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EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY ON THE EMERGENCE AND ESCALATION OF VIOLENT CONFLICT: A CRITICAL TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF MARX, GALTUNG, AND GURR

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Abstract

Social inequality remains a significant concern in conflict studies because unequal access to wealth, political power, social opportunities, and institutional resources can intensify collective grievances and undermine social cohesion. This study examines how structural inequalities contribute to the emergence and escalation of violent conflict through a critical textual analysis of three foundational works: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's The Communist Manifesto (1848), Johan Galtung's "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research" (1969), and Ted Robert Gurr's Why Men Rebel (1970). Drawing on these texts alongside recent scholarship on inequality and political violence, the study investigates the economic, structural, and psychological mechanisms connecting social disparities with collective mobilization. The analysis employs a qualitative interpretive approach involving close reading, thematic comparison, and critical examination of key theoretical concepts. Marx and Engels foreground class antagonism arising from unequal economic relations; Galtung expands the concept of violence to include unjust social structures that restrict human potential; and Gurr explains how perceived discrepancies between expectations and actual opportunities can generate relative deprivation. Contemporary research further suggests that the relationship between inequality and violence depends on group relations, patterns of social mobilization, institutional responses, and opportunities for peaceful participation. The study argues that inequality should not be treated as an automatic cause of violence but as a structural condition whose effects are mediated by political and social processes. It concludes that equitable resource distribution, inclusive governance, and effective grievance-resolution mechanisms are essential to sustainable peace building.

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INTRODUCTION

Social inequality is a persistent feature of human societies, influencing how economic resources, political authority, social recognition, and institutional opportunities are distributed among individuals and groups. Although differences in income and social status do not inevitably produce violence, inequalities become particularly consequential when they are experienced as unjust, institutionalized through discriminatory arrangements, or reinforced by political systems that exclude particular communities from meaningful participation. Under such conditions, social inequality may contribute to collective frustration, weaken institutional legitimacy, and create opportunities for violent mobilization.

The relationship between inequality and violent conflict has long occupied a central position in political sociology, peace studies, and conflict theory. Scholars have approached this relationship through different explanatory frameworks. Marx and Engels interpret social conflict through class divisions and the unequal organization of economic production. Galtung broadens the understanding of violence by examining social structures that systematically restrict human development. Gurr, meanwhile, explains political violence through relative deprivation, emphasizing the perceived discrepancy between what individuals believe they deserve and what they believe they can obtain. These perspectives offer complementary explanations of how unequal social arrangements can become sources of political instability.

Contemporary scholarship continues to investigate whether economic inequality increases political violence and under what conditions this relationship becomes particularly pronounced. A recent study, "Revisiting the Links between Economic Inequality and Political Violence: The Role of Social Mobilization" (2025), highlights the importance of collective mobilization and intergroup relations in shaping the likelihood and intensity of political violence ("Revisiting").

This approach challenges simplistic assumptions that inequality directly and uniformly produces violence. Instead, it suggests that inequality must be examined in relation to social organization, collective identities, political opportunities, and the institutional mechanisms available for addressing grievances.

This article critically examines the theoretical relationship between social inequality and violent conflict through textual analysis of three influential works: The Communist Manifesto, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," and Why Men Rebel. Rather than treating these texts as interchangeable explanations, the study identifies their distinctive contributions and evaluates how their conceptual frameworks can be integrated into a broader understanding of conflict emergence and escalation.

The central argument is that social inequality can increase the risk of violent conflict when unequal resource distribution becomes associated with persistent exclusion, perceived injustice, weak institutional responsiveness, and organized collective mobilization. However, inequality is neither a sufficient nor a necessary explanation for every violent conflict. Its effects depend on the interaction between structural conditions, political agency, group relations, and opportunities for peaceful change.

Problem Statement

Despite substantial theoretical development in conflict studies, the relationship between social inequality and violent conflict remains complex and contested. Economic deprivation, unequal political representation, and group-based discrimination are frequently associated with social unrest, yet societies experiencing comparable inequalities do not necessarily experience equivalent levels of violence. This variation raises an important research problem: through what mechanisms does social inequality become a source of violent conflict, and why do some grievances lead to peaceful resistance while others escalate into organized violence?

