

An “exploitative” theory of inequality: Marxian theory

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- Example of an exploitative theory of inequality: Marxian theory
 - the Marxian model was not intended to be anthropological
 - Marx was not an anthropologist (or he was a very poor anthropologist!)
 - He was what was then called a “political economist”
 - A very broad concept that covered much of what are now social sciences: economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, history
 - but he used some anthropological ideas
 - Like an anthropologist, Marx saw society as integrated, as a system of interrelated parts that all fit together into a coherent whole
 - Economics, politics, social organization, ideology, even emotional well-being
 - all fit together as a single coherent, understandable system
 - to understand any one aspect, you must understand how it fits into the rest
 - Many of Marx’s core ideas still inform a lot of social science
 - often without being even credited to him, because these concepts have become so widespread
 - some prefer the term “Marxian” theory, to distinguish it from the Marxist political project
 - there is much, much more to Marxian thinking than we will cover here
 - **means of production** (of food, goods, etc.)
 - the land, tools, raw materials, infrastructure such as workplaces, technical knowledge, labor, and so on needed for production
 - **social relations of production**
 - the way people relate to each other in the context of production
 - power, control, cooperation, class relations, etc.
 - these social relations could involve
 - self-sufficient family farms
 - independent small producers who make goods for exchange
 - hierarchically organized factories with workers, managers, and owners
 - guilds with systems of master craftsmen and apprentices, etc.
 - **mode of production**
 - a specific combination of certain means of production and certain social relations of production
 - the idea is that only certain combinations of certain means and social relations work together and actually occur
 - Marx identified numerous modes of production
 - we won’t pursue them all here...
 - anthropologists do not accept that all of them really existed
 - anthropology and ethnography did not really exist in Marx’s time
 - so Marx based his ideas on travelers’ stories and histories, which were often naïve and inaccurate

- and his own ideas of what would make sense, rather than things that were actually observed
- example: **kin-based mode of production**
 - kin groups own (or control) the means of production
 - labor is provided as a social obligation
 - payment is not only unnecessary, but would be inappropriate or even insulting
 - as in an extended family group
 - or a Ju/'hoansi camp, in which everyone is seen as kin
 - exchange of labor and products is just one of many aspects of the web of social relations between kin
- example: **capitalist mode of production**
 - capitalists own (or control) the means of production (more on this below)
 - labor is paid for with money (or the equivalent)
 - the relationship between those who do the work and those who direct them is impersonal (“businesslike”)
 - owners and laborers become socially separated
- Marx’s model of economics (more or less)
 - The **labor theory of value**
 - all value can be expressed in terms of labor
 - the value of an ounce of gold is the total of the labor that went into finding the ore deposit, mining it, refining it, transporting it, etc.
 - assuming average amounts of work by workers of average efficiency
 - so the value of a product that comes out of a workshop equals
 - the value of the materials that went in
 - plus the value of the labor applied to the materials in the process
 - (a complete calculation would also include the value of the means of production: tools, the shop building, etc.)
 - There are serious problems with this theory of value
 - Things like land have exchange value, but do not represent any labor at all
 - Exchange value also clearly depends on how much people want the good:
 - an iPhone might take the same amount of labor to make as a generic Verizon phone, yet people will exchange much more for it
 - Many economists will say flatly that the labor theory of value has been rejected
 - But even so, there is evidently some aspect of truth to this theory, too
 - If one group controls the means of production, they can take advantage of the others (exploit them)
 - **capital** is wealth that is used to produce more wealth
 - most easily envisioned as the means of production
 - factories, tools, stockpiles of materials, etc. are capital
 - money that is used to buy (invest in) the means of production is also capital
 - **capitalist**: one who owns means of production
 - capitalists cause the means of production to produce by paying laborers to operate them
 - this labor adds value to the product

