

## CLASSICAL THEORIES I

Émile Durkheim: From Mechanical to Organic Solidarity

Karl Marx: From Capitalism to Communism

Max Weber: The Rationalization of Society

Summary

Suggested Readings

The early giants of social theory are noted for their creation of grand theories, theories that as defined in Chapter 1, are vast, highly ambitious efforts to tell the story of great stretches of social history and/or large expanses of the social world. These theories of history generally culminate, in their authors' times, with descriptions of a society that although it has made progress, is beset with problems. The creators of such theories usually offer ideas about how to solve those problems and thereby create a better society.

## ÉMILE DURKHEIM: FROM MECHANICAL TO ORGANIC SOLIDARITY

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Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) built on the work of the French social theorist Auguste Comte, but he became a far more important figure than Comte in the history of theory. In fact, at least some observers consider Durkheim *the* most important theorist in the history of sociology. To this day, many forms of sociological theorizing bear the stamp of his thinking.

### Two Types of Solidarity

Durkheim's grand theory involves a concern for the historical transformation of societies from more primitive mechanical forms to more modern organic ones. What differentiates these two types of societies is the source of their solidarity, or what holds them together. The key here is the division of labor.

In **mechanical solidarity**, society is held together by the fact that virtually everyone does essentially the same things (gathering fruits and vegetables, hunting animals). In other words, there is little division of labor in primitive society, and this fact holds society together. In contrast, in more modern **organic solidarity** a substantial division of labor has occurred, and people perform increasingly specialized tasks. Thus, some may make shoes, others may bake bread, and still others may raise children. Solidarity here comes from differences; that is, individuals need the contributions of an increasing number of people to function and even to survive.

Durkheim envisioned a historical transformation from mechanical to organic solidarity. This idea is clearly different from Comte's model of social change. Comte thought in terms of changes in ideas, in the way people seek to explain what transpires in the world; Durkheim dealt with changes in the material world, specifically in the ways in which we divide and do our work.

### Changes in Dynamic Density

What causes the change from mechanical to organic solidarity? Durkheim's answer is that the transformation results from an increase in the **dynamic density** of society. Dynamic density has two components. The first is simply the sheer number of people in society. However, an increase in the number of people is not enough on its own to induce a change in the division of labor because individuals and small groups of people can live in relative isolation from one another and continue to be jacks-of-all-trades. That is, even in societies with large populations, each individual can continue to do most of the required tasks. Thus, a second factor is necessary for dynamic density to increase and lead to changes in the division of labor: there must be an increase in the amount of interaction that takes place among the people in society. When increasingly large numbers of people interact with greater frequency, dynamic density is likely to increase to the point that a transformation from mechanical to organic solidarity occurs.

What is it about an increase in dynamic density that leads to the need for a different division of labor? With more people, there is greater competition for scarce resources, such as land, game, and fruits and vegetables. If everyone competes for everything, there is great disorder and conflict. With an increased division of labor in which some people are responsible for one of these things and other people are responsible for other things, there is likely to be less conflict and more harmony. Perhaps more important is the fact that greater specialization

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**mechanical solidarity**—In Durkheimian theory, the idea that primitive society is held together by the fact that there is little division of labor, and as a result, virtually everyone does essentially the same things.

**organic solidarity**—To Durkheim, the idea that because of the substantial division of labor in modern society, solidarity comes from differences; that is, individuals need the contributions of an increasing number of people to function and even to survive.

**dynamic density**—The number of people in a society and their frequency of interaction. An increase in dynamic density leads to the transformation from mechanical to organic solidarity (Durkheim).

in performing specific tasks makes for greater efficiency and ultimately greater productivity. Thus, with an increased division of labor, more of everything can be produced for an expanding population. Greater peace and prosperity are the results, or at least that is what Durkheim contends.

## ÉMILE DURKHEIM (1858–1917)

### A Biographical Vignette

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Durkheim is most often thought of today as a political conservative, and his influence within sociology certainly has been a conservative one. But in his time, he was considered a liberal. This was exemplified by the active public role he played in the defense of French army captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish man whose court-martial for treason in the late 19th century was felt by many to be based on anti-Semitic sentiments in some sectors of French society.

Durkheim was deeply offended by the Dreyfus affair, particularly its anti-Semitism. But he did not attribute this anti-Semitism to racism among the French people. Characteristically, he saw it as a symptom of the moral sickness confronting French society as a whole. He said,

When society undergoes suffering, it feels the need to find someone whom it can hold responsible for its sickness, on whom it can avenge its misfortunes; and those against whom public opinion already discriminates are naturally designated for this role. These are the pariahs who serve as expiatory victims. What confirms me in this interpretation is the way in which the result of Dreyfus's trial was greeted in 1894. There was a surge of joy in the boulevards. People celebrated as a triumph what should have been a cause for public mourning. At least they knew whom to blame for the economic troubles and moral distress in which they lived. The trouble came from the Jews. The charge had been officially proved. By this very fact alone, things already seemed to be getting better and people felt consoled.

Thus, Durkheim's interest in the Dreyfus affair stemmed from his deep and lifelong interest in morality and the moral crisis confronting modern society.

To Durkheim, the answer to the Dreyfus affair and crises like it lay in ending the moral disorder in society. Because that could not be done quickly or easily, Durkheim suggested more specific actions, such as severe repression of those who incite hatred of others and government efforts to show the public how it is being misled. He urged people to "have the courage to proclaim aloud what they think, and to unite together in order to achieve victory in the struggle against public madness."

*Source:* Steve Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) pp. 345, 347.

## Collective Conscience

Another important aspect of Durkheim's argument about the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity is that it is accompanied by a dramatic change in what he called the **collective conscience**, the ideas shared by the members of a group, tribe, or society. These ideas are collective in the sense that no one individual knows or possesses all of them; only the entire collection of individuals has full knowledge and possession of them.

The collective conscience in mechanical solidarity is different from that in organic solidarity. In mechanical solidarity and the small, undifferentiated societies associated with it, the collective conscience affects everyone and is of great significance to them. People care deeply about collective ideas. Furthermore, the ideas are powerful, and people are likely to act in accord with them. The ideas are also rigid, and they tend to be associated with religion.

In contrast, in organic solidarity and the large, differentiated societies linked with it, fewer people are affected by the collective conscience. In other words, more people are able to evade the ideas partially or completely. The collective conscience is not as important, and most people do not seem to care about it deeply. It is far weaker and does not exercise nearly as much control over people. The collective conscience is far more flexible and adaptable and less associated with anything we think of as religion.

For example, in a primitive society with mechanical solidarity, people might feel deeply about being involved in group activities, including the selection of a new leader. If one member does not participate, everyone will know, and difficulties will arise for that person in the group. However, in a modern society characterized by organic solidarity, the feeling about such political participation (e.g., voting) is not nearly as strong. People are urged to vote, but there is not much strength of conviction involved, and in any case the fact that some do not vote is likely to escape the view of their neighbors.

### Law: Repressive and Restitutive

How do we know whether there has been a transition from mechanical to organic solidarity? From a strong to a weak collective conscience? Durkheim argued that we can observe these changes in a transformation in the law. Mechanical solidarity tends to be characterized by **repressive law**. This is a form of law in which offenders are likely to be severely punished for any action that is seen by the tightly integrated community as an offense against the powerful collective conscience. The theft of a

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**collective conscience**—The ideas shared by the members of a collectivity such as a group, a tribe, or a society (Durkheim).

**repressive law**—Characteristic of mechanical solidarity, a form of law in which offenders are likely to be severely punished for any action that is seen by the tightly integrated community as an offense against the powerful collective conscience (Durkheim).

pig might lead to the thief's hands being cut off. Blaspheming against the community's God or gods might result in the removal of the blasphemer's tongue. Because people are so involved in the moral system, offenses against it are likely to be met with swift, severe punishments. These reactions are evidence that repressive law is in place, and such law is, in turn, a material reflection of the existence of a strong collective conscience and a society held together by mechanical solidarity.

