

## A SHORT ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY THROUGH EVOLUTIONARY LENSES: RE-EXAMINING MARX AND WEBER (AND DARWIN AS WELL)

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**Abstract:** This paper intends to provide a short assessment on how Marx and Weber approached social inequality. The assessment is conducted using evolutionary rationality. Even though Marx and Weber had seemingly contrasting approaches, I argue that in reality both are complementary and can be better understood using Darwinian evolutionary theory or “Universal Darwinism” as the locus in which the two rationalities described formation processes based on competition for the survival of social forces and the crafting of adaptive and advantageous strategies that allow for the synchronic and diachronic reproduction of social groups.

**Key words:** Marx; Weber; Darwin; evolution; social inequality.

### Introduction

Conceptions of social difference have been the focus of a heated intellectual debate among social scientists since the work of Karl Marx in the nineteenth century. As social scientists, we should try to explain the social mechanisms responsible for the emergence of social inequality, and the way it is justified through crafted mechanisms such as ideology and false consciousness. Social inequality is widespread across the world, creating a disparity in the living conditions and opportunities available to people from different social strata. Democratic institutions claim that all men and women have access to the same resources and have the right to equal opportunities, but in practice that is not true, and it can be argued that claim is part of the different strategies that elites use in order to create a social fiction in which the only people responsible for their poor material conditions of existence are the poor themselves, not the disparate social relationships in which they are immersed.

Karl Marx and Max Weber have offered answers to this problem and although there are crucial differences between their interpretations (and differences in the different intellectual phases of these thinkers), they are closer than some social scientists might expect. While Marx had a materialistic vision of history, Weber paid more attention to social actions and the development of social structures not necessarily linked to what he called culture.

Rather than dwelling on multiple definitions of social inequality, I will state from the outset that in this paper inequality is understood to be people's unequal access to the economic resources that allow them to maintain the basic conditions of social reproduction or improve their quality of life.

Thus, this work intends to analyze Marx's and Weber's perspectives on social inequality, trying to understand the logic involved in both arguments, but through an evolutionary filter, based mostly on the work of Charles Darwin, placing the discussion within what has been labeled "Universal Darwinism" (Dawkins, 1983). As I will substantiate later, a lot has been written about Marx and Weber in an author focused or comparative way, but studies that frame the two authors within an evolutionary perspective are not that common. Evolutionary theory has a strong explanatory power that can help to put in perspective reasonings that may seem to be opposite but are in evolutionary eyes complementary explanations of a complex phenomenon.

Hence, in this paper, I argue that both Marx's and Weber's concepts of social inequality are complementary rather than mutually exclusive and can be fruitfully explained using evolutionary theory and "Universal Darwinism". To do so, I will first set out Marx's and then Weber's main ideas on social inequality, discussing primarily the mechanisms they identified as the drivers of social change, economic disparity and the rise of the elite. Then I will discuss evolutionary theory and "Universal Darwinism" in an attempt to frame Marx and Weber's contributions using these theoretical insights.

## **Marxism and social change**

Marxism is perhaps one of the most controversial theories to have been developed in order to understand social processes and social change.

Probably none of the great thinkers of the modern world inspires feelings as strong, pro and con, as Marx. This is because Marx saw his scholarship as a means of transforming a capitalist system that exploited the vast majority of the people in the world (McGuire, 1992, p. 10).

Marx developed his theory as an analytical mode for understanding nineteenth century European capitalism and as an account of the social processes responsible for the existence of the capitalist system.<sup>1</sup> Marxist analyses were based on Historical Materialism is the application of the principles of social contradictions to the historical development of humanity, as Marxism is a materialistic theory that bases its analysis on the material conditions of social systems. The fundamental proposition of historical materialism can

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to state that while at some point in his life Marx was dedicated to causal ends (i.e. the end of the capitalist system as he knew it), he preferred to focus on understanding the historical processes (Historical Materialism) and material conditions (Dialectical Materialism) that led to the capitalist system. With that distinction in mind, in this essay I focus on the "analytical" Marx rather than the "activist one". It is also important to mention that this paper takes Marxism as a whole and does not tackle the tensions that some scholars have observed between the "young Marx" and the "old Marx". This is not a paper about Marx or Weber's detailed and changing philosophies but is an attempt to focus on their contributions as part of evolutionary interpretations of social systems and social inequality.

be summed up in this sentence: “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx, 1978, p. 10). Their social consciousness depends upon the kind of social and economic relationships they are involved in. This led to the different stages of social evolution based on the mode of production that characterized each stage. Historical Materialism explains each stage as the accumulation of factors that triggered a new social stage, like Darwinian Evolution. And like Darwinian Evolution, Historical Materialism is the primary influence that determines traits in the environment.