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A major limitation of single-factor explanations is that they may overemphasize either economic structures or individual frustration while neglecting the political and social processes through which grievances are organized. Class-based approaches explain the distribution of economic power, structural theories identify institutionalized forms of disadvantage, and psychological approaches emphasize perceived injustice. Nevertheless, these perspectives must be examined together to understand how inequalities are transformed into collective action.

Recent scholarship reinforces the need for such an integrated approach. Patricia Justino argues that the relationship between inequality and political violence depends partly on the forms of social mobilization that inequalities generate, particularly cooperation between groups and coordination within them (Justino). Similarly, research on horizontal inequalities examines how disadvantages experienced by culturally or politically defined groups may influence both violent and nonviolent mobilization (Hillesund and Østby).

The central problem addressed by this study is therefore not simply whether inequality causes violence, but how economic disparities, structural injustice, and perceived deprivation interact to create conditions in which violent conflict becomes more likely. The study addresses this problem through a critical comparison of Marx and Engels, Galtung, and Gurr, while incorporating recent scholarship to assess the continuing relevance and limitations of their arguments.

Research Objectives

The study pursues five objectives:

1. To examine how Marx and Engels conceptualize class inequality as a source of social antagonism and revolutionary conflict.
2. To analyze Galtung's concept of structural violence and its relevance to institutionalized social disadvantage.
3. To investigate Gurr's theory of relative deprivation and its explanation of collective grievances and political violence.
4. To compare these theoretical perspectives with recent research on inequality, social mobilization, and conflict escalation.
5. To identify the implications of these theories for conflict prevention, inclusive governance, and sustainable peacebuilding.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Marx and Engels, Galtung, and Gurr explain the relationship between social inequality and violent conflict?
2. Through what economic, structural, and psychological mechanisms can inequality contribute to collective violence?
3. Why do similar conditions of inequality produce different forms of collective action across societies?
4. How does recent scholarship extend or challenge the arguments presented in the three foundational texts?
5. What strategies can reduce the likelihood that social grievances will escalate into violent conflict?

Literature Review

Social inequality as a structural condition of conflict

Social inequality refers to the unequal distribution of material resources, political influence, institutional access, and opportunities for social advancement. It may exist between individuals or between socially organized groups distinguished by class, ethnicity, religion, region, or other politically salient identities. While vertical inequality concerns disparities among individuals or households, horizontal inequality refers to systematic disadvantages between groups.

This distinction is important because collective conflict is rarely explained by income differences

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alone. Disparities become politically consequential when individuals interpret them as evidence of group exclusion, discriminatory treatment, or the unfair allocation of public resources. A community systematically excluded from employment, education, political representation, and public investment may perceive its persistent disadvantage not merely as economic deprivation but as a manifestation of collective injustice and structural marginalization.

Research on horizontal inequalities has explored the relationship between group disadvantage and civil conflict. Hillesund and Østby review the literature linking horizontal inequalities to political violence and nonviolent mobilization, emphasizing the need to explain not only whether disadvantaged groups mobilize but also why mobilization takes particular forms (Hillesund and Østby). This distinction prevents researchers from assuming that all inequality produces violent responses.

The analytical implication is that inequality should be understood as a condition that shapes political opportunities, grievances, and relationships between groups. Its effects depend on whether institutions recognize grievances, whether groups can cooperate across social divisions, and whether political participation offers credible alternatives to violence.

Class inequality and conflict in Marx and Engels

Marx and Engels provide one of the most influential explanations of social conflict through their analysis of class relations and economic organization. In The Communist Manifesto, they argue that social history is shaped by antagonisms between groups occupying unequal positions within systems of production. Their analysis directs attention to the relationship between ownership, labor, economic power, and political domination.

The relevance of this framework extends beyond nineteenth-century industrial society. Contemporary inequalities may also emerge through unequal access to land, employment, capital, housing, education, and economic decision-making. When these disparities become institutionalized, disadvantaged groups may perceive prevailing social arrangements as serving the interests of dominant groups rather than society as a whole.

Nevertheless, Marx and Engels's framework should not be reduced to the claim that poverty automatically generates violence. Their analysis emphasizes historically organized class relations and collective struggle. Applied to contemporary conflict studies, it directs researchers to investigate who controls resources, how economic interests shape institutions, and whether disadvantaged groups possess effective mechanisms for challenging unequal arrangements.

Structural violence in Galtung

Galtung expands the analysis of violence beyond direct physical harm. In "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," he distinguishes direct violence from forms of violence embedded within social structures. Structural violence occurs when social arrangements systematically prevent people from realizing their potential or accessing conditions necessary for human development.

