

We are all aware that there is gross inequality in the world. Statistics concerning the human costs of **poverty** are truly numbing in their awfulness (the issue of global poverty is further discussed in **Ch. 20**). Marxist theorists argue that the relative prosperity of the few is dependent on the destitution of the many. In Marx's own words, 'Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality at the opposite pole.'

In the next section we shall outline some of the central features of the Marxist approach—or historical **materialism**, as it is often known. Following on from this, subsequent sections will explore some of the most important strands in contemporary Marx-inspired thinking about world politics. We should note, however, that given the richness and variety of Marxist

thinking about world politics, the account that follows is inevitably destined to be partial and to some extent arbitrary. Our aim in the following is to provide a route map that we hope will encourage readers to explore further the work of Marx and of those who have built on the foundations he laid.

Key Points

- Marx's work retains its relevance despite the collapse of Communist Party rule in the former Soviet Union.
- Of particular importance is Marx's analysis of capitalism, which has yet to be bettered.
- Marxist analyses of international relations aim to reveal the hidden workings of global capitalism. These hidden workings provide the context in which international events occur.

The essential elements of Marxist theories of world politics

In his inaugural address to the Working Men's International Association in London in 1864, Karl Marx told his audience that history had 'taught the working classes the duty to master [for] themselves the mysteries of international politics'. However, despite the fact that Marx himself wrote copiously about international affairs, most of this writing was journalistic in character. He did not incorporate the international dimension into his theoretical mapping of the contours of capitalism. This 'omission' should perhaps not surprise us. The sheer scale of the theoretical enterprise in which he was engaged, as well as the nature of his own methodology, inevitably meant that Marx's work would be contingent and unfinished.

Marx was an enormously prolific writer, and his ideas developed and changed over time. Hence it is not surprising that his legacy has been open to numerous interpretations. In addition, real-world developments have also led to the revision of his ideas in the light of experience. Various schools of thought have emerged, which claim Marx as a direct inspiration, or whose work can be linked to Marx's legacy. Before we discuss what is distinctive about these approaches, it is important that we examine the essential elements of commonality that lie between them.

First, all the theorists discussed in this chapter share with Marx the view that the social world should be analysed as a totality. The academic division of the social

world into different areas of enquiry—history, philosophy, economics, political science, sociology, international relations, etc.—is both arbitrary and unhelpful. None can be understood without knowledge of the others: the social world has to be studied as a whole. Given the scale and complexity of the social world, this entreaty clearly makes great demands of the analyst. Nonetheless, for Marxist theorists, the disciplinary boundaries that characterize the contemporary social sciences need to be transcended if we are to generate a proper understanding of the dynamics of world politics.

Another key element of Marxist thought, which serves to underline further this concern with interconnection and context, is the materialist conception of history. The central contention here is that processes of historical change are ultimately a reflection of the economic development of society. That is, economic development is effectively the motor of history. The central dynamic that Marx identifies is tension between the **means of production** and **relations of production** that together form the economic base of a given society. As the means of production develop, for example through technological advancement, previous relations of production become outmoded, and indeed become fetters restricting the most effective utilization of the new productive capacity. This in turn leads to a process of social change whereby relations of production are transformed in order to better accommodate the

new configuration of means. Developments in the economic base act as a catalyst for the broader transformation of society as a whole. This is because, as Marx argues in the Preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 'the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general' (Marx 1970 [1859]: 20–1). Thus the legal, political, and cultural institutions and practices of a given society reflect and reinforce—in a more or less mediated form—the pattern of power and control in the economy. It follows logically, therefore, that change in the economic base ultimately leads to change in the 'legal and political superstructure'. (For a diagrammatical representation of the base–superstructure model, see Fig. 8.1.) The relationship between the base and superstructure is one of the key areas of discussion in Marxism, and for critics of Marxist approaches. A key contribution to this debate has been the work of Historical Sociologists inspired by the work of Max Weber (see Box 8.1).

Class plays a key role in Marxist analysis. In contrast to liberals, who believe that there is an essential harmony of interest between various social groups,

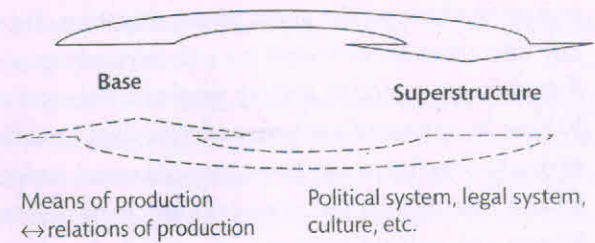


Figure 8.1 The base-superstructure model

Marxists hold that society is systematically prone to class conflict. Indeed, in the *Communist Manifesto*, which Marx co-authored with Engels, it is argued that 'the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle' (Marx and Engels 1967). In capitalist society, the main axis of conflict is between the bourgeoisie (the capitalists) and the proletariat (the workers).

Despite his commitment to rigorous scholarship, Marx did not think it either possible or desirable for the analyst to remain a detached or neutral observer of this great clash between capital and labour. He argued that 'philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it'. Marx

Box 8.1 Historical sociology

As we have seen, one of the key debates in Marxism concerns the relationship between the base and superstructure. Traditionally, Marxists have focused attention on the base, seeing the elements of the superstructure as a reflection of economic relations. At its most forceful, this is often viewed as 'economic determinism'—the view that social relations (e.g. law, politics) can be directly correlated from the underlying mode of production. Frankfurt School critical theorists and neo-Gramscian scholars have relaxed this view, focusing their analysis on the superstructure, and its role in maintaining the economic base.

Another way of thinking about these issues is to consider the work of historical sociologists. The term 'historical sociology' is somewhat daunting and potentially misleading. In essence it means an approach to the study of the social world that draws on history as the main source of evidence. Historical sociologists are interested in the ways in which social life changes over time, and attempt to provide explanations for those changes. As an example, Theda Skocpol's book, *States and Social Revolution* (1979), attempted to develop a theory of revolution, and then drew on the examples of the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions to confirm her analysis.

Historical sociology comes in many different forms (see Hobden and Hobson 2002), one of which is Marxism itself, having as it does a theory of history. However, in international relations, the term has become synonymous with the work of what are termed neo-Weberian scholars. These writers came to the attention of international relations theorists because of their

interest in international relations; their analysis of social change, in particular state formation, provided a more nuanced account than that suggested by realism. For example, part of Skocpol's theoretical analysis argues that it was inter-state relations (e.g. involvement in war) that contributed to a revolutionary outcome, and influenced the outcome of revolutions. Likewise, Charles Tilly (1975; see also Tilly 1992), in his analysis of state development, drew a direct link between war and state-making with his claim that 'war made the state and the state made war'.

Perhaps the most influential of the neo-Weberians has been Michael Mann. His major work, *The Sources of Social Power* (1986; 1993), attempts a rewriting of global history through the lens of a multicausal approach to social change. Whereas Marxists see the main explanation of social change at an economic level, Mann argues that there are four types of social power: ideology, economic, military, and political (often shortened to IEMP). Rather than arguing that one source of social power is more significant (as Marxists do), Mann argues that different sources of social power have been more significant in different historical epochs. For example, Mann argues that in recent centuries economic power has been significant, whereas in the past ideological power (particularly religion) has been more important. Furthermore, the sources of social power can amalgamate to give different combinations. Pre-guessing Mann, one might argue that, given the increasing significance of religion in international politics, economics and ideology are the leading sources of social power in the current era.