Therefore, for Marxism the material conditions of existence in which men and women exist are the bases for their future development as social beings, and these determine the way they see the world and the beliefs they develop in the future. In the words of Marx,

The social history of men is never anything but the history of their individual development, whether they are conscious of it or not. Their material relationships are the basis of all relationships. These material relations are only the necessary forms in which their material and individual activity is realized (Marx, 1978, p. 4).

Historical Materialism identifies the way materiality is intertwined with the development of social inequality, through the analysis of the material conditions of existence in which societies develop.

Key to understanding this process is a concept used in Marxism known as “alienation”. The concept of “alienation” appears early on in Marx’s writing, especially in the period from 1844 to 1846, in relation to the disentanglement that occurs when the worker’s work became estranged and objectified as a commodity.

The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien (Marx, 1973 p. 29).

But it is not only the worker’s work that becomes estranged; his or her social identity does as well, and this concept can also be understood as a state in which people or a social group become alien to themselves (Bottomore, Harris, Kieman, & Milliband, 1991). For example, during the emergence of the capitalist system, workers ceased to engage in different social activities so as to work for the owner of the means of production: the workers were not working in order to reproduce their social lives but to reproduce the life of the capitalist, so not only was their work alienated but their entire existence too, as this class is

within depravity, an indignation against this depravity, and indignation necessarily aroused in this class by the contradiction between its human nature and its life-situation, which is blatant, outright and all-embracing denial of that very nature (Marx, 1978, p. 134).

Hence people become alien to the world they live in, estranged from their social consciousnesses. This concept also appears later, in *The Grundrisse*, where he refers again to the dispossession of the worker’s labor and its disentanglement as capital.

The emphasis comes to be placed not on the state of being *objectified*, but on the state of being *alienated*, disposed, sold; on the condition that the monstrous objective power which social

labor itself erected opposite itself as one of its moments belongs not the worker but to the personified conditions of production, i. e. to capital (Marx, 1978, p. 292).

In the process of social evolution, the materiality in which men and women exist conditions the way they satisfy their basic needs. This is organized through what has been called the *mode of production*—none other than the unit constituted by the *social relations of production* and the *forces of production*—which exist in a dialectic relationship. The *mode of production* is defined as the level of development of the *forces of production* that a society has and the *social relations of production* that corresponds to the development of the *forces of production*. The mode of production defines the degree of alienation that individuals from different social classes have,

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 forces. The sum of total of these relations of productions constitute the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond define forms of social consciousness (Marx, 1978, p. 4).

Having set out the basics of the Marxist analytical framework, it is time to move on to the following question, what were the social mechanisms that led to the emergence of social inequality? Marx envisioned history as the constant opposition of social groups, an opposition that creates a contradiction which is resolved through revolutionary change, in which the constant element is class struggle as “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx, 1978, p. 473). Class struggle, in a capitalist society, is the contradiction between the owners of the means of production and those who only have their labor to offer, which is beautifully exemplified in this comment, “Private property as private property, as wealth, is compelled to preserve its own existence and thereby the existence of its opposite, the proletariat. This the positive side of the antagonism, private property satisfied with itself” (Marx, 1978, p. 133). This struggle makes the system unstable and vulnerable to change. Alienation increases when a social group ceases to work and forces other groups to work for it, establishing as valid only the rules of the social group who own the means of production.

In pre-capitalist societies, class struggle is not necessarily related to the dispossession of the means of production, as

the community itself appears as the first great force of production; particular kinds of production conditions (e.g. stock breeding, agriculture) develop particular modes of production and particular forces of production, subjective, appearing as qualities of individuals, as well as objective [ones] (Marx, 1978, p. 261).

Ethnography, anthropology and archaeology can provide numerous examples of social conflict (or class struggle) being related not to the ownership of the means of production but to the property, as *property* is “the relation of the working (producing or self-reproducing) subject to the conditions of his production or reproduction as his own” (Marx, 1987, p. 262), and property can vary enormously, depending on the conditions in which production takes place.

It is at this level that the superstructure plays a key role in pre-capitalists and capitalist societies as a convincing system favoring the owners of the means of production. As Marx suggested, the superstructure is formed by the “legal, political, religious, artistic, or philosophic—in short, ideological form” (Marx, 1977, p. 2). It is the social consciousness of the ruling class, which in turn is shaped by the *mode of production*, as “the changes in the economic foundation lead, sooner or later, to the transformation of the whole, immense, superstructure (Marx, 1977, p. 2). The material bases of a social system influence the way the world is observed through a series of social institutions and shared beliefs within the social system.