As we have seen, over time mechanical solidarity gives way to organic solidarity and a progressive weakening of the collective conscience. The indicator of a weak collective conscience, of the existence of organic solidarity, is **restitutive law**. Instead of being severely punished for even seemingly minor offenses against the collective morality, individuals in this more modern type of society are likely simply to be asked to comply with the law or to repay (make restitution to) those who have been harmed by their actions. Thus, one who steals a pig might be required to work for a certain number of hours on the farm from which the pig was stolen, pay a fine, or repay society by spending a brief period in jail. This is obviously a far milder reaction than having one's hands cut off for such an offense. The reason is that the collectivity is not deeply and emotionally invested in the common morality ("Thou shalt not steal") that stands behind such a law. Rather, officials (the police, court officers) are delegated the legal responsibility to be sure the law and, ultimately, the morality are enforced. The collectivity can distance itself from the whole thing with the knowledge that it is being handled by paid and/or elected officials.

More extremely, something like blaspheming against God is likely to go unnoticed and unpunished in modern societies. Having a far weaker collective conscience, believing little in religion, people in general are likely to react weakly or not at all to a blasphemer. And officials, busy with far greater problems, such as drug abuse, rape, and murder, are unlikely to pay any attention at all to blasphemy, even if there are laws against it.

## Anomie

At one level Durkheim seems to be describing and explaining a historical change from one type of solidarity to another. The two types of solidarity merely seem to be different, and one does not seem to be any better or worse than the other. Although mechanical solidarity is not problem free, the problems associated with organic solidarity and how they might be solved concerned Durkheim. Several problems come into existence with organic solidarity, but the one that worried Durkheim most is what he termed *anomie*. Durkheim viewed anomie (and other problems) as a pathology, which implies that it can be cured. In other words, a social theorist like Durkheim was akin to a medical doctor, diagnosing social pathologies and dispensing cures.

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**restitutive law**—Characteristic of organic solidarity and its weakened collective conscience, a form of law in which offenders are likely simply to be asked to comply with the law or to repay (make restitution to) those who have been harmed by their actions (Durkheim).

# KEY CONCEPT

## Social Facts

Crucial to understanding Durkheim's thinking and the development of modern sociology is his concept of **social facts**. Durkheim developed this idea because he was struggling to separate the then-new discipline of sociology from the existing fields of psychology and philosophy. Whereas philosophers think about abstractions, Durkheim argued, sociologists should treat social facts as things. As such, social facts are to be studied empirically; this practice distinguishes sociologists from philosophers, who merely speculate about abstract issues without venturing into the real world and collecting data on concrete social phenomena. For example, in his book *Suicide*, Durkheim said that the “social suicide rate”—the relative number of people who commit suicide in a given region or occupation—is a social fact. It describes a measurable, overarching pattern in a society.

Durkheim also argued that social facts are external to, and coercive over, individuals. This distinguishes them from the things that psychologists study. Psychologists are concerned with psychological facts that are internal (not external) to individuals and are not necessarily coercive over them.

Durkheim distinguished between two types of social facts: material and nonmaterial. **Material social facts** are social facts that are materialized in the external social world. An example is the structure of the classroom in which you are taking the course for which you are reading this book. It is a material reality (you can touch and feel the walls, desks, blackboard), and it is external to you and coercive over you. In terms of the latter, the structure of the room may encourage listening to, and taking notes on, lectures. It also serves to prevent you from, say, playing baseball in the room while a lecture is in process.

**Nonmaterial social facts** are social facts that are also external and coercive but that do not take a material form. The major examples of nonmaterial social facts in sociology are norms and values. Thus, we are also prevented from playing baseball while a lecture is in progress because of unwritten and widely shared rules about how one is supposed to behave in class. Furthermore, we have learned to put a high value on education with the result that we are reluctant to do anything that would adversely affect it.

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**social facts**—To Durkheim, the subject matter of sociology. Social facts are to be treated as things that are external to, and coercive over, individuals, and they are to be studied empirically.

**material social facts**—Social facts that take a material form in the external social world (e.g., architecture) (Durkheim).

**nonmaterial social facts**—Social facts that are external and coercive but that do not take a material form (e.g., norms and values) (Durkheim).

We can see how a nonmaterial social fact is coercive over us, but in what sense is it also external to us? The answer is that things like the norms and values of society are the shared possessions of the collectivity. Some, perhaps most, of them are internalized in the individual during the socialization process, but no single individual possesses anything approaching all of them. The entire set of norms and values is in the sole possession of the collectivity. In this sense we can say that these nonmaterial social facts are external to us.

To this day, many sociologists concentrate their attention on social facts. However, they rarely use this now-antiquated term. Rather, sociologists focus on social structures and social institutions. However, it has become clear that in his effort to distinguish sociology from psychology and philosophy, Durkheim came up with a much too limited definition of the subject matter of sociology. As we will see, many sociologists study an array of phenomena that would not be considered Durkheimian social facts.

**Anomie** may be defined as a sense of not knowing what one is expected to do. This is traceable to the decline in the collective conscience in organic solidarity, which means that there are few, if any, clear, strong collective ideas about things. As a result, when confronted with many issues—Should I take that pig that is wandering in the field? Should I blaspheme against God?—people simply do not know what they are supposed to do. More generally, people are adrift in society because they lack clear and secure moorings. This contrasts strongly with mechanical solidarity, in which everyone is aware of what the collectivity believes and what they are supposed to do in any given situation. They have clear and secure moorings; they do *not* suffer from anomie.

## KARL MARX: FROM CAPITALISM TO COMMUNISM

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The most important and most aesthetically pleasing (because its analyses, conclusions, and remedies for society's ills stem seamlessly from basic premises) theory of the classical age is that of the German social thinker and political activist Karl Marx (1818–1883). This assertion might come as a surprise to readers who have previously come into contact only with critical statements about Marx and his thinking. In the popular view, Marx is some sort of crazed radical who developed a set of ideas that led many nations, especially the Soviet Union, in the direction of disastrous communist regimes. The failures of those societies and the abuses associated with them (e.g., the system of prison camps in the Soviet Union—the Gulag—where millions died) have been blamed on Marx and his ideas. But

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**anomie**—A sense, associated with organic solidarity, of not knowing what one is expected to do, of being adrift in society without any clear and secure moorings (Durkheim).

# KEY CONCEPT

## Anomic (and Other Types of) Suicide

The concept of anomie plays a central role in Durkheim's famous work *Suicide*, in which he argues that people are more likely to kill themselves when they do not know what is expected of them. In this situation, regulation of people is low, and they are largely free to run wild. This mad pursuit of anything and everything is likely to prove unsatisfying, and as a result, a higher percentage of people in such a situation are apt to commit suicide, specifically **anomic suicide**.

But what causes the rate of anomic suicide to increase? Social disruption is the main cause, but interestingly, we can see an increase in the rate of such suicide in times of both positive and negative disruption. That is, both an economic boom and an economic depression can cause a rise in the rate of anomic suicide. Either positive or negative disruptions can adversely affect the ability of the collectivity to exercise control over the individual. Without such control, people are more likely to feel rootless, not knowing what they are supposed to do in the changing and increasingly strange environment. The unease that this causes leads people to commit anomic suicide at a higher rate than in more stable times.

Anomic suicide is one of four types of suicide Durkheim describes in a broad-ranging theory of this behavior. The others are **egoistic suicide**, which occurs when people are not well integrated into the collectivity. Largely on their own, they feel a sense of futility or meaninglessness, and more of them adopt the view that they are free (morally and otherwise) to choose to do anything, including kill themselves. In **altruistic suicide**, people are too well integrated into the collectivity and kill themselves in greater numbers than they otherwise would because the group leads them, or even forces them, to do so. Finally, **fatalistic suicide** occurs in situations of excessive regulation (e.g., slavery), where people

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**anomic suicide**—A type of suicide that occurs when people do not know what is expected of them, where regulation is low, and they are largely free to run wild. This mad pursuit is likely to prove unsatisfying, and as a result, a higher percentage of people are apt to commit this type of suicide (Durkheim).

**egoistic suicide**—A type of suicide that occurs when people are not well integrated into the collectivity and are largely on their own; they feel a sense of futility or meaninglessness, and more of them feel that they are morally free to kill themselves (Durkheim).

**altruistic suicide**—A type of suicide that occurs when people are too well integrated into the collectivity; they are likely to kill themselves in greater numbers because the group leads them, or even forces them, to do so (Durkheim).

**fatalistic suicide**—A type of suicide that occurs in situations of excessive regulation (e.g., slavery), where people are often so distressed and depressed by their lack of freedom that they take their own lives more frequently than otherwise (Durkheim).



are so distressed and depressed by their lack of freedom that they take their own lives more frequently than otherwise.

