CHAPTER ONE

KARL MARX (1818–1883)

KEY CONCEPTS

- capitalism
- bourgeoisie
- inequality
- mode of production
- means of production
- proletariat
- private property
- exploitation
- historical materialism
- class relations
- class consciousness
- dialectical materialism
- communism
- subsistence
- species being
- capital
- profit
- use value
- commodification of labor power
- false consciousness
- surplus value
- exchange value
- division of labor
- alienated labor
- alienation from products
- objectification
- alienation in the production process
- alienation from our species being
- alienation of individuals from one another
- standpoint of the proletariat
- ideology
- fetishism of commodities
- superstructure
- economic base
- ruling class
- ruling ideas

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CHAPTER MENU

Timeline 1.1	Major events spanning Marx's lifetime (1818–1883)
1818	First steamship (the *Savannah*) to cross the Atlantic Ocean, taking 26 days
1819	British Factory Act prohibiting employment of children under 9 in the cotton industry; and 12-hour days for those ages 10–16
1821	US population: 9.6 million
1830	Revolution in France, fall of Charles X and Bourbons
1833	Britain abolishes slavery in its empire
1837	US Congress passes a "gag" law to suppress debate on slavery
1840	Railway-building boom in Europe
1841	First university degrees granted to women in America
1842	Depression and poverty in England
1842	British Mines Act forbids underground employment for women and girls and sets up inspectorate to supervise boy labor
1843	Skiing becomes a sport
1845	Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*
1845	Florida and Texas gain statehood
1846	Height of potato famine in Ireland
1848	Revolutions against monarchy/aristocracy in Europe (Paris, Berlin, Prague, Budapest)
1848	Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*
1848	California Gold Rush
1850	Sydney University established
1854	Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*
1859	Peaceful picketing during a strike legalized in Britain
1862	Abraham Lincoln issues Emancipation Proclamation declaring slaves free
1862	Lincoln issues the first legal US paper money
1862	Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*
1866	National Labor Union (crafts union) established in the US
1867	Marx, *Capital* (*Das Kapital*)
1871	Trade Union Act in Britain secures legal status for trade unions, but picketing illegal
1872	Penny-farthing bicycle in general use
1876	Alexander Graham Bell invents the telephone
1877	US railroad strike; first major industrial dispute in US
1879	Thomas Edison produces incandescent electric light
1882	Standard Oil Company controls 95 percent of US oil-refining capacity

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Karl Marx was born in Germany (in Prussia, in 1818) into a middle-class family and completed several years of university education studying law, history, languages, and philosophy. Rather than pursue an academic career, Marx turned to journalism and devoted his attention to business and economics, writing about labor conditions during this era of rapid industrialization. The year 1848 was the "Year of Revolutions" in Europe, as workers and ordinary people rebelled against the ruling monarchies in Germany, Italy, Austria, Hungary, and France. Marx himself had participated in the German revolutionary movement, and that same year he and Friedrich Engels published their famous treatise *The Communist Manifesto*. Marx was expelled from Germany and subsequently also from France because of his revolutionary views. He eventually settled in England in 1849, with his German wife, Jenny von Westphalen. For many years subsequently, they and their six children suffered abject poverty, relying on money from Engels and small fees from Marx's political articles for the American radical newspaper the *New York Daily Tribune*. He died in 1883, predeceased by his wife and three of their children (Kimmel 2007: 170; Tucker 1978: xvii).

Marx's Writings

1844a: "Alienation and Social Classes," ASC
1844b: *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, EPM
1846: *The German Ideology* (with Engels), GI
1847: *Wage Labour and Capital*, WLC
1848: *The Communist Manifesto* (with Engels), CM
1852: "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," Bru
1858: *The Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Gru
1859: "Preface to 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,'" Preface
1867: *Capital* (*Das Kapital*), Cap

EXPANSION OF CAPITALISM

When you hear the name **Karl Marx**, it is tempting to wonder why you should be studying his ideas. Marx has been dead for almost 150 years, and communism, the political and social system with which his theoretical vision is associated, has all but disappeared around the world. The dominant communist power of the twentieth century, the Soviet Union, collapsed – an event captured literally by the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. Today, the largest ex-Soviet republic, Russia, has fully embraced **capitalism**, crystallized by the development of shopping malls even in Siberia and by the expanding global economic reach of Russian billionaire oligarchs, whose ostentatious wealth was foregrounded when Western governments seized their superyachts and sprawling Western properties as one of a number of punitive economic sanctions in response to Russia's aggressive invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Even more impressively, capitalism has exponentially expanded in China (see Topic 1.1), and the country occupies a pivotal role in the global economy both as a manufacturer and supplier of consumer goods, including technology chips, and – with a population of 1.4 billion people – consumers eager to avail of the latest products in the global market.

Lest you think that this capitalist expansion is a reason not to study Marx, you might be surprised to know that Marx, in fact, predicted it:

> The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the **bourgeoisie** [the capitalist ownership class] over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere … The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most [under-developed], nations into civilization. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the… intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image. (CM 83–84)[1]

Thus writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Marx envisioned today's global economy! The expansion of capitalism and its need to have bigger and bigger global markets for its commodities create capitalist societies whose progress is defined by the extent of their bourgeois capitalist culture. These societies must continuously adapt to meet the demands of capitalism by producing commodities for domestic and global consumption. Hence, the expansion of Western capitalism has created a globalizing capitalist world in which consumer goods are the common global cultural currency, a theme I discuss further in chapter 15.

Topic 1.1 Contemporary China: Consumer capitalism in a state-controlled society

The successful Summer Olympics in Beijing, China, in 2008 showcased a highly modern and resourceful city well able to blend old cultural traditions with hypermodern architecture and technologically sophisticated art. The Olympics provided the world with a bright look at the new China as it weaves together authoritarian state control and, since the 1980s, core elements of market capitalism. Today, China is the new global juggernaut, the world's second largest economy (after the United States). A Chinese company, for example, owns Volvo (the quintessential European/Swedish car) and another bought Club Med, originally a French company, with beach resorts dotted primarily across the Caribbean and other sites (e.g., Morocco, Brazil). With over one billion Internet users, rising personal incomes, and an expanding middle class, there is booming demand within China for such staples of capitalist consumption as cars, real estate, the latest household appliances, and imported fresh oysters (from New Zealand), fresh blueberries (from Chile), and fresh tulips (from the Netherlands). Consumer demand for personal technology items is intense, making China the fastest growing market for Apple products. China's own technology companies are also rapidly growing. Alibaba, one of China's largest Internet, e-commerce, and social media titans, has more sales than Amazon and eBay combined, and it can track the spending habits of more than 450 million customers through its popular phone-pay app. Chinese online consumer spending is strong and is expected to continue rapid growth, especially in entertainment, beauty and hygiene products, travel, and dining (Lin 2017a). Chinese tourism to destinations outside of China is increasingly popular and will be further accelerated by Alibaba's new travel-service website, a joint venture with the US Marriott hotel chain, already well-known in China where it owns over 600 hotels (Lin 2017b).

More than 87 percent of Chinese families own or partially own property, and more than one-tenth own more than one property (Wong 2013: A9). Income inequality is a growing problem: households in the top 5 percent income bracket earn a quarter of all China's household income (Wong 2013: A9). Many of China's super-rich families send their children abroad to study – to the US, Vancouver (Canada), and England (e.g., Fan 2016) – and their affluent lifestyles, whether abroad or at home, contrast starkly with the lives of China's middle class and especially the poor. Despite the strong-armed and well-funded domestic security forces that police everyday life, labor and political unrest in China are increasingly common. In 2017, for example, there were about 600 strikes or protests by blue-collar workers (The Economist 2017b). During China's three-year Covid lockdown (2020–2022), public protests erupted across many Chinese cities, and labor unrest has resurged post-pandemic (Hawkins 2023).

CAPITALISM AS STRUCTURED INEQUALITY

Many people across the world enjoy the wide range of consumer goods made available by capitalism. Cubans, for example, take a 13-hour flight to Moscow not to visit the Kremlin but to "bring back bags of jeans, haberdashery and car parts to a Communist island starved of consumer goods" (Kurmanaev and Sharoyan 2017). (Miami is closer, just 300 miles, but US border restrictions are an impediment to Cuban visitors/shoppers.) Marx, however, emphasizes the cost of capitalism: the **inequality** that inheres in it. Capitalism is one way of organizing production to meet the needs of our existence; it is the **mode of production** that characterizes the organization of society. From a long historical perspective, capitalism is not the only mode of production known to society; medieval Europe (for approximately 500 years, from 1000 to 1490), for example, was characterized by a feudal mode of production whereby serfs worked and cultivated the land of medieval lords, who, in turn, assumed responsibility for the everyday welfare of the serfs and their families.

Capitalism is a mode of production based on unequal private ownership of the means of production (in contrast, for example, to state ownership in socialist societies, e.g., North Korea). Under capitalism, a minority of capitalists, the bourgeoisie, own and monopolize the **means of production**, that is, property – land, oil wells, railroads, factories, corporations, technology, and increasingly today, intellectual property (including computer algorithms). Company owners and executives (the bourgeoisie) accumulate profit based on the labor of employees. The employees are the **proletariat**, the wageworkers who must work hard to meet production demands in factories, farms, mines, corporate offices, and in the service industry, and who through their work produce commodities, including material goods, hospitality, information, computer software, that are sold by the capitalists for profit. In turn, capitalists use this profit to expand their ownership of **private property** (including financial capital) while the propertyless workers – like restaurant servers and hotel housekeepers) – continue to toil for minimal wages.

As Marx argued, this **exploitation** maintains the ever-growing economic and social gap between capitalists and workers. Indeed, Britain's (ex-)Prime Minister Theresa May acknowledged the severity of this gap in announcing her candidacy for leadership of the Conservative Party in 2016. She declared that the wage gap between employers and workers is "irrational, unhealthy, and growing." Such inequality, however, is inherent in capitalism; according to Marx, it is both necessary to, and a consequence of, capitalism's profit accumulation logic. And, as we see, whether in advanced capitalist economies such as the United Kingdom, the E.U., or North America, or in developing capitalist economies, the gap continues to grow (e.g., Pew Research Center 2020).

MARX'S THEORY OF HISTORY

Marx understands history as the progressive expansion of the material or economic forces in society, that is, in the advances made by societies in organizing their material production (e.g., agriculture, manufacturing, services). Marx's theory is referred to as **historical materialism** because he focuses on the material (economic) conditions in society and on how these conditions determine social structures and social relations. As elaborated by Marx's intellectual collaborator, Friedrich Engels,

> The materialist conception of history starts from the proposition that the production of the means to support human life and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure; that in every society that has happened in history, the manner in which wealth is distributed and society divided into classes or orders is dependent upon what is produced, how it is produced, and how the products are exchanged. (Engels 1878/1978: 700–701)

History, Marx emphasizes, does not simply evolve independently of individuals and of the objective social relations (e.g., unequal **class relations**) that condition their lives. Rather, Marx argues that historical change, that is, change in the material conditions of society and in how economic-social relations are organized, emerges out of the perceived *contradictions* in existing economic and social arrangements. Thus, in Revolutionary France, the bourgeoisie overthrew the despotism of feudal monarchs and the aristocracy to create progressive economic and social institutions grounded in democratic principles (see Introduction).

As part of a similar historical logic, Marx predicted that the expansion of capitalism with its endless pursuit of profit, would lead to its downfall. Capitalism produces economic crises that threaten its very foundations. These crises include recessions; the collapse of stock markets; severe financial losses for banks, companies, and households; inflation; high levels of unemployment; worker unrest; and the ongoing depletion of natural resources. Marx argued that these recurring crises would create polarized class antagonisms (between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat). They would also lead the working class to develop a **class consciousness**: individual wageworkers would come to recognize that their exploitation is part of the mass exploitation of all wageworkers, and that such exploitation is inherent in the structural organization of capitalism. Class consciousness would propel the working class to revolt against capitalism. Thus, in Marx's construal, the downfall of capitalism is contingent on both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie, through their constant efforts to expand capitalist markets, sow the seeds of their own downfall and of capitalism's destruction; they are its "grave-diggers" (CM 94). And the proletariat is the "revolutionary class" – the "special and essential product" of modern industrial society (CM 91) – the class that would develop the revolutionary consciousness that would lead to the overthrow of capitalism and usher in new societal arrangements. We saw a glimmer of revolutionary potential in the United States in the 1920s with the rise of the antiestablishment Anarchist Party and a surge in labor union protests against factory owners. This disruption was relatively short lived, however, dampened in part by the social-democratic New Deal policies of the Roosevelt government that provided economic benefits to those hardest hit by the Depression. More recently, the Occupy Wall Street movement and the Occupy groups it spawned in various US, European, and Asian cities is another example of an attempt to disrupt capitalism (see chapter 14). It is hard, however, for these actions to gain political momentum due, as Marx also recognized, to the overarching economic and ideological constraints that impede the overthrow of capitalism (discussed later in this chapter).

