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EC SO4001: Understanding Society

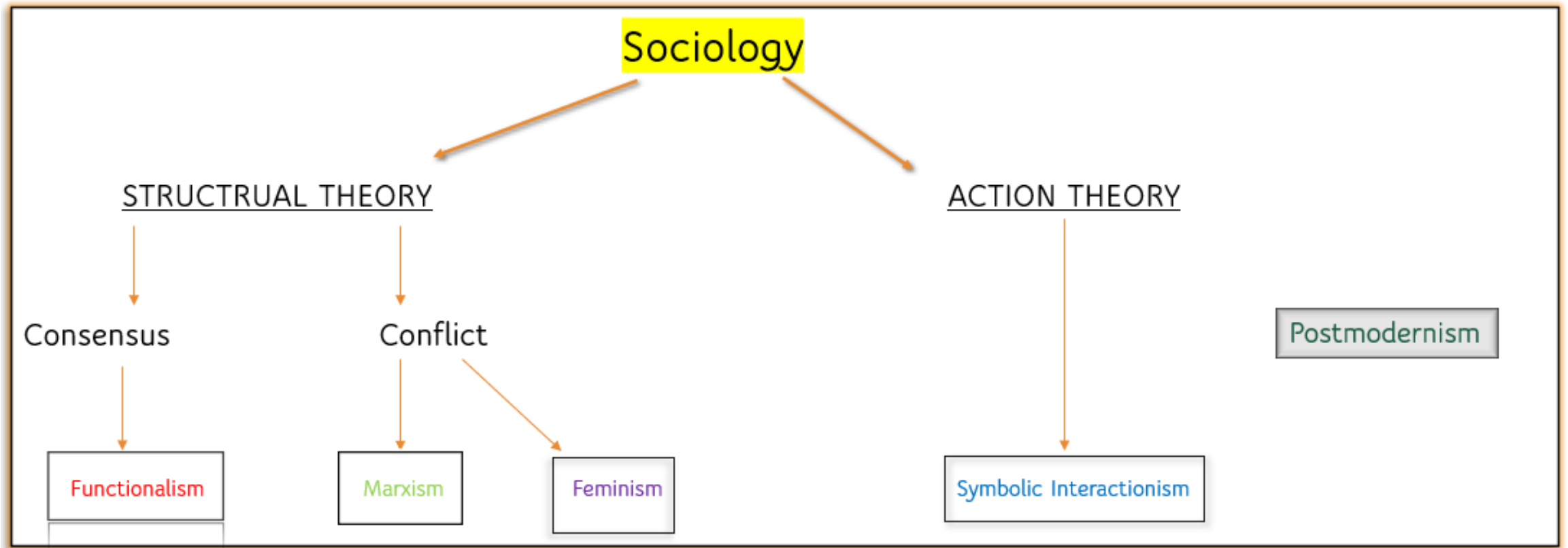
Conflict Theory 2023

Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives

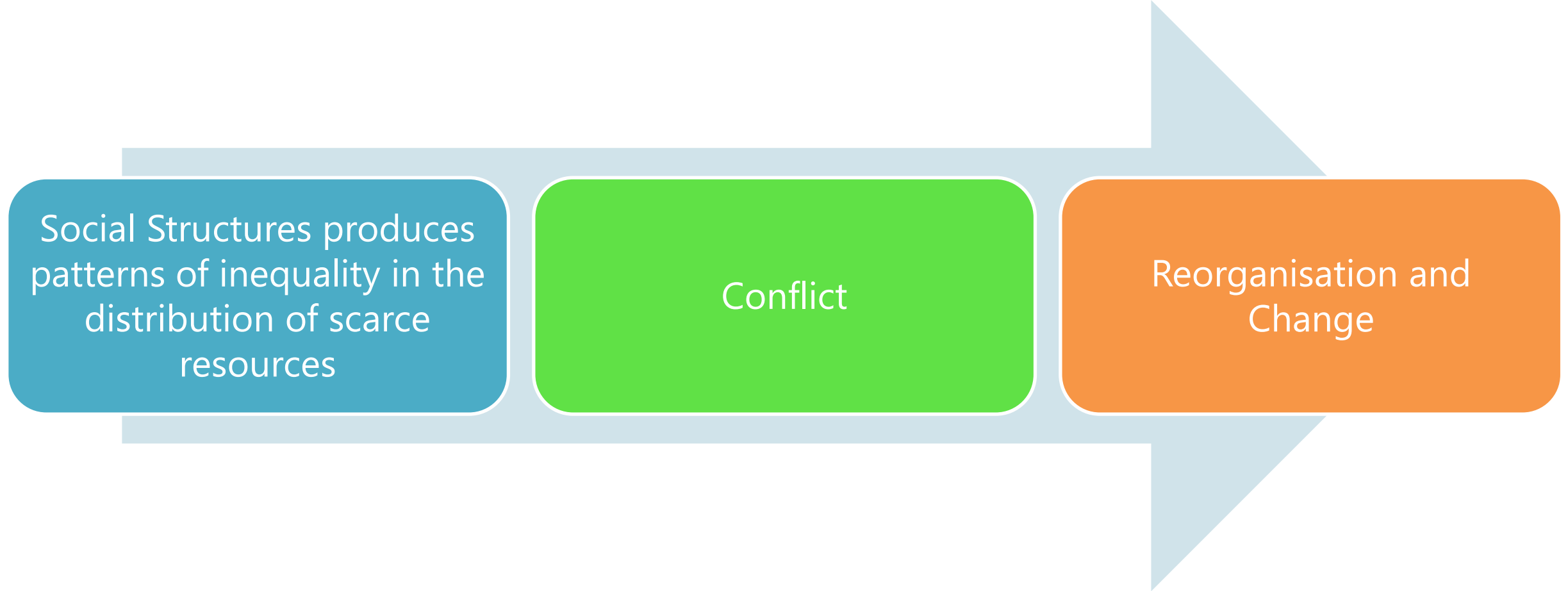


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Sociological Perspectives



The Conflict Theory Model



Types of Conflict Theories

- Derives for Marxism
- Feminism (lecture 5)
- Critical Race Theory (lecture 6)

“Conflict perspectives are based on the view that there is a conflict of interest between groups in society. In particular, the powerful are seen to gain at the expense of the less powerful”

(Haralombos and Holborn, 2013, p. 665)

