

# A Sociological Analysis of a Nation Divided: What Would Marx and Durkheim Say?

Karen Garcia

## Faculty Introduction

Dr. Karen Douglas

Karen Garcia's paper is a sociological analysis of major events that are currently dividing the American population. Guided by history and sociological theory, she constructs a narrative that links the past to the present to arrive at a persuasive explanation for the current polarization in the United States. She relies primarily on the sociological theorizing of Ralf Dahrendorf's *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (1959) to bring together the two competing faces of society – consensus and conflict. In doing so she also reveals the ongoing salience of race that underlies the major tensions in US society from Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, and the capitol insurrection, among others. A promising young scholar, Garcia competently pulls disparate strands from society together in a novel way that bridges the intersection of race and class.

## Abstract

The Black Lives Matter movement, Blue Lives Matter movement, and the siege at the Capitol are reflective of a society in flux. While these movements involve distinctly different actors, they are representative of two antagonistic poles of a riven population. Each movement offers an opportunity to interpret the motivations that are propelling the actions. Dahrendorf's (1959) *Social Structure, Group Interests, and Conflict Groups* will ground the explanation. Unlike many social theorists who divide into distinct sociological camps, Dahrendorf's work bridges this divide.

January 6, 2022, marked the one-year anniversary of the violent breach of the United States Capitol Building. On this day, Americans witnessed a mob of protestors breaking the windows and doors of the Capitol building to gain entrance. The mob's goal was to stop the certification of the election of Joe Biden, whom they believed had stolen the election from Donald Trump.

In the immediate aftermath of the events of January 6th, Republicans and Democrats condemned the violence. There appeared to be bi-partisan support for a commission to study the events that led to the Capitol insurrection, if for no other reason than to keep a similar event from happening. However, partisan differences soon emerged concerning the scope of investigation to be examined by the commission. Democrats called for a commission to examine the circumstances of January 6th and the factors that influenced the event. Republicans, on the other hand, urged an expansion of the scope beyond the events of January 6th to include the Black Lives Matter protests; the car attack on the Capitol that left a Capitol police officer dead; and, the shooting of a GOP lawmaker on a Virginia baseball field in 2017. Arguments over the scope of the commission led to its demise, as Republican leadership refused to sanction its creation. Instead, and against the wishes of most Republicans in Congress, Democrats formed a bi-partisan committee to examine the events of January 6th.

Since January 6, 2021, Democrats and Republicans have become even more divided, with two competing narratives of what happened on that day. These political divisions mirror the broader social instability and division in American society. The Black Lives Matter movement, Blue Lives Matter movement, and the siege at the Capitol, are reflective of a society in flux. While these near contemporaneous movements involve distinctly different actors, they are related to each other nonetheless as they are representative of two antagonistic poles of a riven population. Thus, each movement offers an opportunity to provide an interpretation of the motivations that are propelling the actions.

The purpose of this paper is to provide just that explanation. The divisions are long-standing and require an explication of their historical roots. This interpretation and understanding will be guided by socio-

logical theory. Given that different movements engage different populations, Ralf Dahrendorf's (1959) *Social Structure, Group Interests, and Conflict Groups* is most helpful in articulating an explanation. Unlike many social theorists who divide into distinct sociological camps, either Durkheim (functionalism) or Marx (conflict), Dahrendorf attempts to bridge this divide. His analogy of the "two faces of society" allows us to bring seemingly disparate movements together and ultimately provide the reader a broader understanding of the tensions driving the American population into two bitterly acrimonious camps (Dahrendorf, 1959, p. 179).

Towards these ends, this paper is divided into several sections. First, we summarize the transformation of the US economy away from policies motivated by the ideas of renowned British economist John Maynard Keynes and his idea of government spending and intervention in recessionary periods (known as Keynesianism) towards those of Nobel Prize winning economist, Milton Friedman, and his free market ideology (now called neoliberalism). This transformation has resulted in what Jacob Hacker (2006) calls 'the great risk shift' which has placed the risks of capitalism, once borne by business and government, squarely on the shoulders of Americans. Economic inequality and financial insecurity have been exacerbated by this transformation and underlie the fears motivating the culture wars. We next highlight the role that race continues to play in the divisions of society. Racial tensions have grown in the aftermath of the social movements of the 1960s, albeit in more color blind and covert ways. Critical race theory (itself a specific target in the culture wars and part of the controversy) informs this section. We

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then turn to the specific movements and bring in Dahrendorf's idea of a society with "two faces"—one face rooted in Durkheim, functionalism, and consensus, and the second face rooted in Marx and conflict (1959, p. 179). In the final section of this essay, we bridge these two perspectives into a broader narrative of America divided.