In surviving, the ruling class spreads its class consciousness through its legal and religious institutions (the superstructure) to the other social strata, making them believe that the social order derived by the *mode of production* is the natural state of society. Therefore, the superstructure plays a key role in maintaining and justifying the economic contradictions that have emerged through the evolution of societies. At this point, Durkheim’s functional concept of *anomie* explains how the superstructure, materialized through religion, plays an important role in imprinting false social consciousness in society (Durkheim, 1951). At this juncture, then, I would like to clarify a subtle tension in my argument. On one hand, I have implied that class membership and any associated class interests determine the consciousness of the members of that class, but in the paragraph above, I have stated that the ruling class can convince other social strata of the authority of its rule. One does not contradict the other; they are different stages in the social process of forming social consciousness or false consciousness.

Another concept that is useful in this paper and central to Marx’s late thinking is “commodity fetishism”, or the “fetishism of commodities”, which has its origin “in the peculiar social character of the labor that produces them” (Marx, 1978, p. 321).<sup>2</sup> When commodities are produced, they enter the exchange market, and are sold or exchanged according to their production value. Hence, the social relations between the producers are economic transactions, and the commodities they produce are external elements subject to the value given to them by the laws of supply and demand, which they do not control. Moreover, according to Marx, in a commodity economy, the owners of the means of production create and regenerate beliefs that legitimize the social conditions of their own existence, further developed when money and wages are parts of regular production and market transactions; these two elements validate inequality, allowing the reproduction of the social conditions that sustain a powerful position on the social scale.

Let’s now turn to Max Weber, who contended that Marx’s vision that the material conditions of existence<sup>3</sup> were responsible for the shaping of social institutions and social classes. He believed that Marx had reduced social analysis to a single element – the economic structure—and tried to explore the influence of *culture* in the formation social inequality.

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<sup>2</sup> This concept is intrinsically related to that of alienation, as commodities become estranged from their producers, becoming alien to them when they enter the market’s transactional sphere.

<sup>3</sup> Marx indeed stressed the role of the economy in shaping the social environment, but he thought those economic relations were founded in the material conditions of existence that men and women encounter in the making and remaking of their social life. That is the reason Marxism is a materialist discipline; it is grounded in materiality.

## Max Weber: Classes and social status

Max Weber was and still is an important name in the social sciences. He has made ample contribution to the study of the state structure and social actions, and to religious studies. Weber was mainly concerned with the way the state is structured and the development of bureaucracy as a rational institution derived from the development of market and productive relationships in pre-capitalist societies and the way ideology and religion can shape change in a social system. His work is also related to the establishment of status groups within social classes. These social groups, as we will see, were related to what Weber called “social honor”, which is derived by culture (social practice) and not by economics.

For Weber, “power [is] the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action, even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action” (Weber, 1958, p. 180). Power was not necessarily related to economic power but to social honor and prestige; elements that would allow the individual to acquire political and economic power. “[E]conomically conditioned power is not, of course, identical with power as such” (Weber, 1958, p. 180). In a simplified way, in capitalist societies, social honor leads to prestige, which in the end is transformed into political and/or economic power.

Weber argues that the concept of class interests is ambiguous because it assumes that all members of the class are equally qualified to perform their social tasks, and that they will therefore share the same type of expectations regarding their places in society. These interests may vary according to the existence of *communal action* among the members of the class; this *communal action* could regulate the common consciousness of the class. Here there is a major discrepancy between Weber and Marx. For Marx the sharing of common material conditions of existence conditions allegiance to a certain social group, and materiality defines the consciousness of the class; but for Weber, there is no such thing as class consciousness, unless that consciousness is regulated or spread through *communal action*. Therefore, it could be argued that *communal action* spreads the consciousness of certain members of the class, where there are different social groups in the same class, each one with a proper consciousness. “[T]he rise of societal or even communal action from a common class situation is by no means a universal phenomenon” (Weber, 1958, p. 183). *Communal action* is also called *class action* and following what has been said in the paragraph above, several “class actions” could exist within a social class.

Weber also believed that Marx’s view was too deterministic and simple, agreeing that different classes exist but that status and social prestige were key elements in deciding group allegiance, and that this status and social prestige was not necessarily linked to economic structures.

The degree in which *communal action* and possibly *societal action* emerges from the *mass actions* of the members of a class is linked to general cultural conditions, specially to those of an intellectual sort (Weber, 1958, p. 184).

The social structure is not entirely related to the material basis in which it operates, as not every human action is derived from this materiality. Cases like the formation of social status in which adherence is related to social practice and not economic conditions seem to

argue in favor of Weber (i.e. Weber's discussion of the Brahmans and the Castes, in Weber, 1958, pp. 396-415; or his discussion on the Chinese Literati, in Weber, 1956, pp. 416-444).