Thus, Durkheim offers a broad theory of suicide based on the degree to which people are regulated by, or integrated into, the collectivity.

although the leaders of those societies invoked Marx's name and called themselves communists, Marx himself would have attacked the kinds of societies they created for their inhumanity. The fact is that what those societies became had little in common with what Marx would have liked a communist society to be.

## Human Potential

The starting point for Marx's grand theory is a set of assumptions about the potential of people in the right historical and social circumstances. In capitalistic and precapitalistic societies, people had come nowhere close to their human potential. In precapitalistic societies (say, the Stone Age or the Middle Ages), people were too busy scrambling to find adequate food, shelter, and protection to develop their higher capacities. Although food, shelter, and protection were generally easier to come by in capitalistic societies, the oppressive and exploitative nature of the capitalist system made it impossible for most people to come anywhere close to their potential.

According to Marx, people, unlike lower animals, are endowed with consciousness and the ability to link that consciousness to action. Among other things, people can set themselves apart from what they are doing, plan what they are going to do, choose to act or not to act, choose a specific kind of action, be flexible if impediments get in their way, concentrate on what they are doing for long periods, and often choose to do what they are doing in concert with other people. But people do not only think; they would perish if that were all they did. They must act, and often that involves acting on nature to appropriate from it what people need (raw materials, water, food, shelter) to survive. People appropriated things in earlier societies, but they did so in such primitive and inefficient ways that they were unable to develop their capacities, especially their capacities to think, to any great degree. Under capitalism, people came to care little about expressing their creative capacities in the act of appropriating what they needed from nature. Rather, they focused on owning things and earning enough money to acquire those things. But capitalism was important to Marx because it provided the technological and organizational innovations needed for the creation of a communist society, where for the first time, people would be able to express their full capacities. Under communism, people would be freed from the desire merely to own things and would be able, with the help of technologies and organizations created in capitalism, to live up to their full human potential (what Marx called "species being").

## Alienation

The idea that people must appropriate what they need from nature is related to Marx's view that people need to work. Work is a positive process in which people use their creative capacities, and further extend them, in productive activities. However, the work that most people did under capitalism did not permit them to express their human potential. In other words, rather than expressing themselves in their work, people under capitalism were alienated from their work.

One cannot understand what Marx meant by alienation without understanding further what he meant by human potential. In the circumstance (communism) where people achieve their human potential, there is a natural interconnection between people and their productive activities, the products they produce, the fellow workers with whom they produce those things, and what they are potentially capable of becoming. **Alienation** is the breakdown of these natural interconnections. Instead of being naturally related to all of these things, people are separated from them.

First, under capitalism, instead of choosing their productive activities, people have their activities chosen for them by the owners, the capitalists. The capitalists decide what is to be done and how it is to be done. They offer the workers (in Marx's terminology, the proletariat) a wage, and if the workers accept, they must perform the activities the way they have been designed to be performed by the capitalist. In return, they receive a wage that is supposed to provide them with all the satisfaction and gratification they need. The productive activities are controlled, even owned, by the capitalist. Thus, the workers are separated from those activities and unable to express themselves in them.

Second, capitalists also own the products. The workers do not choose what to produce, and when the products are completed, they do not belong to the workers. The workers are unlikely to use the products to satisfy their basic needs. Instead, the products belong to the capitalists, who may use them, or seek to have them used, in any way they wish. Given the profit orientation that serves to define capitalism, this almost always means that they will endeavor to sell the products for a profit. Once the workers have made the products, they are completely separated from those products and have absolutely no say in what happens to them. Furthermore, the workers may have little sense of their contribution to the final products. They may work on assembly lines, perform specific tasks (e.g., tightening some bolts), and have little idea of what is being produced and how what they are doing fits into the overall process and contributes to the end products.

Third, the workers are likely to be separated from their fellow workers. In Marx's view, people are inherently social and, left to their own devices, would choose to work collaboratively and cooperatively to produce what they need

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**alienation**—The breakdown of and separation from the natural interconnection between people and their productive activities, the products they produce, the fellow workers with whom they produce those things, and what they are potentially capable of becoming (Marx).

to live. However, under capitalism, the workers, even when surrounded by many other people, perform their tasks alone and repetitively. Those around them are likely to be strangers who are performing similarly isolated tasks. Often the situation is even worse than this: the capitalist frequently pits workers against each other to see who can produce the most for the least amount of pay. Those who succeed keep their jobs, at least for a time, whereas those who fail are likely to find themselves unemployed and on the street. Thus, instead of working together harmoniously, workers are forced to compete with one another in a struggle for survival. Even if they are not engaged in such life-and-death struggles, workers in capitalism are clearly separated from one another.

Finally, instead of expressing their human potential in their work, people are driven further and further from what they have the potential to be. They perform less and less like humans and are reduced to animals, beasts of burden, or inhuman machines. Their consciousness is numbed and ultimately destroyed as their relations with other humans and with nature are progressively severed. The result is a mass of people who are unable to express their essential human qualities, a mass of alienated workers.

## Capitalism

Alienation occurs within the context of a capitalist society. As we have seen, **capitalism** is essentially a two-class system in which one class (capitalists) exploits the other (proletariat). The key to understanding both classes lies in what Marx called the **means of production**. As the name suggests, these are the things that are needed for production to take place. Included in the means of production are things such as tools, machinery, raw materials, and factories. Under capitalism, the **capitalists** own the means of production. If the **proletariat** want to work, they must come to the capitalists, who own the means that make most work possible. Workers need access to the means of production to work. They also need money to survive in capitalism, and the capitalists tend to have that too as well as the ability to make more of it. The capitalists have what the proletariat need (the means of production, money for wages), but what do the workers have to offer in return? The workers have something absolutely essential to the capitalists: labor and the time available to perform it. The capitalists cannot produce

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**capitalism**—An economic system comprising mainly capitalists and the proletariat in which one class (capitalists) exploits the other (proletariat) (Marx).

**means of production**—Those things that are needed for production to take place (including tools, machinery, raw materials, and factories) (Marx).

**capitalists**—Those who own the means of production under capitalism and are therefore in a position to exploit workers (Marx).

**proletariat**—Those who, because they do not own the means of production, must sell their labor time to the capitalists to get access to those means (Marx).

and cannot make more money and profit without the labor of the proletariat. Thus, a deal is struck. The capitalists allow the proletariat access to the means of production, and the proletariat are paid a wage (albeit a small one, as small as the capitalists can possibly get away with). Actually the worker is paid what Marx called a **subsistence wage**, enough for the worker to survive and have a family and children so that when the worker falters, they can be replaced by one of their children. In exchange, the proletariat give the capitalist their labor time and all the productive abilities and capacities associated with that time.

On the surface, this seems like a fair deal: both the capitalist and the proletariat get what they lack and what they need. However, in Marx's view this is a grossly unfair situation. Why is that so? The reason is traceable to another of Marx's famous ideas, the **labor theory of value**. As the name suggests, his idea is

## KARL MARX (1818–1883)

### A Biographical Vignette

After graduating from the University of Berlin, Marx became a writer for a liberal-radical newspaper and within 10 months had become its editor in chief. However, because of its political positions, the paper was closed shortly thereafter by the government. The essays that Marx published in this period began to reflect a number of the positions that would guide him throughout his life. They were liberally sprinkled with democratic principles, humanism, and youthful idealism. He rejected the abstractness of philosophy, the naive dreaming of utopian communists, and the arguments of activists who were urging what he considered to be premature political action. In rejecting these activists, Marx laid the groundwork for his own life's work:

Practical attempts, even by the masses, can be answered with a canon as soon as they become dangerous, but ideas that have overcome our intellect and conquered our conviction, ideas to which reason has riveted our conscience, are chains from which one cannot break loose without breaking one's heart; they are demons that one can only overcome by submitting to them.

Source: "Communism and the Augsburg Allgemeine Zeitung," in D. McLellan (ed), Karl Marx: Selected Writings (New York: OUP, 1844/1972), p. 20.

**subsistence wage**—The wage paid by the capitalist to the proletariat that is enough for the worker to survive and have a family and children so that when the worker falters, they can be replaced by one of their children (Marx).

**labor theory of value**—Marx's theory that *all* value comes from labor and is therefore traceable, in capitalism, to the proletariat.