## **The US Economy Transformed**

Beginning in the 1970s, the American economy began to transition in

several ways. Technologically driven innovations and the eventual development and deployment of the internet transformed the workplace in America and around the world. Positions like bank tellers, telephone operators, and receptionists disappeared as technology rendered these positions obsolete. The manufacturing sector in the United States transformed to capital intensive endeavors with automation and robots replacing large portions of human labor. Large corporations downsized both white- and blue-collar positions with the remaining 'lean' workforce assuming more of the workload (Massey, 2007).

Unstable oil prices, gasoline shortages, rising prices and a stagnating economy set in motion reforms at the federal level, including massive cuts to the social safety-net programs and a devolution of risk from government and business to the American public (Hacker, 2006). Economists have referred to the changes that began in the 1970s as “the great U-turn” corresponding to the shape of the line that traces economic inequality over four broad areas: (1) the laissez-faire capitalism of the 1920s; (2) the New Deal-Fair Deal era of Roosevelt and Truman in the 1940s; (3) the Postwar Consensus era (1950s-1970s); and, (4) the era of neoliberal restructuring (Massey, 2007, p. 31). Economic inequality under laissez-faire capitalism was high with 45 percent of national income going to the richest 10 percent of the workforce. Era two, the New/Fair Deal era, is characterized by income compression between the top and bottom of the American workforce. In this era, the richest ten percent witnessed their share of national income drop to 35 percent. The share of national income for the top ten percent remained around 32 percent during the post-war consensus era, before trending sharply upward beginning in the 1980s (Massey, 2007).

By 2000, the share of national income going to the top 10 percent was 43.9 percent, similar to the share of income going to the top ten percent during the 1920s. Over the 2000s, income and wealth inequality has only continued to grow, with business profits reaching unprecedented levels (Fox, 2021). A Pew Research report revealed that increases to income and wealth over the past two decades have grown most rapidly for those in the upper incomes (Horowitz et al., 2000). They note that the wealth divide between upper- and lower-income families is sharply rising; and that the wealth of American families today is no different than was two

decades ago. Alarming, in the US, income inequality between the top and bottom segments of society is so extreme that in 2017 the United Nations investigated the United States for poverty and human rights abuses (Pilkinton, 2017).

Yet, despite mirroring the levels of inequality of the era of laissez-faire capitalism of the early 20th century, the structure of inequality today is quite different. As Massey explains, today's inequality is due to "deep structural changes in the political economy rather than from monetary or fiscal policies associated with a particular administration, be it Democratic or Republican" (2007, p. 35). Unfortunately for the American working public, this means that inequality is now an entrenched feature of society that would need bipartisan support to address.

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Unfortunately, bipartisanship does not describe today's political and social landscape. Furthermore, Democrats and Republicans disagree on whether changes to the economic system will address economic disparity or even if changes to the economic system are needed (Horowitz et al., 2000).

## **Social Unrest in the New Millennium and the Enduring Role of Race**

It is in the context of a shrinking of the middle class, lower earnings, stagnant family income, and increasing inequality, that serves as the backdrop to the growing tensions in the US. Furthermore, the rising and declining fortunes of Americans have not impacted the population evenly. Racial minorities, due to their overrepresentation in blue-collar and manufacturing occupations, have been severely impacted by shifts in the US economy (Squires, 1990). Hamilton (2019) succinctly summarizes the disparate impact on racial minorities:

In addition to wages, wealth disparity, and mass incarceration, black Americans face other obstacles to economic inclusion such as vulnerability to predatory finance, municipal fees, shortage of affordable housing (and the instability associated with evictions), food insecurity, environmental injustice, and climate gentrification. These vulnerabilities disproportionately fall on

women, blacks, and other nonwhites. Their education, employment, and earnings are more precarious, and they tend to have more caregiving and financial responsibilities. Yale political scientist Jacob Hacker summed this economic vulnerability as The Great Risk Shift, in which our society shifted our social insurance that evolved out of the New Deal from the government onto families and individuals (Hamilton, 2019, para 8).