The idea of different *class actions* competing within a social class fits nicely into an evolutionary perspective as *class actions* would represent interests—probably selfish ones—that should find adaptive advantages to being selected and embraced by a social class. Therefore, representative *social action*, once it has secured its pre-eminent position, would develop more adaptive stratagems that would help it preserve its privileged situation.

Unlike Marx, Weber believed that the source of this social practice was to be found in religion and ideology, which are strong components of *class actions*. This is particularly clear in the analysis of Calvinism that he performs in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 2001). Here, Weber argues that the religious principles of Calvinism were responsible for the emergence of the capitalist system, as Calvinism imposed an individualistic ideology on its practitioners: “in spite of the necessity of membership in the true Church for salvation, the Calvinist's intercourse with his God was carried on in deep spiritual isolation” (Weber, 2001, p. 63). Calvinism is a puritan religion, in which it is established that to achieve divine grace, men and women should achieve social success, as this success is the fulfilment of God's plan for humankind.

The world exists to serve the glorification of God and for that purpose alone. The elected Christian is in the world only to increase this glory of God by fulfilling His commandments to the best of his ability. But God requires social achievement of the Christian because He wills that social life shall be organized according to His commandments in accordance with that purpose. The social activity of the Christian in the world is solely activity in *majorem gloriam Dei* (Weber, 2001, p. 64).

As there are no ways to achieve provisional states of “grace”, as in Catholicism or even Lutheranism,<sup>4</sup> the only way for Calvinists to secure their place in “heaven” is to acquire high social success that will show the rest of society that they are the chosen ones, and in acquiring that high social success they will prove that they are the chosen ones; therefore for Weber, ideology and religion shape and reshape the social and economic fabric of society. But ideas do not appear just by magic; religious institutions must have a material base in which operate. It could be argued that the Protestant religion emerged in opposition to two factions of Catholicism, probably due to divergences not only in the interpretation of religious practice but also in the class interests of the rulers, and in this dialectic cycle the formation of two new social institutions emerged; each representative of a set of interests. Therefore, there is a material explanation for the origins of Calvinism and its view in interpreting the world.

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<sup>4</sup> Confessions would be one way. Men and woman had the opportunity to be redeemed from their sins through confession, but Calvinism saw this as an act equal to sorcery or superstition. As it is an individualistic religion, the only way to achieve grace is through a life dedicated to acquiring success, as this success expresses the conviction that the person is one of the chosen ones to be saved at the end of the world.

## Universal Darwinism as a social synthesis

Now let's turn to Universal Darwinism and bring together Marx and Weber's claims regarding social inequality into an evolutionary perspective. Darwinian evolution operates under the assumption that an organism wants two things: to survive and to pass its genes onto the next generation. In *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (Darwin, 2001), Darwin focused on the mechanism of *natural selection*, which is the "principle by which each slight variation [of a trait], if useful, is preserved" (Darwin, 2001, p. 61), and what is not useful is discarded. "[T]he preservation of favourable variations and the rejection of injurious variation, I call Natural Selection" (Darwin, 2001, p. 81).

Based on Smolin's causality for the physical world, certain conditions would need to be found in order to apply social selection to certain populations, such as a) a space of parameters for each entity, such as social structures or types of societies; b) a mechanism of reproduction; c) a mechanism whereby parameters change, but only slightly, from one entity to another; and d) differentiation, as reproductive success strongly depends on the fitness of the parameters (Smolin, 2005). I will return to these four conditions later in this section.

Attempts to fully extrapolate Darwinism to the study of social sciences have been made by a number of scholars (Aldrich et al., 2008; Aunger, 2001; Boyd & Richerson, 1988, 2012; Dawkins, 1983; Hodgson, 2001, 2004; Hodgson & Knudsen, 2006; Knudsen, 2001; Kurzban & Leary, 2001; Levit et al., 2011; Nelson, 2006) who have attempted to understand social life through evolutionary lenses. We can try to roughly subsume these attempts into *Universal Darwinism*, a term coined by Dawkins that implies that Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection is "probably the only theory that can adequately account for the phenomena that we associate with life" (Dawkins, 1983, p. 403). As I will discuss next, it is important to consider that strictly applying biological Darwinism to the social sciences would be problematic as it would focus on individuals (as individuals carry genes and memes) rather than processes. This is the main reason I fully subscribe to Nelson's statement that,

If Universal Darwinism provides a roomy intellectual tent welcoming scholars studying a variety of topics, with the unifying element being a dynamic theory involving variation and selection, but with the key variables and mechanisms being recognized as perhaps differing greatly between biology and human culture, we can be happy at that camp (Nelson, 2006, p. 491).

