothing to sell but their labor.”

For Marx, capitalism was a new chapter in an ancient story. It was more productive and generated more wealth than any previous societal form, but it also generated more misery. Each form of society creates its own problems and contradictions, and the mode of production of industrial capitalism is marked by its own unique aspects. These include the following:

- **Wealth accumulation:** “Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets” (Marx, 1887/1967, p. 595). Industrial capitalism unleashes tremendous productive power and allows for great accumulation of wealth. Marx saw capitalism as a necessary evil, something that was necessary until the world had enough productive capacity and accumulated wealth to redistribute.
- **Narrowing of the class structure:** The class structure of capitalism, like that of all the societal forms that preceded it, is more complex than a simple two-class system—owners and workers, bourgeoisie and proletariat—but the forces of capitalism eventually drive almost everyone into these two classes. Rural landowners become less important, and small independent producers (petite bourgeoisie) are driven out of business by large capitalists.
- **Homogenization of labor:** Under older systems, the peasants labored apart or in family units and were slow to see their common interests. In the towns, the crafts guilds all proudly guarded their own specialties. Under industrial capitalism, workers are “deskilled,” turned into highly replaceable parts of the factory production. And they are all brought together on the factory floor. These two factors, common skills and common ground, make it easy for capitalists to control the workers. Marx believed that these factors would also ultimately make it easier for workers to see their common interest and join forces to overturn the system.
- **Constant crisis of profit:** Capitalists are in an intense competitive struggle that drives them to try to increase production while cutting costs. This drives wages down to a subsistence level—that is, capitalists pay their workers no more than they must to allow them to survive and keep working.
- **Alienation:** Workers take no satisfaction in being mere cogs in a machine that is making products they cannot afford and may never even see. Factory workers are alienated from the products they make, from nature, and from their own human nature, which longs to take pride in meaningful work.

The combined effect of these aspects of capitalism is a great contradiction: Workers under industrial capitalism make more money than ever before but have less. As the realization of this contradiction strikes them, they are ripe for revolution. Eventually, especially if they read Marx and Engels's pamphlets, they will gain **class consciousness**. They will become a "class for themselves," realizing that they are in a struggle, not against each other but ultimately against the ruling class. Capitalists can forestall this realization by trying to hide the nature of the system, telling workers that they need only work harder or better to improve their lives. Capitalists can resort to coercion, using the military or the state police against the workers. But ultimately, as the capitalists become richer and fewer and the workers become evermore numerous and evermore miserable, the system must collapse. When it does, the stage is set for the next phase: socialism, a system of collective production and just distribution that overturns the class structure. Here, the prior process of history stops. Given that history is the history of class struggles, and class struggle is the force that ultimately brings down each society, it stands to reason that a classless society with no class struggle will stand forever. For Marx, true socialism is the final stage of economic history.

In the meantime, Marx encouraged his followers to work with sincere reformers wherever they could. Thus, these radicals promoted practical ideas that no longer seem radical: minimum wage laws, worker safety laws, the end of the 16-hour workday and the 7-day workweek, the abolition of child labor, and the creation of unions. Marx, however, did not believe the capitalist system could be fully reformed; for Marx, capitalism is corrupt at its heart. Revolutions that change only governments without overturning the nature of the economy are ultimately false revolutions, the French and American revolutions included. Yet Marx believed that the efforts of the reformers were sincere and could be supported as first steps. Eventually, it would become obvious to them that they could never tame the beast of capitalism; they would have to slay it.

Marx's grand revolution never came—at least it has not come yet. The revolutions that convulsed Europe in 1848 as Marx and Engels worked on the *Communist Manifesto* were put down by the force of repressive states. The revolutions that would succeed in later years—in Russia, China, Cuba, and Nicaragua, among others—were all closer to old-style peasant revolts. Many of these were led by educated revolutionaries, but they occurred in largely agrarian societies as revolts against landlords. Marx looked for true revolution in the most advanced capitalist countries, including Germany and Great Britain, and he was particularly hopeful about the United States. What happened?

In part, the changes brought about by social reformers, sometimes with the support of Marxist socialists, alleviated the worst misery that Marx had witnessed. Gradually, the most unsafe workplace conditions were improved, workdays and workweeks were shortened, and child labor was curtailed. Unions gained growing clout. Further, Marx could not have anticipated how continually and quickly industry would make technological advances. New productive capacity allowed capitalists to cut costs without cutting wages. New technologies also required the employment of a whole new group of technicians and engineers—and, later, programmers and analysts—who had

new skills to sell and could command higher wages. Even as the middle class of small, independent producers, the *petite bourgeoisie*, was declining, a new middle class of salaried professionals was emerging.