In the 1980s, Reagan's declaration of the War on Drugs contradicted his federal devolution of the welfare state. Consequently, the federal penal footprint expanded along with the prison population driven largely by a war on drugs. Furthermore, the enemy in the war on drugs was racially defined. African Americans were being arrested and incarcerated in such large numbers that researchers at Columbia's Center for Spatial Research identified what they called "million-dollar blocks"—residential neighborhoods where the incarceration costs of its residents exceeded a million dollars (Douglas et al., 2018, p. 370). Civil rights attorney, Michelle Alexander, argues that the war on drugs was never about removing the high-level operators of the drug wars but instead about arresting as many low-level dealers and users to give an illusion of winning the war (2020). Poor, Black communities were targeted as these neighborhoods lack the social and political power to fight the system in which they were entwined (Kaplan et al., 2007).

Evidence of the racial targeting of the drug war is seen in the imprisonment rates in the United States. The period between 2006 and 2008 marked the nation's highest levels of incarceration peaking at 1,000 inmates per 100,000 adults. During this time, Black incarceration rates were significantly higher. For example, in 2006, the Black imprisonment rate was 2,261 per 100,000 Black adults compared to the White male incarceration rate of 324 per 100,000 White adults. While the numbers have dropped since then, more than 2 million people remained incarcerated in the United States at the end of 2019 (Gramlich, 2021).

The salience of race in the United States dates to the era of indentured servitude prior to the institution of slavery. Prior to, and even after the Civil War, the White working class aligned themselves with White plantation owners because they gained "currency" through their whiteness

which they could not attain through their social class (Levesque, 2006). In other words, there were bonuses to being White that didn't involve being rich; above anything, at least they were not Black. Therefore, White working-class individuals "[defined] and [accepted] their class positions by fashioning identities as 'not slaves' and as 'not Blacks'" (Levesque, 2006, p.71).

However, after the Civil Rights gains to racial minorities during the 1960s, working-class Whites lost this psychological wage. The same working-class Whites--many of whom were illiterate and struggling to get by--were now forced to compete on more equal terms for limited jobs with people who they grew up being taught were inferior to them. Wealthy Whites bore little of these social or psychological costs. Wealthy individuals maintained their exclusive and racially homogeneous neighborhoods and could afford to send their children to all-White private schools

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(Alexander, 2020). It was the working-class Whites that were subsequently forced to

share once racially segregated schools and other areas with racial minorities. Affirmative action programs generated a belief among Whites that Black individuals were cheating their way into prestigious universities which created fear, anger, resentment, and anxiety amongst the White working class (Alexander, 2020).

### **Functional Theories and the Capitol Insurrection**

Looking at the consensus and stability portion of Dahrendorf's analogy of a two-faced society, structural-functionalist theory holds that rapid changes in society disrupts its equilibrium; and that slow and relatively small changes are less disruptive (Dahrendorf, 1959; Sinn, 2018a). We can see the manifestation of this in the Capitol riots. The rioters were extremely loyal to Donald Trump because of the validation to their lives he offered while in office. They were happy to respond to Trump's call-to-action partly motivated by a fear of a loss of status that would occur with Trump no longer in office.

Robert Merton's structural strain theory suggests that people engage in deviant behavior when they are not able to achieve culturally de-

financed goals through socially legitimate means, such as education and hard work (Merton, 1938). When strained to a point of desperation, individuals will choose to engage in socially unacceptable ways to make themselves heard. Throughout his presidency, Trump made it his top priority to keep power predominantly in the hands of those who are White. Even before Biden was declared the winner, Trump made declarations that the election had been stolen. Upon not seeing any change in the ballot count and subsequent election results, Trump encouraged his supporters to rally outside of the Capitol to make themselves heard. (Cabral, 2021). Fueled by rage, the protestors, who were predominantly White, middle-aged men, took up arms and seized the Capitol. According to “Strain Theory 101,” “there is not a direct connection between feeling strained and acting out” (Rowe, 2015, 0:48). There are three different states that make individuals more likely to engage in deviant behavior: 1) the inability to achieve positively valued goals, 2) the presence of negative stimuli, and 3) the anticipated removal of positive stimuli (Rowe, 2015); however, we can clearly see the three sources of strain present throughout this event. Their inevitable loss of the election and power would be considered the inability to achieve positively valued goals. The presence of negative stimuli would be Trump’s statements encouraging supporters’ misbehavior. Trump leaving office and supporters believing that their privilege would cease to exist would be the anticipated removal of positive stimuli. “Strain Theory 101” also presents that negative emotions follow when people experience strain, and according to Rowe (2015), this can clearly be observed in the rioters. In fact, the belief that Hispanics and Blacks were getting more rights and overtaking Whites increased the chances of a White individual joining the insurrection (Pape, 2021, slide 54).

