



SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

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Dr Michael Biggs

Theoretical Perspectives

7. Systemic oppression; functionalism

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SociologicalTheory.shtml](http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0060/SociologicalTheory.shtml)

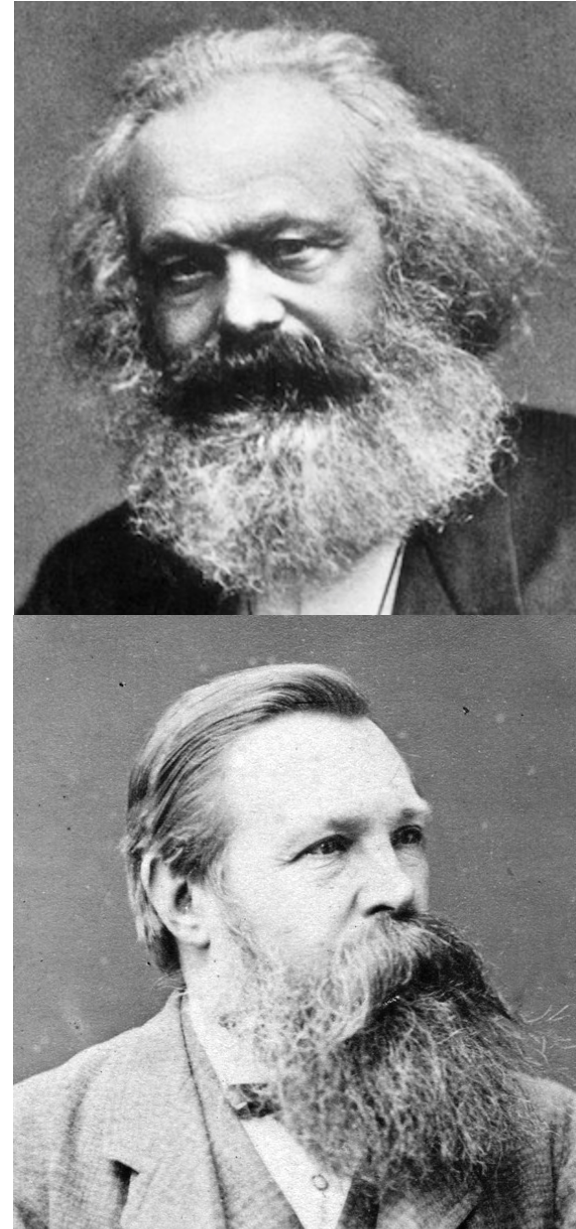
Introduction

- Networks are *horizontal* (e.g. friendship, directorships)
- *Vertical* relations of oppressor and oppressed, dominant and subordinate
 - systemic and total, extending beyond national states
- Class; sex; race ...

Class

‘The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society or in the common ruin of the contending classes.’

(Marx & Engels 1848)





- Oppression located in production: the material “*base*”
- Oppressor class *exploits* the oppressed class
- Dynamic: oppressed have a compelling interest in overturning oppression

Capitalism reveals oppression

- Bourgeoisie ‘has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his “natural superiors,” and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment.”... for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.’ (Marx & Engels 1848)

Capitalism conceals oppression

- commodity fetishism: ‘It is nothing but the definite social relations between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things’ (Marx 1867)
 - e.g. famines: lack of entitlement rather than food (Sen 1983)
- ostensibly free exchange in market conceals exploitation in production

- Bourgeoisie / capitalist class
 - view the conditions of its own emancipation—private property, free market—as universal
 - ‘the state is the executive committee of the ruling class’ (Marx & Engels 1848)
 - under democracy? => functionalist
- Proletariat
 - class-in-itself => class-for-itself
 - immiserization and polarization
 - class struggle
 - “*false consciousness*” (but 20C, Lukacs and Marcuse!)