Although Marx was clearly aware of the importance of technological change and continually critiqued industrial capitalism, his focus was always on the social relations of capitalism rather than on the social relations of industrialism. Could it be that the mass-production process of full-scale industrialization was inherently alienating, whether it was done for capitalist owners or a socialist government? Marx was accurate in describing the plight of the workers of his day, yet in hindsight, he seems to have been greatly overoptimistic about a socialist system's ability to address that plight.

Marx was clearly wrong in some of his predictions, but he has not been retired from the great debate. New generations of neo-Marxists continue to rediscover and refine his ideas. This group plays a key role in what has become known as the *conflict position* in sociology, of which Marx must clearly be seen as a founding thinker. Many in the conflict school of thought believe Marx was fundamentally right in viewing conflict in general, and class conflict in particular, as the driving force in society and social change. They differ with Marx only concerning the nature of that conflict.

Conflict theorists such as Ralf Dahrendorf contend that Marx was right about the tension in the social relations of production but wrong in seeing this tension as based solely on ownership of property. Dahrendorf (1959) asserts that the real issue is authority relations: who has the power to command and who must take the orders. Property, in this view, is only one basis of authority. A top corporate executive may have great authority even without owning a majority interest in the company. A government or military leader, even a communist bureaucrat, may have authority and use it abusively without actually owning the productive forces being commanded. Erik Olin Wright and Luca Perrone (1977) have demonstrated that Marxist class categories are good predictors of income if a third category, managers (those who have authority without property), is added to the categories of owners and workers.

Others have noted that capitalism has proven more adaptable than Marx realized it could be. Marx described the perils of competitive capitalism. Some neo-Marxist conflict theorists, such as Michael Burawoy (1979), contend that in fact what we now have is monopoly capitalism. In this system, the heads of major corporations and financial institutions can coordinate their actions and control their competition to ensure profits while still offering workers enough to secure their consent. In these theorists' view, the workers are indeed consenting to their own exploitation as they work to secure bonuses and benefits, but the system goes on because these perks hide the exploitative nature of the system.

One of the most interesting extensions of Marx's thinking comes from the most famous Marxist of all, Vladimir Lenin, and Lenin's intellectual contemporary, Nikolay Bukharin. Lenin (1917/1948) and Bukharin (1921/1924, 1917/1973) contended that Marx was essentially right but only beginning to understand the full nature of global capitalism. Britain could have what Lenin called a "laboring aristocracy" of well-paid labor only because the miserable subsistence-level workers who were really supporting the system were located somewhere else, such as Calcutta, India. Capitalist exploitation had moved from the national to the international level, and the only answer was global revolution and international communism. Lenin believed that in

the Russian Revolution *he* was firing the shot that would be heard around the world. Russian communism under Stalin turned inward and became nationalistic, but some in this line of thinking believe that the only true revolution must be international. Only when global capitalism is replaced by international socialism, ideally of the humane and democratic form that Marx dreamed of, will the misery and exploitation end (Wallerstein, 1974). This is the foundation of the international conflict perspectives that have become known as dependency theory and world systems theory. Dependency theorists argue that poor nations are poor because they are still dependent on the First World nations, many of which were their old colonial masters. The world systems approach extends this understanding to look at the way the world operates as a single economic unit with a privileged core and an impoverished periphery.

Max Weber and Life Chances

Max Weber, a founding thinker in the emerging field of sociology at the beginning of the 20th century, was writing in Germany at a time when the ideas of the late Karl Marx were much debated. Weber accepted many of Marx's ideas: the centrality of economics to all other human affairs, the importance of property relations in making social classes, and the importance of social conflict in creating social change. Weber, however, sought to expand and refine Marx's ideas to fit more accurately the realities he observed and analyzed. In Weber's view, a person's social class is defined by that individual's **life chances** in the marketplace. Ownership of property matters, but so do authority and expertise, particularly what the person can command based on these assets. The real divisions are between the powerful and the powerless, with gradations in between. Further, power is exercised in different realms: the economic realm, the social realm, and the political realm. In formulating these ideas, Weber often moved among what are now the separate disciplines of economics, sociology, and political science, respectively.