Conflict Theory: Assumptions

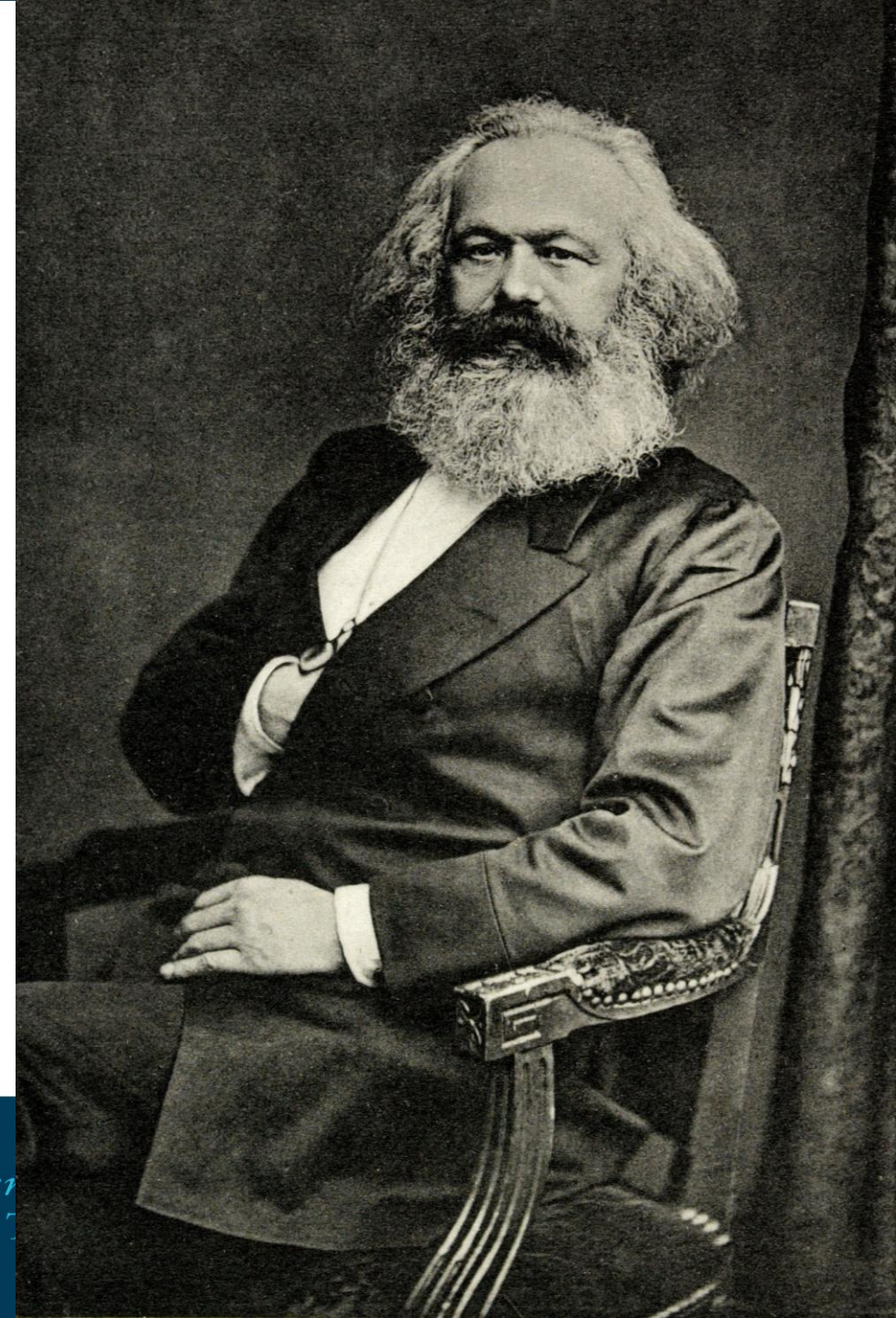
- Interactions
 - Human interaction results in conflict
- Change
 - Conflict and change are normal and inevitable in society
- Competition
 - Competition over scarce resources. e.g., money, leisure, sexual partners, etc is part of all social groups
 - Competition rather than consensus is characteristic of human relationships
- If everyone had the resources they needed, conflict would not exist