This perspective changes the meaning of conflict prevention. A society may experience an absence of warfare while continuing to reproduce severe inequalities in healthcare, education, housing, employment, and political participation. Such a society may possess negative peace in the limited sense of an absence of direct violence while remaining structurally unjust.

Galtung's framework therefore provides a way to analyze the institutional conditions that may contribute to future instability. Persistent exclusion can weaken trust, normalize unequal treatment, and create grievances that become politically mobilized. Structural violence is not identical to armed conflict, but it may form part of the wider environment in which direct violence emerges.

Relative deprivation in Gurr

Gurr's Why Men Rebel provides a complementary explanation by focusing on

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perceived deprivation. Relative deprivation arises when people perceive a discrepancy between the conditions they believe they deserve and the conditions they believe they can actually attain. Such perceptions are influenced by social expectations, comparisons with other groups, changing opportunities, and judgments about fairness.

This theory helps explain why absolute poverty alone cannot account for political violence. Individuals living in material hardship may not engage in collective violence when their expectations remain limited, when institutions are regarded as legitimate, or when peaceful avenues for change are available. Conversely, groups that experience improvements in living standards may still become politically discontented if their expectations rise faster than their opportunities or if they believe other groups are receiving unfair advantages.

Gurr's framework also emphasizes that grievance and violence are distinct stages of a broader process. Discontent must become politically focused, and collective action must be directed toward particular targets before it can develop into political violence. The distinction is central to explaining why dissatisfaction may result in petitions, demonstrations, electoral participation, or organized rebellion under different conditions.

Recent scholarship and the inequality–violence debate

Recent scholarship has renewed attention to the conditions under which inequality contributes to political violence. Justino's 2025 article in World Development argues that social mobilization mediates the relationship between economic inequality and violence. The article identifies intergroup cooperation and the capacity of groups to coordinate collective action as important factors shaping whether mobilization remains peaceful or becomes violent (Justino).

This argument contributes to the present study in two ways. First, it reinforces the importance of collective organization rather than treating individual grievances as sufficient explanations of conflict. Second, it highlights the possibility that mobilization may produce peaceful reform when groups cooperate across social divisions, while antagonistic relations and strong within-group coordination may facilitate violent outcomes.

Hillesund's study of horizontal inequalities and conflict tactics also emphasizes the need to analyze violent and nonviolent resistance together rather than examining civil war in isolation (Hillesund). This approach is significant because peaceful mobilization is not simply the absence of violence; it may be an alternative means through which disadvantaged groups demand institutional change.

Bulutgil and Prasad's research on inequality, elections, and communal riots in India further illustrates the importance of examining inequality alongside political competition and group relations (Bulutgil and Prasad). Their study directs attention toward the interaction between distributive disparities and political processes rather than assuming that inequality operates independently of institutional context.

Collectively, these studies suggest that the inequality–violence relationship is conditional. Economic disparities can generate grievances, structural injustice can reinforce exclusion, and relative deprivation can intensify frustration. However, the escalation of these grievances depends on political organization, intergroup relations, institutional responses, and the perceived availability of peaceful alternatives.

Research Methodology

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design based on critical textual analysis. It examines how three foundational scholarly texts conceptualize the relationship between social inequality and violent conflict and evaluates their continuing relevance through comparison with recent academic research.

The study does not claim to measure a statistical causal relationship or to produce new empirical

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findings from interviews, surveys, or fieldwork. Instead, it develops a theoretically grounded interpretation of the mechanisms through which unequal social arrangements may contribute to collective grievances and violent mobilization.

Selection of primary texts

The three primary texts were selected purposively because each provides a distinctive explanation of the relationship between inequality and conflict.

- Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto (1848): Selected for its analysis of class divisions, economic power, and antagonistic social relations.
- Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research" (1969): Selected for its distinction between direct violence and structural violence.
- Gurr, Why Men Rebel (1970): Selected for its theoretical explanation of relative deprivation and political violence.

These works are treated as complementary but not identical frameworks. Marx and Engels primarily foreground economic relations, Galtung examines structural arrangements that restrict human development, and Gurr focuses on the relationship between perceived deprivation and collective action.