Despite the ongoing crises that capitalism produces, it has also evolved in ways that Marx did not anticipate, and these developments mitigate against its (predicted) downfall. One, Marx assumed that the expansion of capital and profit accumulation would also require the expansion of the proletariat (i.e., that more laborers are needed to produce more commodities), which would produce a subsequent increase in workers' mass association and unionization (CM 89–90). Two, he assumed that the expanding proletariat would remain poor (CM 87–88) and thus would be further motivated to revolt against the capitalists. These conditions did not occur. Technological advances have made commodity production less contingent on manual labor than Marx anticipated, and while there is persistent poverty and substantial class inequality in well-developed capitalist societies such as the United States (e.g., Desmond 2023), the working class is relatively well off (Kochhar and Sechopoulos 2022). Wageworkers avail themselves of many of the economic and consumer opportunities in society: The shopping mall has become an equalizer of sorts, because we can all (more or less) go shopping. Thus, the working class, like the capitalist class, has a major stake in the ongoing success of capitalism. I explore the reasons for this in a later section of this chapter when I discuss ideology.

DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM

For Marx, history does not progress smoothly. Rather, "revolution is the driving force of history" (GI 29). Each historical-economic epoch (e.g., slave society, feudalism, capitalism) is characterized by tensions or contradictions. Change emerges only when these contradictions, and the social forces and relations that reproduce these contradictions, are exposed and then ruptured through social revolution. Marx's view of history emphasizes how the human-created economic conditions at a given historical moment give rise to specific economic and social practices. These practices motivate particular groups (like Occupy Wall Street) to challenge the unequal conditions of their existence, and such activism opens the possibility for the emergence of new economic conditions and social relations.

This historical process, for Marx, is **dialectical materialism**. "Dialectic" derives from the Greek word *dialegein*, meaning "to argue." Philosophers from Plato to Hegel used its method to draw out the contradictions in the logic used in intellectual ideas. Dialectical method does not outline a linear argument. It instead works back and forth like a pendulum: posing a thesis, followed by its antithesis, and the integration of the two into a synthesis. Marx emphasized the importance of focusing on *real* history, that is, the history not of ideas but of "the production of material life itself" (GI 16). And he used "dialectical materialism" to convey the human-social activity involved in the historical transformation of contradictory or antithetical economic forces and relations. In this framing, existing material conditions (e.g., capitalist class inequality – the thesis) would produce opposition to the status quo (class revolution – the antithesis), which in turn ushers in a new economic system (communism – the synthesis). In an earlier historical transformation, slave-based economies gave way to feudalism with indentured peasants only to be superseded by capitalism with its rising middle class of small shop owners.

Although the dialectic sounds complicated, we basically see a dialectical process in the regular cycle of democratic electoral politics. In the modern United States, for example, no one political party has dominated the White House for more than 12 years, partly because when Republicans are in power, their policies (thesis) eventually produce a backlash (antithesis) among the electorate that contributes to the Democrats gaining power. Once in power, Democrats deal with the new reality created by Republican policies and thus modify their own agenda, producing new policies (synthesis), which, after creating a temporary balance, lead eventually to disaffection among the electorate, who then return the Republicans to power; and the back-and-forth cycle of adjustment and change continues. Though there are more than two parliamentary parties in the United Kingdom, a largely similar dynamic occurs with a back-and-forth swing in whether the Conservative or the Labour Party are in government. For Marx, dialectical materialism means that historical change (i.e., material/economic change) is the result of conscious human activity, which is conditioned by economic forces. Human conscious activity emerges from specific material/economic conditions, and as human consciousness acts upon those conditions and their contradictions, it produces a new form of social existence:

> History is nothing but the succession of separate generations, each of which exploits the materials, the forms of capital, the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding ones, and thus on the one hand, continues the traditional activity in completely changed circumstances, and on the other, modifies the old circumstances with completely changed activity … It shows that circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances. (GI 38, 29)

COMMUNISM

In Marx's historical-evolutionary analysis, **communism** is the type of society that would emerge following the overthrow of capitalism. He did not outline a blueprint of how the transition to communist society would be worked out or how communism would be organized. And indeed, the economic and social realities both in the late nineteenth century and today make the practical imagining of such a society an excessively hypothetical exercise. For Marx, what was important was that the transcendence of capitalism would produce a society characterized by the abolition of private property/capital, profit, social classes, and the division of labor (e.g., between owners and workers, and among workers). All these concepts have very particular meanings in Marx's analysis and need to be understood in terms of his construal of human/social existence, as I elaborate later. But in essence, the logic of material production in communist society would be based on individual/social needs and talents rather than profit accumulation. It would require each person to contribute their creativity and labor to the everyday economic and social good of the community based on their diverse, multifaceted abilities. Communism would deprive

> no man of the power to appropriate the products of society: all that it does is to deprive him of the power to subjugate the labour of others by means of such appropriation … In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association [a community] in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. (CM 99, 105)

In contrast, therefore, to the unequal relations of capitalist production between owners and wageworkers, there would be equality between people (no one would be particularly rich or poor). This would end the structural conflict that inheres in capitalism: The asymmetrical division between the property-owning bourgeoisie and the property-less proletariat. Marx outlined this vision in *The Communist Manifesto*. Labor, he argued, would "no longer be converted into capital, money, or rent, into a social power capable of being monopolized" (CM 98). Instead, all individuals would be entitled to "appropriate the products of society" (CM 99), because the division of labor, private property, profit, and class inequality would disappear (CM 104–105; GI 21–23).

Consequently, communism would represent the "end of history," so to speak; it would mark the end of the periodic historical ruptures from ancient times, through the slave-owning Roman and Classical epoch (from 500 BCE to AD 999), the Feudal Age (1000 to 1490), and through the various stages of capitalism. In communist society – that is, a society in which the division of labor, private property, profit, and inequality would be eliminated, no one class (e.g., slave owners, feudal lords, capitalists) would control the means of production (e.g., slaves, land, capital). Consequently, there would be no more tensions and contradictions to resolve, and the dialectic or pendulum of history (dialectical materialism) would come to a stop.

Marx's theoretical vision of communism, therefore, would entail the emancipation not only of the working class but of all people: Communism represents "universal human emancipation" (EPM 82). Thus: "All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interests of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority" (CM 92). It would produce a society wherein each person would have rights and responsibilities toward the maintenance of their shared material and social existence. Clearly, Marx's emancipatory principles have never been realized, especially in societies that are often referred to as communist. Rather, the Soviet Union and North Korea, for example, epitomize political oppression and economic and social inequality.

THE MILLENNIUM'S GREATEST THINKER

Capitalism has not collapsed and yielded to communism (or has not *yet* collapsed, as contemporary Marxists who have not ruled out its possible downfall might aver; e.g., Wallerstein; see chapter 14). Nevertheless, Marx's analysis provides an insightful critique of capitalism's structures and processes and how they work in the production of inequality. Capitalism has changed a lot over the past several decades, and especially since the late 1990s, propelled by the rise of Internet technology and wide-ranging globalizing forces. Today's capitalist structures are much more complex than they were in the mid- to late nineteenth century when Marx was writing. And there was a lot more economic and social deprivation and industrial strife than we see today in Western societies. Just think of America or England in the 1890s when child labor was a normal part of everyday life, a theme vividly portrayed in Charles Dickens's novels.

Despite the changes that have occurred over the last century, Marx's ideas continue to provide a highly salient lens for analyzing the many ways capitalism infuses everyday life. Even the highly influential *Economist* magazine, an active proponent of free-market capitalism, stated in May 2017 that "there is an enormous amount to learn from Marx. Indeed, much of what Marx said seems to become more relevant by the day" (2017a: 52). Appreciation for Marx's influence is also seen in British public opinion, which at the end of the twentieth century resoundingly favored Marx as the "millennium's greatest thinker," followed by Einstein, Newton, and Darwin.

The logic of capitalism is not restricted to just one domain of activity such as the economy or paid work. It also pervades sports, medicine, education, Hollywood, politics, and even romance and marriage. We can enjoy living in a capitalist society and the freedoms associated with capitalism, most especially the freedom to shop. But while reading Marx, we have to step back from our complete immersion in capitalism and all that we take for granted about how society is organized. Instead, we begin to critique it, probing beneath surface appearances to discern the multiple ways in which capitalism matters in daily life. It makes us probe, for example, why hotel housekeepers receive low wages for their labor (see Introduction), whereas many chief executive officers (CEOs) receive multimillion-dollar yearly salaries and bonuses. For example, the median pay for CEOs at the biggest US companies in 2022 was $22.3 million. Apple CEO Tim Cook earned $99.42 million, while Peloton CEO Barry McCarthy earned $168.07 million.

HUMAN NATURE

Marx's view of human nature is frequently misunderstood. Because Marx is critical of the inequality structured in capitalist society, people who have not studied him tend to think he is opposed to work. This is far from true. Marx, in fact, has a very positive view of work, of labor. Indeed, he saw the individual's productive skills as integral to what it means to be human. Through work, the ability to work with and transform nature, individuals demonstrate the higher consciousness of the human species. In *The German Ideology*, Marx celebrates those traits that are distinctively human:

> The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature … Man can be distinguished from animals by consciousness … [Humans] begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of **subsistence** [their livelihood]. (GI 7)

By creatively working with and transforming their physical-natural environment to produce a livelihood, individuals working together "are indirectly producing their actual material life" (GI 7). The creativity in producing material life – our actual physical, economic, and social existence – is something that whole populations have necessarily shown throughout history. The ability to adapt to and make use of the physical and material resources in any given environment is exclusive to the human species. Engagement in this process of transforming nature is integral to what Marx calls our **species being** (our humanity). We don't just perform basic bodily functions (e.g., eating, sleeping, procreating); we also creatively work in and on our physical and social environment and adapt it to our needs (for food, tools, education, entertainment, etc.).

The activities individuals do in order to live and in order to reproduce their mode of existence (their way of life) are what set humans apart from other species. We live with nature and we embrace our natural surroundings. But we also act on nature, and in acting on nature we produce and continually reproduce our means of economic and social life. We transform our natural environment through what we make of it and out of it, that is, what we produce. Marx elaborates:

> The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce … This production … presupposes the intercourse of individuals with one another. (GI 7–8)

MATERIAL AND SOCIAL EXISTENCE INTERTWINED

Through production, we create and recreate a mode of existence that is compatible with who we are as a species. As humans, we are physical beings, but not that alone. Rather, we have a consciousness that makes us aware that we exist in relation to other individuals. As Marx emphasizes, we maintain a social existence by producing material goods and doing so in interaction with other individuals:

> In production men not only act on nature but also on one another. They produce only by co-operating in a certain way and mutually exchanging their activities. In order to produce, they enter into definite connections and relations with one another and only within

> the social connections and relations does their action on nature, does production, take place … Thus the social relations within which individuals produce, the social relations of production, change, are transformed, with the change and development of the material means of production, the productive forces. The relations of production in their totality constitute what are called the social relations, society, and specifically, a society at a definite stage of historical development, a society with a peculiar, distinctive character. (WLC 29–30)

Throughout history, individuals have always existed in relation to other individuals, both physically and socially. As Marx notes, Robinson Crusoe, the exemplar of the lone individual, is a fictional character. In historical fact, there is no Robinson Crusoe. Explorers, settlers, and immigrants have always adapted to their physical surroundings by working collectively to transform them and creating a society in the process. Society is made up of

> real individuals, their [practical] activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity … Life is not determined by consciousness [ideas], but consciousness by life [everyday lived existence]… the real living individuals themselves …not in any fantastic isolation and rigidity, but in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions. (GI 7, 15)

Individuals' material existence, *what* people do in everyday life and *how* they do it, is therefore what matters; it is this "practical activity" (GI 15) that we need to focus on. Existence is not something abstract or philosophical. Questions about the meaning of existence have a place in human thinking, and many of us have some doubts about the meaning of existence (as seen in the novels of e.g., Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus). But Marx is not interested in looking at the *idea* of existence. He wants us to focus on the *actuality* of our existence: the concrete things we do, the living conditions and practices that characterize everyday reality, because through practical activity "definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into … definite social and political relations" (GI 13). Therefore, if we want to understand what is going on in society – the nature of social structures and the forces that drive social relations – we must study the "life-process of definite [real] individuals … [who] produce materially, and are active under definite material limits" (GI 13). This is what sociologists do. We don't philosophize about social life; we go out into society and investigate how real people live in and adapt to definite economic and social contexts.

CAPITALISM AS A DISTINCTIVE SOCIAL FORM

PRIVATE PROPERTY

Marx emphasizes that the notion of private property developed as the world became more populated and more complex in its social organization. Private ownership was the norm in ancient Rome (e.g., ownership of slaves), in the feudal system in medieval

Europe, and it is a core characteristic of capitalism. In capitalist society, ownership of the means of production – of land, oil wells, factories, hotels, financial capital, computer software programs – differentiates the bourgeoisie from the proletariat. It is on this unequal division that the whole system of economic and social relations rests (GI 8–13). Society, therefore, has long been stratified (organized into unequal classes or strata). Inequality is not the result of the transition to capitalism, or the result of industrialized, factory production, and nor is it the result of the emergence of today's digital economy. Rather, inequality has characterized social organization and social relationships from as early as the slave-owning Roman Empire.

