CHAPTER 2
IN MARX'S WAKE: THEORIES OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

This chapter is an important one because it reviews many of the major theoretical perspectives on social stratification and social inequality.

This chapter examines theories of structural functionalism, Marxism, conflict perspectives, and the power elite.

Making Sense of the World

A **sociological theory** is a combination of observations and insights providing a systematic explanation of social life.

Structural Functionalism and Talcott Parsons

structural functionalism – is a sociological perspective which suggest that groups in interaction tend to adjust to one another in a fairly stable, conflict-free way.

Talcott Parsons, author of *The Social System,* emphasized that the system was stable, in equilibrium. He contended that change, conflict, social stratification, and social inequality were not the prominent concerns of the system.

Structural Functionalism and Davis and Moore

Another example of the structural functionalist perspective is one put forward by **Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore.** They argue that conflict is inevitable and necessary. They assert that there are positions that require special ability or training. Because the individuals qualified to do these jobs are in short supply they are paid more to encourage more people into these occupations.

PEARSON

Conflict Perspective and Melvin Tumin

Countering Davis and Moore's position is **Melvin Tumin**. He argued that although there may be positions that pay more because they require special talent or training, but that there are also positions that do not require special ability or training that may pay more as well as those that require special ability or training that do not pay well.

Conflict Perspective

conflict theory – a perspective asserting that the struggle for wealth, power, and prestige in society should be the central concern of sociology.

Conflict Perspective and Karl Marx

Marxism – a theory that focuses on capitalism. It is founded on the relationship to the means of production between two important classes – the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

➢ **bourgeoisie** – the owners of the means of production
➢ **proletariat** – the workers who do not own the means of production

Two of the other classes used by Marx and others like Erik Olin Wright include: the **lumpenproletariat** (the "dregs" of society) and the **petit bourgeoisie** (small business owners).

Marxist Concepts

Capitalism uses powerful **ideologies** (complex of values and beliefs that support a society's social-stratification systems and their distribution of wealth, income, and power) like **false consciousness** to keep the proletariat from perceiving, and thus challenging, the prevailing unequal system.

Marx advocated a system of **socialism** which would replace capitalism. Socialism is an economic system in which the proletariat controls the means of production and the distribution of profits.

PEARSON

Conflict Perspective and Max Weber

Max Weber's (*pronounced Mahx Vehber*) theory focused on three core concepts: class, status, and party.

     class – a set of individuals with similar chances for gaining income and wealth in the business world. Class ranking is based on people's production and acquisition of goods

     status – an estimation of a person's honor or prestige. Status groups are communities in which members share a broadly similar lifestyle. Membership in status groups derives from the consumption of goods, which promotes distinctive lifestyles.

Conspicuous consumption involves spending money on high-priced goods and services in order to flaunt one's wealth and show one's status.

Weberian Theory

The third core concept in Weber's theory is party.

     party – parties can represent the interests of either class or status groups, but often they support a combination of both.

Parties exhibit three kinds of authority. **Authority** is power derived from a person's location within an organization or structure.

Core Concepts

The three kinds of authority are:

> **bureaucratic** – a structure that systematically administers the tasks controlling an organization's operation

> **traditional** – a system is usually patriarchal, with the dominant individual, whether a husband, father, master, chieftain, lord, or king, maintaining legitimacy based on established belief. It is a situation in which the rules are sacred, with violation leading to anger and perhaps violent reaction

> **charismatic** – an individual who pursues a mission driven by a powerful sense of divine purpose and draws followers who are committed to that mission

The Power Elite and C. Wright Mills

C. Wright Mills argues that there is a group of upper-class men who receive special privileges and have the background and contacts to enter the three branches of the power elite.

The "power elite" involves three key groups:

> **political leadership**
> **military circle**
> **corporate elite**

The power elite has an "inner core" composed of individuals able to move from one institutional area of power to another.

Core Concepts

Interlocking directorates is a formal connection between corporations when officers from different companies serve on each other's boards.

The companies are thus "interlocked" (interconnected) and have shared interests which are beneficial to these companies but which can be extremely problematic for smaller, less powerful companies which do not have these interlocking relationships.

The Power Elite and William Domhoff

William Domhoff found that individuals who belong to the "power elite" often have memberships in **elite organizations and social clubs**. This provides them with greater access to other individuals with power. All of this helps those in power to maintain their positions in society by building social capital.

According to Domhoff, the process starts in exclusive prep schools, then moves on to elite colleges and universities, and finally involves upper-class clubs. The **Business Roundtable** and the **Bohemian Club** are two such examples of these clubs. As prospective members of the power elite go through school and then into the world of work, they develop fruitful friendships and business relationships with individuals similar to themselves.

The Power Elite and Thomas Dye

Thomas Dye, in his examination of the power elite, concluded that these individuals have certain similar characteristics related to age, gender, ethnicity, education, and social club membership. In essence, they tend to be well-educated, prestigiously employed, older, affluent, urban, white, Anglo-Saxon, upper-class and upper-middle-class males.