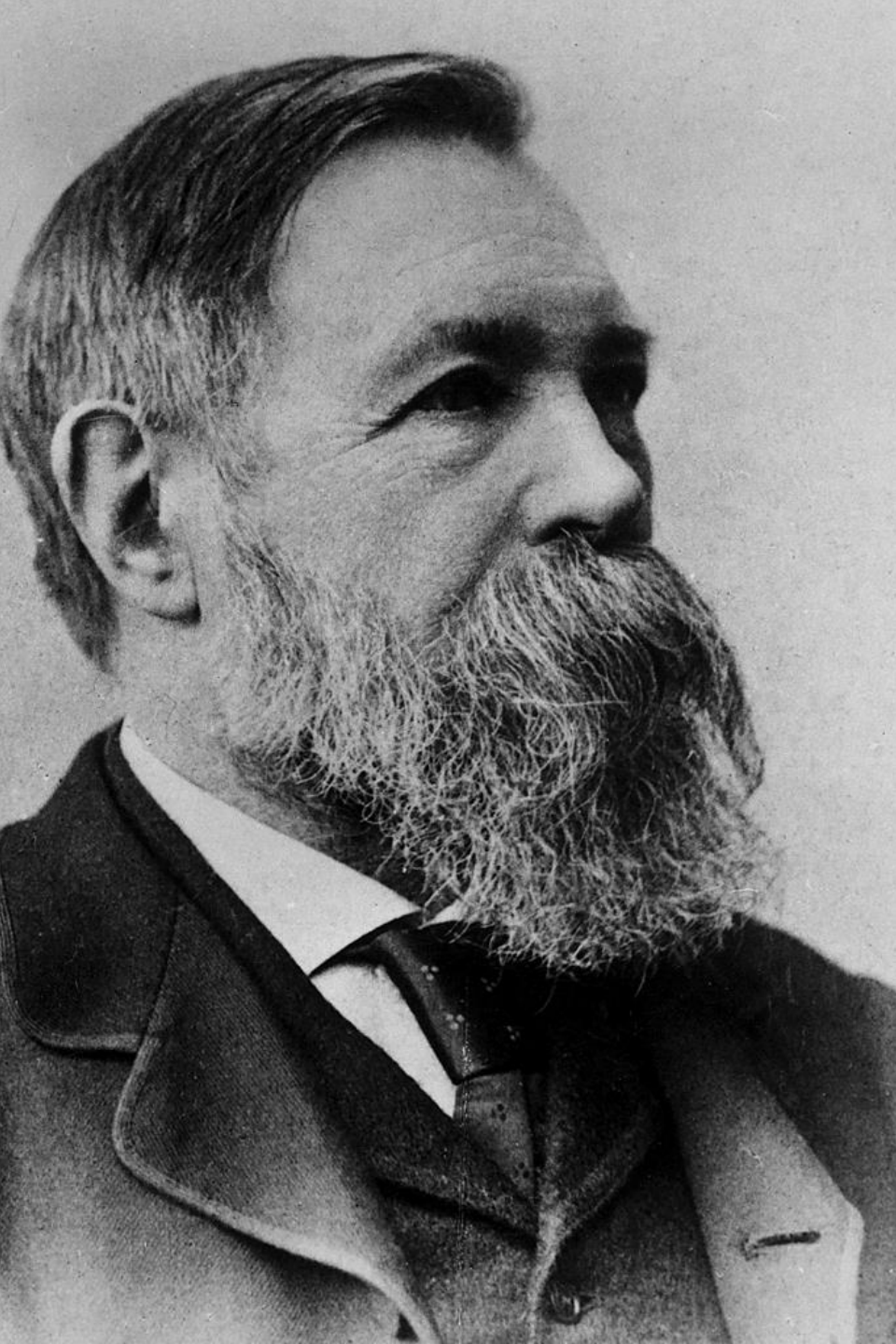
Key Theorists and Concepts



Karl Marx (1818-1883) / Marxism

- Ideas about the social classes/capitalism are the roots of Conflict Theory