Universal Darwinism is not a monolithic and single defined concept; there is variation in its structure. As such, two classes of Universal Darwinism have been identified, *Biologistic Universal Darwinism* and *Process based Universal Darwinism*<sup>5</sup> (Sydow, 2012).

*Biologistic Universal Darwinism* reduces the processes and entities of culture to Darwinian biology, and "vigorously advocates the reduction of all other explanatory

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<sup>5</sup> A roughly similar distinction has been made by Bradie, who states that there are two different epistemologies in Darwinism, the *Evolutionary Epistemology of Mechanics* and the *Evolutionary Epistemology of Theories* (Bradie, 1986). The former relates to *Biologistic Universal Darwinism* and the latter to *Process based Universal Darwinism* (Sydow, 2012).

levels like organisms, groups, gene pools and ecosystems to only one unit of selection. The ultimate reality is built by single egoistic genes only” (Sydow, 2012, p. 215). A variant of this particular trend in Universal Darwinism is *Sociobiology* which can be defined as “the extension of population biology and evolutionary theory to social organization” (Wilson, 1978, p. x). Sociobiology emerged as an extension, developed by researchers working in the fields of population biology, entomology and vertebrate zoology. Wilson, the primary proponent of this approach, stated that organisms do not live for themselves but to reproduce other organisms, as organisms are only temporary gene carriers.

When new sex cells are manufactured in each generation, the winning genes are pulled apart and reassembled to manufacture new organisms that, on the average, contain a higher proportion of the same genes. But the individual organism is only their vehicle, part of an elaborate device to preserve and spread them with the least possible biochemical perturbation (Wilson, 1975, p. 3).

This approach resembles to the one adopted by Dawkins in the *Extended Phenotype* and *The Selfish Gene* (Dawkins, 1982; 1976). Both books were published after Wilson’s *Sociobiology* (Wilson, 1975). While Dawkins focused on the gene, Wilson focused on the organism and the group, using the terms *group selection* and *kin selection*, trying to understand the evolutionary path of altruism, morality and solidarity.

The problem is that for a social group to function as an adaptive unit, its members must do things for each other. Yet, these group-advantageous behaviors seldom maximize relative fitness within the social group. The solution, according to Darwin, is that natural selection takes place at more than one level of the biological hierarchy. Selfish individuals might out-compete altruists within groups, but internally altruistic groups out-compete selfish groups (Wilson & Wilson, 2007, p. 329).

Process based Universal Darwinism needs only be defined on the ground of Darwinian processes, mainly to *natural selection* or, as I argue, its social counterpart *social selection*. Going down the hierarchical ladder, Process-Darwinism can be used as “Universal Process Darwinism (UPD), which denotes Process-Darwinism as world-view, or in the sense of a *Particular Process Darwinism (PPD)*, which denotes Process-Darwinism – the exclusive application of Darwinian processes—in a certain subject area” (Sydow, 2012, p. 209). Along the same lines, Nelson distinguishes between sticking closely to biological theory in order to explain cultural or social change or exploring how evolutionary theory should be structured in order to account for processes of cultural or social evolution and biological evolution under the same theory (Nelson, 2006).

These meanings or epistemological distinctions in Dawkins’ original label and subsequent definition of Universal Darwinism set the tone for a mutually exclusive binary distinction between the strict extrapolation of biological concepts and the adaptation of a biological theory to a particular field of study or particular problem. The approach I am taking in this paper leans towards the *adaptationist* application of Darwinian Theory or to use Sydow’s explanatory label, *Universal Process Darwinism*, as I do not see social institutions and their agents as passive carriers alienated by spirit-like forces that supersede human or social consciousness.

Using Smolin's model, described a few paragraphs above, the parameters for understanding the development of social inequality would be the social entity (i. e. the superstructure in Marxist terms) that is defined by a social formation or social system, which, for example, in the contemporary western world would be the nation-states. The mechanism of reproduction is variable and diverse, and it is strictly related to the social entities that are in charge of creating, controlling and disseminating the self-serving parameters that perpetuate the conditions in which rulers maintain their privileges. In relation to the mechanism for parameters to change, even though I emphasize religion as the social unit that selects what is or is not transmitted, there are multiple units that can act simultaneously, and that is the reason there cannot be a single transmission mechanism. Lastly, variation will be related to the degree of change between the previous social entity and its new incarnation—in relation to the survival rate of the social entities or the superstructure that allows the perpetuation of power.