Power in the economic realm is **social class**. It is vested in possession of goods and opportunities: what one can sell in the commodity markets (investments) and what one can sell in the labor markets (skills and expertise). Weber's emphasis on the marketplace as the arena for power struggles continues to fit well with what we see in the often-contentious market-driven economy that is part of U.S. society.

Power in the social realm is status honor, or **prestige**. It is vested in respect and respectability as well as just plain showing off. According to Weber, "Classes are stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods; whereas 'status groups' are stratified according to the principles of their *consumption* of goods as represented by special 'styles of life'" (as cited in Gerth & Mills, 1946, p. 193). Fine clothes and fine cars are a part of status honor, as are one's family background and family name, residence, and reputation. Status groups are communities in which the members recognize one another and common sets of symbols or indicators of **status**. What constitutes prestige varies greatly across communities. The distinguished sociologist who commands great respect and deference from other sociologists at a professional conference may be largely unknown and undistinguished outside of the discipline. A gang lord who commands

great respect within a particular community may be reviled as a thug outside of that community. Weber's emphasis on what we now call *lifestyle* is also very contemporary and fits well with our consumption-oriented and prestige-conscious society.

Power in the legal realm is what Weber called "party." A political party is clearly a community based on gaining power through legal authority. Weber's term, however, may also be used for a labor union, a student union, a social action group, a lobbying organization, or a political action committee. Any group that is involved in a struggle to use the legal realm to gain advantage and position is an example of the kinds of groups that Weber termed *parties*. "Parties," he wrote, "live in a house of power" (as cited in Gerth & Mills, 1946, p. 194).

Weber acknowledged that the three realms just described are not isolated spheres; rather, they are constantly interacting. Despite this, he believed that they are distinct. The pope may command great social honor within some communities while possessing little personal wealth and limited legal authority. A political boss from a poor family background may wield great political power without having any obvious personal wealth and perhaps may have a mixed and dubious reputation. Yet Weber acknowledged that if one of these realms is dominant, Marx was likely correct in looking to social class. Command of great wealth can be used to gain prestige and buy influence if not outright power. Again, his assessment sounds very contemporary.

Whereas Marx emphasized struggles between classes that were largely fixed in place, as social classes have been over most of history, Weber was writing at a time of greater class mobility: As the Industrial Revolution matured, some former members of the working class were entering the middle classes, some in the middle class were getting fabulously rich, some in the upper classes were trying to protect their position of old wealth from the "new rich," and some people seemed to be losing ground altogether. Weber thus focused more on the up-and-down nature of social mobility. In particular, he stressed the idea of **social closure**, or monopolization. Groups that have attained positions of power, prestige, and privilege try to close off access to other groups; that is, they attempt to monopolize these positions. In a sense, power, prestige, and privilege are limited goods. If all are prestigious, then no one is *really* prestigious; if all are powerful, then no one can be *really* powerful. Against this backdrop of monopolization, outside groups are continually trying to usurp power, prestige, and privilege, trying to claim these goods for themselves and win social acceptance of their new standing (Weber, 1920/1964, 1922/1979; see also Parkin, 1979).

Whereas Marx seemed to sympathize with the struggles of the exploited, Weber wrote about the struggles of the excluded. Marx described the conflicts between owners and workers, landlords and landless that have wracked societies and continue to divide our own. Weber anticipated the rivalries that continue to rage in our times: between political parties, factions, and points of view; between racial and ethnic groups; between conservative and liberal attitudes toward lifestyles and values. Marx and Weber agreed on this common dynamic: Social interaction is filled with conflict, social organization is built on conflict, and social change is the result of conflict. Both were conflict theorists.

Émile Durkheim and the Search for Order

Not all of the social scientists working in the emerging disciplines in the early 20th century were convinced that the underlying issue of society is conflict. Although they recognized the reality of conflict, they were more interested in the question of how a society maintains order. Why doesn't it fly apart, becoming a battle of all against all? These theorists did not necessarily favor great inequalities, but like Aristotle and philosophical conservatives, they believed that stratification is a part of maintaining a functioning social order. At times, they expressed this in terms of that favorite analogy: society as a body with differentiated parts.