- Focused on economic differences and the conflict this produces





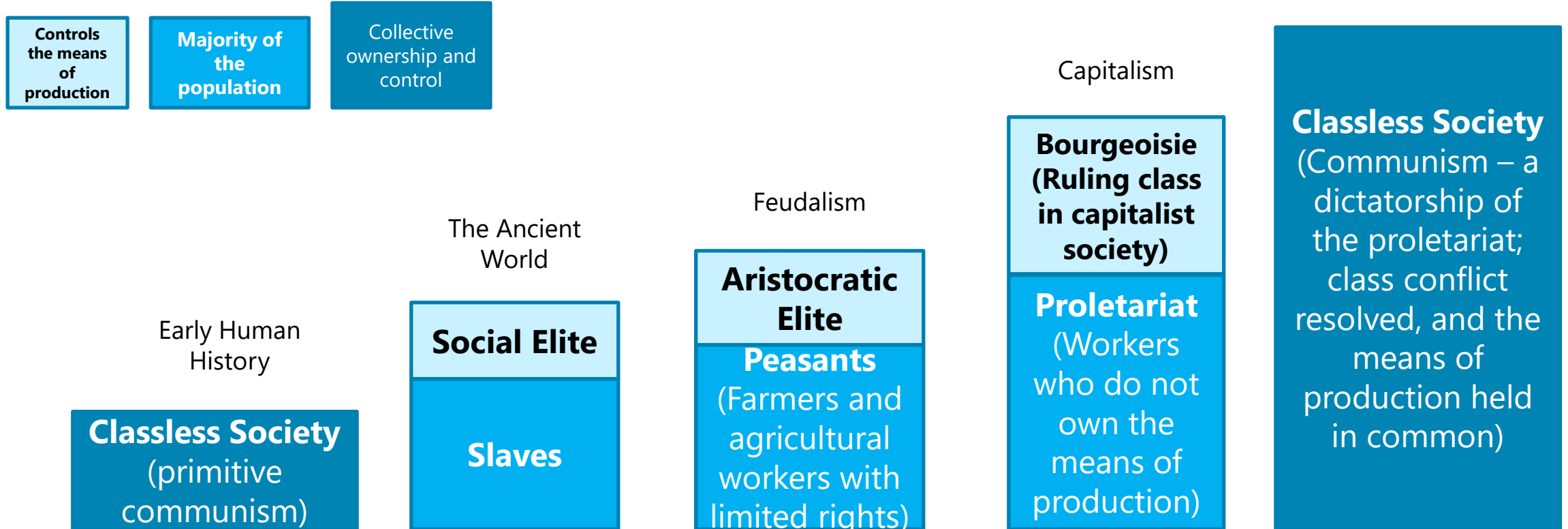
Friedrich Engels (1820-1895)