THE PRODUCTION OF PROFIT

Marx singled out capitalism for specific critique largely because in his assessment (and in accord with his view of the progressive march of history), capitalism had outlived its usefulness. Although he appreciated the economic and technological advances achieved by capitalism, and recognized it as a progression over previous modes of production (e.g., feudalism), he also emphasized its regressive aspects. In particular, he underscored the fact that capitalism is a system of commodity production. Its fundamental objective is the production of commodities whose sale in the marketplace produces **capital** (money/economic resources), which accumulates as **profit** for the capitalist. The primacy of capital and profit means that the ties among individuals in a capitalist society are purely determined by economic interests. Capitalism requires a mass of individuals who must sell their labor power, and the only relevance wage-workers have for the capitalist is the extent to which they can be used (employed) to produce profit for the capitalist.

This, according to Marx, is what sets capitalist social relations apart from those in ancient Roman or in feudal systems. In Roman society, slavery was common and inequality clearly existed between slaves and masters (and there was also inequality between free men and women). Notwithstanding this inequality, however, slave-masters also had a certain commitment to the welfare of their slaves, as did feudal lords toward their serfs – even if these commitments were driven largely by self-interest. Feudal lords, for example, did not abandon the serfs in times of famine – they felt obliged to still feed them even though the serfs were (temporarily) unable to produce food for the manor.

Conversely, under capitalism, when there is an economic downturn or when profits are in decline, factory owners and corporations fire many of their workers; they downsize and retrench. Thus, Pfizer laid off more than seven thousand workers in Brooklyn, New York, when its profits were hurt by other companies' sales of generic drugs. Notwithstanding any personal regrets that any individual capitalists might have, they are obliged to terminate a worker's employment. This is what "the economy," that is, capitalism requires – typically referred to in everyday conversation as "Wall Street," or "the City" (London's concentrated financial district). By using these terms, we reify capitalism and its financial institutions and processes. This language makes us think of economic processes as if they are *things* separate from and beyond the control of the collective economic and political decision-making of powerful individuals, rather than a product of capitalist structures and social relations (see Marx, CM 97; Cap 83).[2]

Figure 1.1 Walmart, the largest private employer in the United States, is an ever-growing global retail corporation with over 10,000 stores in 27 countries (with ASDA its store name in the United Kingdom). Its employee policies epitomize the low-wage, cost-reduction strategies required by contemporary capitalism. Source: Jonathan Weiss / Alamy Stock Photo.

Capitalism as a system of profit production and profit accumulation requires the factory owner or corporation to maintain economic competitiveness vis-à-vis other companies, and thus to cut production costs (including employees) in order to maintain profitability, its economic viability.

WAGE LABOR: THE COMMODIFICATION OF LABOR POWER

In capitalist society, the capitalists (e.g., owners of capital, land, oil, factories, railroads, banks, technological systems, television networks, etc.), care about workers only insofar as they have **use value**, that is, the extent to which they can be put to use in producing something useful, something that results in producing capital and profit for the capitalists. Marx elaborates: "The capitalist buys labour-power in order to use it; … The purchaser of labour-power consumes it by setting the seller of it to work … on something useful" (Cap 197). Thus, the extent to which use-value converts into capital, into profit, is the criterion determining social relations in a capitalist society. The ties between individuals are based on "naked self-interest," and sentiment and honor are displaced by the only value that matters in a capitalist society, the "callous 'cash payment'" (CM 82). In short, "Show me the money" is the catch-cry informing social relations under capitalism (see Box 1.1).

What is distinctive about capitalism vis-à-vis other historical systems of inequality is that under capitalism, workers are free. This is a mark of progress; workers are not owned by masters, even though historically, slavery was integral to the expansion of capitalism (e.g., Patterson 1982; see chapter 12). In democratic capitalist societies, political and economic freedom tend to be coupled (though there are historical exceptions, such as South African apartheid). The interrelation of economic and political freedom produces the historically unusual circumstance whereby in capitalist societies, free workers (must) sell their labor (their labor power) on the market. And in

Box 1.1 Georg Simmel: The coldness of money

Georg Simmel (1858–1918), another important German figure in the founding of sociology, also wrote about the centrality of money, economic exchange, and how they shape the character of modern society and social relations. For Simmel, monetary transactions reflect and reinforce the coldness, utility, fluidity, and emotional detachment of modern social ties. He used the example of prostitution to illustrate the calculated and impersonal detachment that inheres in monetary exchange relations more generally. He argued that the money transaction allows for "a purely momentary relationship which leaves no traces … for money establishes no ties … Money serves most matter of factually and completely for venal pleasure which rejects any continuation of the relationship beyond sensual satisfaction: money is completely detached from the person and puts an end to any further ramifications. When one pays money one is completely quits, just as one is through with the prostitute after satisfaction is attained … Of all human relationships [prostitution] is perhaps the most significant case of the mutual reduction of two persons to the status of mere means … Money is concerned only with what is common to all, i.e., with the exchange value which reduces all quality and individuality to a purely quantitative level." (Simmel 1903/1950: 326, 1907/1971: 121–122).

doing so, wageworkers themselves become commodities to be bought and sold. Capitalism thus requires and is built upon the **commodification of labor power**. Marx explains,

> what [workers] sell to the capitalist for money is their labor *power*. The capitalist buys this labor power for a day, a week, a month etc. And after he has bought it, he uses it by having the workers work for the stipulated time. For the same sum with which the capitalist has bought their labor power, for example, two marks [German currency], he could have bought two pounds of sugar or a definite amount of any other commodity. The two marks with which he bought two pounds of sugar, are the *price* of the two pounds of sugar. The two marks, with which he bought twelve hours' use of labor power, are the price of twelve hours' labor. Labor power, therefore, is a commodity neither more nor less than sugar. The former is measured by the clock, the latter by the scales. Labor power is, therefore, a commodity which its possessor, the wage worker, sells to capital … Labor power was not always a commodity. Labor was not always wage labor, that is, free labor. The slave did not sell his labor power to the slave owner anymore than the ox sells its services to the peasant. The slave, together with his labor power, is sold once and for all to his owner. He is a commodity which can pass from the hand of one owner to that of another. He is *himself* a commodity, but the labor power is not *his* commodity. The serf sells only a part of his labor power. He does not receive a wage from the owner of the land; rather, the owner of the land receives a tribute from him … The free laborer, on the other hand, sells himself and

> indeed sells himself piecemeal … The worker belongs neither to an owner nor to the land, but eight, ten, twelve, fifteen hours of his daily life belong to him who buys them. (WLC 17–21)

The freedom under capitalism is really an illusion, Marx argues, because in actuality capitalism is a coercive system of labor exploitation. In capitalist societies, the commodities produced are not solely the sorts of things we typically think of, such as manufactured goods, our clothes and food, or information and services. Labor power itself is a commodity. Wageworkers are exchanged and traded on the market and their market value, as with other commodities, is given a price. Unlike slaves and serfs, wageworkers are free to leave a particular employer if they don't like the price they get for their labor or don't like their general working conditions. This freedom, however, is always constrained. The movement of labor especially in today's gig economy may appear to be done freely, but it is in fact required, demanded, and coerced by capitalism (see Topic 1.2). Marx explains:

> The worker leaves the capitalist to whom he hires himself whenever he likes, and the capitalist discharges him whenever he thinks fit, as soon as he no longer gets any profit out of him, or not the anticipated profit. But the worker, whose sole source of livelihood is the sale of his labor power, cannot leave the *whole class of purchasers*, that is, the capitalist class, without renouncing his existence. He belongs not to this or that capitalist but to the *capitalist class*, and, moreover, it is his business to dispose of himself, that is, to find a purchaser within this capitalist class. (WLC 21)

Accordingly, for Marx, wage labor is, essentially, "forced labour" (EPM 74). Whereas slavery is "*direct* forced labour," wage labor is "*indirect* forced labour." Under capitalism, workers are obligated to present their labor power – their usefulness to a prospective employer – as a commodity for sale. Laborers "live only so long as they find work, and … find work only so long as their labour increases capital. These labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market" (CM 87). Wageworkers think they are free – they may even think of themselves as just trying to make a decent living – but the reality is that their labor power is a commodity bought and sold on the market for others' profit accumulation.

> What [a wage-laborer] produces for himself is not the silk that he weaves, not the gold that he draws from the mine, not the palace that he builds. What he produces for himself is wages, and silk, gold, and palace resolve themselves for him into a definite quantity of the means of subsistence, perhaps into a cotton jacket, some copper coins and a lodging in a cellar. And the worker who for twelve hours, weaves, spins, drills, turns, builds, shovels, break stones, carries loads etc., – does he consider this twelve hours' weeding, spinning, drilling, turning, building, shoveling, stone-breaking as a manifestation of his life, as life? On the contrary life begins for him when this activity ceases, at table, in the public house, in bed. The twelve hours labor, on the other hand, has no meaning for him as weaving, spinning, drilling etc., but as *earnings*, which bring them to the table, to the public house, into bed. (WLC 20)

Topic 1.2 The on-demand, gig economy

The rise of what's called the gig economy facilitated by computer apps (e.g., Uber and Lyft ride-hailing services, Airbnb home rentals, GrubHub food delivery, TaskRabbits home-skills service) is changing the organization of work. On the one hand, it gives individuals more control of their schedules; they can make themselves available to drive for Uber or Lyft on days and time slots that suit them (or to rent out a spare bedroom at their convenience). The popularity of these new options means that many workers can supplement their monthly income as Uber drivers, etc., and some even as a full-time job (with enough money to live on, and yet still on their own schedule). The gig economy also encourages worker creativity. You decide what you are good at and what you enjoy, whether driving (e.g., Uber, Lyft), doing light household carpentry work (e.g., TaskRabbits), or minding pets (e.g., Dogvacay), and you opt for that kind of work, rather than being required (coerced) to do tasks that you find boring or restrictive.

Notwithstanding the advantages of the gig economy both for workers (flexibility, creativity, income) and users (efficiency, personalized service), it also has the disadvantages and inequalities that are built into capitalist labor processes more generally (e.g., Schor and Vallas 2021; Wingfield 2021). The sharing economy is still a *competitive* marketplace. Though *you* know what you are good at (or what a beautiful home or bedroom you can rent to a user), the customer ratings of the quality of the work/service you provide, and of your attitude while doing so, will affect whether you become a go-to person for the particular on-demand service. Prospective clients, as they review the online ratings and comments, might choose to give you a miss in favor of another. Similarly, although you can, in principle, set your own schedule, you still need to be available when customers/clients need you/your service. It is, after all, an *on-demand* economy and you must meet that demand, that is, share yourself (and do it well) in order to live, that is, to make enough money for yourself. On-demand also means that your work is contingent on the needs of others, and is therefore more unstable and uncertain than many other jobs, though seasonal (e.g., fruit-pickers) and adjunct (e.g., per-course college lecturers) work is also precarious. Further, because most gig workers are considered "independent contractors" rather than company "employees," they do not get health insurance and sick day benefits from the contracting company (e.g., Uber). They are useful to the company only as *workers*; it is their labor and services, not their unwell feelings, that are valued for profit.

Moreover, the app/contracting company also gets a cut of the money exchanged (via the app) for the service. Airbnb, for example, typically takes 10 percent of what a guest pays for leasing accommodation from a registered host. Although Airbnb, Uber, and other sharing companies have business costs (e.g., the costs of building and maintaining the app computer platform infrastructure and administering and overseeing the details of everyday operations), each company still makes *surplus profit* at the expense of those who work for it (and of those who use it). Uber, for example, has had multiple corporate scandals: Some are over its work practices – in Singapore, for example, it knowingly leased unsafe SUVs with electrical problems to its drivers; others relate to its corporate culture where sexual harassment is prevalent. Indeed, in September 2017, London's Transport Authority banned Uber from operating in London (where it has 3.5 million users), citing its "lack of corporate responsibility." Uber, nonetheless, is valued at approx. $87 billion (and Airbnb at approx. $73 billion).

PROFESSIONAL SPORTS: THE COMMODIFICATION OF LABOR POWER IN ACTION

The commodification of labor power is well demonstrated in professional sports. We see this in several ways. The very language that professional sports organizations and teams use in talking about their hiring practices ensures that there is no ambiguity about the fact that football or basketball or hockey players are evaluated as commodities. This is underscored in the United States by the National Football League's (NFL) annual draft. We hear about the *trading* that occurs prior to draft day; one team exchanges their #5 pick for two lower-ranked choices from a different team. We hear how much money prospective players are willing to settle for, what price they will accept for their labor power, and we are left in no doubt that the quarterback (QB) is being selected and subsequently assessed not for his all-around athletic ability or leadership qualities, but for his *piecemeal* value – his arm, his ability to throw the ball, his "passing efficiency." Despite the glamour and the high salary (think of Tom Brady who for many years was the New England Patriots QB), the QB more than any other player – and especially compared to defensive backs whose entire bodies are commodified – is reduced to the value of one body piece, the usefulness of the arm. And the efficiency of the arm is determined statistically: the number of completed passes and the ratio of touchdowns to interceptions thrown.

