

Marx and the concept of social inequality.

The theory of class is at the center of Marx's social theory, for it is the social classes formed within a particular mode of production that tend to establish a particular form of state, animate political conflicts, and bring about major changes in the structure of society.

In Marx's view, social stratification is created by people's differing relationship to the means of production: either they own productive property or they labor for others.

In Marxist theory, the capitalist mode of production consists of two main economic parts: the substructure and the Superstructure. In a capitalist society, the ruling class, or the bourgeoisie, owns the means of production, such as machines or tools that can be used to produce valuable objects. The working class, or the proletariat, only possess their own labor power, which they sell to the ruling class in the form of wage labor to survive.

These relations of production—employer-employee relations, the technical division of labor, and property relations—form the base of society or, in Marxist terms, the substructure. From this material substructure, the superstructure emerges. The superstructure includes the ideas, philosophies and culture of a society. In a capitalist society, the ruling class promotes its own ideologies and values as the norm for the entire society, and these ideas and values are accepted by the working class.

A temporary status quo could be achieved by employing various methods of social control—consciously or unconsciously—by the bourgeoisie in various aspects of social life. Eventually, however, Marx believed the capitalist economic order would erode, through its own internal conflict; this would lead to revolutionary consciousness and the development of egalitarian communist society. In this communist society, the state would own the means of production, and it would equally distribute resources to all citizens. The means of production would be shared by all members of society, and social stratification would be abolished.

For Marx, what distinguishes one society from another is its mode of production (i.e., the nature of its technology and division of labour), and each mode of production engenders a distinctive class system in which one class controls and directs the process of production while another class is, or other classes are, the direct producers and providers of services to the dominant class. The relations between the classes are antagonistic because they are in conflict over the appropriation of what is produced, and in certain periods, when the mode of production itself is changing as a result of developments in technology and in the utilization of labour, such conflicts become extreme and a new class challenges the dominance of the existing rulers of society. The dominant class, according to Marx, controls not only material production but also the production of ideas; it thus establishes a particular cultural style and a dominant political doctrine, and its control over society is consolidated in a particular type of political system. Rising classes that gain strength and influence as a result of changes in the mode of production generate political doctrines and movements in opposition to the ruling class.