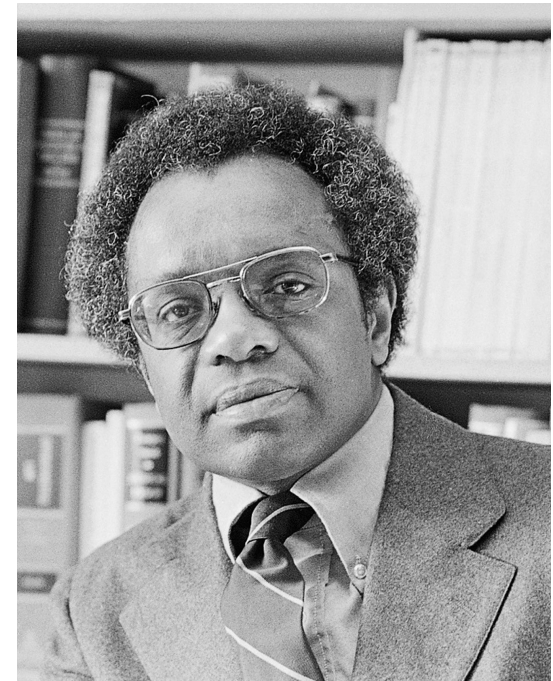
Sex

- ‘As the organization of the work of some for the benefit of others defines a class, workers, the organized expropriation of the sexuality of some for the use of others defines the sex, woman’ (MacKinnon 1989)
 - sexual harassment, rape, prostitution, pornography
- Concealed:
 - male viewpoint is ostensibly objective and universal
 - ‘The assumption that in matters sexual women really want what men want from women, makes male force against women in sex invisible’ (MacKinnon 1989)
 - ‘a feminist standpoint based on women’s relational self-definition and activity exposes the world men have constructed ... as partial and perverse’ (Hartsock 1983)

- Disanalogies with class:
 - patriarchy is not historical like capitalism
 - women are not an increasing majority like proletariat
 - women and men have intimate relations, not segregated
- Does explain why dominance aligns with biological sex
 - ‘Male is a social and political concept, not a biological attribute, having nothing whatever to do with ... nature ... or body as such’ (MacKinnon 1989)