The most profound and influential early thinker in this line was the French sociologist Émile Durkheim. A contemporary of Max Weber, Durkheim was especially interested in the issue of social solidarity. How did societies first come together, and amid the changes of urban industrial society then gripping France, how could they continue to hold together and function? A central concept for Durkheim was the **division of labor**, the way tasks are evermore likely to be divided into the domains of specialists. Simple societies, according to Durkheim (1895/1964), have “mechanical solidarity,” the solidarity that comes from shared experience in which everyone works together on common tasks. This solidarity, which can be reinforced by religion and ritual, forms the basis of social cohesion. Modern societies have seen a shift to what Durkheim called “organic solidarity.” Like the organs of the body, all persons in a society have their own specialized tasks, and each individual needs all the others for survival. We hold together as a society because we realize that few of us could make it alone; we are dependent on all the other “organs” to play their part. Durkheim was concerned with social evolution and the ways in which societies and their members cope with the changes around them. His focus on social order and the functions of social differentiation, the division of labor, became the basis of a largely conservative line of theory that was dubbed *functionalism*.

Some American theorists were even more explicit in contending that inequality is fundamental to a working society. William Graham Sumner, extending the ideas of British social philosopher Herbert Spencer, seized on the growing interest in Charles Darwin's theory of evolution to stress what he termed *social Darwinism*. He explained the great inequalities and social struggles that marked the Industrial Revolution as merely social examples of the survival of the fittest. The strongest, brightest, and most ambitious (some might say most ruthless) moved to the top, where they could command further progress, while the weakest and least able fell to the bottom. The actual links between Sumner's theory and Darwinian theory were thin and forced, but the approach provided a veneer of scientific-sounding explanation to the harsh realities of wealth and poverty at the turn of the century.

The growth of the social sciences brought new data and new theories to an old debate. They intensified rather than resolved this debate, however, and set the stage for the sociological debate on inequality that came into focus in the middle of the 20th century.

Conflict and Functionalist Approaches to the Debate

The intellectual legacy of Marx and Weber, already well established in Europe, became central to American conflict sociology through the work of Ralf Dahrendorf on authority relations and the work of C. Wright Mills on changing American classes and power elites. The Durkheimian legacy became American functionalism through the extensive work of Talcott Parsons and, later, Robert Merton. The essence of the debate between these schools of thought was captured in a midcentury exchange published in the *American Sociological Review* in which Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore presented the essential functionalist statement on inequality, and Melvin Tumin countered with rejoinders based in the conflict tradition. In many ways, the points made in this exchange provide a systematic outline of the conservative thesis and the radical antithesis.

Davis and Moore (1945) began with the simple assertion that to maintain a working social order a modern society must do two things: It must place people in the division of labor, and it must motivate them to work hard in that position. They argued that social stratification does both. Differential rewards are needed to compensate those people who make sacrifices to gain an education and work to make it to the top. The competitive struggle to reach the top ensures that everyone works hard, hoping for advancement, and that the most talented should eventually garner the most powerful positions, where they can accomplish the most good. Stratification is universal, occurring in all societies, because it is necessary and inevitable, resulting from the need for a working social order. It is equitable insofar as the competition is fair, and it ultimately benefits everyone by creating the most efficient, most productive society. Although these ideas are now 50 years old, they could have been drawn from yesterday's campaign speeches. In fact, they may summarize many of the ideas you offered in response to my questions at the beginning of this chapter.

But is this system fair? Is it truly efficient and productive? Is it inevitable? Tumin (1953) drew on the conflict tradition to deny all these things. Stratification systems may actually limit the discovery of talent, he argued, because those without access to resources such as fine schools may never be able to develop and display their talents. Many of the people in the "best" schools and in the most powerful positions are the children of people who have previously attended those schools and held those positions; what of the talented poor who may never get a chance to reach the top? Further, is working toward the top really a sacrifice? Given the choice of attending an elite college with a beautiful campus and then moving from one executive suite to another or going directly into the workforce to help support oneself and one's family through backbreaking unskilled labor, how many would not prefer the former, quite apart from the higher income to be gained? Further, "sacrifices" such as college tuition may be made by family members and not directly by the persons benefiting. Tumin argued that, quite apart from creating social solidarity and consensus, inequality is likely to create hostile parties who distrust one another. The losers in the great game are likely to be discouraged, disgruntled, alienated, and openly hostile to the system. It is neither easy nor "efficient" for a society to control such hostile factions,

nor are the losers likely to be highly productive. Certainly, Tumin contended, there must be other, better ways to motivate people.