# KEY CONCEPT

## Exploitation

To Marx, capitalism, by its nature, leads to exploitation, particularly of the proletariat, or working class. His thinking on exploitation is derived from his labor theory of value and more specifically the concept of **surplus value**, defined as the difference between the value of a product when it is sold and the value of the elements (including workers' labor) consumed in its production. Surplus value, like all value from the perspective of the labor theory of value, comes from the workers. It should go to the workers, but in the capitalist system the lion's share of the value goes to the capitalists. The degree to which the capitalists retain surplus value and use it to their own ends (including, and especially, expansion of their capitalist businesses) is the degree to which capitalism is an exploitative system. In a colorful metaphor, Marx describes capitalists as "vampires" who suck the labor of the proletariat. Furthermore, the more proletariat "blood" the capitalists suck, the bigger, more successful, and wealthier they will become. In capitalism, the deserving (the proletariat) grow poorer, while the undeserving (the capitalists) grow immensely wealthy.

that *all* value comes from labor. The proletariat labor; the capitalist does not. The capitalist might invest, plan, manage, scheme, and so on, but to Marx this is not labor. Marx's sense of labor is the production of things out of the raw materials provided by nature. The proletariat and only the proletariat do that, although under capitalism the raw materials are provided by the capitalist and not directly by nature. To put it baldly, because the proletariat labor and the capitalist does not, the proletariat deserve virtually everything and the capitalist almost nothing.

Of course, the situation in a capitalistic society is exactly the reverse: the capitalist gets the lion's share of the rewards and the workers get barely enough to subsist. Thus (and this is another of Marx's famous concepts), the proletariat are the victims of **exploitation**. Ironically, neither capitalist nor worker is conscious of this exploitation. Both are the victims of **false consciousness**. Marx believed that it is possible for people to be unaware of the forces that determine their social

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**surplus value**—The difference between the value of a product when it is sold and the value of the elements (including workers' labor) consumed in its production (Marx).

**exploitation**—The nature of the relationship between capitalists and workers in capitalism, where the capitalists get the lion's share of the rewards and the proletariat get only enough to subsist, even though based on the labor theory of value, the situation should be reversed (Marx).

**false consciousness**—The inaccurate sense of themselves that both proletariat and capitalists have under capitalism regarding their relationship to each other and the way in which capitalism operates (Marx).

# CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS

## Does Marx's Theory Have Any Relevance to a Postcommunist World?

When the Soviet Union and its allies began to fall in the late 1980s, some observers believed not only that communism had failed but also that Marx's theory, on which that system was ostensibly based, would finally, once and for all, be relegated to the dustbin of disproven and dishonored theories. Indeed, in the early 1990s there was much talk of the end of Marxian theory. Yet Marx's theory, as well as the many neo-Marxian theories derived from it, not only survives in the early 21st century but is also considered by many scholars to be more relevant and useful than ever.

The fact is that Marx did little or no theorizing about communism. Rather, he was a theorist of capitalism, and it is clear that with the demise of Soviet communism (and the transformation of Chinese communism into a vibrant capitalist economy coexisting with a communist state), capitalism is freer than it has been in 100 years (since the birth of Soviet communism in 1917), if not in its entire history, to roam the world and intrude itself into every nook and cranny of that world.

From 1917 to 1989 the expansion of capitalism was limited by communism in various ways. First, many countries in the world, including some of the biggest and most important, were communist or were allied with the communist bloc. As a result, capitalist businesses found it impossible, or at least difficult, to establish themselves in those parts of the world. Second, the global conflict between capitalism and communism, especially the U.S.-Soviet Cold War, which began shortly after the close of World War II, inhibited the development and global spread of capitalism. For one thing, the huge expenditures on the military and military flare-ups associated with those periods in which the Cold War heated considerably (e.g., the wars in Korea and Vietnam) sapped resources that could have been devoted to the expansion of capitalism.

With communism fast becoming a dim memory (except in Cuba and, at least rhetorically, in China), capitalism has been freed of many of its global restraints and is rampaging through the world. This is most obvious in the former communist countries that have become prime territory for capitalist expansionism. Western capitalists have rushed into the old Soviet bloc and established a strong presence, whereas in China they have done the same, even as a strong indigenous capitalism has developed. Indeed, the question now is not whether China will replace the United States as the leading capitalist country but *when* that transformation will take place.

Marx foresaw that capitalism not only would but must become a global phenomenon. Capitalist businesses now, much more than in Marx's day, must

expand or die. Thus, they must ceaselessly seek new markets as old markets grow less able to produce ever-expanding business and profits. Marx's prediction was prevented from coming to full fruition in the 20th century because of the global conflict between communism and capitalism (as well as other factors, such as two devastating world wars). However, in the past two decades the global proliferation predicted by Marx has occurred with a vengeance.

What this all means is that Marx's ideas are more relevant today than ever before to the analysis of capitalism, especially global capitalism. Not only has capitalism spread around the world, but we are now increasingly facing the kinds of crises that Marx anticipated would accompany capitalism's expansion. These include growing levels of global inequality, a disappearing middle-class, financial crises such as the recent worldwide recession, and environmental threats. At the same time, global social movements have emerged to challenge capitalism. In fact, some of the most important works in globalization theory these days emanate from a Marxian perspective (see Chapter 11). That is not to say that Marx's ideas are sacrosanct. Many of them are dubious, even downright wrong, and contemporary Marxian theorists need to amend, adapt, or abandon those ideas. Indeed, that is what many of those thinkers are doing. Nonetheless, they take as their starting point Marx's theoretical ideas on capitalism and build on them to gain insight into the global success of capitalism in the wake of the failure of communism.

To answer the question posed in the title of this box, Marx's ideas are, if anything, *more relevant today than ever!*

positions. Even though the proletariat suffer under capitalism, they are unaware of the reasons for that suffering, or at least they have a false understanding of the sources of that suffering. The workers think they are getting a fair day's pay. The capitalists think that they are being rewarded not because of their exploitation of the workers but for their cleverness, their capital investment, their manipulation of the market, and so on. The capitalists are too busy making more money ever to form a true understanding of the exploitative nature of their relationship with workers. However, the proletariat do have the capacity to achieve such an understanding, partly because eventually they are so exploited and impoverished that the reality of what is transpiring in capitalism is no longer hidden from them. In Marx's terms, the proletariat are capable of achieving **class consciousness**; the capitalists are not.

Class consciousness is prerequisite to revolution. The proletariat must understand the source of their exploitation before they can rise up against capitalism. However, the coming revolution is aided by the dynamics of capitalism. In other

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**class consciousness**—The ability of a class, in particular the proletariat, to overcome false consciousness and attain an accurate understanding of the capitalist system.

words, for a revolution to occur, the proper material conditions must be in place *and* the proletariat must understand that they can create a better world through their own actions. For example, capitalism grows more competitive, prices are slashed, and an increasing number of capitalists are driven out of business and into the proletariat. Eventually, the proletariat swells while the capitalist class is reduced to a small number who maintain their position because of their skill at exploitation. When the massive proletariat finally achieve class consciousness and decide to act, there will be no contest because the capitalists will be so few that they are likely to be easily brushed aside, perhaps with little or no violence.

Thus, capitalism will not be destroyed and communism will not be created without the proletariat taking action. In Marx's terms, the proletariat must engage in **praxis**, or concrete action. It is not enough to think about the evils of capitalism or develop great theories of it and its demise; people must take to the streets and make it happen. This does not necessarily mean that they must behave in violent ways, but it does mean they cannot sit back and wait for capitalism to collapse on its own.

## Communism

Marx had no doubt that the dynamics of capitalism would lead to such a revolution, but he devoted little time to describing the character of the communist society that would replace capitalism. To Marx, the priority was gaining an understanding of the way capitalism works and communicating that understanding to the proletariat, thereby helping them gain class consciousness. He was critical of the many thinkers who spent their time daydreaming about some future utopian society. The immediate goal was the overthrow of the alienating and exploitative system. What was to come next would have to be dealt with once the revolution succeeded. Some say that this lack of a plan laid the groundwork for the debacles that took place in the Soviet Union and its satellites.