Secondary literature

The analysis incorporates recent scholarly contributions on economic inequality, horizontal inequalities, political violence, and social mobilization. Particular attention is given to Justino's 2025 review of inequality and political violence, Hillesund's examination of conflict tactics, Hillesund and Østby's review of horizontal inequalities, and Bulutgil and Prasad's study of inequality and communal riots in India.

These publications provide a contemporary context for evaluating the foundational theories. The secondary literature is used to identify points of agreement, theoretical limitations, and questions requiring further empirical investigation.

Analytical Procedure

The study uses four analytical stages.

First, the primary texts are examined through close reading to identify key concepts, central arguments, and relevant passages. Second, selected passages are interpreted in relation to each author's broader theoretical framework. Third, recurring themes—including economic domination, structural exclusion, perceived injustice, collective mobilization, and political responses—are compared across the texts. Finally, the resulting interpretations are evaluated against recent scholarship to identify the explanatory strengths and limitations of each framework.

The analytical categories are therefore theory-informed rather than generated through statistical coding. The study seeks interpretive depth and conceptual integration, not numerical generalization.

Citation and interpretive considerations

MLA-style parenthetical citations are used throughout the article. Page references for primary texts refer to the editions identified in the Works Cited section wherever those editions can be established. Because pagination varies across editions and digital transcriptions, quotations should be checked against the exact print or digital edition used for final submission.

The analysis distinguishes between the authors' original arguments and the present study's interpretations. It also avoids treating theoretical propositions as universal empirical laws. The findings are consequently presented as a critical synthesis of established scholarship rather than as the results of an independent field investigation.

Textual Analysis and Discussion

Marx and Engels: Class antagonism and the economic foundations of conflict

Marx and Engels's The Communist Manifesto offers a structural explanation of social conflict grounded in the organization of economic production. Its opening discussion of class struggle establishes a central proposition:

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"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx and Engels, ch. 1).

This statement provides the starting point for understanding their interpretation of inequality. The authors do not treat social divisions as merely differences in wealth or personal achievement. Instead, they connect them to historically organized relationships between groups that possess unequal economic power.

The significance of this argument lies in its emphasis on the structural origins of antagonism. Where one group controls productive resources and another depends on selling its labor, economic relations can generate competing interests over wages, working conditions, ownership, and the distribution of wealth. Inequality consequently becomes more than an individual disadvantage: it can reflect a social arrangement that systematically benefits some groups while limiting the opportunities of others.

A critical reading of the Manifesto suggests that conflict becomes particularly consequential when economic divisions are accompanied by collective awareness and organization. Unequal conditions may exist without producing coordinated resistance. However, when individuals recognize shared interests and understand their disadvantages as products of a common social structure, they may develop a collective identity around demands for change.

This distinction is important for contemporary conflict studies. Economic inequality can create material grievances, but the political consequences of those grievances depend partly on how they are interpreted and organized. Workers experiencing insecure employment, communities excluded from economic investment, or populations facing unequal access to land may organize through unions, political parties, protest movements, or other collective institutions. Such mobilization may remain peaceful or become confrontational, depending on institutional conditions and the strategies adopted by the groups involved.

Marx and Engels's framework is particularly useful for examining situations in which political institutions reproduce unequal economic relations. Where economic power influences access to political decision-making, disadvantaged groups may perceive formal political equality as insufficient. If electoral participation, labor organization, and legal mechanisms fail to produce meaningful change, existing arrangements may lose legitimacy.

Nevertheless, the relationship between class inequality and violence should not be interpreted deterministically. Marx and Engels's analysis identifies structural antagonism and revolutionary struggle, but it does not establish that every unequal society must experience violent conflict. Labor movements, democratic reforms, welfare institutions, collective bargaining, and redistributive policies can alter the relationship between economic inequality and political confrontation.

The strength of the Marxian perspective is therefore its ability to direct attention toward the distribution of economic power. Its limitation, when applied in isolation, is that it may not sufficiently explain why similarly disadvantaged groups adopt different strategies or why conflicts sometimes develop along ethnic, religious, or regional lines rather than strictly along class divisions.

For the present study, the most useful contribution of Marx and Engels is their explanation of inequality as a relational and institutional phenomenon. Their work encourages researchers to investigate not only how much inequality exists, but also how economic resources are controlled, how social advantages are reproduced, and how competing interests become organized.