- Engels worked closely with Marx
- He funded Marx to write (from capitalist means!)
- They wrote "The Communist Manifesto" together in 1848

Marx's five historical epochs

(Taken from, Atkinson, 2015, p. 30)

The End of History



Capitalism

- “Capitalism is characterized by four sets of institutional and behavioural arrangements:
 - market orientated commodity production;
 - private ownership of the means of production;
 - a large segment of the population that cannot exist unless it sells its labour power in the market;
 - and individualistic, acquisitive, maximizing behaviour by most individuals within the economic systems”

(Hunt and Luatzenheirser, 2011, p. 4)

Capitalism

- An economic system with:
 - Private ownership of the means of production
 - The creation of goods or services for profit

(Slatterly, 2003)

Proletariat (the subject class)

- The proletariat are the working class who did not own:
 - resources
 - land
 - or tools
 - they produce goods for the bourgeoisie

(Slatterly, 2003)



Bourgeoisie (The ruling class)

- The bourgeoisie are the capitalist class who own
 - the resources
 - land and tools
- They exploit the proletariat by
 - paying them less than their work is worth



(Slatterly, 2003)

Marx and capitalism

- Marx argued capitalism causes:
 - Alienation
 - Insecurity
 - Workers get paid little, the rich get richer
 - It's unstable
 - It's not good for capitalists

Social Stratification:

Categorises people based on wealth, power and status

- Society changed from
 - agrarian, rural groups into industrialised, modern societies
 - a social hierarchy emerges
 - Creating distinct classes based on:
 - Wealth
 - power
 - Prestige
- Conflict Theory believes:
 - This structure of social stratification
 - that pits those in the upper class
 - most power, wealth and prestige
 - against the lower classes

(Slatterly, 2003)



Class Conflict

- Marx believed the proletariat and the bourgeoisie were dependent on each other
- But is not an equal relationship
- The ruling class gain at the expense of the subject class
- Therefore, there is a conflict of interest between them
- This conflict is inevitable
- It's expressed in all areas of life:
 - Politics
 - Economics
 - Policy
 - Laws

(Haralambos and Holborn, 2013, p. 31)

False Consciousness

- False Consciousness: Marx believed the proletariat could not see their position in the class system
 - Refers to a false picture of the nature of the relationship between the social classes
 - Both classes accept the status quo as normal
 - Conflict of interests is hidden
 - Social stability produced
 - e.g., The Wages of Whiteness – Roediger (1991)
- False consciousness keeps society stable

(Haralambos and Holborn, 2013, p .32)

Class Consciousness

- False consciousness replaced with awareness that they are being exploited
- A common identity is formed
- Shared interests are recognised
- This is class consciousness
- This creates class solidarity
- Finally, through collective struggle the ruling class can be overthrown