We see similar efficiency-evaluation scales used across other professional sports. Players' usefulness is determined by their productivity; their performance statistics, such as a baseball pitcher's velocity, the per-game shooting percentages of basketball and hockey players, the number of goals scored on the football field, etc., provide a shorthand metric determining their market value. Star football players like Tom Brady and David Beckham are paid millions of dollars not only to play ball and to expand a team's fan base but also for their off-the-field usefulness in promoting and selling their favored footwear (e.g., Adidas, UGGs), clothing, and bottled water brands, among other products. Indeed, David Beckham was allegedly paid $150 million to promote Qatar before and during the 2022 World Cup, notwithstanding the contradiction between his reputation for supporting LGBTQ+ rights and Qatar's repression of sexual freedom. And although some players are "free agents," not bound by their contract to a previous team owner, they are nonetheless, as Marx reminds us, not really free; they must find another team owner to whom to sell themselves. Wageworkers, whether professional sports players or waitresses, must sell their labor power. Why do they sell it?

> In order to live. But the exercise of labor power, labor, is the worker's own life activity, the manifestation of his own life. And this life activity he sells to another person in order to

> secure the necessary *means of subsistence*. Thus his life activity is for him only a means to enable him to exist. He works in order to live. He does not even reckon labor as part of his life, it is rather a sacrifice of his life. It is a commodity which he has made over to another. (WLC 19)

Many professional sports players earn big salaries; their multimillion-dollar contracts allow them to meet their subsistence needs far more easily than is the case for waitresses, salespeople, skilled workers, and most professional workers (e.g., lawyers, doctors). Nonetheless, despite their exceedingly high incomes, professional sports players are commodities, and perhaps more than many other workers, they literally sacrifice their lives to work. Many sports players retire with a comfortable amount of money but are severely disabled from a career marked by repeated concussions (which lead, for example, to early onset of Alzheimer's disease) and other injuries that have long-term debilitating effects on the player's physical and mental functioning. This is a topic getting increased attention in football circles, and after decades of denial, even NFL owners/executives are acknowledging the negative long-term impact of sports injuries (see Topic 1.4).

Not only do professional athletes endure these injuries as part of their job, many feel the competitive pressure to actively harm their bodies over the long term by taking steroids to build up their short-term strength and endurance. As early as high school, young men are taking steroids – substances that over time build up cumulative negative effects on an individual's physical and mental health – in order to enhance the price they can get for themselves when (*if*) they make it to draft day and a professional career.

WORK: LIFE SACRIFICE

There is compelling evidence from professional sports of workers' willingness to sacrifice their health for someone else's profit. Many other wageworkers sacrifice their health, working in dangerous jobs in return for moderate earnings. Meat-packers, miners, firefighters, police officers, soldiers, and construction workers confront the threat of injury and death on a regular basis (see Topic 1.3). In any case, because all wageworkers sell their labor power "in order to live" (WLC 19), work becomes a means to an end rather than an end in itself. It thus loses its potential as a creative and cooperative activity reflective of humans' higher consciousness. Its value is instead determined by its usefulness in the production of capitalist profit.

Further, even if steroid-using athletes were assured of success – of getting drafted (bought) or getting a contract extension – a Marxist analysis would argue that they are deluded by **false consciousness**, a consciousness that is itself the historical product of capitalism. Because we embrace the "illusion" of the capitalist epoch in which we live (GI 30) – its affirmation and celebration of freedom, equality, money, and consumption (GI 40) – we willingly and freely sell ourselves because we believe that we are profiting through our particular actions.[3] But this is false, Marx tells us: The capitalist will always profit more than even the most highly paid professional athlete. The capitalist's profit, by definition, always comes at the expense of the wageworker's life. Wageworkers, though consciously working to produce capital (and in the process, reproducing capitalism as a system), work under a false illusion. This is the historically produced illusion that capitalism is a natural economic system rather than a historically specific, and humanly produced, economic system that favors some (the owners/capitalists) at the expense of others (wageworkers). Under capitalism, therefore, wageworkers are unable to develop a true consciousness of how their economic interests are in contradiction with those of capitalism. They cannot see that their objective (unequal) class position is in contradiction with the class position and economic profit interests of the capitalists (for whom belief in the "naturalness" of capitalism aligns with their interests).[4]

WAGE LABOR AND SURPLUS VALUE

What the high-income professional sports player and the low-income hotel housekeeper have in common is that **surplus value** is extracted from each by their respective employers. The logic of capitalism is the accumulation of profit, and this profit has to come from somewhere. It comes from the extra value – the surplus value or extra capital – created by wageworkers' labor. Supply and demand influence how much a given worker or a group or class of workers, electricians say, can earn in a given place at any given time. How well the economy is doing, and whether there is an under- or oversupply of qualified workers available to meet the market demand for a particular commodity (e.g., new housing, dentists, restaurant services at a seaside resort), have an impact on how much money workers get for their labor power.

Topic 1.3 Occupational injuries in the meatpacking industry

In 2021, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics recorded 5,190 deaths sustained from injuries in the workplace, with the construction, warehousing/transportation, protective services (e.g., firefighters, police officers), and agriculture/forestry/fisheries sectors the most hazardous (https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/cfoi.pdf). A report by Human Rights Watch vividly highlights the occupational hazards some workers confront: "Meatpacking work has extraordinarily and unnecessarily high rates of injury, musculoskeletal disorders (repetitive stress injuries), and even death. Whatever the inherent dangers of meatpacking work, they are aggravated by ever-increasing line speeds, inadequate training, close-quarters cutting, and long hours with few breaks … Almost every worker interviewed … for this report began with the story of a serious injury he or she suffered in a meat or poultry plant, injuries reflected in their scars, swellings, rashes, amputations, blindness or other afflictions." Among the meat-industry injuries recorded by the US federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) were the following:

- "Worker killed when hog-splitting saw is activated."
- "Worker dies when he is pulled into a conveyor and crushed."
- "Worker loses legs when a worker activates the grinder in which he is standing."
- "Worker loses hand when he reaches under a boning table to hose meat from chain."

(See "Blood, sweat, and fear: Workers' rights in US meat and poultry plants," https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/usa0105.pdf.)

Meat-workers are further disadvantaged because many are illegal immigrants. Case Farms is a chicken plant in Ohio that produces nearly a billion pounds of chicken for Kentucky Fried Chicken and Taco Bell, and deli meat for supermarkets and the US federal government's school-lunch program. It is "among the most dangerous workplaces in America. In 2015 alone, federal workplace-safety inspectors fined the company nearly two million dollars, and in the past seven years it has been cited for two hundred and forty violations." Working conditions such as fast "line speeds and a procedure that required [workers] to cut three wings at a time by stacking the wings and running them through a spinning saw [meant that] occasionally the wings broke, and bones got caught in workers' gloves, dragging their fingers through the saw." When some employees protest against such procedures, however, the company typically uses their undocumented immigration status as a reason to fire them (Grabell 2017: 46, 51; see also Miraftab 2017).

Topic 1.4 "If I had a perfect place to die, I would die on the [football] field"

Injured bodies – in football, rugby, tennis, or golf – are part of professional athletes' exchange value. Chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a degenerative disease of the brain, is associated with repeated head traumas like concussion. In 2016, after years of dismissing the issue, a senior NFL official publicly acknowledged a connection between football and CTE, and the NFL and the NFL Players Association agreed to a new policy to enforce concussion protocols. Teams violating the policy are subject to discipline, through fines or losing upcoming draft picks. The league and its 32 club owners will provide $100 million in support of engineering advancements and medical research, in addition to $100 million it previously pledged to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for medical and neuroscience research (a donation that was itself controversial because the NFL sought to have medical doctors with ties to the NFL supervise the NIH research).

In July 2017, a study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (*JAMA*) identified CTE in 110 of 111 deceased NFL players' brains that were donated to scientific research. A few days later, when asked at training camp about his concerns over CTE, the New York Jets rookie (and first-round draft pick) Jamal Adams said: "I'm all about making the game safer … but as a defensive player, I'm not a big fan of it [laughing]…But, I get it….and I could speak for a lot of guys that play the game, we live and breathe [football] — this is what we're so passionate about. Literally, if I had a perfect place to die, I would die on the field. I would be at peace. Literally. That's not a lie" (http://www.espn.com/blog/new-york-jets/post/_/id/69973/jamal-adams-on-cte-field-is-perfect-place-to-die-fans-cheer). What might be seen as Jamal's "false consciousness" – literally sacrificing his life for football – is not unusual. Roy Keane, as assistant manager of the Irish soccer team and a renowned ex-Manchester United player, similarly conveyed his view of the body sacrifice players should be willing to make: "We want players to put their bodies on the line. People have died for their country.... they've done more than just break their leg" (*Irish Times*, June 9, 2017. https://www.irishtimes.com/sport/soccer/international/roy-keane-we-want-players-to-put-their-bodies-on-the-line-1.3113821).

Marx recognizes these factors in determining wages. But he also highlights an even more basic way in which wages are determined: the actual cost of production. Marx argues:

> the price of labor will be determined by the cost of production, by the labor time necessary to produce this commodity – labor power. *What then is the cost of production of labor power? It is the cost required for maintaining the worker as a worker and of developing him into a worker... . The price of his labor* will, therefore, be determined by the *price of the necessary means of subsistence* ... Another consideration ... in calculating the cost of production of simple labor power, there must be included the cost of reproduction, whereby the race of workers is enabled to multiply and to replace worn-out workers by new ones. Thus the depreciation of the worker is taken into account in the same way as the depreciation of the machine. The cost of production of simple labor power, therefore, amounts to the *cost of existence and reproduction of the worker*. The price of this cost of existence and reproduction constitutes wages. Wages so determined are called the *wage minimum*. (WLC 27–28; italics in original)

In other words, the capitalist pays the minimum necessary to ensure the worker's physical subsistence as an able-bodied worker, and enough to ensure the actual physical, social, and biological reproduction of a new generation of workers. Today, in the United States, the federally mandated minimum wage is $7.25 per hour (less than the cost of a large cheese pizza). Wage costs are necessary costs that the capitalist encounters in reproducing current and future workers who can be put to work creating capital and profit. In return for these wages, the capitalist receives "the productive activity of the worker, the creative power whereby the worker not only replaces what he consumes [as a worker] but gives to the accumulated labor a greater value than it previously possessed ... he produces capital" (WLC 32). And this capital has a surplus value for the capitalist above and beyond the worker's production cost (i.e., the cost to the capitalist of the worker's subsistence and reproduction as a worker).

Marx explains surplus value as the difference between a worker's **exchange value** – that is, the market value of a worker's labor, or simply, their wages – and their use value:

> The daily cost of maintaining [labor] and its daily expenditure in work, are two totally different things. The former [the cost of maintaining labor, i.e. the subsistence and reproduction of the worker] determines the exchange value of the labour-power, the latter [the living labor that it can call into action] is its use-value ... Therefore, the value of labour power, and the value which that labour-power creates in the labour process are two entirely different magnitudes, and this difference of the two values was what the capitalist had in view, when he was purchasing the labour power ... What really influenced him was the specific use-value which this commodity possesses of being a source not only of value,

> but of more value than it has itself. This is the special service that the capitalist expects from labour power, and in this transaction he acts in accordance with the "eternal laws" of the exchange of commodities. The seller of labour-power, like the seller of any other commodity, realizes [acquires] its exchange value, and parts with its use-value. He cannot take the one without giving the other. The use value of labour-power [labor] … belongs just as little to its seller, as the use-value of oil after it has been sold belongs to the dealer who has sold it. (Cap 215–216)

THE GAP BETWEEN EXCHANGE VALUE AND USE VALUE

Consequently, what workers are paid – their earnings/market value or exchange value – and what they are paid for – their labor power/use value, their usefulness in creating capital/profit – are two very different things. The capitalist pays the exchange value (wages) of 20 hours' labor power but gets the use value of 40 hours' labor; wageworkers' usefulness in creating capital extends beyond what they are paid for, and this difference between their exchange value (wages) and their use value is what constitutes surplus value, or profit for the capitalist (Cap 207–217). For workers to subsist and to physically maintain themselves as workers, they may need to work for only four hours a day, but they work for eight hours a day. A worker may need to prepare and cook 12 cheese pizzas every day in exchange for the wages they are paid by the restaurant owner, but in fact, the worker prepares 48 pizzas every day thereby creating surplus value for the owner because their labor produces 36 additional pizzas. The additional hours worked, or the additional pizzas prepared by the worker, over and above the capitalist's production cost (including the costs of the ingredients, electricity, building maintenance, etc.), represent surplus value for the capitalist. And it is this surplus value produced by the worker that constitutes the capitalist's profit.

Accordingly, the capitalist's surplus value is the worker's surplus labor (Cap 207–217). The production of surplus value is necessary for the pursuit and accumulation of capitalist profit. The more productive workers are, the more surplus value they create for the capitalist. Consequently, the proportional cost of their labor power becomes cheaper for the capitalist. As Marx states: "The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces … The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates" (EPM 71). Workers' use value to the capitalist increases but their exchange value – the cost of maintaining them as workers (i.e., their wages) – decreases in inverse proportion to their use value. In short, workers' use value to the capitalist is greater than their exchange value is to themselves (Cap 215–216). Notwithstanding the gap between the surplus value (profit) workers create and the wages they receive, employers continuously look to find ways to increase their profits at workers' expense.