Race

- Race analogous insofar as it is dichotomous
- Whites as oppressor; indigenous or colonized or former slaves as oppressed
- How to claim exploitation claim when oppressed race is a minority?
 - historical: slavery or colonialism was the foundation for current economic prosperity;
 - USA: ‘A nation built on the backs of black labor’ (Bell 1995)



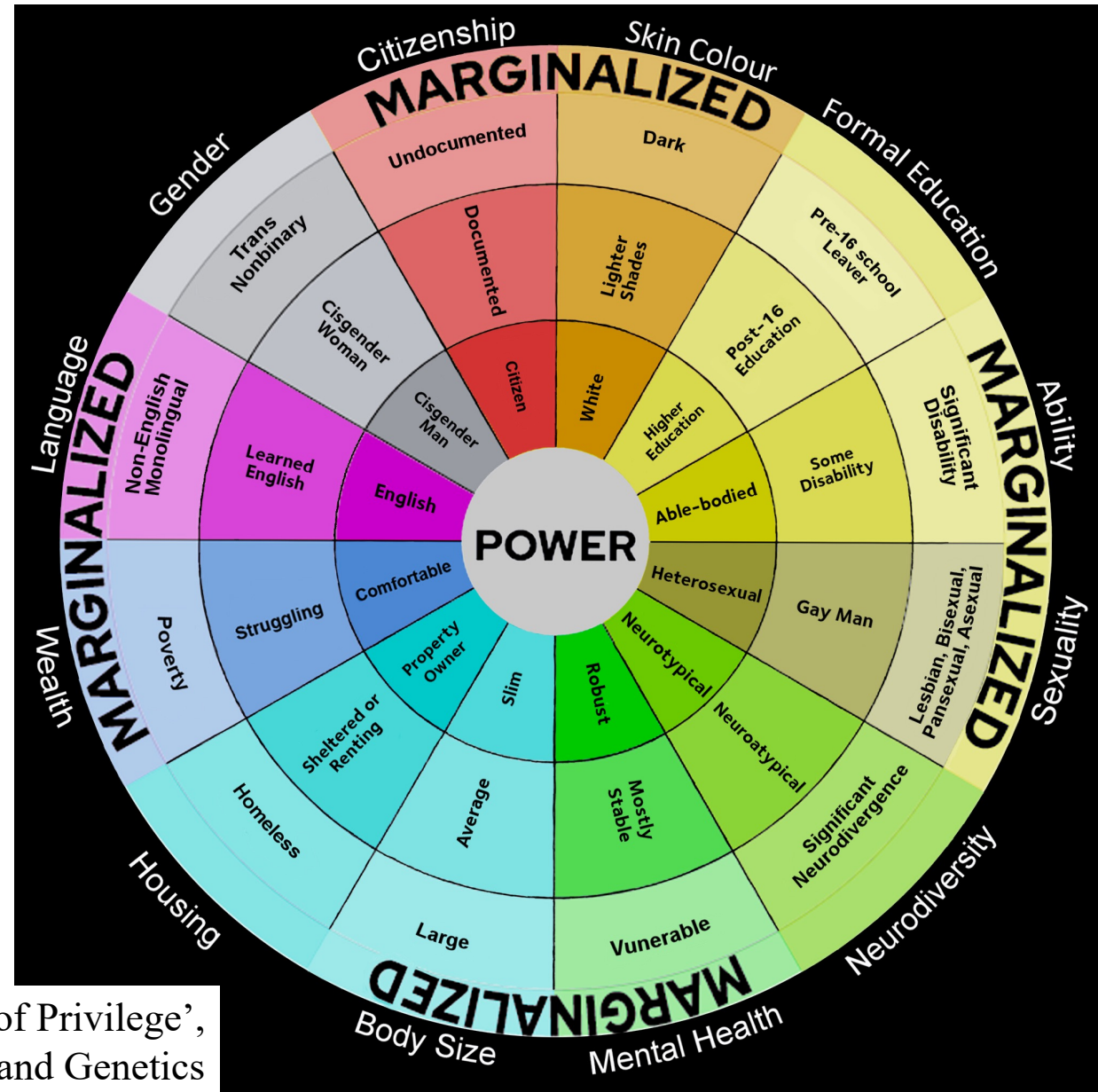
- System of oppression is homeostatic:
 - ‘The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites’ (Bell 1980)
 - ‘abstract legal rights, such as equality, could do little more than bring about the cessation of one form of discriminatory conduct that soon appeared in a more subtle though no less discriminatory form’ (Bell 1992)
 - legal equality masks de facto inequality—like Marx
- Is race real?
 - ‘the most critical resistance strategy for disempowered groups is occupy and defend a politics of social location rather than to vacate and destroy it’ (Crenshaw 1991)