(Haralambos and Holborn, 2013, p .32)

Communism

- Overthrow of the class system
- Abolition of private property
- Aims for communal ownership of means of production
- Communism replaces capitalism
- Divisions (e.g., social stratification) are eradicated

Max Weber (1864-1920)

- Agreed with Marx that ownership/non-ownership of property was significant in class formation
- But rejected the idea that economic division was the only division
- Weber believed that there could be multiple divisions between the classes, such as:
 - Status
 - Political interests
 - Gender



The Protestant Work Ethic (Weber, 1905)

- Capitalism exists due to a set of ideas, mostly Protestantism
- Protestantism makes one feel guilt and anxious to prove your virtue
- These feelings were channelled into working hard
- All work was seen as holy and in the name of God
- Protestants focus on community, not family
- Protestants don't believe in miracles, so wealth isn't 'God given'
- Protestants focused on science which resulted in technological innovations

(Weber, 2011 [1905])

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) and Hegemony

- Hegemony: the political and ideological domination of society
- Capitalism is upheld by hegemony
- Persuading the population that to accept the political and moral values of the ruling class

"The ruling class only maintained their control through to the extent that they could command the beliefs of the population through civil society"

(Haralambos and Holborn 2013, p. 597)





C. Wright Mills (1916-1962)

- Mills (1956) argued the elite rule through institutionally, not psychologically
- The 3 main institutions:
 - The major corporations
 - The military
 - The federal government
- Mills called these the 'Power Elite'
- They make national and internationally important decisions
- The mass media are directed by the elite who tell people what to think/feel/do/hope for

(Halambos and Holbon, 2013, p. 589-590)

Critical Theory

- Associated with 'The Frankfurt School'
- Critical theory was initially influenced by the work of Karl Marx (Bonner, 2017).
- It was originally 'intended as a general theory of society fuelled by the desire for liberation' (Bonner, 2017, p. 21). Not just understand society but change it.
- Or a means 'to emancipate the disempowered' (Scotland, 2012, p. 13)
- Critical theories seek to raise consciousness: "of social conditions and promoting emancipatory values such as equity, social welfare, justice, mutuality and political liberty" (Thomas, 2009, p. 54)
- Key figures: Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, Walter Benjamin, Jurgen Habermas, and Herbert Marcuse

Critical Theory

- Max Horkheimer defined critical theory in the book *Traditional and Critical Theory* (1937)
- Critical theory must do two things:
 - It must account for society within a historical context
 - Offer a robust and holistic critique by incorporating insights from all social sciences.
- It explains the social problems that exist, offers solutions
- Horkheimer criticised "traditional" theorists for failing to question power, domination, and the status quo.

(Horkheimer, 2002)

Applying Conflict Theory to society Health, Poverty and Crime

Conflict Theory and Health

- Medicine is used to 'define normality, punish deviance and maintain social order' (Haralombos and Holborn, 2013, p. 305)
- Navarro (1986) believes capitalism benefits from medicine in 3 ways:
 - Medicine keeps people healthy to contribute to the economy. Definitions of health are linked to the ability to produce goods. Healthy = productive, unhealthy = unable to produce wealth
 - Masks structural influences on health (social class/gender/ethnicity). Illness seen as bad luck/blamed on the individual
 - Medicine emphasises biomedical reasons for illness and use drugs treatments which is profitable

Conflict Theory and Poverty

- It is the failure of society to allocate resources and provided opportunities fairly that explain poverty and social exclusion for 4 reasons:
 - Some see the welfare state as responsible
 - Others consider lack of power of the poor and socially excluded. They're unable to sell their labour or prevented from receiving sufficient funds to lift themselves out of poverty
 - Some connect poverty to structural forces (e.g., stratification)
 - Poverty is the inevitable consequence of capitalism, so society needs to be transformed.