THE DIVISION OF LABOR AND ALIENATION

The **division of labor**, or the structure of economic and occupational specialization, is a dominant feature of modern capitalist society and has evolved over time (GI 8). The division of labor separates sectors (e.g., agriculture, manufacturing, services) and workers into discrete spheres of ever-more specialized activity. Adam Smith (1776/1925), the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher and advocate of free-market capitalism, emphasized the material advantages that derive from exchange based on occupational specialization and the division of labor. Marx, by contrast, underscores its negative, fragmentary effects. He argues that individuals have the human ability to do many things and have the capacity for many creative interests and hobbies. But the division of labor – as an objectified structure of capitalism – essentially reduces the individual to the performance of the specialized activity that has the most use value in the production of capital (e.g., the arm-throwing labor of football QB Tom Brady). Marx states,

> as soon as labor is distributed, each man has a particular exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood…; while in communist society where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity, but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes … makes it possible for me to do one thing to-day and another to-morrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic. (GI 22)

THE PRODUCTION PROCESS

The organization of capitalist production – whether in factories, construction sites, or corporate offices – ensures the usefulness or efficiency of workers in the creation of surplus value (capitalist profit). Workers' tasks are divided into minute elements so that each individual is responsible for a very specific aspect of the production process. The diversity of occupations that exists in any industrialized country underscores that to make a living in today's economy, a worker must specialize in a highly defined activity. Just picking a random page in the US Census occupational code, we see the following specialized jobs: "aircraft cleaner, aircraft communicator, aircraft designer, aircraft electrician, aircraft engine specialist, aircraft instrument tester, aircraft lay out worker, aircraft log clerk, aircraft machinist, aircraft metalsmith, aircraft painter, aircraft riveter, aircraft stress analyst," and so on.

The fast-moving, assembly-line production we associate with the manufacture of goods (whether cars, pizzas, or chocolates) epitomizes the division of labor under capitalism. Assembly-line production assigns specific tasks to each worker (or worker team), whose speedy task accomplishment is essential to the smooth, uninterrupted operation of commodity production. A similar division of labor is evident in the production (construction) of houses: a primary contractor is hired to build the house and in turn hires a whole retinue of subcontractor specialists: laborers, plasterers, plumbers, tilers, carpenters, electricians, roofers, and landscapers. Intellectual labor is also highly specialized. Doctors typically specialize in one of a broad array of specialties (oncology, gynecology, dermatology, pediatrics, urology, cardiology, etc.). Lawyers also specialize corporate law, family law, property law, and estate law. Even sociologists are expected to specialize in a particular subfield: The American Sociological Association currently has 53 sections, reflecting the specialized topics and subject areas of its members: sociology of culture, medical sociology, sex and gender, political sociology, etc.

ALIENATED LABOR

The division of labor may seem necessary for distributing responsibility and expertise for the many complex jobs that need to be done in society. It ensures that labor is used efficiently to produce the vast amount of commodities (including knowledge commodities) that are needed to meet consumer demand. But Marx sees it differently – as dehumanizing of the individual and of society. He argues that the commodification of labor power reduces workers to commodities (with exchange and use value) and produces alienation, or **alienated labor**. Alienated labor thus objectively inheres in the economic and social organization of capitalism; it is entwined with the production objectives (e.g., profit) and processes of capitalism such as the division of labor (see EPM 71–81; Box 1.2).

Box 1.2 Alienation inheres in capitalism

(a) Alienation of wageworkers from the products produced
(b) Alienation through the production process
(c) Alienation of individuals from their species being (their human essence)
(d) Alienation of individuals from one another

(a) Alienation of workers from the products they produce

Workers are alienated or estranged from the **products** their labor produces; their labor and the product of their labor are *external* to them, both literally and in terms of ownership. Workers' labor is not their own but is "forced labor" (EPM 74); it belongs to the employer. Similarly, the products of the worker's labor do not belong to the worker but to someone else – the employer who sells the product/commodity and the consumer who buys it. The commodities that workers produce are not theirs to use despite their having made them; they are only theirs to buy. Thus, the product of a worker's labor (like the labor itself) becomes a force that is external to the worker. Rather than being the objective reflection of the worker's transformation of raw materials into something new – an object available to the worker – the product of the worker's labor becomes an object for someone else's disposal on the market. Marx writes, "it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him; … it becomes a power of its own confronting him: it means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien" (EPM 72). He refers to this process as the **objectification** of labor. The products produced by a worker's labor exert a power over the worker; the worker must keep producing more and more products (and service workers must serve more and more customers; hotel housekeepers must clean more rooms, change more beds; and university lecturers must teach more students, etc.) – but the value of this extra work returns to the employer and not to the worker.

This idea fits with Marx's thesis (discussed previously) that the more commodities the worker produces the relatively poorer the worker becomes. Wages can increase, but the profit to the capitalist from the wageworker's labor will always be proportionally greater than the wages paid to (for) the worker. Wage labor thus differs from the labor done, for example, under feudalism, where the farmer-serfs plowed the land, planted the seeds, tilled and cultivated the furrows, and then harvested the crops and kept what was necessary for their family's subsistence. The farmers experienced the complete cycle of production and produced for their own needs while also producing for others, as did craft workers and others under the feudal lord's tutelage.

(b) Alienation of workers in the production process

The worker is also alienated through the **production process** itself. The process of production is "active alienation," whereby the "worker's own physical and mental energy" is turned against him (EPM 74, 75). Labor is not an end in itself that is freely chosen by the worker. Rather, it is coerced by and performed for someone else, most immediately, the capitalist employer. Wage labor is "activity performed in the service, under the dominion, the coercion and the yoke of another" (EPM 80). In short, wageworkers do not determine what they produce or how they produce it; they are simply objects in the production process. As anyone who has worked in a restaurant knows, your daily schedule and the number of tables/customers you serve are not spontaneously determined by you but by your supervisor/employer. And the speed with which you serve the customers is also not yours to decide; each employer sets standards and rules that you have to abide by, irrespective of how much energy you might have on a given day (see Topic 1.5).

(c) Alienation of workers from their species being

By reducing workers to objects with use value in commodity production, the production process **alienates them from their species being** – from the creativity and higher consciousness that distinguish humans from animals (EPM 76–77). Wage labor coerces us to use work – our life activity – as a means to our physical existence, rather than using our physical existence to realize our humanity and to engage in the freely chosen physical and mental activities of which our species is capable. In principle, work can be a creative extension of ourselves: "the productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life" – but under capitalism, "life itself appears only as a means to life" (EPM 76). In other words, we work to live (to subsist) rather than working to fully actualize our human-social life. Alienated labor strips work of its intrinsic human meaning and its potential to express human creativity. In this process, humans are reduced essentially to an animal-like status; they are alienated from the very characteristics that distinguish them as humans. Marx writes:

> First, the fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself….His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labor*. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it … man (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes

> animal. Certainly eating, drinking, procreating, etc., are also genuine human functions. But in the abstraction which separates them from the sphere of all other human activity and turns them into sole and ultimate ends, they are animal. (EPM 74)

(d) Alienation of individuals from one another

Although humans are a social species who relate to and cooperatively interact with others, capitalism produces "the *estrangement of man* from *man*" (EPM 78; italics in original), of **individuals from one another**. Work becomes the individual's life, rather than the means to enjoy life with others. The demands of work, whether for wage laborers or for salaried professionals, are not conducive to workers' family life or to their participation in community activities; the demands of work require that work rather than nonwork activities receive priority. At many companies – including Starbucks, Amazon, Gap, Abercrombie & Fitch, and Victoria's Secret – on-call and erratic scheduling means that workers can't make plans for nonwork activities. Walmart, for example, increased its store employees' minimum pay to $14 an hour in 2023. Yet, even though its retail sales surged during Covid, it reduced workers' hours but not their workload (Sainato 2020). Its workplace policies "create a cheaper, more flexible work force by capping wages, using more part-time workers and scheduling more workers on nights and weekends," meaning that workers are pressured to be available 24/7 (Greenhouse and Barbaro 2006). This enables Walmart to have more part-time than full-time employees, thus reducing its wage costs, expanding its profits, and increasing its stock price on Wall Street. On-call, open-ended scheduling demands have a negative impact on employees' family and other commitments, making it difficult for them to care for their children, to attend school functions, or to go to church. One worker said, "it makes it hard to establish routines like reading to your kids at night or having dinner together as a family" (Greenhouse and Barbaro 2006). Walmart, moreover, "routinely refuses to accept doctors' notes, penalizes workers who need to take care of a sick family member and otherwise punishes employees for lawful absences" (Abrams 2017). The working conditions in Amazon warehouses are similarly penalizing of employees (e.g., Kantor et al. 2021).

And at work, the alienation of workers from one another is accomplished through the production process. Its demands of speed and efficiency – the number of beds made, of customers served, of hours billable to a client – require workers to work rather than to socialize. Another way in which workers are alienated from one another is through the competitive nature of the workplace. Who will be the employee of the month? Who will get a bonus? Who will get the most valuable player award? These are competitive awards for which there are winners and losers, thus pitting workers against one another, and they exist across all work sectors, from fast-food restaurants to the banking industry. The worker who receives an award will be the one who has been the most productive, that is, delivers the most pizzas, sells the most condominiums, and sees the most patients thereby creating the most surplus value/profit during a given time interval. So, even when it seems that employers (including universities) are being nice to workers by giving them bonuses and awards, from a Marxist perspective, these incentives are a capitalist strategy to ensure that more and more surplus value, more and more profit is being produced by workers for their respective employers and for the capitalist class as a whole.

Capitalist production, moreover, is structured so that the livelihoods of employed workers are under constant threat from those on the sidelines (e.g., because of seasonal work, unemployment, immigration flows). The capitalist always has access to the labor power of the unemployed, especially when employees can be fired and replaced by other workers who must necessarily find work in order to make a living wage. This is yet another way in which labor is coerced and by which capitalism sets individuals against one another. Further, interworker competition is globalized. Workers in the United States or the United Kingdom, for example, are stripped of sympathy for their fellow workers in the sweatshops of China and Bangladesh because they see them as a threat to their own continuing employment. This, in turn, further dampens the development of the class consciousness of the proletariat envisioned by Marx.

Topic 1.5 Laboring in the poultry factory

Chicken processing plants exemplify how the capitalist production process produces not just commodities but objectively alienated labor. At these plants, there is a highly specialized division of labor; the women who work in the plant's "deboning line" are not just *poultry* workers, but, more specifically, chicken deboners or "wing cutters." Their personal identity is reduced to this highly specific wing-cutting activity such that they are described as if they were machines, as objects rather than humans (i.e., alienated in the production process and from their human species being). With growing consumer demand for chicken, the National Chicken Council (which represents poultry companies in the United States) actively lobbies the government for permission to increase line speeds from 140 to 175 birds a minute. Even at 140 per minute, the line speed pressure means that workers are not allowed to have bathroom breaks. (Walmart and other workplaces have similar restrictions on employee rest breaks.) Nor clearly is there time for chatting with other workers on the line. These demands produce alienated labor: The workers' physical and social needs are subjugated to the demands of profit production. Workers make approximately 18,000 deboning cuts during a typical shift (eight hours), preparing chicken pieces for supermarket sales to consumers. The deboned chicken breasts, fillets, etc. thus come to exist as objects that have an external, controlling power over the workers; they are not for the workers' consumption, for satisfaction of their physical hunger, but are tallies of the workers' speed and productivity (thus producing workers' alienation from the products of their labor power). Most chicken deboners, even those with a lot of experience, earn less than $8 an hour. Given that a packet of chicken tenders sells in the supermarket for about $7, we can readily see that, even taking account of the expense incurred in raising a chicken, and the production costs and profit margins in the distribution chain from factory owners to shop owners, there is a substantial gap between the worker's exchange value (approx. $8 per hour) and their use value (deboning over 2,000 chickens per hour) – the surplus value or profit their labor produces for the factory owner. Chicken-cutters produce a lot of surplus value. Nevertheless, their profit usefulness is lessened if they take bathroom breaks – thus this activity is regulated. It is not the workers who decide when they need to go to the bathroom; like the amount of wing-cuts required, this need is determined externally – by factory owners who are mindful only of the production of profit. Reflecting global capitalism's competitive nature, the Chicken Council argues that a line speed increase would increase both worker and plant efficiency and help the US reclaim international meat sales lost to competitors like Brazil, which has surpassed the US in chicken export sales (Bunge 2017). And in 2021, pork plants received government approval to increase production line speeds: 1,106 pigs per worker per hour. (See also Topics 1.3 and 2.4, chapter 2.)

THE OPPRESSION OF CAPITALISTS

In Marx's analysis of capitalism, it is not just wageworkers who are objectively alienated. Business owners and corporate executives are also in servitude to production demands, that is, the production of capital. Companies and all employers (e.g., meat plants, hospitals, universities) must compete with others in their sector to cut production costs and increase profits and market share.

