Marx’s Conflict Based View of Society

It appears from the selected readings that, in part, Marx set out to advance a new theoretical approach to the study of society and social change. His point of comparison seems to be Hegel and other German philosophers who viewed society as a single entity with purposive action toward change. Marx centers his approach around conflict, emphasizing change through a dialectical process. Additionally, he sees human development as being driven by historical materialism; “every succeeding generation finds itself in possession of the productive forces acquired by the previous generation, which serve it as the raw material for new production, … Hence it necessarily follows that the social history of men is never anything but the history of their individual development, … Their material relations are the basis of all their relations” (137).

We saw the idea of conflict as imperative to Marx’s theoretical agenda. Specifically, it is the conflict between the material productive forces of society and the existing relations of production which lead to social revolution, creating upheaval in the economic foundation (or base) which in turn transforms the legal, political, religious, and cultural “superstructure” (5). It is through this lens of conflict that Marx analyzes concepts like alienation, the division of labor and class struggle, the mode of production and ideology.

Marx thought of private property as something from which society needed to be emancipated, as it resulted in the alienation of labor. Alienation from the product of one’s labor meant for Marx estrangement from oneself and from nature. As a result, the
product of labor was something alien and hostile, exercising power over man and forcing him into service of another. Marx saw private property as reducing one to absolute poverty “in order that he might yield his inner wealth for the outer world” (87). For Marx, man’s social being determined his consciousness, his consciousness did not determine his being (4). Thus, workers, alienated from the product of their labor were estranged also from themselves, reduced to viewing their labor as a commodity to be sold. In fact, whether wages were paid or not, Marx argued that the worker was in essence a slave to the owners of the means of production; if the product of labor did not belong to the worker, it must belong to another. If the worker’s activity was torment for him, another must delight in it (78).

It is through man’s relation to others that his relation to himself becomes objective and real (78). Therefore, if the product of man’s labor was alien and hostile to him, then his relationship to the master of the object – the owner of the means of production – must also be alien and hostile. But it is through this conflict that the seeds of struggle and revolution are born. Marx held out hope that man could be emancipated, that new ideas could be constructed through everyday activities and social interactions, which would in turn lead to changed consciousness and thus changed being.

The relationship of production to society features centrally in Marx’s analyses, and he examines this too through a lens of conflict-induces change. Relations of production constitute the economic structure of society, which is, in turn, the foundation on which rests political and legal superstructures and their corresponding forms of social consciousness (4). He also posits that the beginnings of social revolution result from evolutions in the material productive forces of society (which run afoul of existing modes
of production) (5). In Marx’s estimation, social revolution and social change only proceed the installation of newer modes of production that can already support them. He writes, “mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve […] it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist, or are at least in the process of formation” (5). Thus, any social movement must necessarily begin with a revolutionizing of relations of production and economy, regardless of the nature of the social result desired.

Marx critiques other thinkers for failing to see the centrality of production in social forces and the significance of historical context and its evolution over time. He cites M. Proudhon for his failure to differentiate man’s inability to let go of “things” for what Marx sees as man’s natural ability to relinquish outdated social forms, when they no longer correspond to workable modes of production (137). Marx continues by discussing social forms as “historical and transitory,” shifting with contemporary modes of production, no more eternal than they at any moment in time (140).

Central to relations of production, in Marx’s analysis, is the division of labor and class struggle. Class struggle is an important element of Marx’s conflict theory. In Marx’s analysis, two classes are in a continuous struggle, diametrically opposed to one another. The antagonism between the two classes is vital, because class struggle is a necessary precursor to the revolution that Marx considers essential for the liberation of man. Marx elaborates: “for a popular revolution and the emancipation of a particular class of civil society to coincide, for one class to represent the whole of society, another class must concentrate in itself all the evils of society” (63). The class that represents the society is the proletariat. As Marx describes it, the proletariat is derived from all classes
(480), who are not in control of their own labor or production. It is the bourgeoisie that encapsulates all that is evil in society. Marx goes into great detail on this point in *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, but one point that is important to this discussion is the fact this conflict has always existed, that “With its birth [the proletariat] begins its struggle with the bourgeoisie” (480).

The differences between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are multitudinous but there are is one important difference that involves the division of labor. In this respect, the bourgeoisie may be referred to as the non-workers, while the proletariat consists of the workers. For the proletariat, their labor is not their own; instead, it is controlled by the bourgeoisie. In essence, the proletariat, or the worker, is estranged from his own labor, as Marx states: “Estrangement is manifested… in the fact that my means of life belong to someone else, that my desire is the inaccessible possession of another…” (100). The consequence of this is that the proletariat does not control its own labor, in fact, they are alienated from the outcomes, or products, of their own labor, as that is controlled by the bourgeoisie.

The bourgeoisie does not only control labor, it also, controls the prevalent ideas in society. Marx posits, “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.” (172). The ruling ideas, he goes on to explain, are the conceptual expressions of the dominant material relationships in a particular historical moment. All that the ruling individuals possess becomes a part of their rule and dominance. The ruling individuals possess their own thoughts and ideas, so those, too, naturally become tools and expressions of their rule. They regulate the production and distribution of ideas, just as they regulate the production and distribution of capital.
This conception of ideas as tools and expressions of the dominant class holds within it Marx’s notion of classes embroiled in conflict. Marx also applies the lens of conflict when looking at the division of labor within a ruling class. The ruling class is divided into thinkers, or professional ideologists, and producers of material goods. While this division does not threaten the class itself, the split between these two sub-units of the ruling class does generate opposition and hostility.

When Marx describes the manner in which ideas become dominant, his language becomes much more explicitly focused on conflict. His language and imagery is not only conflict-laden; it is the language of physical battle: “Just as philosophy finds its material weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its intellectual weapons in philosophy. And once the lightning of thought has penetrated deeply into this virgin soil of the people, the Germans will emancipate themselves and become men.” (65). For Marx, the conflict that is omnipresent in society is emotional, mental, and physical. So, the impending revolution will not only involve weapons; it will also involve ideas, and a change in the physical conditions of man.

Each time a new class prepares to revolt against the ruling class, Marx argues, the new class must position its ideas as being in the greater societal interest. The new class is able to successfully position its ideas in this way by gathering its ideas under the banner of universality. For Marx, this equation of ruling classes with ruling ideas is necessarily and obviously linked to his vision of a conflict-driven society. When society is no longer characterized by the domination of one class by the other, there is no longer a need to represent particular ideas as being in the general interest.