Marx did have some specific things to say about the future state of communism, but we get a better sense of communism by returning to his basic assumptions about human potential. In a sense, **communism** is *the* social system that permits, for the first time, the expression of full human potential. In effect, communism is an anti-system, a world in which the system is nothing more than the social relations among the people who make up the system. Marx did discuss a transitional phase after the fall of capitalism, when there would be larger structures (e.g., the dictatorship of the proletariat), but that was to be short-lived and replaced by what he considered true communism. (The experience in the Soviet Union after the 1917 revolution indicates the naïveté of this view and the fact that it may be impossible to eliminate the larger structures that exploit and alienate people.)

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**praxis**—Concrete action, particularly that taken by the proletariat to overcome capitalism (Marx).

**communism**—The social system that permits, for the first time, the expression of full human potential (Marx).



Thus, communism is a system that permits people to express the thoughtfulness, creativity, and sociability that have always been part of their nature but have been inhibited or destroyed by previous social systems (e.g., feudalism, capitalism). Communist society would utilize and expand upon the technological and organizational innovations of capitalism, but otherwise it would get out of people's way and allow them to be what they always could have been, at least potentially.

## MAX WEBER: THE RATIONALIZATION OF SOCIETY

If Karl Marx is the most important thinker from the point of view of social thought in general, as well as from the perspective of political developments of the last 100-plus years, then his fellow German theorist Max Weber (1864–1920) is arguably the most important theorist from the perspective of sociology (the other possibility is Émile Durkheim). Weber was a complex thinker who made many contributions to social thought, but his best-known contribution is his theory of the increasing rationalization of the West. That theory is based on Weber's work on action, especially rational action.

### Social Action

For many years, Weber's work on social action was the center of attention, rather than his theory of rationalization, which is now seen as the heart of his theoretical orientation. The focus on social action is traceable to the work of Talcott Parsons, who, in the 1930s, introduced classical European theory in general, and Weberian theory in particular, to a large American audience. However, he did so with a number of now widely recognized biases. One of those biases was his own action theory, which led him to accentuate the importance of Weber's thinking on action (which played a central role in the creation of Parsons's own perspective).

### Behavior and Action

Weber's thinking on action is based on an important distinction in all sociologies of everyday life (see Chapter 6), that between behavior and action. Both behavior and action involve what people do on an everyday basis, but **behavior** occurs with little or no thought, whereas **action** is the result of conscious processes. Behavior is closely tied to an approach, largely associated with psychology, known as **behaviorism**, which has played an important role in the development of many sociologies of everyday life. It focuses on situations where a stimulus is

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**behavior**—Things that people do that require little or no thought.

**action**—Things that people do that are the result of conscious processes.

**behaviorism**—The study, largely associated with psychology, of behavior.

applied and a behavior results, more or less mechanically, with little or no thought process intervening between stimulus and response. For example, you engage in behavior when you pull your hand away from a hot stove or automatically put up your umbrella when it starts raining.

Weber was *not* concerned with such behavior; his focus was on action in which thought intervenes between stimulus and response. In other words, Weber was interested in situations in which people attach meaning to what they do: what they do is meaningful to them. In contrast, behavior is meaningless, at least in the sense that people simply do it without giving it much or any thought. Weber defined sociology as the study of action in terms of its subjective meaning. What matters are people's conscious processes. Furthermore, what people believe about a situation in which they find themselves is more important for an understanding of the actions they take than the objective situation.

At a theoretical level, Weber was interested in the action of a single individual, but he was far more interested in the actions of two or more individuals. Sociology was to devote most of its attention to the regularities in the actions of two or more individuals. In fact, although Weber talked about collectivities (e.g., Calvinists, capitalists), he argued that they must be treated solely as the result of the actions of two or more people. Only people can act, and thus sociology must focus on actors, not collectivities. Sociologists may talk about collectivities, but that is only for the sake of convenience. A collectivity is nothing more than a set of individual actors and actions.

## MAX WEBER (1864–1920)

### A Biographical Vignette

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Max Weber was born in Erfurt, Germany, on April 21, 1864, into a decidedly middle-class family. Important differences between his parents had a profound effect on both his intellectual orientation and his psychological development. His father was a bureaucrat who rose to a relatively important political position. He was clearly a part of the political establishment and as a result eschewed any activity or idealism that would require personal sacrifice or threaten his position within the system.

In addition, the senior Weber was a man who enjoyed earthly pleasures, and in this and many other ways, he stood in sharp contrast to his wife. Max Weber's mother was a devout Calvinist, a woman who sought to lead an ascetic life largely devoid of the pleasures craved by her husband. Her concerns were more otherworldly; she was disturbed by the imperfections that were signs that she was not destined for salvation. These deep differences between the parents led to marital tension, and both the differences and the tension had an immense impact on Weber.

Because it was impossible for him to emulate both parents, Weber was presented with a clear choice as a child. He first seemed to opt for his father's orientation to life, but later he drew closer to his mother's approach. Whatever the choice, the tension produced by the need to choose between such polar opposites negatively affected Weber's psyche.

During his 8 years at the University of Berlin (where he obtained his doctorate and became a lawyer), Weber was financially dependent on his father, a circumstance he progressively grew to dislike. At the same time, he moved closer to his mother's values, and his antipathy toward his father increased. He adopted an ascetic way of life and plunged deeply into his work. During one semester as a student, his work habits were described as follows: "He continues the rigid work discipline, regulates his life by the clock, divides the daily routine into exact sections for the various subjects, saves in his way, by feeding himself evenings in his room with a pound of raw chopped beef and four fried eggs." Weber, emulating his mother, had become ascetic and diligent, a compulsive worker—in contemporary terms, a *workaholic*.

This compulsion for work led him in 1896 to a position as professor of economics at Heidelberg University. But in 1897, when Weber's academic career was blossoming, his father died following a violent argument between them. Soon after, Weber began to manifest symptoms that culminated in a nervous breakdown. Often unable to sleep or to work, Weber spent the next 6 or 7 years in near total collapse. After a long hiatus, some of his faculties began to return in 1903, but it was not until 1904, when he delivered (in the United States) his first lecture in 6.5 years, that Weber was able to begin to return to active academic life. In 1904 and 1905, he published one of his best-known works, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In this work, Weber announced the ascendance, on an academic level, of his mother's religiosity. Weber devoted much of his time to the study of religion, although he was not personally religious.

## Types of Action

Weber offered a now-famous delineation of four types of action. **Affectual action** (which was of little concern to Weber) is action that is the result of emotion; it is nonrational. Thus, slapping your child (or an aged parent) in a blind rage is an example of affectual action. Also nonrational is **traditional action**, in which what is done is based on the way things have been done habitually or customarily. Crossing oneself in church is an example of traditional action. Although traditional action was of some interest to Weber (especially given its relationship to traditional authority, discussed later in this chapter), he was far more interested,

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**affectual action**—Nonrational action that is the result of emotion (Weber).

**traditional action**—Action taken on the basis of the way things have been done habitually or customarily (Weber).

because of his overriding concern with rationalization, in the other two types of action, both of which are rational.

**Value-rational action** occurs when an actor's choice of the means to an end is based on the actor's belief in some larger set of values. The action chosen may not be optimal, but it is rational from the point of view of the value system in which the actor finds herself. So, if you belong to a cult that believes in a ritual purging of one's previous meal before the next meal is eaten, that is what you do, even though purging may be quite uncomfortable and will delay, if not ruin, your next meal. Such action would be rational from the point of view of the value system of the cult.

**Means-ends rational action** involves the pursuit of ends that actors have chosen for themselves; thus, their action is not guided by some larger value system. It is, however, affected by the actors' view of the environment in which they find themselves, including the behavior of people and objects in it. This means that the actor must take into account the nature of the situation when choosing the best means to an end. Thus, when you are at a party and spot someone you want to dance with, you must decide on the best way to meet that person, given the nature of the situation (it may be an all-couples party) and the objects (there may be a table in your path) and other people (one of whom may already be dancing with that person) present. Taking those things into consideration, you choose the best means of achieving your end of getting that dance.

These four types of actions are ideal types (see the discussion of the ideal type that follows). The fact is that one rarely if ever finds actions that can be categorized solely within one of these four types. Rather, any given action is likely to be some combination of two or more of these ideal-typical actions.

Weber offers an approach to studying social action and the theoretical tools to examine such action. Many sociologists have found this work useful.

## Types of Rationality

Although Weber's theory of action relies on the typology outlined previously, his larger theory of rationalization rests on the typology of rationality outlined as follows. (As you will see, the two typologies overlap to some degree.)