Capitalists' relation to capital – as owners of land, factories, corporations – is quite different from that of workers, and the production process is organized to maximize the capitalists' accumulation of capital. Nevertheless, capitalists themselves are controlled by capital, though it may seem that they are their masters. In actuality, their life activity is driven toward the accumulation of capital. To succeed as capitalists they must defer their noneconomic interests and activities to the pursuit of profit; this activity takes on a life of its own and renders the capitalist "under the sway of [the] inhuman power" of capital (EPM 125). The excessively long work days (and nights) of early career executives in finance attest to this subservience as they labor to meet the expectations of their bosses chasing (yet another) lucrative company merger or acquisition.

The pressure toward ever-more capital accumulation on the everyday, capital-accumulation habits of corporate executives gives flesh to Marx's argument:

> The less you eat, drink and read books; the less you go to the theater, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence etc., the more you save – the *greater* becomes your treasure which neither moths nor dust will devour – your *capital*. The less you *are*, the more you *have*; the less you express your own life, the greater is your *alienated* life – the greater is the store of your estranged being … all passions and all activity must therefore be submerged in *avarice*. (EPM 118–119; italics in original)

This avarice is not necessarily a personal trait of any individual capitalist but is demanded by capitalism: The accumulation of capital and profit is a ceaseless task, a 24/7 commitment.

And the capitalist who fails to serve capital, who fails to accumulate it in an ever-greater amount, must leave the capitalist class. Or, in today's more differentiated corporate structure, must leave its higher echelons, at least for a while. Any action that threatens to reduce the stock price of a company, whether faulty financial management or a CEO's lapse in personal behavior (e.g., sexual harassment, embellishing one's résumé), can spell the demise of its corporate leader. As the business news attests, the "resignation" and management "restructuring" (i.e., the firing or demotion) of corporate executives are quite common. The everyday, profit-oriented activities and the personal reputation of corporate executives are beholden to "Wall Street" and "the City." Corporate value and the profit productivity of companies and their executives are the objects of several economic indexes and ratings. Therefore, just as the productivity of factory workers and football players is easily assessed, we can also readily see the stock performance and capital rankings of corporations, indicators that signal whether company executives themselves are adding value to the company by making profit-oriented decisions that satisfy corporate owners/shareholders.

Corporate executives are thus subservient to Wall Street's capital growth demands; each business quarter – three months, or the length of one semester – brings the threat of failure, of having a profit sheet that shows less capital than anticipated by shareholders and investors. In sum, although capitalist owners/executives are much wealthier than workers, they are nonetheless self-alienated because of the hold of capital accumulation on their lives. The objective alienation that capitalism produces is all the more dehumanizing given, as Marx recognized, the vast resources that capitalism generates. These could be used to create a society in which individuals are free to pursue goals that are not incessantly tied to the unrelenting obligation to produce surplus value/profit. But under capitalism, capitalists and workers alike are servants of capital.

Recognizing exploitation

It is more difficult for the capitalists than it is for the proletariat, however, to recognize the self-alienation and objectification that capitalism produces. After all, it is wageworkers – chicken deboners, Walmart shelf-stockers, hotel housekeepers – who experience the dehumanization of the production process most immediately on a daily basis. By contrast, the bourgeoisie, "the possessing class" (e.g., corporate executives), experiences the profit production process and its results, that is, private property, as affirming their own abilities and power. Consequently, they misrecognize the alienation that capitalism produces for capitalists and wageworkers alike. Further, unlike wageworkers, they "experience alienation as a sign of their own [bourgeois] power" (ASC 133). Such misrecognition propels their domination of the proletariat, their exploitation of wageworkers' surplus value in the accumulation of profit. Partly for this reason, according to Marx, the overthrow of capitalism will originate with the workers (discussed previously), or from within what the Hungarian Marxist theorist Lukács (1968: 149) refers to as the **standpoint of the proletariat**. Given the bourgeoisie's exploitation of the proletariat, Marx states, "the proletariat … is compelled to abolish itself and thereby its conditioning opposite – [the capitalist structure] – which makes it a proletariat" (ASC, 133).

ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

The different positions that capitalists and workers objectively occupy in relation to capital – that is, what is surplus value for the capitalist is the worker's surplus labor – produce the oppositional standpoints and polarized class structure that Marx saw as inherent in capitalism. Politicians celebrate worker productivity and job creation as signs of a strong economy, but Marx offers a different view. He argues that as industry prospers and as the mass of workers grows, "the domination of capital extends over a greater number of individuals" (WLC 34). For Marx, increased employment and increased productivity – even if accompanied by an increase in wages – mean that more surplus labor is being extracted from more workers to provide more wealth for the bourgeoisie. Thus, the economic and social gulf between capitalists and workers widens (WLC 34–35).

Marx argues that an increase in wages does nothing to change the structural inequality inherent in capitalism (between capitalists and workers), nor does it diminish the capitalists' privileged access to capital, a privilege seen in corporate executive pay. This inequality inheres in the fact that "the existence of a class which possesses nothing but its capacity to labor is a necessary prerequisite of capital" (WLC 31). Accordingly,

> to say that the most favorable condition for wage labor is the most rapid possible growth of productive capital is only to say that the more rapidly the working-class increases and enlarges the power that is hostile to it, the wealth that does not belong to it and that rules over it, the more favorable will be the conditions under which it is allowed to labor anew at increasing bourgeois wealth, at enlarging the power of capital, content with forging for itself the golden chains by which the bourgeoisie drags it in its train. (WLC 41)

The chains in which workers are enmeshed were more vividly apparent during Marx's day. He was writing when factory conditions were unsafe and unhygienic, child labor was the norm, and extreme poverty was visible on the streets and in the housing tenements of the increasingly populous cities. During the twentieth century, working

Figure 1.2 Financial crises and evidence of economic inequality motivated the Occupy Wall Street movement. Occupy protests occurred in over 200 cities across the world. Source: PAUL DAVEY.

conditions changed for the better in most sectors of the economy notwithstanding the dangerous conditions that still exist in many workplaces (e.g., meat factories, mines) and especially in the factories and construction sites of expanding capitalist countries (e.g., China, Qatar). However, despite economic growth and the many changes that have occurred in recent decades – that is, a substantial increase in the number of college graduates, advances in computer technology, and the shift from private to publicly traded companies – economic assets are increasingly concentrated among fewer households. Marx's claim of the relational inequality between wageworkers and capitalists continues to find strong empirical support: In 2016, 12.7 percent of Americans (40.6 million people) were living in poverty; and the top 20 percent of households accounted for 51.5 percent of total US household income (Leubsdorf 2017). Since the 1980s, the family incomes of the top 5 percent of American households have increased at a faster rate than the incomes of all other earners, and the wealth gap between upper-income and both middle- and low-income families continues to expand exponentially. In short, "the richest are getting richer faster" (Pew Research Center 2020: 20). On the persistence of poverty and its interconnected problems such as eviction and homelessness see Desmond (2016, 2023).

MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO

Why are wageworkers seemingly content to accept the status quo? Why do workers work as hard as they do (e.g., Burawoy 1979)? And why, notwithstanding the Occupy movement, do we not see much evidence today of the class antagonism that Marx regarded as integral to capitalism? Many reasons are likely. First, the huge post-World War II expansion in education, the expansion of service occupations, occupational mobility, and a growing middle class (largely composed of professional, service, and sales workers) have made a relatively affluent consumer lifestyle available to a large sector of the population in Western societies and especially in the United States (Fischer and Hout 2006; Kochhar and Sechopoulos 2022). Second, even among the working class (composed largely of skilled, semiskilled, and unskilled workers), an increasing proportion of wageworker households do not rely solely on wages for their livelihood. A half of all American households and about a quarter of British households own investment stock (Halle and Frank Weyher 2005: 209). The transformation in capitalism away from family or individual company ownership toward the shareholder society ushered in by the public selling of company shares on the stock exchange is highly significant. This trend has been accelerated by the rise of the Internet and the digital economy. Meta (the corporate umbrella company that owns Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp), Google, Apple, Microsoft, and Amazon are all public companies. This means that many wageworkers today, regardless of their occupation or where they work, have a direct economic interest in specific corporations, through either personal or work-related pension investments; although workers own far fewer shares than company executives, their shares can constitute a significant proportion of their overall economic assets. And even among low-paid retail and service workers, incentives such as the college tuition benefits offered by Starbucks, Walmart, Chipotle, Amazon, Disney, and several other companies dampen employees' criticism of inequality. Despite deepening socioeconomic inequality, therefore, and its well-documented negative consequences on individuals' health and well-being (e.g., Gutin and Hummer 2021), wageworkers have a compelling incentive to support corporate interests and the profit objectives of local and global capitalism.

Accordingly, the line between capitalists and wageworkers is not as clear cut as it was in Marx's time and for much of the twentieth century, when owners' and workers' relations to property and capital were more straightforward. Stock investment gives workers a particular stake in the production (and reproduction) of capital. This is so notwithstanding the empirical truth in Marx's point that the expansion of the economy does not alter the inequality between the capitalists (the industrial and media tycoons and the corporate executive elite) and the proletariat (all those who rely primarily, if not solely, on wages for their livelihoods).

A third reason why class antagonism is relatively muted is due to the role of the state. Governments intervene to dampen some of the most severe effects of capitalist crises by propping up financial institutions and markets (e.g., government bailouts of banks and insurance companies during the 2007–2008 Great Recession; government payments to small business owners during the Covid pandemic). They also buffer individuals against some of the excesses of the profit logic of capitalism (e.g., by giving payments to the unemployed). The state, therefore, has a more active role in softening inequality in capitalist society than envisioned by Marx. The neoliberal turn in Western democracies has seen a decline in welfare benefits, even in countries where the welfare state was strongly embedded, such as the United Kingdom and Sweden. Austerity policies stoke political disaffection. Nonetheless, enough welfare benefits remain in place and temporary income assistance programs can be periodically instituted for low-earners, as we saw during the pandemic. Consequently, governments can still claim their policies help hard-working ordinary individuals, even as those same policies reinforce inequality and the capitalism system.

Fourth, worker unionization and the legal right of unionized workers to go on strike also help to quell workers' concerns that they are being exploited by employers. Many employers resist unionization and in some instances prohibit workers from joining unions. Some workers vote against unionization, as did nearly two-to-one employees at a Nissan plant in Mississippi in 2017; others believe, nonetheless, that union membership protects them from employer mistreatment. Increasingly, however, this is a minority view. In the 1950s, 35 percent of employees in the United States were union members; this proportion declined to 20 percent in 1983 and to 10.3 percent in 2021. Workers in government and the public sector are far more likely than those in the private sector to be union members; and in the private sector, utilities workers are more likely to be unionized than retail or sales employees (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2022). European countries and Australia, New Zealand, and Canada have a stronger labor movement tradition, and labor unions are still relatively vibrant in these places. The Nordic countries have the highest rates of unionization (ranging from 74 percent in Finland to 52 percent in Norway). Close to a quarter of workers in Ireland (29 percent) and the United Kingdom (23 percent) are unionized, and fewer in Germany (18 percent). The United Kingdom experienced a significant uptick in industrial protest activity in winter 2022/2023 with nurses, ambulance drivers, railway workers, and other everyday service workers striking over pay and conditions. And in the United States, while a railway strike was averted in 2022 after legally mandated interventions by President Biden, nurses at a couple of large hospitals in New York City went on strike in early January 2023. Unions, strikes, and the threat of strikes, therefore, are still a significant force in bolstering workers' bargaining position, notwithstanding the varied ways in which worker consciousness and labor unrest are absorbed by the workings of capitalism.

All these adaptations of capitalism (e.g., unionization, expanding middle class, changes in capital ownership, an activist state) contribute to workers' acceptance of economic and social inequality. Another, and perhaps the strongest, reason why workers accept the status quo is their immersion in an ideological and cultural system that celebrates consumption and the promise of upward mobility (e.g., the "American Dream"). In so doing, it masks inequality and, when visible, makes it seem fair and justified. Therefore, even when people say, as is increasingly the case, that there is "too much" economic inequality (Pew Research Center 2020), they are unable or reluctant to translate those views into political action (e.g., voting for candidates who might enact polices such as child tax exemptions that would help redistribute wealth).

IDEOLOGY AND POWER

To talk of **ideology** is basically to refer to the ordinary, everyday ideas that permeate society. These ideas organically derive from our lived, material-social existence. Lived experience – everyday practical reality – is what determines our ideas about what is normal. Marx emphasizes that:

> Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men in their actual life-process … [i.e.] developing their material production … Life [social/economic existence] is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life [by material-social existence]. (GI 14, 15)

The everyday activities and experiences in capitalist societies make it seem normal that wageworkers and owners and executives should work as hard as they do. Although the financial rewards differ, most people consent to produce the surplus labor and surplus value that create the profit needed to sustain capitalism.

EVERYDAY EXISTENCE AND NORMAL IDEAS

More generally, the ideas we have about what is normal and what's inane and what's cool, and whether, for example, to go to college and what to do afterward, do not just pop into our heads out of nowhere. *What* we think about, and *how* we think about those things come from our everyday existence. They derive from what we already know and have already seen and experienced in our families and neighborhoods, at school, on the Internet, etc. Many young people don't apply to university. This is not because they are not interested in education but because their material/social existence essentially rules out the normality of this idea and the feasibility and affordability of this option.