Davis and Moore responded that Tumin was bringing in secondary issues. The role of family and inheritance is not a fundamental part of stratification. A system such as our own could be reformed by laws encouraging equal opportunity. Further, Davis and Moore contended that the conflict approach is ideological, arguing for what ought to be and not describing what is, and that it is counterfactual, flying in the face of the existing evidence on all actual working societies. Tumin responded to this by saying that inequality may be universal, but does that mean it is necessarily functional and indispensable? Other evils have also been universal. Tumin contended, like Plato and Marx before him, that the role of family and inheritance is not secondary; rather, it is a crucial part of a stratified system. Finally, he asked, isn't all of this ideological? The analyses on both sides of this debate were shaped by their authors' views of a social ideal, and their arguments were created to justify particular social patterns.

The debate in the *American Sociological Review* broke off at this point, but the ideas have accompanied us into the 21st century and have clearly become wedded to ideologies. The "conservative thesis" of the new Right in American politics and much of the rest of the world echoes Davis and Moore's arguments: Inequality motivates hard work, competition, and efficiency. The antithesis from the Left echoes Tumin's assertions: Inequality erodes opportunity, perpetuates privilege, and undermines motivation and hard work while it perpetuates inefficiencies. From classrooms to campaigns, the debate continues.

Reframing the Debate

Lenski's Synthesis

Gerhard Lenski (1966) sought to lay out a new theory of stratification, a synthesis of the functionalist and conflict views. Lenski, like Marx, wanted to show how patterns of stratification had shifted over different societies. He had access to better anthropology and historical-comparative sociology than Marx did, and he focused his attention on the technology of production, what Marx called the "mode" of production. Lenski's work addressed a variation on Weber's three dimensions of class, status, and party, which Lenski labeled *privilege*, *prestige*, and *power*. Clearly conversant with the ideas of conflict theorists, Lenski focused on societal evolution in a manner similar to Durkheim and later functionalists. He called his approach *ecological-evolutionary theory*.

As Lenski surveyed the sweep of human society from the simplest hunter-gatherers through simple horticultural farmers to vast agrarian empires and on to industrial states, he found common trends at work. The expansion of technology and a growing division of labor made each stage in social development more powerful but also made certain individuals and families within those societies more powerful. He concluded, with the functionalists, that some measure of social inequality is inevitable in complex societies,

given the multitude of tasks and social positions that exist in such societies. Yet he argued, in line with the conflict theorists, that the level of inequality in complex societies is always higher than necessary, as powerful and well-placed individuals used their social power to increase their prestige and commandeer greater privilege.

Lenski's work is often cited, but his approach, filled with historical complexities, has not been widely expanded on in the great debate. There is one very simple and important kernel of a theory of stratification in his work, however: Although inequality may begin in differences in human abilities, it is primarily a social rather than a natural construction. We thus arrive at a social network or social institutional theory of inequality.

Functionalist theories of inequality place the roots of social stratification in fundamental human differences in talents, abilities, and, possibly, motivation. Marxist theories question this underlying assumption, placing the roots of inequality in property relations, the social relations of production. Anthropological evidence suggests that inequality is not based on the fact that humans have different talents and levels of ability (Diamond, 1997; Harris, 1989). Hunter-gatherers have different levels of ability, but because individuals in hunter-gatherer societies all share and work together, they remain essentially equal. The acceptance of inequality begins when someone can claim a position of social power, a central position in a network of exchange that can be exploited for personal as well as clan gain. The families of key *big men* who redistribute resources may receive more than others, gaining in both prestige and privilege. Inequality, thus, is based not so much on differences in human ability as on differences in social position within a network of exchange. Unlike in the functionalist model, gain depends on social position rather than mere talent, and unlike in the Marxist model, the key role is not in the production but in the distribution and redistribution of goods. Privilege goes not to the exceptionally talented but to the exceptionally well connected.

The failure of Marxist states lies in the fact that they revised the social relations of production but did not substantially alter the privileged positions of distribution and redistribution. Such a model is also important for understanding contemporary social inequalities. Despite the so-called triumph of markets, these are not face-to-face markets but rather markets increasingly mediated by global redistributors who are able to garner privileged positions in global networks of exchange. New technologies have not only created possibilities for new and broader opportunities, but they have also created new concentrations of power. As Max Weber noted a century ago, those benefiting from this power have often used it to guard their position by means of monopolization and social closure. The current prospects for a more equitable global economy hinge on humankind's ability to limit concentrations of distributive power and open multifaceted avenues of information and opportunity through more open social networks.