- the capitalist sells the product for its total value
- but he pays the workers less than the value that their labor added to the product
- he keeps the difference as his profit
- this difference is the “**surplus value of labor**”
- the owner is said to “**expropriate** the surplus value of labor” from the workers
 - Marx saw expropriation as unfairly taking what rightfully belonged to the workers
- Why can capitalists get away with paying workers less than the value they add to the product?
 - because they control the means of production
 - laborers can’t work without it
 - so they have to accept lower pay than if they owned the means of production themselves
- Why can capitalists stay the only ones who own the means of production?
 - because they control or influence the state
 - they cause the state to set up rules that support the capitalist’s exploitation by...
 - requiring payment of debts,
 - limiting escape through bankruptcy
 - limiting or banning strikes or other labor organization
 - prohibiting vandalism, theft, etc.
 - these rules are enforced by the state’s police, courts, etc.
 - using the state’s **monopoly on the legitimate use of force**
 - a defining feature of states, not just a Marxian idea
 - the idea that the state is legitimately entitled to use force (police, military) for the general good
 - but individuals are not (it is not OK to “take the law into your own hands”)
 - the capitalists could not do this themselves
 - although they have tried, with private police forces, strikebreaking thugs, etc.
 - this enforcement by the state of a system that favors the capitalists at the expense of the majority is called **political repression**
- in order to keep laborers from trying to change this situation, capitalists try to control the ideology of the society
 - capitalists try to create an **ideology of class**
 - the idea that classes (i.e. laborers and capitalists) are natural, right, normal, and a necessary aspect of reality
 - that lower classes are lower for good reasons
 - that upper classes deserve their status
 - so that workers will go along with being exploited and won’t resist, refuse, sabotage, revolt, etc.
- So, we asked how class inequality and hierarchy are constructed and naturalized
 - Marx answered that the capitalist class intentionally constructs and naturalizes the hierarchy in people’s minds
 - By promoting class ideology through control of
 - private media channels like newspapers, TV, radio

- which present events in a light that supports the ideology
 - Fox News is an extreme example
- which are obliged to disseminate leaders’ speeches, etc. that emphasize that
 - there is equality of opportunity
 - authorities are always striving to ensure a “level playing field”
 - and that anyone can get rich
 - the system is good - it gives you hope
- Think of Herman Cain, Republican candidate for president, who recently said “If you aren’t rich, blame yourself!”
- think of Rupert Murdoch, Fox news, the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, etc.
 - only the most extreme on the left question the appropriateness of our class system
- public channels like public schools
 - that teach classical free-market (“Smithian”) economics, which claims that
 - maximizing material profit is the only rational behavior
 - not even considering other possible goals, like
 - maximizing employment
 - minimizing ills such as hunger or disease
 - maximizing economic equality
 - maximizing economic status of the poorest person, or the median person
 - maximizing lifespan
 - maximizing happiness
 - that is, the main goal itself is an arbitrary social construct
 - competition, supply and demand, the “invisible hand of the marketplace” always lead to the optimal allocation of resources
 - that demonstrate that education is necessary to join the upper class, but do not make it available to laborers
 - that children are naturally separated into groups at school that reflect the class of their parents
 - that teach people that the system is good and inevitable
 - that just happens to benefit the capitalist class
- and through control of the church, that promotes ideas like
 - a hierarchy of gods, saints, etc.
 - which makes the hierarchy of workers, managers, and owners in this life seem normal and appropriate
 - low status in this life is rewarded in the next life
 - poverty is a virtue, the rich won’t go to heaven, etc.
 - economic standing in this life does not really matter; spiritual things are what count
 - God works in mysterious ways, so a worker’s status in life is God’s will
 - even that God rewards the virtuous with wealth, so they deserve it, and the poor obviously don’t