Important to this processual understanding is conflict and the opposition of interests, as catalyzers that trigger the whole evolutionary social change and consequent development of social inequality that changes power allocation among those who want it. Conflict not only has to be materialized in a violent way. Violence emerges when the fitness of non-violent conflict manifestations is inadequate, and when cost-benefit analyses of non-violent conflict are negative. Then force emerges and violence becomes the choice made by social agents, triggering an evolutionary process.

## Discussion

Having briefly covered the concept of Universal Darwinism, I now return to the Marx-Weber problem through evolutionary lenses. As the material conditions of existence define the *mode of production*, this material input provides all the necessary information for a social group to define its relationships, which are rooted in their environmental constraints or advantages. A social system is composed by a number of social factions, triggering processes of social competition among different strata and classes or of *class actions* in order to survive, improve their living conditions and reproduce those conditions in the next generations. Adaptive attributes should then be selected from these in order to provide advantageous conditions during their struggle for success. In this regard, Darwinian Theory can help us understand the complex relationships described by Marx, when we focus on power and authority, in the mechanism of achieving a position of authority, which in turn will legitimize power. Power as it is not a sustainable resource, as it has to be accepted through the filter of authority that is acceptance of the power allocation in a given social group, whether represented by an individual (leaders with AAA personalities<sup>6</sup>) or not. As struggle (class struggle, *class action* struggle, ideological struggle, etc.) becomes the medium through which society sorts out its leadership, each faction in the competition would develop different approaches to convince those who need to be convinced and indoctrinated, crafting competitive advantages such as religion. Religion, as a whole, has been selected

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<sup>6</sup> Ambitious, abrasive and accumulative (Hayden & Villeneuve, 2010).

as an evolutionary trait which can not only secure power and legitimize authority, but also preserve authority and pass it on to the next generation of members of a given social class or *class action*.

As Hayden puts it, “of all Darwinian imperatives for survival, the pursuit of self-interest by organisms is the most fundamental” (Hayden, 2014, p. 14). This self-interest is rooted in the need for survival and the preservation and reproduction of advantageous conditions and has been also suggested by Lewin as the basis for governmental decisions and for market development (Lewin, 1986). Unlike Durkheim’s work and his altruistic view of religion, a Darwinian approach will put religion as a competitive advantage, as well as all management and regulatory instances (i.e. legal or judiciary institutions) that act towards the preservation of a system that keeps in authority those who hold it (not precisely talking at the individual level but at the group level). Thus, ideology or the *communal cultural intangible way of interpreting the world* plays a role as intrinsic and important as that of religion, in normalizing and naturalizing behaviors that have the *tradeoff* of providing any sort of fulfillment against the deadly prospect of fatality. It can also be argued that ideology is a base for competition, as an adaptive trait, once class social consciousness has been grasped by a particular social stratum, and the struggle for power (another unconventional way of talking about class struggle or class action struggle) and the preservation of advantageous material conditions of existence begins. Then “alienation” and “commodity fetishism” provide the tools from which the superstructure imposes its selective pressure.

Natural selection “almost inevitably causes much extinction of the less improved forms of life” (Darwin, 2001, p. 5). It is necessary to state that Darwin was referring to *less improved forms of life*, as those who did not have the ability to adapt to environmental constraints as “any being, if it varies however slightly in any manner profitable to itself, under the complex and sometimes varying conditions of life, will have a better chance of surviving and thus be *naturally selected*” (Darwin, 2001, p. 5).

Darwinian Evolution, as Marxism, is also a materialistic theory as it is rooted in the materiality provided by the environment, and can be seen for example in primeval religions, where their origin was closely related to the cultural traditions derived from particular settings (Durkheim, 1915).

How could Max Weber be understood through evolutionary lenses? Competition, as it is for Marxism, could be a way to understand Weberian *class actions* or *social honor*. For Weber,

in contrast to the purely economically determined ‘class situation’ we wish to designate as ‘status situation’ every typical component in the life fate of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of *honor* (Weber, 1946, p. 186).

Weber distinguishes himself from Marx as Weber sought to give more weight to cultural and even ideological differences before assigning too much credit to the economy as the prime mover for class distinction. To understand that *difference*, which I argue is not really that much of a difference, I would like to introduce the following model, with the risk of again being labeled as an organicist.