Problems

- Amelioration interpreted as masking oppression—welfare state (=> functionalism)
- Selective recruitment of disparities—criminalization of racial minorities versus men; gender pay gap versus gender longevity gap
- Prescriptions for the oppressed are falsified—e.g. working-class Tories; feminist BDSMers

Summary

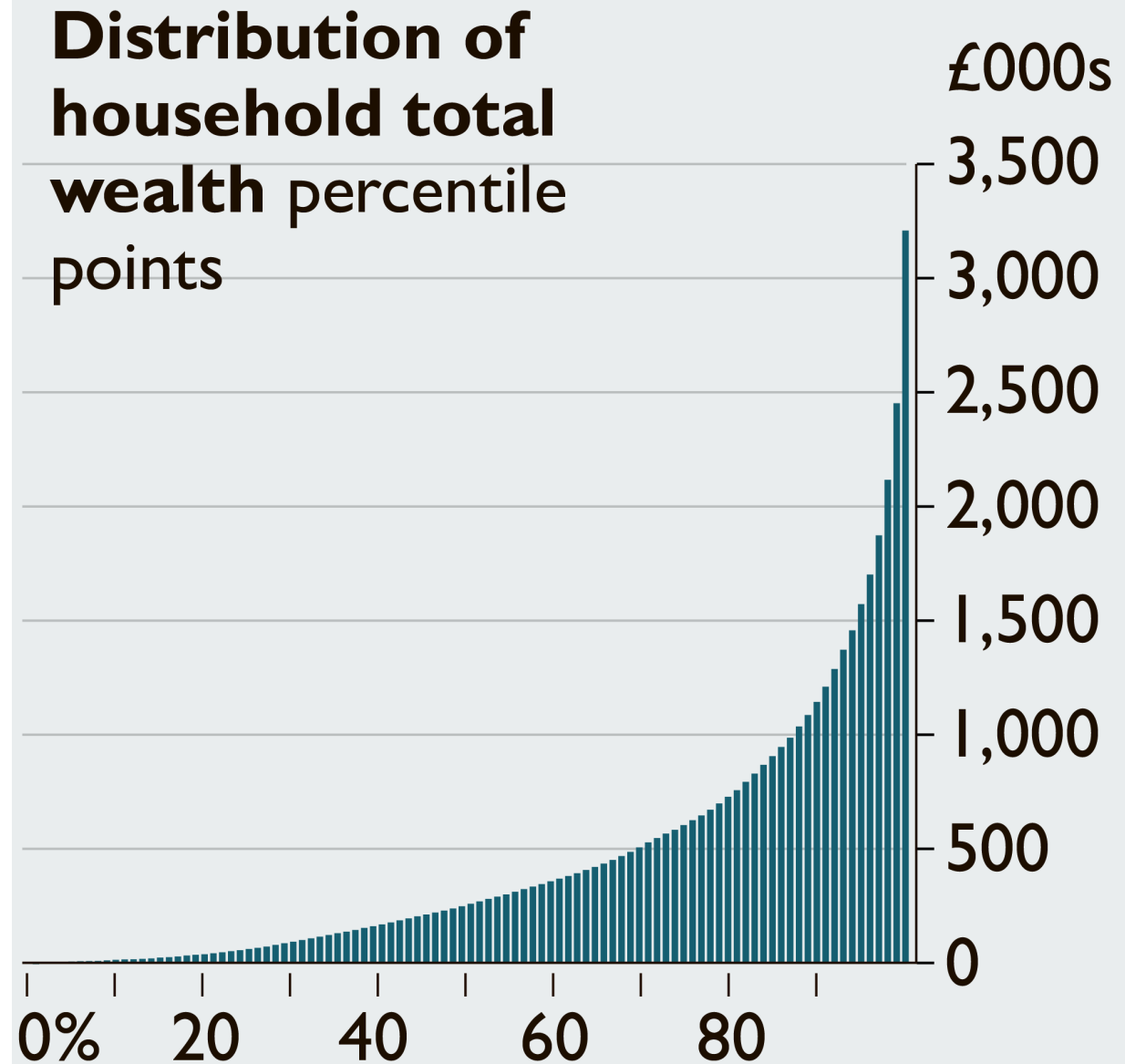
- Social phenomena are explained by the struggle between oppressor and oppressed—either maintaining oppression or revolting against it
- Dimensions multiply ...
- Multiple dimensions combined as intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991)