Galtung: Structural violence and the institutional reproduction of inequality

Galtung's "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research" expands the conceptual boundaries of violence by distinguishing direct physical harm from violence embedded within social structures. His analysis is

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particularly relevant to societies in which formal peace coexists with persistent exclusion and unequal access to opportunities.

Galtung writes:

"Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (168).

This formulation shifts attention from visible acts of aggression to the social conditions that prevent people from developing their capabilities. In Galtung's framework, violence cannot be understood exclusively through identifiable perpetrators and immediate physical injuries. It may also arise through arrangements that systematically deprive individuals of the resources, opportunities, or institutional support needed to achieve their potential.

The analytical significance of this argument becomes clearer when inequality is examined through access to essential social goods. Unequal educational opportunities can restrict future employment. Discriminatory allocation of public resources can marginalize particular communities. Unequal access to healthcare can deepen social disadvantage. When such conditions are systematically reproduced through institutions, disadvantage becomes structural rather than merely accidental.

Galtung's framework therefore broadens the research question from whether inequality generates violent acts to whether existing institutions create conditions that sustain injustice and increase vulnerability to conflict. A society may experience limited direct violence while maintaining institutional arrangements that repeatedly disadvantage particular populations.

This does not mean that every instance of poverty or unequal service provision should automatically be classified as structural violence. A rigorous application of Galtung's framework requires attention to the social arrangements that produce or maintain the deprivation, the extent to which preventable inequalities constrain human potential, and the distribution of opportunities across groups.

Galtung's distinction between negative and positive peace further develops this argument. Negative peace refers to the absence of direct violence, whereas positive peace concerns the wider social conditions necessary for peaceful and just relations. A state may suppress armed confrontation without addressing the grievances that contributed to it. In such circumstances, the immediate conflict may decline while the underlying conditions of instability remain.

The distinction is valuable for understanding post-conflict societies. A ceasefire may halt fighting, but it does not necessarily resolve unequal land ownership, political exclusion, discriminatory public policy, or unequal access to employment. If these issues remain unaddressed, the social foundations of conflict may persist even when violence temporarily subsides.

Galtung's framework also clarifies the relationship between institutional legitimacy and conflict prevention. Institutions are more likely to command public confidence when people believe that rules are applied fairly, resources are distributed transparently, and political participation is meaningful. Conversely, persistent perceptions of institutional bias can weaken confidence in peaceful dispute resolution.

However, structural violence should not be treated as a direct predictor of armed conflict. Many societies maintain substantial inequalities without experiencing civil war, while some violent conflicts emerge from strategic competition, territorial disputes, state repression, or other processes that cannot be reduced to inequality alone. Galtung's theory is strongest when used to identify unjust conditions and broaden the concept of peace, rather than as a standalone explanation of when violence will occur.

For this study, Galtung contributes the institutional dimension of the analytical framework. Marx and Engels direct attention to

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economic domination, while Galtung explains how unequal social arrangements can restrict human development even without overt physical aggression. His approach therefore provides a conceptual bridge between enduring social disadvantage and the broader conditions under which grievances may develop.

Gurr: Relative deprivation and the politicization of grievances

Gurr's Why Men Rebel offers a third perspective by explaining how perceived deprivation can contribute to political violence. Unlike an exclusively economic interpretation of conflict, relative deprivation focuses on the relationship between people's expectations and their perceived opportunities to meet those expectations.

The central concept is important because objective disadvantage does not automatically translate into political discontent. People interpret their circumstances in relation to social norms, previous experiences, promises made by political authorities, and comparisons with other groups. A perceived injustice may become especially powerful when individuals believe that benefits available to others are being unfairly denied to them.

Gurr describes the relationship between deprivation and violence through a sequence in which discontent develops, becomes politically focused, and is eventually expressed through action (Gurr). This sequence helps explain why social inequality may contribute to violence without inevitably producing it.

The first stage involves a perceived discrepancy between expected and actual conditions. Individuals may believe that access to employment, political representation, public services, or economic advancement should be available to them. When these expectations are persistently frustrated, dissatisfaction may intensify.

The second stage concerns the interpretation of deprivation. People must develop some understanding of why their expectations have not been met. They may attribute disadvantage to institutional discrimination, corrupt leadership, economic exploitation, exclusionary policies, or the actions of a rival group. Such interpretations transform dissatisfaction into a political grievance.

