# Karl Marx & Conflict Theory: Crash Course Sociology #6

Crash Course: Sociology
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You've probably heard of Karl Marx.

He's remembered as the father of divisive political movements, and his name is sometimes still thrown around in American politics as a kind of slur. But I don't want to talk about that.

I want to talk about Marx the philosopher. Marx the scholar. In the 19th century, a time defined by radical inequality and rapid technological and political change in Europe, Marx was concerned with one question: What does it mean to be free?

Starting from this question, Marx developed an entire theory of history. And in doing so, he laid the foundation for the paradigm of conflict theory in sociology, ultimately pushing the discipline to look at questions of power, inequality, and how these things can drive societal change.

[Theme Music]

If Durkheim was concerned with social solidarity, with how society hangs together, Marx was concerned with freedom. The question that Marx asked was "how can people be free?" Because humans aren't just naturally free.

When you think about it, we're actually incredibly constrained. Our physical bodies have all kinds of needs we have to meet in order to survive, and they're needs that we're not really adapted to meet. Like, if you take a hummingbird and put it in the middle of a forest somewhere, it'll just go on about its day, collecting nectar and living its life.

But if you drop a person in the middle of the woods, they'll probably starve. Compared to other animals, Marx thought, we're incredibly poorly adapted to the natural world. In fact, the only way for us to survive in nature is to change it, working together to remake it to fit our needs.

This is labor, he said, and we must labor cooperatively in order to survive. As we labor, we change the world around us, and gradually free ourselves from our natural constraints. But what Marx saw was that just as we freed ourselves from these natural constraints, we entangled ourselves in new social constraints.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble to explore this some more. Think about it like this. Ten thousand years ago, basically everybody spent all day trying to get food.

In this "primitive communism," as Marx called it, people were strongly bound by natural constraints, but socially very equal. Now compare that to the Middle Ages when, under feudalism, you have an entire class of people, the nobility, who never spent any time worrying about where their next meal would come from. But you also have the peasantry, who still worked constantly, making food.

In fact, they spent a lot of their time making food for the nobility. People were producing more than they needed to survive, but instead of that surplus being equally distributed, society was set up so that some people simply didn't need to labor at all, while others had to work harder. That's not a natural constraint anymore, that's a social one.

Working together allowed us to transcend our natural constraints, Marx argued, but the way labor is organized leads to massive inequalities. Thanks Thought Bubble. So, central to the question of freedom for Marx is the question of labor, how it's organized and who it benefits, and how this organization changes over time.

This focus on labor gave rise to the perspective created by Marx and his longtime collaborator Friedrich Engels – a perspective known as historical materialism. Historical materialism is historical because it looks at change over time, and it's materialism because it is concerned with these questions of material reality – that is, how production is organized, and who has things like food, or money, and who doesn't. Now, it's not that Marx didn't care about other things, like politics or religion.

But he felt that they were secondary to the production and control of resources. And I don't mean secondary as in less important; I mean secondary because he thought that if you wanted to understand those things, you had to understand the material reality they were based on first. In this view, the economy – that is, the organization of labor and resources in a society 3:16– was the foundation, and everything else – politics, culture, religion, even families 3:21– was what Marx called the superstructure, which was built on top of material reality.

So when Marx studied history, he didn't focus on wars and power struggles between states. Instead, he saw historical development in terms of modes of production and economic classes. Now, "modes of production" might sound like they're about how stuff is made, but Marx understood them as stages of history.

Primitive communism, feudalism, and capitalism are all modes of production. And modes of production are all defined by a combination of forces of production and relations of production. Forces of production are basically the technical, scientific, and material parts of the economy 3:53– tools, buildings, material resources, technology, and the human labor that makes them go.

In modern capitalism, the forces of production include things like factories, oil, and the internal combustion engine. But they also include cultural or social technologies, like the idea of the assembly line and mass production. The relations of production, meanwhile, define how people organize themselves around labor.

Do people work for wages, or does everyone produce and sell their own goods? How does ownership or property work? Is trade a central part of the economy?

These are all questions about the relations of production. And these questions are important because, if you think in terms of social constraints and surplus, the relations of production specify how the surplus is taken from the people who produce it, and who gets to decide how the surplus is used. And, in capitalism, these relations aren't all that clear-cut.

For one thing, we don't have legally defined classes. In feudalism, being a lord or a peasant was a legal matter. If a peasant didn't work, their lord could legally punish them.

But under capitalism there aren't any legal rules about who labors and who doesn't. If you skip work you don't get tossed in jail, you just get fired. But Marx was a historical materialist, so in his view, even in feudalism, classes weren't really defined by laws, they were actually defined by their place in the relations of production.

And when Marx looked at industrial capitalism taking shape around him, he saw two main classes: the working class (or proletariat) and the capitalists (or the bourgeoisie). The proletariat are defined by the fact that they don't own or control the means of production 5:15– that is, the materials you need to use in order to labor and produce goods. One way of thinking about the means of production is as the inanimate part – the actual, physical stuff – that makes up the forces of production.