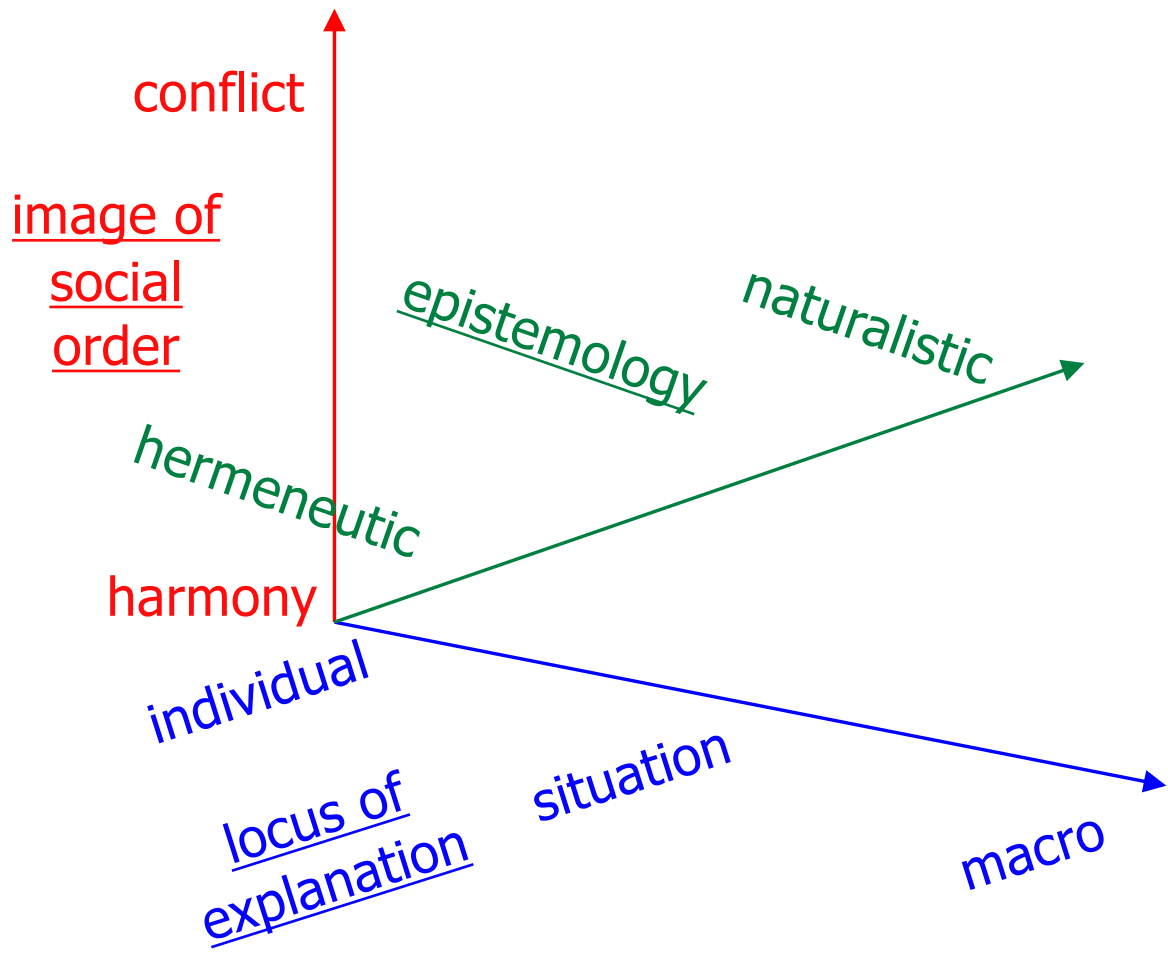


‘Wheel of Privilege’,
Department of Physiology, Anatomy and Genetics

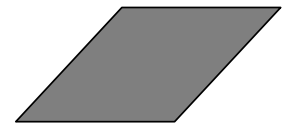
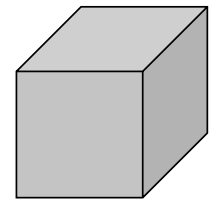
Virtues

- Institutionalized as EDI
 - just as RCT undergirds libertarianism and neoliberalism
- Economic inequality fundamental to modern society—
notwithstanding equality!





Systemic oppression



Questions

- ‘An important function of social institutions in societies such as Britain or France or the USA is to maintain white supremacy.’ Do you agree?
- ‘Gender is inextricably connected with hierarchy: masculinity denotes domination, femininity subordination.’ Do you agree?
- ‘Modern ideals of equal rights serve to conceal class, gender, and racial oppression.’ Discuss.
- Are profound inequalities inevitable in modern complex societies?
- Why do so many staff and students at elite universities proclaim egalitarian values while enjoying the privileges of inequality?

Functionalist explanation

- **functionalist**: explain something in terms of its *beneficial consequences*
 - e.g. heart's function is to circulate blood (William Harvey, 17th century)
- **Functionalism**: 'to provide a satisfactory explanation of social life we need to show how the phenomena which are its substance come together to place society in harmony with itself and with the outside world' (Durkheim 1895)
 - inequality is functional for society (Davis and Moore 1945)—like biological explanation at the level of the species
 - reforms are functional for the system of oppression, e.g. welfare state, sexual liberation, racial desegregation

Problems

1. Tautology: how can *beneficial* be defined? what functions are really necessary for societies (or social systems)?
2. Mystery: how do consequences become *causes*? what is the feedback mechanism?

Providing a feedback mechanism

- ‘The ruling class does not rule’ (Block 1977):
 - politicians depend on economic growth, for tax revenue and for public support
 - capitalists will decide not to invest if unfavourable policies are implemented—or even if atmosphere is uncongenial (Keynes 1936)
 - feedback mechanism does not require collective conspiracy: unintended consequences of individual decisions

Functionalism can also be justified by evolution ...

Questions

- ‘An important function of social institutions in societies such as Britain or France or the USA is to maintain white supremacy.’ Do you agree?
- Is it sufficient to explain an institution in terms of its function?
- Can functionalist explanations used in biology be imported into the social sciences?
- Are social norms always functional for solving problems of collective action?

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