The third stage involves collective mobilization. Grievances may be articulated by political organizations, community leaders, social movements, or other actors capable of coordinating collective action. Mobilization may take peaceful forms, including petitions, demonstrations, elections, and labor strikes. Under other conditions, it may develop into riots, insurgency, or organized political violence.

This distinction demonstrates the explanatory strength of relative deprivation theory. It accounts for the fact that the experience of inequality is mediated by perception, political interpretation, and collective organization. The same material conditions may generate different outcomes because people differ in their expectations, political opportunities, organizational resources, and beliefs about the effectiveness of peaceful action.

The theory is also useful for understanding situations in which expectations rise faster than opportunities. Expanding education, greater access to information, or promises of political reform can increase expectations of social advancement. If institutions fail to provide corresponding opportunities, the resulting gap may intensify dissatisfaction. Similarly, visible improvements in the position of one group may generate resentment among another group that perceives itself as being left behind.

Nevertheless, relative deprivation should not be confused with objective poverty or assumed to produce violence independently. Perceived injustice may motivate collective action, but its consequences depend on the credibility of grievance narratives, organizational capacity, state responses, and the availability of nonviolent alternatives.

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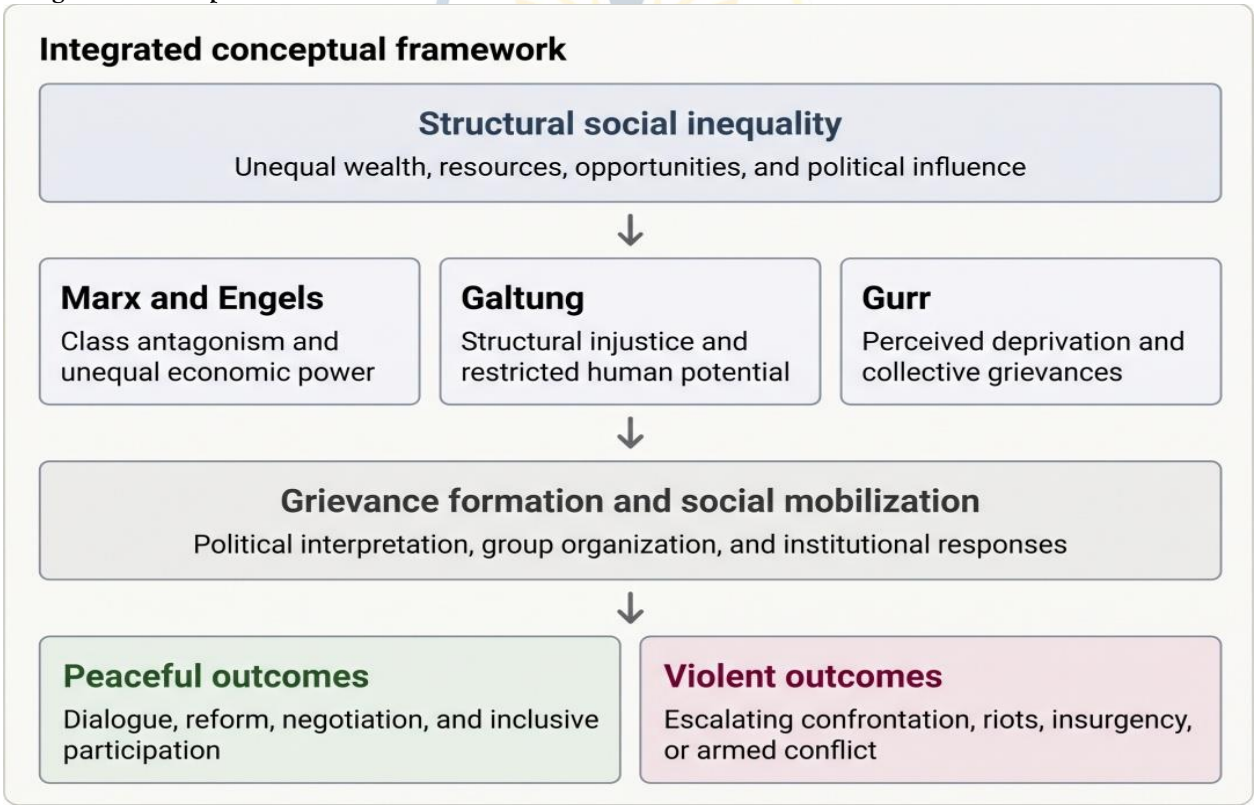
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Gurr's theory therefore complements the structural approaches developed by Marx and Engels and Galtung. Marx and Engels explain the distribution of economic power; Galtung identifies the institutional arrangements through which disadvantage can be maintained; Gurr explains how people may interpret such conditions and transform them into political grievances. Together, the three perspectives suggest that an explanation of violent conflict must account for both structural conditions and the processes through which people respond to them.