**Practical rationality** is the type that we all practice on a daily basis in getting from one point to another. Given the realities of the circumstances we face, we try

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**value-rational action**—Action that occurs when an actor's choice of the means to an end is based on the actor's belief in some larger set of values. The action chosen may not be optimal, but it is rational from the point of view of the value system in which actors find themselves (Weber).

**means-ends rational action**—Action that involves the pursuit of ends that actors have chosen for themselves; that choice is affected by the actors' view of the environment in which they find themselves, including the behavior of people and objects in it (Weber).

**practical rationality**—The type of rationality people use on a day-to-day basis in dealing with whatever difficulties exist and finding the most expedient way of attaining the goal of getting from one point to another (Weber).

to deal with whatever difficulties exist and find the most expedient way of attaining our goal. For example, our usual route to the university is blocked by a traffic accident, so we take a side road and work our way to campus using a series of back roads. Westerners are not the only people who engage in practical rationality; all people in all societies throughout history have used this type of rationality.

**Theoretical rationality** involves an effort to master reality cognitively through the development of increasingly abstract concepts. Here the goal is to attain a rational understanding of the world rather than to take rational action within it. Thus, to continue with the example, theoretical rationality as applied to traffic problems would involve the efforts of experts in the area to figure out long-term solutions to traffic bottlenecks. Like practical rationality, theoretical rationality has been used everywhere in the world throughout history.

**Substantive rationality**, like practical rationality, involves action directly. Here the choice of the most expedient thing to do is guided by larger values rather than by daily experiences and practical thinking. Thus, for example, people are sometimes guided by the values of love and friendship, even when these may interfere with completing tasks efficiently and effectively. If I take time out of my day to help a friend in distress, I may not get the report to my boss on time, and this will cost my employer business. From the point of view of practical rationality, taking time to care for a friend in the middle of the workday is clearly not rational, but it is rational within social systems that value friendship. As with the preceding two types of rationality, substantive rationality occurs transcivilizationally and transhistorically.

Finally, and most important to Weber, is **formal rationality**, in which the choice of the most expedient action is based on rules, regulations, and laws that apply to everyone. The classic case of this is modern bureaucracy, in which the rules of the organization dictate the most rational course of action. Thus, if the rules say that every action must be preceded by the filling out of a required form in triplicate, then that is what everyone must do. To some outside the organization this may seem inefficient and irrational, but it is rational within the context of the bureaucracy. Unlike the other types of rationality, formal rationality arose only in the Western world with the coming of industrialization.

Thus, what interested Weber was formal rationality and why it arose only in the modern West and not anywhere else at any other time. This led him to

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**theoretical rationality**—A type of rationality that involves an effort to master reality cognitively through the development of increasingly abstract concepts. The goal is to attain a rational understanding of the world rather than to take rational action within it (Weber).

**substantive rationality**—A type of rationality in which the choice of the most expedient action is guided by larger values rather than by daily experiences and practical thinking (Weber).

**formal rationality**—A type of rationality in which the choice of the most expedient action is based on rules, regulations, and laws that apply to everyone. This form of rationality is distinctive to the modern West (Weber).

examine the factors that expedited the development of (formal) rationalization in the West and the barriers to such rationalization that existed elsewhere. He found that major expediting forces and barriers existed in religion.

## The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

In the West, Protestantism played a key role in the rise of rationalization. In this case, Weber was primarily interested in the rationalization of the economic system, and the most rational economic system is capitalism. Weber considered capitalism to be rational in a number of ways but most importantly because of its emphasis on quantifying things, which is best represented by its development and reliance on modern bookkeeping. Thus, Weber was interested in the expediting role that Protestantism (especially the sect known as Calvinism) played in the rise of capitalism. In contrast, other religions throughout the world (Confucianism in China, Hinduism in India) served to impede the rise of rationalization in general, and capitalism in particular, in those nations.

Weber was primarily interested in the **Protestant ethic** as it existed in Calvinism. The Protestant ethic is a belief system that emphasizes hard work and asceticism, the denial of personal pleasure. This ethic grew out of the more general Calvinist belief in predestination, the religious doctrine that a person's fate in the afterlife, whether heaven or hell, is predetermined. According to the Calvinists, there is no way that a person can directly know what their fate in the afterlife will be, and further, there is no way a person can directly affect that fate. However, it is possible for a person to discern signs that they are either saved or damned, and one of the major signs of salvation is success in business. Thus, the Calvinists were deeply interested in being successful in business, which meant building bigger and more profitable businesses. It also meant that instead of spending profits on frivolous personal pleasures, they had to save money and reinvest it in their businesses to make them even more successful. The Calvinist business owners were comforted in their sometimes ruthless pursuit of profits by the fact that it was their ethical duty to behave in such a way. They were also provided with hardworking, conscientious Calvinist workers, who were similarly motivated in looking for signs of success, and being a good worker was one such sign. Finally, Calvinist business owners did not have to agonize over the fact that they were so successful while those who worked for them had comparatively little. After all, this was all preordained. If they were not among the saved, they would not be so successful. And if at least some of their employees were saved, they would prosper economically. It was a wonderfully reassuring system for those who sought and acquired wealth.

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**Protestant ethic**—A belief system, associated with the Protestant sect of Calvinism, that emphasized hard work and asceticism, the denial of personal pleasure. The development of capitalism depended on the presence of this ethic (Weber).

# KEY CONCEPT

## Verstehen

*Verstehen* is a German word meaning understanding. From the point of view of action theory, *Verstehen* refers to the effort to understand the thought processes of the actor, the actor's meanings and motives, and how these factors led to the action (or interaction) under study.

Weber made clear that this was not a softer, or less scientific, method than, for example, the experimental methods employed by behaviorists. To Weber, *Verstehen* was not simply intuition but involved a systematic and rigorous method for studying thoughts and actions. In fact, a researcher using *Verstehen* has an advantage over those who fancy themselves hard-nosed scientists using positivistic methods. The advantage lies in the fact that because subjects are fellow human beings, the social scientist can gain an understanding of what goes on in the subjects' minds and why they do what they do. A physicist studying subatomic particles has no chance of understanding those particles; in fact, the particles cannot be understood in the same way that human beings can be understood. The particles can be observed only from without, whereas the thoughts and actions of humans can be observed from within, introspectively.

But how does this methodology, this sense of understanding actors and actions, relate to Weber's grand theory of, for example, the relationship between Calvinism and the spirit of capitalism? It could be argued that Weber was trying to understand what went on in the minds of individual Calvinists that led them to the kinds of actions that set the stage for the rise of the spirit of capitalism. However, another view on this is that Weber used *Verstehen* as a method to put himself in the place of individual Calvinists to understand the cultural context in which they lived and what led them to behave in a capitalist manner (i.e., energetically seeking profits). Here the view of the researcher is outward, examining the cultural context, rather than inward, examining the mental processes of the Calvinist. A third view is that *Verstehen* is concerned with the relationship between individual mental processes and the larger cultural context. In fact, all three views have ample support. However, one valid interpretation is that *Verstehen* is a method to analyze action from the perspective of individual mental processes.

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**Verstehen**—A methodological technique involving an effort to understand the thought processes of the actor, the actor's meanings and motives, and how these factors led to the action (or interaction) under study (Weber).

All of these beliefs about economic success among the Calvinists (and other sects) added up to the Protestant ethic, which Weber linked to the development of another system of ideas, the **spirit of capitalism**. It was this idea system that led, in the end, to the capitalist economic system. People had been motivated to be economically successful at other times and in other parts of the world, but the difference at this time in the West was that they were motivated not by greed but by an ethical system that emphasized economic success. The pursuit of profit was turned away from the morally suspect greed and toward a spirit that was deemed to be highly moral.

The spirit of capitalism had a number of components, but most important for our purposes is the rational and systematic seeking of profits. Other ideas associated with this spirit included frugality, punctuality, fairness, and the earning of money as a legitimate end in itself. Above all, it was people's duty to work ceaselessly to increase their wealth and economic prosperity. The spirit of capitalism was removed from the realm of individual ambition and made an ethical imperative.