FREEDOM TO SHOP

Individuals' social experiences vary in all kinds of intersecting ways from place to place and by gender, race, socioeconomic class, sexuality, religion, etc. But, across today's globalizing economy, the common cultural denominator is the primacy of consumption in everyday life (notwithstanding the persistence of poverty; see Desmond 2023). Consumption is not only encouraged; it is required by the commodity production that is critical to capital and profit accumulation. A snapshot of any city in the world will testify to the prominence of consumer culture, highlighted by the well-known brand names on shop fronts, billboards, buses, and other public advertisements. We live, as we are frequently reminded, in a consuming society and many partake directly and vicariously of the great range of commodities available. Marx predicted the globalization of consumerism: "The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world-market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country … In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands" (CM 83).

As I have noted, freedom and capitalism tend to go together, though for Marx "free" labor is coerced. Democratic societies are almost always capitalistic societies. In nondemocratic countries such as China and Russia, however, a growing capitalist economy coincides with and requires the freedom of consumer choice, but not the freedom of the press, the freedom to vote, to criticize the government, or to publicly assemble, etc., that is, freedoms institutionalized in the everyday culture of Western societies. Each semester when I ask students to list what it means to be American, they invariably name all these political freedoms without much prompting. These are the freedoms that democratic societies take for granted.

Additionally in capitalist societies, one of the most ingrained freedoms is the freedom of choice, and its twin, the freedom to shop. Yet it is rare for students to mention these freedoms in an initial listing of American values. Because the freedom to shop and to make choices every day at the vending machine and in the supermarket and on our favorite merchandise websites is so integral to our social existence, we don't think of it as something special; it is simply what we do. It is an everyday, easy freedom in contrast to one we might deploy more occasionally by voting, going to a place of religious worship, or attending a political rally.

IDEOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION

Consumption pervades our existence – which is why so many people work as hard as they do: They endure the burdens of work so that they can buy the things they covet. We work to live, Marx tells us, and many define their life by what they own. The power of money to buy all the things we do not ourselves possess – for example, beauty, popularity, friends, status – Marx argues, lures us into reproducing capitalism through consumption. "All the things which you cannot do, your money can do. It can eat and drink, go to the dance hall and the theater; it can travel, it can appropriate art, learning, the treasures of the past, political power – all this it can appropriate for you – it can buy all this for you" (EPM 119). Hence, many affluent men buy "trophy wives" and trophy ranches or vineyards, and billionaires buy trophy football teams. It is so "natural" for us to shop, to consume, and to own things, we don't consider this a special freedom or privilege. It is our existence. This is the power of ideology in everyday existence: Consumption, and ideas about consumption, structure who we are and what we do, and how we evaluate others.

We rarely wonder, moreover, where the impulse to buy comes from, or how things get produced; we don't usually contemplate the labor invested in making commodities, or the heavy lifting housekeepers must do in moving the super-thick mattresses in a hotel's "heavenly" beds (see Introduction). It is only when a favorite brand is missing from the shelf that we wonder what unnatural thing might have happened to account for its mysterious absence. The expected and coveted presence of commodities in our lives, in defining and anchoring our everyday social existence, is what makes capitalism so alluring. It also makes the critique of capitalism difficult, even at an intellectual level (i.e., while studying Marx). We are enchanted with consumption because that is what is real to us; we are more likely to shop than to vote, or assemble for a religious, political, or civic event. Public holidays – for example, Labor Day/May Day, Thanksgiving, Veterans Day – days on which we might well ponder the value of labor, are instead occasions for shopping, promoted by the additional allure of heavily marketed "super sales events."

THE MYSTICAL VALUE OF COMMODITIES

We relish being consumers and by extension living in a capitalist society, but because freedom of choice is so routinized in daily life, we remain blissfully unaware of the social relations that underlie our freedom to shop. Marx reminds us that the unequal relations of workers and capitalists to capital and profit underpin commodity production and consumption. He refers to the obfuscation of the production process as the **fetishism of commodities**. We are so fixated with the commodity as an object in itself, we don't recognize what it really is: raw materials transformed by (exploited) human labor (increasingly outsourced to unsafe factories in underdeveloped economies such as Bangladesh) for someone else's profit. As with other aspects of capitalism, we idealize commodities as if they are things that have a life of their own, as if they are mysteriously independent of the social organization of production (and consumption). But as Marx emphasizes, production is "always production … by social individuals … Production mediates consumption; it creates [consumption's] material; without it, consumption would lack an object" (Gru 85, 91). He elaborates,

> A commodity appears at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood … So far as it has a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it, … it is capable of satisfying human wants, … [and is] the product of human labour. It is as clear as noon-day, that man, by his industry, changes the … materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent … The mystical character of commodities does not originate, therefore, in their use-value … A commodity is … a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that

> labour … the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses … There is a physical relation between physical things. But it is different with commodities. There, the existence of the things qua commodities, and the value-relation between the products of labor which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom … the definite social relation between men [as producers of the products of labor] … assumes … the fantastic form of a relation between things. (Cap 81–83)

Marx is not opposed to consumption. His writings fully acknowledge that needs are not just physical but social, and that each mode of existence produces new needs. Thus, college students today need an iPhone. But what Marx critiques is how we let our idealization of commodities obscure the unequal relations that underpin commodity production (and consumption), and how in this process we objectify the workers as well as ourselves. "You are known by what you own" was a tagline used a few years ago by Zebo, an Internet and advertising technology company. This is not simply a cliché. It is the ideology – the dominating idea – that infuses capitalist societies. The class that owns the means of production (e.g., land, oil, financial capital) also owns more things and has more wealth than the working class. We are reduced to what we own. We own our labor power but are coerced to sell it for wages (in order to live); but we can consume the (other) commodities we possess. We ourselves are active promoters of consumer ideology in our own everyday habits and relationships. And we are heavily encouraged by the advertising industry to do so. Advertising celebrates consumption and in doing so celebrates capitalism as a system of commodity production: It "glorifies the pleasures and freedoms of consumer choice" (Schudson 1984: 218). Every advertisement – on the highway, in the subway, at the bus stop, in the football stadium, on television and the Internet, in magazines and church bulletins – is celebrating the everyday capitalist freedom to shop – even if it is not showcasing a product that we ourselves want. We might not be persuaded to buy a given advertised item, but each advertisement reminds us of what we can own and, importantly too, what we should aspire to own (e.g., Marchand 1985).

Figure 1.3 Love of Taylor Swift and for her Eras Tour in 2023 was a major driver of consumption. Ticket sales; song and album downloads; an array of fan fashion and merchandise including beads for friendship bracelets; and high-priced travel, accommodation, and food purchases, all contributed an inflationary boost to the economy. In North America alone, Swift's concerts generated over $4.5 billion in economic activity. Source: Michele Dillon.

Our social existence and our consciousness are determined by capitalism. And though we make our own history, as Marx tells us, it is not under conditions of our own choosing: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given, and transmitted from the past" (Bru 595). We freely consume, but in ways and under conditions not chosen by us but by the capitalist class and by the advertising industry, which is one of its core channels of power.

The allure of consumption further dampens the development of class consciousness. The freedom to shop means we can all go to the mall and enjoy the commodities produced by capitalism (some more, some less). False consciousness keeps us from perceiving that we are cheaper than the commodities our labor power produces and cheaper than the commodities we buy (see the section on "Wage Labor and Surplus Value"). Additionally, we deceive ourselves into thinking we will be worth more if we buy more. Marx presumed that in pushing through a revolution against capitalism, "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains" (CM 121). The failure of Marx's prediction, however, is itself a testament, in part, to the insightfulness of his analysis of the power of money and of consumer ideology within capitalism. Commodity consumption is such an integral part of lived existence in economically developed societies that it makes a vision of society in which "we are *not* what we own" beyond the imagination of most of us (though some individuals and families experiment with living a simpler life). Consumption, and the ideology of consumption, bind us to capitalism; they are the mark of global civilization (see also chapter 5).

THE CAPITALIST SUPERSTRUCTURE

The advertising industry is just one, albeit a very powerful, element in the larger ideological system that governs our everyday existence. Marx highlights that other institutions in society, those not tied directly to economic markets, also promote capitalist ideology. He argues that because the social institutions in a capitalist society evolved in ways that are compatible with capitalism, they serve the economic interests of the bourgeoisie. The ideology of "free competition [is] accompanied by a social and political constitution adapted to it, and by the economic and political sway of the bourgeois class" (CM 85). In this view, the political, legal, educational, family, religious, and cultural institutions – all those spheres of social existence whose (apparent) purpose is not economic/capital production – promote ideas and practices that support and reinforce capitalism. And they suppress those ideas that might in any way challenge the capitalist status quo (EPM 102–103; CM 100).

Marx refers to these institutions as the **superstructure**; their existence and activities bolster the foundational, **economic base** of capitalism, and the structural inequality of capitalists and wageworkers.

> In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and

> intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being [everyday existence/experiences] that determines their consciousness [ideas]. (Preface 5)

The everyday institutional practices of the state, the media, education, the church, the family, the courts, and the parliament, in executing their specialized activities and constraining individuals' social experiences, are, at the same time, practices that support profit accumulation and the ideology of capitalism that underpins and justifies it. Thus, Marx argues, the organization of the bourgeois family and the gender inequality and exploitation it institutionalizes is "based on capital, on private gain … the bourgeois [man] sees in his wife a mere instrument of production" (CM 100–101; see also Engels 1844/1978): She produces the next generation of wageworkers and capitalists and her (unpaid) labor in the home (as well as her paid labor if she is employed) contributes to the surplus value required and appropriated by the capitalist class.[5]

When we look at education, we see that schools and colleges (and parents) emphasize daily practices affirming disciplined work habits, focus, and productivity; and you are required to major in a specialized field of study rather than dabble in several of your intellectual and creative interests. Colleges verbalize the intellectual value of an allegedly wide-ranging "liberal arts" education. Yet, this must be balanced with training graduates who are able to meet the economy's demand for specialized workers and entrepreneurs. In the legal domain, the courts protect individuals' property rights. In politics, there is a lot of hand-wringing about big business and corporate donations having too much influence on the political process. Yet, the right of business leaders and political lobbyists to make large campaign donations is defended as part of their constitutional rights, that is, their (political-economic) freedom of expression. See Topic 1.6.

In a capitalist society, the rights of capital are more strongly protected than the rights of workers and of the poor. As Marx emphasizes, you "cannot give to one class without taking from another" (Bru 616). Hence, when politicians approve legislation (e.g., freezing the minimum wage), or universities are revising the curriculum, or the courts are evaluating particular laws (e.g., workplace discrimination), we are prompted to ask: "Who benefits?" The answer in most instances can be traced to the capitalist class. And even when workers appear to be benefitting, it's likely also that capitalism too is being propped up (as with welfare payments). What the poor do have, Marx argued, is religion. For Marx, religion is yet another institution that upholds capitalist ideology and the status quo; it distracts workers from consciousness of their exploitation. Just as wage labor (coerced by capitalism) produces alienation (see the preceding section on "Alienated Labor"), so too Marx argues, does religious faith; "The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself" (EPM 72). Thus, religion becomes an alien power over the individual. The core ideas in Christianity, for example, can be seen as promoting the interests of the capitalist class: It is meekness and nonmaterial values that Christian scripture affirms: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land; blessed are the poor for theirs is the Kingdom of God." And although activists in disadvantaged neighborhoods frequently use religion to challenge economic and social inequality (e.g., Wood and Fulton 2015), for the most part, religion has a stabilizing rather than a revolutionary impact on society.

Topic 1.6 The uberization of corporate political influence

The Internet is expanding opportunities for ordinary individuals to engage in political communication and activism, and it is also changing how wealthy individuals and corporations influence the political process. The sociologist Walker (2017) highlights how Internet corporations mobilize "protest on demand" movements to resist government regulation of their company practices. The "uber-ization of activism" refers to how "companies and interest groups galvanize their own users as unpaid campaigners, and do so all with the tap of an app." Walker discusses Uber's mobilization of grassroots activists in its intensive (and mostly successful) efforts in the US and elsewhere to resist government regulations. In 2015, when New York City's Mayor Bill de Blasio attempted to restrict the number of Uber cars in NYC, Uber "added a 'de Blasio's Uber' feature (NO CARS – SEE WHY), so that every time New Yorkers logged on to order a car, they were reminded of the mayor's threat and were sent directly to a petition opposing the new rules." Uber also offered them free rides to a rally against the measure at City Hall.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, where housing is both scarce and highly expensive, Airbnb provided funding for the "Fair to Share" short-term housing rentals campaign against government efforts to prevent properties from being primarily used for Airbnb rentals. And e-mails from eBay to its users nudged them to fight online sales tax legislation. As Walker notes, these companies also use traditional political campaign tools (e.g., television ads, robo calls, mass mailings, celebrity endorsements, and public relations and lobbyist firms). Uber, for example, has a third more state lobbyists than Walmart. He argues that given companies' leveraging of their own social media and Internet tools and users, we need to differentiate between "corporate populism" that benefits a wealthy patron, and genuine grassroots activism that uses social media, such as #Blacklivesmatter or Bill McKibben's climate change activist organization "350.org" (Walker 2017; see also Walker 2014).