- this is what Marx meant by “Religion is the opiate of the masses”
- The social effects of capitalism:
 - all these aspects of capitalism result in **alienation**
 - the **alienation of labor**: separation of labor from social relationships
 - work is no longer organically embedded in a web of social relations that exist for other reasons
 - it is simply paid for by an employer, and is performed apart from any social relations the worker has
 - alienation of labor robs labor of its social meaning
 - making labor a meaningless, unfulfilling grind
 - **alienation of production** (here, production means the goods that are produced): separation of labor from its production (the goods it produces)
 - workers are no longer connected to their product
 - they feel little pride in it, responsibility for it, etc.
 - products are not connected to individuals
 - the cease to be possessions, linked to their makers
 - they become merely commodities
 - alienation of production robs material things of their social meaning
 - filling the world with meaningless goods
 - alienation also makes it easier to abuse laborers
 - because workers and managers have little or no social relationship
 - no obligations, responsibility, personal connections
 - abuse of labor (low pay, excessive work, bad conditions, little time off, etc.) is the inevitable result of capitalism
 - so alienation itself, and the abuse that it fosters, makes workers’ lives meaningless, unsatisfying, and miserable
- Marx felt that expropriation of the surplus value of labor by capitalists was unfair
 - the workers will eventually develop **class consciousness**
 - workers become conscious of the fact that they they *are* a class, all together in the same boat
 - and that their class interests conflict with those of the capitalist class
 - Note: very different from class ideology!
 - class ideology justifies class hierarchy
 - class consciousness is the awareness of membership in a class, and awareness of the interests of that class
 - capitalists *promote* class ideology
 - but capitalists hope to *prevent* the development of class consciousness
 - as the workers try to better their situation and the capitalists resist, conflict will arise
 - the capitalists control the state and means of state repression
 - so the only solution, eventually, is to overthrow the state
 - which can only be done violently, because the state and the capitalists behind it won’t give up their status willingly
 - that is, the result is **violent revolution**

- Evaluating Marx
 - He got some things wrong
 - his labor theory of value is incomplete at best
 - value clearly involves how much people want something, separately from how much labor it requires to make it
 - this is handled better by classical market economics (“Smithian” supply and demand)
 - workers were able to resist and change capitalism’s worst abuses without revolution
 - by influencing the state through voting to pass laws and regulations
 - by forming unions to negotiate contracts with capitalists
 - there has not actually been much violent revolution by the working class...
 - the few “Marxist” revolutions, like Russia’s, were really organized by elites, and were not in response to the capitalist abuses that Marx said they would be
 - maybe the current turmoil in the Middle East is what Marx predicted?
 - his communist alternative to capitalism has never been made to work
 - some say that it has never really been implemented
 - many argue that it is fundamentally flawed, and could never work
 - but he definitely got some things right
 - the capitalist class clearly *does* try, and often succeeds, to use the state, schools, church, etc. to promote its interests
 - there clearly *is* an ideology of class
 - many of his concepts are very useful for understanding the world
 - labor and capital
 - means of production, and relations of production
 - ideology of class that naturalizes class hierarchy
 - and how and why it might be created and maintained
 - these are widely used anthropological ideas: ideology, construction of ideas, naturalization...
 - class consciousness
 - something that seems lacking in the US right now...
 - another anthropological way of thinking...
 - that labor and economic exchange are embedded in social relations
 - still more anthropological thinking
 - alienation of labor, and alienation of production
 - alienation is yet another anthropological concept...
 - and others...
- So back to hierarchy in general:
 - Both integrative and exploitative views of hierarchy seem true at the same time
 - Integrative: integrative functions really are provided by hierarchy
 - Exploitative: people at the top really are striving to maintain and extend the hierarchy and their positions in it, for their own benefit
 - people near the top need not be greedy or cynical to do this
 - they just need to believe the ideology that legitimizes the hierarchy

- which happens to be to their benefit
 - so it is easy to believe, and keep believing...
- Since hierarchy both provides integrative benefits and involves exploitative abuse...
- the questions are not “is hierarchy present?” or “is hierarchy good?”
 - but rather “how much, and what kind of, hierarchy is present?”
 - and “how much, and what kind, of hierarchy is desirable?”
 - how much wealth and power inequality do we want in our society?
 - by what criteria should it be distributed?
- but as we saw earlier, there are many other bases for inequality and hierarchy aside from just socioeconomic class
 - We will look at some other forms of inequality, and how they are naturalized, next time