The resistance after the election results can be compared to the same resistance that occurred after the Civil Rights Movement, which resulted in the loss of White Americans’ “racial currency” (Levesque, 2006). It can be speculated that perhaps these insurrectionists feared that they would suffer social demotion once again. Structural-functionalist theory states that individuals themselves do not have power; rather it is institutions that do (Sinn, 2018a). In America, the most powerful positions (e.g., those of lawmakers and police officers) are held by White men who, according to Lu et al., have this vendetta against people of color



(2020). While one could argue that a larger presence of people of color in positions of power should reduce inequality, “greater diversity [does not] always [translate] to more equal treatment” (Lu et al., 2020, para. 3). Legalized forms of discrimination that the government once fought to eliminate have been re-established through legal institutions (Alexander, 2020). Thus, the theory suggests White individuals can secure their power over others and avoid losing more of their psychological wage.

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### **Where Two Worlds Collide**

W.E.B. Du Bois references the “color line” to the continued discrimination based on race even after the abolition of slavery and civil rights movements (1903, p. 407). In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois examines the “uncertain outline, the spiritual world in which ten thousand Americans live and strive” and relates this to the domination and exploitation that the White race has brought upon them (1903, p. 407). For the slave, “[e]mancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty” but even after they were freed, prejudice and discrimination still ensued (Du Bois, 1903, p. 409). Because courts actively perpetuate forms of discrimination, they have made it impossible to make claims against patterns and practices of racial profiling. They have also made it clear that claims of racial discrimination cannot be made unless proof of conscious intentional bias or admission by a law enforcement officer of bias is provided, no matter how overwhelming the statistical evidence is or how severe racial disparities are (Alexander, 2020). While more overt forms of racism, such as lynchings and segregation, have been eliminated, “racism continues to blight the lives of people of color” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 415).

Conflict theory establishes that society is divided into two groups—the oppressors and the oppressed (Sinn, 2018b). The oppressed, once they realize the inequality they have been facing, retaliate against the oppressors, which causes conflict. We can see this throughout the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that advocates for policy changes to provide equal opportunity for African Americans. However, this movement

originally arose in response to police brutality and racially motivated crimes against African Americans. Conflict theory mentions that the ruling class uses their authoritative positions to determine and define deviant acts and punishments and that individuals who don't respect authority are deviant (Adams, 2020; Chambliss, 1975). Frustrated with the evident power imbalance, the protestors—predominantly people of color, and significantly more diverse than the rioters at the Capitol—resorted to deviant behavior. In the eyes of White elites, this was a challenge to authority and the status quo. As a result, police officials began arresting, charging, and brutally beating many protestors.

In *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels claim that “the ruling ideas were the ideas of the ruling class and that the dominant interests in society used ideas to legitimate their position” (1948 p. 10). Further in their work, they also explain that “[t]he executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie” (Marx & Engels, 1948 p. 33). This leads to later theorists concluding that the court system fails Blacks daily and monetizes them by imprisoning them—The War on Drugs and the ‘Get Tough’ movement being clear examples—while White criminals seem to receive a slap on the wrist (Alexander, 2020). “Members of the ruling class will be able to violate the laws with impunity while members of the subject classes will be punished; [a]s ... the gap between [the opposing classes] widens, penal law will expand in an effort to coerce the proletariat into submission” (Chambliss, 1975, p. 152). Several White officers who murdered Black individuals received no punishment, and the few who were criminally charged faced relatively minor consequences.