Libertarian and Rational Choice Thinking

Although functionalist theories are still given prominence in virtually every sociology text, a diligent student has to read many current sociological articles before ever coming across one that begins, "This is a functionalist

analysis of . . .” Some contend that functionalism has not disappeared, but quietly underlays much sociological thinking. New energy advancing a conservative thesis tends to come from other venues. Adam Smith, while something of a reformer in many ways, is best known for the “invisible hand” that guides economy and society to prosper when workers and entrepreneurs each seek the best returns for themselves. The principle of individual actors driving the system by seeking personal gain is the underlying idea of neo-classical economics and neoliberalism, whose worldwide influence we will consider in the next chapter. It enters sociology as rational choice theory through the work of sociologist George Homans (1974) and, more recently, Gary Becker (1964, 2007), a 1992 Chicago School Nobel economics laureate with joint appointments in economics and sociology. While theorists in this line of thought, in both economics and sociology, stress the importance of free agents making rational choices about personal gain, many—including economic historian Douglass North (1990) and economists Eleanor Olstrum and Oliver Williamson, who shared the 2009 Nobel Memorial Prize in economic sciences for their work in this area—also point to the importance of power structures and policy in setting the rules of the game. Theorists in this line begin with a conservative thesis about human behavior, but they may also propose progressive policy reform to make sure all actors engage in an equitable and efficient system.

Others are less sure of the need for a major role for large-scale institutions, including national government and public policy. In novels such as *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand (1957/1999) creatively touts what she calls “objectivism,” a philosophy based on the idea that individuals free to pursue personal gain, while relying on rugged individualism and living free from government as well as religious constraint, would create the freest, most prosperous, and, ultimately, most fulfilling society. Inequality in such a society is both just and good, with the most capable and most diligent getting ahead. These ideas find expression in the American Libertarian Party and some of its advocates. In several presidential runs, Congressman Ron Paul of Texas has won fervent and devoted support, even if in somewhat limited numbers. His son Rand Paul, named for Ayn Rand, is determined to carry the ideas into a new generation. The Tea Party movement that emerged out of the economic crisis of 2008 has vigorously espoused these ideas under the banner of limited federal government and expanded personal liberty. Unlike Rand, however, many in this movement are strongly patriotic and fervently religious. Like Durkheim a hundred years earlier, they seem to be seeking a moral foundation and a sense of solidarity to underlie the emphasis on personal freedom. Rand, like the character in the movie *Wall Street*, was convinced that “greed is good” or at least can lead to good. Vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan has often spoken of the inspiration he found in Rand’s ideas, but like many who bring this conservative thesis into U.S. politics, he maintains that his version is built on a foundation of faith and patriotism that undergirds profit seeking with a foundation of traditional values.

Postmodernism and Critical Theory

As the classic debates between conflict and functional approaches lost energy in the later 20th century, new lines of thought emerged to carry the

ideas into new dimensions. One influential but hard-to-pin-down line of thought has come to be known as postmodernism. Theorists from Marx and Weber forward have tried to understand the challenges of what we came to call *modernism*. At the close of the second millennium, some thought that perhaps we were moving in directions that made “modern” analysis obsolete. One of the most influential thinkers in this movement was French social scientist Michel Foucault. Foucault didn’t particularly like the label of *postmodern theory* and saw himself as bringing a new critique of modernism. But in works such as *The Order of Things* and *Discipline and Punish*, his emphasis on hidden structures of power and the importance of discourse—how social change is discussed and by whom—have become hallmarks of postmodernist thought. Marx contended that in any age, the ruling ideas are those of the ruling class, and postmodernists attempt to extend this to the many groups who have been marginalized, and therefore silenced, in the general discourse about social ills and social change. They seek to give new voice, and thereby new power, to groups marginalized by race and ethnicity, by sexuality and gender, and by any form of forced subservient status.