Evolution acts at all levels, at the micro and macro levels, as an aggregation of processes that originate change, as evolution is descent by modification (Darwin, 2001), and this

descent by modification will allow genotypic and phenotypic<sup>7</sup> traits to be transmitted to the next generations; that being said, let's focus for the moment on the concept of *survival*. Spencer coined the catching phrase of the "survival of the fittest" (Spencer, 1864, p. 444), which I modify to "survival of the best adapted". Survival has a diachronic value as it does not necessarily relate to a particular moment in time but to the constant reproduction of those social conditions which would allow the group to maintain its privileges or increase them.<sup>8</sup> For Weber, *status groups* evolved into closed castes, and distinctions of status are normalized through cultural values regulated through rituals. Ritual and values are cultural traits that need to be selected as competitive advantages in order to be maintained. These competitive advantages increase the survival odds as "the sense of dignity that characterizes positively privileged status groups is naturally related to their 'being' which does not transcend itself, that is, it is to their 'beauty and excellence'" (Weber, 1946, p. 190). These reinforcements will act as selection tools for selecting the cultural practices that will allow the constant replication of the conditions that are advantageous for the constant reproduction of the social system. This endogenic reproduction of beneficial traits and conditions is under constant stress by external pressures where other systems, class strata or social groups are doing exactly the same thing: trying to reproduce and select their best adaptive conditions. This is where competition enters: to sort out what remains and what's discarded, as "competition will generally be most severe between those forms which are most nearly related to each other in habits, constitution, and structure" (Darwin, 2001, p. 121).

But there is an important caveat concerning the way in which selection operates in social systems, since "the distinction between genotype and phenotype is vital to understand the mechanisms of an evolutionary process involving inheritance and replication" (Hodgson & Knudsen 2006, p. 354). Dawkins argued that a meme can actually be the cultural counterpart of a gene (Dawkins, 1976), and this has been further supported by scholars such as David Hull (1982; 2000, pp. 43-67). Although other researchers have argued that a meme is not the only form of *social genotype* that should be included in that category; habits, routines and ideas would belong here too (Hodgson & Knudsen, 2006). It is not my intention to dwell on this issue as it exceeds the focus of this essay, but it is important to take these points into consideration when descending from macro processes to micro processes of Darwinian social evolution.

Elsewhere (Mesia-Montenegro, 2017) I have argued that religion is the main trait selected that allows authorities to preserve their privileged social position, especially when religion powerfully permeates the social relations of production. But even an advantageous position, when it becomes too *advantageous* and risks overexploiting those at the base, becomes a non-adaptive trait that must be regulated if those with the upper hand want to keep their privileges.

Adaptation, competition, selection, survival and reproduction are evolutionary categories that help us to understand how elites, authorities, social groups and similar entities maintain

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<sup>7</sup> Granted, Darwin knew only about phenotypes. Mendel and Morgan's experiments with *Drosophila melanogaster* come later.

<sup>8</sup> The conundrum here is that in order to survive organisms may as well take the opposite path to complexity, which is one of the elements that set Darwin apart from Lamarck.

their privileged positions. These categories can also explain Marxist and Weberian models of the very same processes of social selection, where competition is the main force.<sup>9</sup>

Social groups always look for creative ways to enhance their chances of social reproduction. The processes described by Marx and Weber are simply different manifestations of how competitive attributes emerge, succeed and fail to provide social groups with the tools necessary for their existence, as it is or in an improved manner. It is important to note that the connection with biology is important in explaining the ascendance of AAA personalities, who as Alpha figures crave powerful positions (Nettle, 2006). This topic might be disregarded by orthodox Marxism as an attempt to de-socialize and individualize social processes, but the role of AAA individuals has been extensively documented in the anthropological literature (Hayden, 1995, 2001, 2011, 2014; Hayden & Gargett, 1990; Hayden & Villeneuve, 2010) as catalyzers of social transformations under the right environmental and social conditions. Again, we face what I think is the *leitmotif* of social inequality studies, the material conditions in which societies and their processes occur, which is common ground in Darwinism and Marxism and even Weber's theory.

## Final thoughts

Let us return to the Marx-Weber *dialectical opposition*. Despite the differences stated above and looked as from within the evolutionary framework discussed extensively in this paper, it is logical to conclude that the respective approaches of Marx and Weber shared similarities. They believed that Capitalism had a positive effect on the development of technological advances, increasing the rate of production and its efficiency, and that these advances allowed humanity to exert better control over nature. They even agreed on the basic concept of alienation: that this efficiency towards an increase in production had a negative effect on the workers. However, Weber disagreed with Marx on the idea that alienation could be defeated through revolution. Weber thought that Socialism would be just as bureaucratic and rationalized as capitalism, and therefore would have the same degree of alienation.<sup>10</sup> Weber broadened the understanding of social conflict in bringing the concept of "social status" into the discussion. Indeed, within a social class there are going to be different factions that are unified, depending on conditions other than economic ones. Weber uses the term "culture": culture is a concept that has several definitions in the anthropological literature (Durham, 1991; Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952; Tylor, 1871) and its definition changes randomly