### **Response to the Black Lives Matter Movement**

The Blue Lives Matter movement can be included in this discussion as a counterattack to the Black Lives Matter movement. It was used to support law enforcement and their families while simultaneously diffusing and derailing the attention garnered by the BLM movement (Solomon & Martin, 2018). Those involved in the movement wanted to shift the narrative to victimize themselves and claim that they were the ones that were being oppressed and discriminated against on the basis that they were White and police officers. Sinn points out a cycle of conflict here. The oppressors (White individuals) are now becoming the oppressed

and once they regain their power, things will go back to being how they were before until the original oppressed group (BLM) retaliates once again (Sinn, 2018b). Individuals and far-right militant groups, such as the Proud Boys, who support this movement were also participants in the Capitol riots, so their interests overlap and intersect with those of the insurrectionists. However, in contrast to their stated loyalty to police, they attacked the police protecting the Capitol during the insurrection (Shanahan & Wall, 2021). Nonetheless, devoted Trump supporters have tried to shift the blame off themselves, to “a cadre of covert ‘BLM and Antifa’ members” (Shanahan & Wall, 2021, p. 73).

The response of law enforcement differed significantly for BLM, Blue Lives Matter, and the Capitol insurrection. In these different events we can see clear representations of how members of the ruling class (Whites) are treated and punished differently than members of the subordinate class. While BLM protestors were met with rubber bullets, tear gas, and beatings, “[the] scenes [from the insurrection] provide a stark contrast to what the nation witnessed from police mere months ago, during the Black Lives Matter protest...The difference in the Capitol Police’s response shocked many who bemoaned the double standard. But police brutality against Black Americans and police inaction toward White Americans is not some surprising anomaly; it is the status quo” (Jackson, 2021, para. 2-3).

### **Race Theory in the Black Lives Matter Movement**

Critical race theory (CRT) holds that since race is socially constructed, racism is inherently embedded into social institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In fact, while it is true that more blatant forms of racism and discrimination, such as lynching and the use of derogatory racial epithets, are much less frequent today, racist ideology persists and is directed to racial minorities no matter their social, academic, or political accomplishments (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). One of the core issues of the BLM movement is the power imbalances and unequal treatment of people of color by law enforcement and the court systems. Michelle Alexander (2020) points to research that suggests that White youth are more likely to engage in drug-related activities; yet Whites are not the ones being targeted and arrested.

Unfortunately, eradicating racism and appropriately addressing the grievances of the BLM movement seems intractable. Critical race theory states that “civil rights advances for Blacks always coincided with changing economic conditions and the self-interest of elite Whites. Sympathy, mercy, and evolving standards of social decency and conscience amounted to little, if anything” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 417). Conflict theory maintains that the elite will do anything to maintain their power and change will only occur if they see some sort of benefit to them. Persisting racial divisions indicate we are not yet at this point.

## **Conclusion**

Illustrating the historical backgrounds of each respective movement helps reveal the motivations behind them. Structural-functionalist theory mentions that individuals are inherently powerless, and that change can only occur gradually through institutions (Sinn, 2018a). Although the Capitol insurrectionists tried to violently disrupt the peaceful transfer of power from one administration to the next, their efforts ultimately failed, and the institution held. Strain theory provides an explanation of the motivations to action for participants in Black Lives Matter and the Capitol insurrectionists. Conflict theory suggests that the Capitol rioters were pawns of those who hold power in society. Hearings from the 1/6 Commission reveal the planning for the events of January 6, 2020 extended to members of Congress and even to the presidency. As has been the pattern throughout history, the lowest members of the insurrection are being held to account, while the actors occupying the highest levels of political power and social position have, so far anyway, remained unscathed. As conflict theory and critical race theory inform, the political turmoil between two classes is a result of an unequal distribution of power. Critical race theory illustrates the prominence of racism in modern times and how it is embedded within social institutions which align with the discrimination and racially motivated attacks by law enforcement and others--a major trigger for the commencement of the BLM movement.

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### *Student Biographies*

Karen Garcia is a senior majoring in Psychology and minoring in Sociology at Sam Houston State University. She is involved with the National Society of Collegiate Scholars and was the secretary and treasurer of the organization this past academic year. When Karen was assigned to write a paper on social theory regarding ongoing social movements for a sociology course, she was inspired to delve deeper into the subject. Her inspiration led her to become affiliated with the Department of Sociology which could help her achieve her research goals. Karen began researching under the advisement of Dr. Karen M. Douglas, a professor in the Department of Sociology. Karen Garcia will graduate in the Summer of 2022 and plans to attend graduate school to earn her Master's in Social Work. She hopes to continue her research on current social movements and how traditional and post-modern social theories apply to them.