There is a clear affinity between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism: the former helped give rise to the latter. Weber found evidence for this in an examination of those European nations in which several religions coexisted. What he found was that the leaders of the economic systems in these nations—business leaders, owners of capital, high-grade skilled laborers, and advanced technically and commercially trained personnel—were overwhelmingly Protestant. He took this as an indication that Protestantism was a significant factor in the choices people made to enter these occupations and, conversely, that other religions (e.g., Roman Catholicism) failed to produce idea systems that impelled people into these positions. In other words, Roman Catholicism did not give, and could not have given, birth to the spirit of capitalism. In fact, Roman Catholicism impeded the development of such a spirit. In this, it functioned in the West as Confucianism and Buddhism functioned in the East.

## Confucianism, Hinduism, and Capitalism

China, like the West, had the necessary conditions for the development of capitalism, including a tradition of intense acquisitiveness and unscrupulous competition. There was great industry and enormous capacity for work among the Chinese people. With these and other factors in its favor, why did China not undergo rationalization in general, and more specifically, why did capitalism

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**spirit of capitalism**—An idea system that led to the capitalist economic system. In the West, unlike in any other area of the world, people were motivated to be economically successful not by greed but by an ethical system that emphasized the ceaseless pursuit of economic success. The spirit of capitalism had a number of components, including the rational and systematic seeking of profits, frugality, punctuality, fairness, and the earning of money as a legitimate end in itself (Weber).



not develop there? Although elements of capitalism were there (moneylenders, businesspeople who sought high profits), China lacked a market and other rational elements of capitalism. There were a number of reasons capitalism failed to develop in China but chief among them was Confucianism and its characteristics.

Confucianism emphasized a literary education as a prerequisite of obtaining an office and acquiring status. A cultured person well steeped in literature was valued. Also valued was the ability to be clever and witty. The Confucians devalued any kind of work and delegated it to subordinates. Although the Confucians valued wealth, working for wealth was not regarded as proper. Confucians were unconcerned with the economy and economic activities. Active engagement in a for-profit enterprise was viewed as morally dubious and unbecoming a Confucian. Furthermore, Confucians were not oriented to any kind of change, including economic change. The goal of the Confucians was to maintain the status quo. Perhaps most important, there was no tension between the religion of the Confucians and the world in which they lived. Therefore, they did not need to take any tension-resolving action. This stands in contrast to Calvinism, in which the tension between predestination and the desire to know one's fate in the afterlife led to the idea that success in business might be a sign of salvation and striving for such success could bring about a resolution of the tension.

In India, Hinduism posed barriers to rationalization and capitalism. For example, Hindus believed that a person was born into a given caste (a fixed position within a system of social stratification) based on what that person deserved by virtue of behavior in a past life. Through faithful adherence to the ritual of caste, a person gained merit for the next life. Salvation was to be achieved through the faithful following of the rules. Innovation, particularly in the economic sphere, could not lead to a higher caste position in the next life. Activity in this world was not seen as important because this world was understood to be merely a transient abode and an impediment to the spiritual quest.

## Authority Structures and Rationalization

The theme of rationalization runs through many other aspects of Weber's work. Let us examine it in one other domain—authority structures. Authority is legitimate domination. The issue is: What makes it legitimate for some people to issue commands that other people are likely to obey? The three bases of authority are tradition, charisma, and rational-legal factors. In keeping with his theory of rationalization, Weber foresaw a long-term trend in the direction of the triumph of rational-legal authority.

**Traditional authority** is based on followers' belief that certain people (people from particular families or tribes or with special lineage) have exercised

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**traditional authority**—Authority based on followers' belief that certain people (people from particular families or tribes or with special lineage) have exercised sovereignty since time immemorial. The leaders claim, and the followers believe in, the sanctity of age-old rules and powers (Weber).

authority since time immemorial. The leaders claim, and the followers believe in, the sanctity of age-old rules and powers. Forms of traditional authority include rule by elders and rule by leaders who inherit their positions. Weber viewed feudalism as one type of traditional authority. Traditional authority structures are not rational, and they impede the rationalization process. Although one still finds vestiges of traditional authority in the world today, especially in less developed societies, it has largely disappeared or become marginalized. For example, the monarchy in England is a vestige of traditional authority, but it clearly has no power.

**Charismatic authority** is legitimated by followers' belief in the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of the charismatic leader. This idea obviously involves the now-famous concept of **charisma**. Although in everyday usage we may describe someone as charismatic to indicate that they have extraordinary qualities, Weber emphasized the fact that others define a person as having charisma. This leads to the important conclusion that a person need *not* have any discernible extraordinary qualities to be defined as a charismatic leader. To Weber, charisma is an extremely important revolutionary force. Throughout history charismatic leaders have come to the fore and overthrown traditional (and even rational-legal) authority structures.

However, it is important to remember that charismatic authority is *not* rational and therefore is ill suited to the day-to-day demands of administering a society. In fact, this becomes obvious almost immediately to the followers of a victorious charismatic leader. Soon after the leader takes power, the followers take steps to ensure that the new regime is able to handle the routine tasks of administering a domain. They do this through a process Weber labeled the **routinization of charisma**, in which they seek to recast the extraordinary and revolutionary characteristics of their regime so that it is able to handle mundane matters. They also do this to prepare for the day when the charismatic leader passes from the scene so that they are not thrown out of power as soon as the leader dies. Through routinization they hope to transfer the charisma to a disciple or to the administrative organization formed by the group of disciples.

There is a terrible contradiction here. In attempting to make charisma routine, the disciples do what is needed to allow this form of authority to function on a daily basis and to continue in existence after the leader dies, but if they are

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**charismatic authority**—Authority legitimated by followers' belief in the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of the charismatic leader (Weber).

**charisma**—Extraordinary qualities attributed to an individual by other people. A person need not actually have such qualities to be defined as charismatic (Weber).

**routinization of charisma**—Efforts by disciples of a charismatic leader to recast the extraordinary and revolutionary characteristics of the leader so that the regime is better able to handle mundane matters. The followers also do this to prepare for the day when the charismatic leader passes from the scene so that they can remain in power (Weber).

# KEY CONCEPT

## The Ideal Type and the Ideal-Typical Bureaucracy

Weber created many important methodological ideas, but one of the most important is the **ideal type**. It is worth noting immediately that Weber did *not* mean that an ideal type is some sort of utopian, or best possible, phenomenon. It is ideal because it is a one-sided exaggeration, usually an exaggeration of the rationality of a given phenomenon. Such one-sided exaggerations become concepts that Weber used to analyze the social world in all its historical and contemporary variation. The ideal type is a measuring rod to be used in the comparison of specific examples of a social phenomenon either cross-culturally or over time.

One of Weber's most famous ideal types is the **bureaucracy**. The ideal-typical bureaucracy has the following characteristics:

1. A series of official functions become offices in which the behavior of those who occupy those offices is bound by rules.
2. Each office has a specified sphere of competence.
3. Each office has obligations to perform specific functions, the authority to carry them out, and the means of compulsion to get the job done.
4. The offices are organized into a hierarchical system.
5. People need technical training to meet the qualifications for the positions in each office.
6. Those who occupy these positions are given the things they need to do the job; they do not own these things.
7. The position is part of the organization and cannot be appropriated by an incumbent.
8. Much of what goes on in the bureaucracy (acts, decisions, rules) is in writing.

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**ideal type**—A one-sided, exaggerated concept, usually an exaggeration of the rationality of a given phenomenon, used to analyze the social world in all its historical and contemporary variation. The ideal type is a measuring rod to be used in the comparison of specific examples of a social phenomenon either cross-culturally or over time (Weber).

**bureaucracy**—A modern type of organization in which the behavior of officers is bound by rules; each office has a specified sphere of competence and has obligations to perform specific functions, the authority to carry them out, and the means of compulsion to get the job done; the offices are organized into a hierarchical system; technical training is needed for each office; those things needed to do the job belong to the office and not to the officer; the position is part of the organization and cannot be appropriated by an officer; and much of what goes on (acts, decisions, rules) is in writing (Weber).