These ideas are echoed in schools of thought that have come to be known as critical theory and postcolonial theory. Critical theory originated in loosely neo-Marxist schools of thought such as the Frankfurt School. It shared Marx’s ideals of challenging power structures to bring about real change: “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244). Postmodern critical theorists often move beyond strictly political and economic structures to think, as did Marx, about how the ways that we learn to think and discuss topics often limit our consciousness and readiness to bring about deep change. A classic postmodern phrase is “hegemonic discourse,” which means simply that our ways of discussing social problems are often predetermined and dominated by powerful, and oppressive, interests. This emphasis on intangibles can make for difficult reading and nonobvious approaches, but it also can help to explain the persistence of racial and gender inequalities, even as many claim they hold no biases and believe in racial and gender equality. Postcolonial theory applies this type of analysis to the global arena. In this case, colonial powers and their corporate successors were the hegemonic forces that shaped education, media, and worldview in ways that limit the voice, the awareness, and the power of former colonial subjects, particularly groups of color, religious minorities, and others who were suppressed.

KEY POINTS

- The debate about whether inequality is just and necessary has been ongoing since the establishment of the earliest civilizations.
- The *conservative thesis* represents the dominant thinking that social inequality reflects basic differences among people in creation, ability, or worth and is necessary to the orderly functioning of society.
- The *conservative thesis* represents the dominant thinking that social inequality reflects basic differences among people in creation, ability, or worth and is necessary to the orderly functioning of society.
- Challengers to unequal systems have offered the radical antithesis, the argument

that great social inequality is fundamentally unjust and ultimately destructive to societies.

- The philosophical debate concerning inequality was taken up by social scientists in the 1800s. Karl Marx developed an approach to understanding history that is based on conflict between social classes. Capitalism takes this conflict to new intensity in the struggle between owners and workers. Marx contended that workers could fully secure their rights only through collective control of the means of production.
- Max Weber continued Marx's emphasis on social conflict but asserted that the struggles are rooted in three different dimensions of unequal social power: social class or economic power, status honor or social prestige, and "party" or political and legal power.
- Émile Durkheim emphasized the importance of a complex division of labor for modern societies, arguing that social stability depends on a society's filling a multitude of interdependent positions. Functionalist sociologists built on Durkheim's ideas to contend that social inequality serves an important function for society by helping place people in this division of labor and motivating them to work hard.
- Conflict theorists drew on the work of Marx and Weber to point out how large social inequalities can function to create social unrest, overlook abilities, and discourage workers while promoting social misery.
- Gerhard Lenski tried to synthesize conflict and functionalist ideas in looking at how privilege, power, and prestige emerge from different types of societies. The debate on what constitutes a just social order and how such an order can best be achieved continues.

FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

1. What arguments have been offered in support of the social benefits of inequality? What counterarguments have been offered to challenge these supposed benefits? How have these arguments formed the basis of conflict and functionalist views of social inequality?
2. In what ways are Marx and Weber in agreement on the causes and nature of social inequality? In what ways do their views of stratification and class formation differ?
3. Is social inequality desirable for society? Defend your view with arguments from historical and sociological viewpoints discussed in this chapter.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

In the Media

The conservative position on social inequality has gained new momentum in recent decades through many social and political groups. The radical antithesis also continues in the arguments of many progressive (many prefer this term to the extremist-sounding *radical* or the

often ambiguous *liberal*) groups. To get a sense of how the debates discussed in this chapter continue into the present, try one of the following:

- Look at the coverage of issues related to inequality in economy and society in a publication associated with conservative

political opinion, such as the *National Review* (<https://www.nationalreview.com/>). Compare the ideas presented there with those in a publication associated with progressive political opinion, such as the *New Republic* (<https://newrepublic.com/>). These magazines are targeted toward educated readers and are not particularly extremist, but they do have their own definite points of view.

- Compare the newspaper columns of a respected columnist associated with conservative opinions, such as *National Review* editor and *LA Times* columnist Jonah Goldberg, with those of a respected columnist associated with progressive opinions, such as the *New York Times* columnist Gail Collins. You might include someone with generally more centrist opinions such as David Brooks or Thomas Friedman, both who write for the *New York Times*. Collins and Brooks have also

done a blog of dialog on current issues. Each of these writers is well informed and thoughtful, sometimes with wit but not the vitriol of more extremist outlets, yet their opinions vary. How do their perspectives on issues reflect different economic theories and approaches?

- Compare the perspectives on social and economic issues, as well as the use of religious tradition, in publications of groups on the religious right, such as the Faith and Freedom Coalition (<https://www.ffcoalition.com/about/>), with those in publications of “radical discipleship” groups that generally take progressive stands on economic issues, such as Sojourners (<https://sojo.net/>). What positions on social justice, taxes, and immigration do these groups have in common? How do their positions differ? How does each side use religious traditions to support and defend its positions?