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<sup>9</sup> In this regard it is worth mentioning that *Analytical Marxism* argued for a functional understanding of social relations in which all the mechanisms that enabled the development of the forces of production must be preserved. But as Tarrit has noted, *Analytical Marxism* "derives its own unity not only from its subject, Marx's theory, but also from its use of traditional academic methods that are not from Marx" (Tarrit, 2006, p. 3). Therefore, it is a post Marxist—and some would argue a non-Marxist interpretation—of Marx. Its champion, Gerald Cohen, argued for a functional observance of Marx's economic theories, rather than a dialectical one (Cohen, 1978; 1982), which in turns strays far away from Orthodox Marxism.

<sup>10</sup> The bureaucratic and centralized administrative apparatus of a socialist system would be just another crafted mechanism whereby elites preserve their positions under the regime and the system preserves itself.

according to the context in which it is used. In my estimation, Weber was referring to social practice: a set of beliefs, tastes and actions that characterized social status. Social practice could not be entirely related to the economy, but it is related to the material conditions of existence, as the way the world is perceived is defined by the set of conditions a person encounters in his or her daily life.

Men, who daily remake their own life, begin to make other men, to propagate their kind: the relation between man and wife, parents and children, the family. The family which to begin with is the only social relationship, becomes later, when increased needs create new social relationships and the increased population new needs, a subordinate one and must then be treated and analyzed according to the existing empirical data (Marx, 1978, p. 8).

This paper originated with the intention of only discussing Marx and Weber, pinpointing the main differences between them and emphasizing what links them within an evolutionary framework. Of course, this is not the only such comparative effort (Ashcraft, 1972; Bendix, 1974; Birnbaum 1953; Burris, 1987; Crompton & Gubbay, 1977; Löwith, 1993; Wenger, 1987) and it is far from comprehensive; although it is the first time that both authors have been scrutinized together within an evolutionary framework. What Weber and Marx proposed regarding social inequality can be considered distinct adaptive strategies crafted by social groups in order to secure success, prestige and most importantly, privileged conditions that would put them above other social groups or ultimately, secure the survival of the group, as – to paraphrase Darwin – selection in social animals will adapt the structure of all the members of a social group for the benefit of the community (Darwin, 2001). Is the survival and reproduction of privileged conditions the ultimate benefit? If those conditions can be passed onto the next generation, then yes.

Although human mental capacities are more highly developed, most living organisms anticipate, choose, and strive for prefigured goals. These intentional factors generally play a major role in biological as well as cultural evolution, because the nature and sophistication of these cognitive mechanisms has an enormous bearing on adaptation and survival in the evolutionary process (Hodgson & Knudsen, 2006, p. 342).

Evolutionary theory has a solid explanatory power that has been extensively and successfully used in the natural sciences and while its use in the social sciences has not been as extensive, it offers a theoretical framework that can adequately explain social processes such as social inequality, as I have tried to show in this paper. Evolutionary Theory as first envisioned by Darwin was designed for the natural world, but he then started to consider whether it could work for the social world, following a suggestion made by Karl Marx.

But the transfer of Darwin's theory to social theory was destined to meet with reservations. Unlike Spencer, Darwin intended to restrict evolutionary theory to biology and seemed very reluctant to accept any creative force of evolutionary principles behind the course of sociohistorical events. Thus, it was only with some hesitancy and without open acknowledgment that he took note of Marx's suggestion that it was in no way unreasonable to interpret Marx's theory of the rise and fall of various modes of societal production within the categories of a theory of natural selection (Schmid, 1987, p. 81).

As I have explained, more extensively through the latter half of this work, the contributions of Marx and Weber complement one another in understanding social inequality, which is originated through differences of interest derived mainly from the material conditions of existence in which social groups operate. Social groups can be understood in terms of class or social status. The first is categorized by the level of access to economical resources, and the second by social practice (culture). Both conditions are rooted in materiality. The alienation of men's and women's work is derived from their estranged labor, which explains the conflict of interests among social groups. On the other hand, while Weber did not provide a solid explanation for the origins of ideology and religion, Marx's materialistic explanation provides a better understanding of these two elements. The two visions of how society behaves and operates describe different situations and strategies that, as I have tried to explain, are better understood when examined through evolutionary lenses, since Darwinism "provides a general framework in which additional and context specific explanations may be placed" (Aldrich et al., 2008).

I am aware that it is impossible to extensively discuss this topic in such a short space, but I hope that at least some of these ideas may be useful for understanding social inequality from an evolutionary point of view, that is, taking into account the contributions of Max Weber.

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