So this includes everything from the land to stand on while you work, to the raw materials you need, like trees, and coal, and iron ore, to the tools and machines you use. To simplify things

dramatically, the proletariat are defined by the fact that, while they work in the factories and use resources to make things, they don't own the factories or the things they make. The bourgeoisie are defined by the fact that they do own the factories and the things that are made in them.

They control the means of production and the products that come from them. It's this difference in who controls the means of production, Marx said, that leads to exploitation in capitalism, in the form of wage labor. If the proletariat lack access to the means of production, he argued, then they only have one thing they can sell: their labor.

And they must sell their labor. If they don't, they starve. Now you might argue that, hey, they're being paid, right?

Well, Marx would counter that they're only being paid enough to live on, if barely. However, Marx would also argue that they're being paid less than the worth of what they produce. And it is that difference – between the value of the wage and the value of what's produced – which is the source of surplus in capitalism.

You know this surplus as profit. And the bourgeoisie get to decide what to do with the profits. Because of this, Marx believed that the bourgeoisie will always be looking to make profits as large as possible, both by driving down wages and by driving up productivity.

And this leads to one of the big problems with capitalism: crises. Specifically, crises of overproduction. Other modes of production had crises, too, but they were caused by not having enough.

In capitalism, for the first time in history, there were crises of having too much. We reached a point where the forces of production were so developed that we could produce far more than we needed. But the vast majority of people couldn't afford to buy any of it.

And so we had crises where the economy collapsed, despite the fact that there was more than enough to go around. Crises of overproduction are an example of what Marx saw in every mode of production: the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production. Marx understood history as a series of advances in the forces of production – like, greater coordination among capitalists, more technological complexity, and more organizational innovation.

But eventually, he said, those advances always stall, as the forces of production run up against the limits created by the relations of production. For example, in the early days of capitalism, the relations of production included things like private ownership of property, competition among capitalists, and wage labor. And these things allowed for explosive economic growth.

But eventually, these very same things became limitations on the forces of production – stuff like factories, technology, and human labor. That's because capitalists drove wages down in pursuit of profit, and they competed with each other, leading to a lack of coordination in the economy. So you wound up with a population that couldn't afford to buy anything, while at the same time being offered way more goods than it would ever need.

And, with the economy in shambles, there's no way for the forces to keep developing – there's no money to invest in new factories or new technologies. So the relations of production that created economic growth became precisely the things that caused crises. Marx saw this as an impasse that all modes of production eventually meet.

So how do you get a society to move past it? Marx said, the way forward was class conflict. History is a matter of struggling classes, he said, each aligned with either the forces or relations of production.

The bourgeoisie are aligned with the relations of production, he said, because these relations are what allow them to extract surplus from the workers. So they're quite happy with the situation as it stands. But the proletariat want change.

They want the further development of the forces of production – of which their labor makes up a large part – and they want a complete change in the relations of production. They want an end to exploitation and they want the surplus to benefit them. After all, it was their labor that created the surplus.

In short, they want revolution. And so this is Marx's model of history: a series of modes of production, composed of forces and relations of production. These forces and relations develop together until they eventually come into conflict, leading to a revolution by the oppressed class and the institution of a totally new set of relations, where the workers benefit from the efforts of their labor.

Plenty of theorists followed in Marx's wake, taking his idea of historical materialism and expanding it to better deal with some of the areas that Marx had left out. Particularly interesting here is the work of the Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, who wrote in the years preceding World War II. One of the big questions implicit in Marx's theory is just how the bourgeoisie manages to stay in power so effectively.

And Gramsci answered this with the theory of hegemony. He argued that the ruling class stays in power, in part, through hegemonic culture, a dominant set of ideas that are all-pervasive and taken for granted in a society. While they're not necessarily right or wrong, these ideas shape everyone's understanding of the social world, blinding us to the realities of things like economic exploitation.

But hegemonic ideas don't need to be economic ones. They could just as easily be beliefs about gender, or race. And this points to possibly Marx's biggest impact.

While Marx's model of history is specific to economic conflict, we can see in it the essence of the broader sociological paradigm of conflict theory. Conflict theory is the basic idea of looking at power dynamics and analyzing the ways in which struggles over power drive societal change, as all kinds of groups, not just workers and owners, fight for control over resources. Marx's ideas gave rise to a host of conflict theories in sociology, including Race-Conflict Theory, Gender-Conflict Theory, and Intersectional Theory.

These theories give us ways to understand power, control, and freedom in modern society, and we're going to be looking at them over the next couple of weeks. But for today, you learned about Karl Marx, historical materialism and Marx's basic perspective on history. You also learned about modes of production, their development, and how they fit into Marx's overall theory of historical development, along with class struggle and revolution.

And finally, we saw how Marx's ideas gave rise to Gramsci's idea of hegemony, and to conflict theories more generally. Crash Course Sociology is filmed in the Dr. Cheryl C. Kinney Studio in Missoula, MT, and it's made with the help of all these nice people. Our animation team is Thought Cafe, and Crash Course is made with Adobe Creative Cloud. If you'd like to keep Crash Course free for everyone, forever, you can support the series at Patreon, a crowdfunding platform that allows you to support the content you love.

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