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This ideal type, like all ideal types, exists nowhere in its entirety. In creating it, Weber had in mind the bureaucracy as it developed in the modern West, but even there no specific organization has all of these characteristics and to a high degree. But Weber used this ideal type (and every ideal type) to do historical comparative analysis—in this case, analysis of organizational forms. He did this in terms of the organizations associated with the three types of authority and found that the organizational forms associated with traditional and charismatic authority are lacking most or all of these characteristics; they are not bureaucracies, and they do not function nearly as well as the bureaucratic organizations associated with rational-legal authority. One could also use the ideal type to compare specific organizations within the modern world in terms of the degree to which they measure up to the ideal type. The researcher would use the ideal type to pinpoint divergences from the ideal type and then seek to explain them. Among the reasons a specific organization does not measure up to the ideal type might be misinformation, strategic errors, logical fallacies, emotional factors, or more generally, any irrationality that enters into the operation of the organization.

successful, they undermine the basis of charismatic authority—it will no longer be extraordinary or perceived by the followers in that way. Thus, the successful routinization of charisma eventually destroys charisma, and the structure is en route to becoming one of Weber's other authority structures: traditional or rational-legal.

As we said, charismatic authority is a revolutionary force. It operates by changing people from within; they change their minds and opt to follow the charismatic leader. However, as a revolutionary force, charisma pales in comparison to what Weber considered the most important revolutionary force in history—rationalization and the coming of **rational-legal authority**. Under rational-legal authority, the legitimacy of leaders comes from codified rules and regulations; leaders hold their positions as a result of those rules. Thus, for example, the president of the United States has rational-legal authority: the president's position as leader is legitimated by the results of a national election.

Although charisma changes people's minds (charisma changes people from within; rationalization changes them from without), it alters the structures in which they live. And the key structure associated with rational-legal authority is the modern bureaucracy (see the Key Concept box on the ideal type). The other forms of authority have organizations associated with them, but they do not measure up to bureaucracy and do not have nearly the effect on people that bureaucracy does. Bureaucracy was so important to Weber that for him it was the heart of rational-legal authority as well as *the* model for the rationalization

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**rational-legal authority**—A type of authority in which the legitimacy of leaders is derived from codified rules and regulations; leaders hold their positions as a result of those rules (Weber).

process in the West. Weber saw bureaucracy not only as a rational structure but also as a powerful one that exercises great control over those who work within it and even those who are served by it. It is a kind of cage that alters the way people think and act.

More generally, Weber thought of rationalization as having cage-like qualities. There is no question that rationalization in general and rational-legal authority (and its bureaucracy) in particular bring with them numerous advantages, but Weber was attuned to the problems associated with them. In fact, Weber formulated the notion of an iron cage of rationalization, using the imagery of a powerful, cage-like structure from which it is nearly impossible to escape, to describe the increasing rationalization of the West. He appreciated the advances brought by rationalization but despaired of its increasingly tight control over people. He feared that as more sectors of society (not only the government bureaucracy) were rationalized, people would find it increasingly difficult to escape into non-rationalized sectors of life. They would find themselves locked into an iron cage of rationalization.

Weber viewed rationalization as triumphant in the West, and he saw rational-legal authority in the same way. Rational-legal authority is much more effective than traditional authority with the result that the latter must, over time, give way to the former. Charismatic revolutions will continue to occur, but once routinized, the organization of charismatic authority is weak in comparison to the rational bureaucracy. In any case, once routinized, charisma is destroyed, and the authority structure is on its way to taking some other form. Although the new form could be traditional authority, in the modern West it is increasingly common for charismatic authority to be transformed into rational-legal authority. Furthermore, as modern charismatic movements arise, they are increasingly likely to face the iron cage of rationalization and rational-legal authority. That cage not only locks people in, but it also is becoming ever more impervious to external assault, able to keep out both the charismatic leader and the rabble who follow such a leader. The result is that charismatic authority, like traditional authority, has become increasingly inappropriate to the demands of modern society and unlikely to accede to power. Rational-legal authority, rationalization, and the iron cage of rationality are triumphant!

## SUMMARY

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1. The great theories of sociology's classical age were vast, highly ambitious efforts to tell the story of great stretches of social history.
2. Émile Durkheim's theory deals with the changing division of labor and the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity.

3. The major factor in this transformation is an increase in dynamic density.
4. The change from mechanical to organic solidarity is accompanied by a dramatic decline in the power of the collective conscience.
5. An indicator of that change is the transformation from the predominance of repressive law to the predominance of restitutive law.
6. The major pathology associated with organic solidarity and its weak collective conscience is anomie.
7. Karl Marx's theory deals with the historical roots of capitalism, capitalism itself, and the hoped-for transition to communism.
8. Marx's critique of capitalism is based on a series of assumptions about human potential. That potential is thwarted in capitalism, leading to alienation, especially among the workers.
9. Capitalism is essentially a two-class economic system in which the members of one class (the capitalists) own the means of production and the members of the other class (the proletariat) must sell their labor time to have access to those means.
10. Marx adopts the labor theory of value—all value comes from labor—and this allows him to see that capitalists exploit the proletariat.
11. The proletariat (and the capitalists) are unable to see this reality because of false consciousness, but they are eventually capable of getting a clear picture of the way capitalism works and of achieving class consciousness.
12. To overthrow capitalism, the proletariat must engage in praxis.
13. Communism is a social system that permits for the first time the full expression of human potential.
14. Max Weber distinguished among four types of rationality—practical, theoretical, substantive, and formal—but his focus was on formal rationality and the way its preeminence led to the rationalization of the West.
15. The Protestant ethic played a central role in the rationalization of the West, especially the economy. It was a key factor in the development of the spirit of capitalism and ultimately the rise of the capitalist economic system.
16. Weber was interested in the factors within Confucianism in China and Hinduism in India that hindered the development of rationalization and capitalism in those nations.

17. Weber was concerned with the three types of authority—traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal—and the emergence of rational-legal authority as the dominant form.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

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ROBERT J. ANTONIO and IRA COHEN, eds. *Marx and Modernity: Key Readings and Commentary*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002. Includes a lengthy and excellent introduction by Antonio, key selections from Marx's work, and a section devoted to contemporary work on his theories.

ROBERT J. ANTONIO "Karl Marx." In George Ritzer and Jeffrey Stepnisky, eds., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists*, vol. 1, *Classical Social Theorists*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 115–164. First-rate analysis of Marx's life and work, including discussion of Marx's relevance in the present moment.

CHARLES CAMIC, PHILIP GORSKI, and DAVID TRUBEK, eds. *Max Weber's "Economy and Society": A Critical Companion*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005. Contains a series of essays on Weber's most important and all-encompassing work.

MUSTAFA EMIRBAYER, ed. *Émile Durkheim: Sociologist of Modernity*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003. A useful collection of some of Durkheim's most important work as well as more contemporary works that pick up on key themes in his work.

MARCEL FOURNIER *Émile Durkheim: A Biography*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013. The most recent and comprehensive account of Durkheim's life, relationships, and main ideas.

KARL MARX and FRIEDRICH ENGELS. 1848/2016. *The Communist Manifesto Illustrated*. George S. Rigakos, ed., and Red Viktor, illus.. Ottawa, ON: Red Quill books. A graphic novel set to the words of the Communist manifesto. This book is entertaining, and it visually connects the ideas of the *Manifesto* to contemporary events.

TARA MILBRANDT and FRANK PEARCE "Émile Durkheim." In George Ritzer and Jeffrey Stepnisky, eds., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists*, vol. 1, *Classical Social Theorists*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 236–282. Extensive overview of Durkheim's major ideas and works placed in biographical, intellectual, and historical context.

STEPHEN KALBERG, ed. *Max Weber: Readings and Commentary on Modernity*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. Key selections of Weber's work followed by contemporary work on his theories.

STEPHEN KALBERG *The Social Thought of Max Weber*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2017. Best treatment of Weber and his diverse contributions available in the context of a short book.

DAVID HARVEY. *A Companion to Marx's Capital: The Complete Edition*. 2018. New York: Verso. A detailed guide to one of Marx's most important and influential works written by one of most prominent Marxist theorists writing today. The book is accompanied by an extensive website including video lectures about *Capital* by Harvey: <http://davidharvey.org/reading-capital/>

DAVID MCLELLAN *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought*. New York: Harper Colophon, 1973. A monumental treatment of Marx's life and work.

JOACHIM RADKAU *Max Weber: A Biography*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009. Major Weber biography, based on recently available archival material, that offers a view of Weber's life distinctly different from that originally provided by Marianne Weber. Excels in connecting Weber's personal life with his thought and work.

MARIANNE WEBER *Max Weber: A Biography*. Harry Zohn, ed. and trans. New York: Wiley, 1975. Biography by Weber's wife, a scholar in her own right, that offers much detail about Weber's life.