Across various social institutions, therefore, we see that the ideas routinely articulated are ideas that serve the interests of the capitalist class – that is, the **ruling class** – and of capitalism as a system (of inequality). Marx explains:

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the **ruling ideas**, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (GI 39)

As I have highlighted, the interests and ideas of the ruling class are affirmed and protected across noneconomic social institutions (e.g., education, law, politics, etc.). Additionally, the ruling class has the capital to purchase media and other opportunities to directly disseminate advertisements and political and economic messages that serve its interests. The class that owns or controls access to capital gets to define literally what we are reading or watching. And by extension, it also controls the sorts of things and issues we are prompted to think about and how to think about them (e.g., Gitlin 1987). Even with the democratizing opportunities provided by YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, corporations and wealthy business owners and executives tend to have greater resources to publicize their ideas than ordinary individuals. It is hard to compete, for example, against billionaire Elon Musk who among other ventures owns Twitter (now rebranded as X). He actively uses it to promote his own opinions about various people, political issues, and events and, on impulse, suspends the Twitter accounts of well-regarded journalists and others who criticize his business practices.

THE RULING POWER OF MONEY IN POLITICS

The ideas of the ruling class also get directly transmitted into the halls of political power as a result of the ruling class's political spending. Once again, we can refer to Marx's analysis of the power of money in a capitalist society. Just as the capitalist can buy bravery, culture, glamour, love, a "trophy wife," so too can he buy political power. Money is crucial in determining who runs for and gets elected to political office. Although Donald Trump was an exceptionally wealthy businessman, others who competed in the 2016 US presidential election (including Hillary Clinton, and Jeb Bush and Ted Cruz) reported multimillion-dollar personal assets; similarly, the US Senate is aptly referred to as a "millionaires' club." President Biden's current net worth is an estimated $8 million (much of it due to speaker fees and book deals he secured following his term as President Obama's Vice-President), while in the United Kingdom, the personal assets of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and his wife are reported to be over $8 million.

Additionally, money can buy access to politicians in multiple ways. Company owners and corporate executives move in much the same social circles as politicians, making it easy for them to press their economic concerns at all sorts of informal and formal gatherings – whether at dinner parties or Davos (at the World Economic Forum). But corporations do not have to wait for dinner parties, fundraisers, golf tournaments, and other events to communicate with politicians. The extensive lobbying system in politics provides a well-organized, routinized way for corporations, industries, and other groups to advance their economic and legislative interests. And many paid lobbyists have themselves been political officeholders (or intimately related to legislators). In short, networks matter (see chapter 7), and in a capitalist society money buys network connections. Corporate interests readily receive greater priority from politicians than the everyday issues that matter to ordinary wageworkers and their families. This is so despite the opportunity ordinary people have to e-mail politicians or to meet with their local political representatives during public constituency meetings.

Further, as underscored by the routine eruption of political corruption scandals, some politicians sell their political (labor) power (as either legislators or lobbyists) in exchange for free dinners, golf trips, and cash. And, as is true of all wage labor, politicians' use value to the capitalist extends beyond their exchange value. The use value continues with the politicians' ongoing policy interventions aiding capitalist profit accumulation, long after they have consumed free meals, vacations, and other gifts.

In sum, the power of money in the political process and in determining the political agenda illustrates Marx's thesis that the ruling ideas in society are, and always will be, those that accord with the interests of those who are the ruling economic force in society. Think here, for example, of "free trade" as a ruling idea, or of the elevation of economic priorities over human rights in US and European relations with China. And these ideas serve not simply the individual interests of a given entrepreneur but, more importantly, the interests, practices, and ideology of capitalism as a whole.

SUMMARY

Marx argued that each mode of production (e.g., imperial Rome, feudal Europe, capitalism) contains the seeds of its own destruction. His thesis assumes that the form of economic and social organization that was once an improvement over its predecessor will eventually suffer its own demise, and be replaced with a system that improves on it. In this framing, history will end with the destruction of capitalism and its replacement by communism. This latter stage has (so far) not emerged. To the contrary, capitalism continues its global expansion and has shown itself to be remarkably adaptive to integrating the crises and contradictions that inhere in it. Moreover, its basic structure (e.g., division of labor, unequal class relations), and processes (e.g., commodification, production of surplus value/profit), are highly resilient. Indeed, with the increasingly global reach of capitalism and consumer culture, Marx's analysis remains highly relevant to understanding contemporary society.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

Marx focused on the structure of capitalist society. He saw history as a progression in material forces and conditions:

- Slave society
- Feudal society
- Capitalism
- Communism

Marx emphasized that capitalism and all existing societies are characterized by inequality. The characteristics of capitalism emphasized by Marx:

- The objective of capitalism is the production of capital/profit
- Capitalism is a system of structured class inequality based on unequal relations to capital
- There are two dichotomously opposed classes:
    - The bourgeoisie (capitalists/owners)
    - The proletariat (wageworkers who produce capital/profit)

- Capitalism is a system of commodity production
- Labor power is itself a commodity
- Wage labor is exploited labor; labor power is used by the capitalist to produce profit for the capitalist
- Surplus value produced by wageworkers becomes the capitalist's profit
- Surplus value derives from the gap between workers' exchange value and their use value to the capitalist
- The division of labor produces estranged or alienated labor:
  - Alienation from the product produced
  - Alienation in the production process
  - Alienation from our own species being
  - Alienation from other workers
- Economic power determines political and social power
- Everyday economic and social existence determines our consciousness of society; our lived experience informs what we know and how we think
- Economic relations determine ideology; the ideas of the ruling (capitalist) class are the ruling ideas in society
- Economic/profit logic (the base of society) determines the logic/practices of all social institutions (superstructure)

GLOSSARY

alienated labor the objective result of the economic and social organization of capitalist production (e.g., division of labor):

alienation from products produced Wageworkers are alienated from the product of their labor; a worker's labor power is owned by the capitalist, and consequently the products of the worker's labor belong not to the worker but to the capitalist who profits from them.

alienation within the production process Wageworkers are actively alienated by the production process; labor is not for the worker an end in itself, freely chosen, but coerced by and performed for the capitalist; the worker is an object in the production process.

alienation of workers from their species being By being reduced to their use value (capitalist profit), workers are estranged from the creativity and higher consciousness that distinguish humans from animals.

alienation of individuals from one another The competitive production process and workplace demands alienate individuals from others.

bourgeoisie the capitalist class; owners of capital and of the means of production, who stand in a position of domination over the proletariat (the wageworkers).

capital money and other (large-scale) privately owned resources (oil wells, land, software) used in the production of commodities whose sale accumulates profit for the capitalist.

capitalism a historically specific way of organizing commodity production; produces profit for the owners of the means of production (e.g., factories, land, oil wells, financial capital); based on structured inequality between capitalists and wage laborers whose exploited labor power produces capitalist profit.

class consciousness the group consciousness necessary if wageworkers (the proletariat) are to recognize that their individual exploitation is part and parcel of capitalism, which requires the exploitation of the labor power of all wageworkers (as a class) by the capitalist class in the production of profit.

class relations unequal relations of capitalists and wageworkers to capital (and each other). Capitalists (who own the means of production used to produce capital/profit) are in a position of domination over wageworkers, who, in order to live, must sell their labor power to the capitalists.

commodification of labor power the process by which, like manufactured commodities, wageworkers' labor power is exchanged and traded on the market for a price (wages).

communism envisioned by Marx as the final phase in the evolution of history, whereby capitalism would be overthrown by proletarian class revolution, resulting in a society wherein the division of labor, private property, and profit would no longer exist.

dialectical materialism the idea that historical change (i.e., material/economic change) is the result of conscious human activity emerging from and acting on the socially experienced inequalities and contradictions in historically conditioned (i.e., human-made) economic forces and relations.

division of labor the separation of occupational sectors and workers into specialized spheres of activity; produces for Marx, alienated labor.

economic base the economic structure or the mode of production of material life in capitalist society. Economic relations (relations of production) are determined by ownership of the means of production and rest on inequality between private-property-owning capitalists (bourgeoisie) and propertyless wageworkers. Economic relations determine social relations and social institutional practices (i.e., the superstructure).

exchange value the price (wages) wageworkers get on the market for the (coerced) sale of their labor power to the capitalist; determined by how much the capitalist needs to pay the wageworkers in order to maintain their labor power, so that the workers can subsist and maintain their use value in producing profit for the capitalist. The workers' exchange value is of less value to the worker than their use value is to the capitalist.

exploitation the capitalist class caring about wageworkers only to the extent that wageworkers have "use value," that is, can be used to produce surplus value/profit.

false consciousness the embrace of the illusionary promises of capitalism.

fetishism of commodities the mystification of capitalist production whereby we inject commodities with special properties beyond what they really are (e.g., elevating an Abercrombie & Fitch shirt to something other than what it really is, that is, cotton converted into a commodity), while remaining ignorant of the exploited labor and unequal class relations that determine production and consumption processes.

historical materialism history as the progressive expansion in the economic-material-productive forces in society.

ideology ideas in everyday circulation; determined by the ruling economic class such that they make our current social existence seem normal and desirable.

inequality structured into the profit objectives and organization of capitalism whereby the exploited labor power of wageworkers produces surplus value (profit) for the capitalist class.

means of production resources (e.g., land, oil wells, factories, corporations, financial capital) owned by the bourgeoisie and used for the production of commodities/profit as a result of the labor power of wageworkers.

mode of production how a society organizes its material-social existence (e.g., capitalism rather than feudalism or socialism).

objectification the dehumanization of wageworkers as machine-like objects, whose maintenance (with subsistence wages) is necessary to the production of commodities (objects) necessary to capital accumulation/profit. The term is interchangeable with "alienation."

private property the source and result of the profit accumulated by capitalists; and a source and consequence of the inequality between capitalists and wageworkers.

profit capitalists' accumulation of capital as a result of the surplus value generated by wageworkers' (exploited) labor power.

proletariat wageworkers who, in order to live, must sell their labor power to the capitalist class, which uses it to produce surplus value/profit.

ruling class the class that is the ruling material force in society (capitalists/bourgeoisie) is also the ruling intellectual/ideological force, ensuring the protection and expansion of capitalist economic interests.

ruling ideas ideas disseminated by the ruling (capitalist) class, invariably bolstering capitalism.

species being what is distinctive of the human species (e.g., mindful creativity).

standpoint of the proletariat the positioning of the proletariat vis-à-vis the production process, from within which they perceive the dehumanization and self-alienation structured into capitalism, unlike the bourgeoisie, who experience capitalism (erroneously) as self-affirming.

subsistence wage minimum needed to sustain workers' existence (livelihood) so that their labor power is maintained and reproduced for the capitalist class.

superstructure noneconomic social institutions (legal, political, educational, cultural, religious, family) whose routine institutional practices and activities promote the beliefs, ideas, and practices that are necessary to maintaining and reproducing capitalism.

surplus value capitalist profit from the difference between a worker's exchange value (wages) and use value; the extra value over and above the costs of commodity production (i.e., raw materials, infrastructure, workers' wages) created by the labor power of wageworkers.

use value the usefulness of wageworkers' labor power in the production of profit.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. What specific characteristics of capitalism contribute to the inequality that is inherent in capitalism as an economic and social system?
2. How does the organization of production under capitalism contribute to dehumanizing the individual?
3. What is ideology, and how does it work in everyday life?
4. What are the structural and cultural (ideological) factors in contemporary society that seem to militate against the development of class consciousness?
5. How do the state and other social institutions (e.g., universities) prop up capitalism?

NOTES

1. In citing Marx's writings (and subsequently Durkheim's, chapter 2, and Weber's, chapter 3), I reference the book initials rather than the date of publication. Thus, in this first quote, "CM" refers to Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. I do this to help students keep in mind the classical theorists' main books, which comprise the core foundation of sociological theory. A list of the theorist's writings, their dates, and the book title initials for referencing them appears after the biographical note in the chapter.
2. The influential Hungarian Marxist theorist Georg Lukács (1885–1971), elaborates on the centrality of the concept of reification in Marx's writing (1968: 83–222). See also chapter 5 on Critical Theory in this textbook.
3. Marx argues that we misunderstand history because we do not perceive the real conditions of everyday life, instead preferring to talk in general terms of some universal idea (e.g., freedom). Under capitalism and the division of labor in production, individuals' material activities become divorced from their real interests and hence their economic activities "become an alien power opposed" to them (GI 22), a power that makes us desensitized to the real, unequal, material forces in society (GI 20–24). See the section in this chapter on historical materialism.
4. Lukács (1968: 48–55) elaborates on Marx's theory of class consciousness. He emphasizes that Marx's collaborator Friedrich Engels pointed out that although humans make history and do so

consciously, this consciousness is false insofar as it is part of "the historical totality" of class-conditioned social relations of inequality that exist under capitalism, and which can only be transcended by the class-conscious revolutionary political action of the proletariat.

5 There are times when superstructural institutions critique capitalism – for example, the critique by the Catholic church, especially Pope Francis, of consumerism and of the extremes of economic inequality within the West and between the so-called first and third worlds (see Dillon 2018). These critiques, however, tend to be of specific capitalistic practices and ideas, rather than of the system of capitalism as a whole.

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