(Haralombos and Holborn, 2013, pp. 269-270)

Conflict Theory and Crime

- Modern society and the...
 - ‘...criminal justice system and criminal law...operates on the behalf of the rich and powerful social elites, with the resulting policies aimed at controlling the poor’
- Perpetuating a system in which:
 - The upper class maintains power
 - All other classes remain:
 - economically disadvantaged
 - disenfranchised
 - nearly powerless.

(Slatterly, 2003)

Some of the key terms

- Capitalism
- Ruling class and subject class
- Social Stratification
- Class conflict
- Class consciousness
- Hegemony
- Power Elite

As a group, critique conflict theory

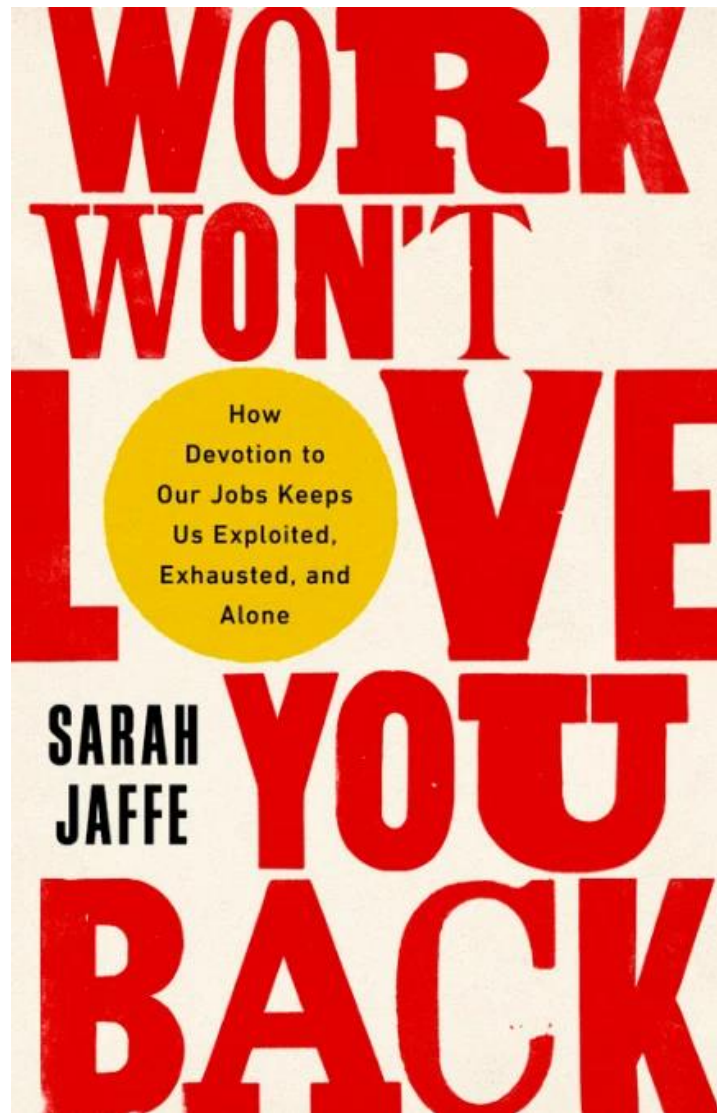
- What are its positives?
- What are its drawbacks?
- Think of modern examples i.e., BLM

Some criticisms of Conflict Theory

- Focuses too much on the macro and doesn't offer insight into the individual (Ritzer and Goodman, 2003)
- Portrays society as lots of different groups in conflict, can be confusing to understand how society works (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013, p. 971)
- Doesn't explain why one group of people will be success and another won't be (Marxism does this to an extent) (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013, p. 971)
- Overlooks the ways society does work and cooperate
- Doesn't explain social stability

Conflict Theory: Overview

- Structural Inequality
 - Inequalities in power and rewards are built into all social structures
 - Resources are scarce and groups will always compete over these resources
- Degree of Inequality
 - Inequality exists in varying degrees with people having different amounts of resources
 - Hierarchies exist
- Revolution
 - Macro changes occur as a result of conflict between
 - competing interests
 - rather than through adaptation
 - It is often abrupt and revolutionary rather than evolutionary



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