Comparative analysis: Integrating the three theoretical perspectives

A comparative examination of Marx and Engels, Galtung, and Gurr reveals three distinct but interconnected dimensions of the inequality–conflict relationship: economic structure, institutional injustice, and perceived deprivation. Marx and Engels establish the material foundations of conflict by emphasizing unequal economic relations. Galtung extends the analysis by identifying the ways in which institutional arrangements can restrict human development. Gurr explains how perceptions of injustice can transform unequal conditions into collective discontent and political action. These theories are most useful when treated as complementary explanations of different stages and dimensions of conflict rather than as competing universal theories.

Integrated Conceptual Framework



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Author-developed conceptual synthesis based on Marx and Engels, Galtung, Gurr, and contemporary research. The framework is theoretical, not an empirically validated causal model.

The framework demonstrates that inequality alone is insufficient to explain the emergence of violent conflict. Economic and institutional disparities may create conditions for grievance, but the transition from grievance to violence depends on additional mechanisms. Political organizations may channel dissatisfaction into peaceful reform, while antagonistic group relations, blocked participation, and confrontational strategies may increase the risk of escalation.

This interpretation is consistent with Justino's argument that inequality-related mobilization can produce different outcomes depending on intergroup cooperation and the capacity for collective coordination (Justino). It also aligns with research examining the choice between violent and nonviolent conflict tactics (Hillesund).

The framework therefore advances a conditional explanation: inequality can increase the potential for conflict, but its consequences depend on how disadvantage is experienced, interpreted, organized, and addressed.

Social inequality and the escalation of collective grievances

The emergence of grievances does not necessarily indicate that a society is approaching violent conflict. Grievances become more consequential when they are sustained over time, shared by identifiable groups, interpreted as evidence of systematic injustice, and directed toward institutions or actors perceived to be responsible.

The distinction between emergence and escalation is essential. The emergence of conflict may begin with dissatisfaction over employment, political representation, public spending, or discriminatory treatment. Escalation occurs when disagreement becomes increasingly confrontational and peaceful mechanisms fail to resolve it.

Marx and Engels help explain why unequal economic interests may produce enduring antagonisms. Galtung highlights how institutional arrangements can reproduce disadvantage, while Gurr identifies the psychological and political processes through which frustration becomes collective action. Together, these approaches indicate that escalation should be investigated as a process rather than treated as an immediate consequence of inequality.

Institutional responses are especially important. When governments recognize grievances, provide credible channels for participation, and implement fair policies, social dissatisfaction may lead to reform rather than violence. Conversely, the denial of legitimate complaints, selective repression, and unequal enforcement of laws may reinforce perceptions that peaceful action is ineffective.

However, repression does not always produce escalation, and concessions do not always guarantee peace. Outcomes depend on the credibility of institutions, the organization of social groups, the objectives of political actors, and the broader context of conflict. The central implication is that researchers must examine the interaction between grievance formation and political opportunity rather than attributing violence to inequality alone.

Group-based inequality and collective mobilization

Inequality may become particularly contentious when economic disadvantages correspond with ethnic, religious, regional, or other group identities. In such circumstances, individuals may interpret unequal access to resources as evidence of collective exclusion. This can strengthen group solidarity, sharpen perceptions of injustice, and influence the forms of political mobilization that emerge.

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The importance of this relationship is reflected in scholarship on horizontal inequalities. Hillesund and Østby emphasize that the relationship between group disadvantage and civil war requires an explanation of the processes through which inequality generates organized, large-scale conflict (Hillesund and Østby). Their approach highlights the need to investigate both the distribution of resources and the organization of social groups.

Similarly, Bulutgil and Prasad's study of inequality, elections, and communal riots in India illustrates why distributive disparities should be analyzed alongside political competition and group relations (Bulutgil and Prasad). The implication is not that inequality inevitably generates communal violence, but that its political effects may depend on how groups compete for power and how institutions manage their relationships.

This insight also qualifies a purely class-based interpretation of conflict. Economic interests may overlap with group identities, but political actors can mobilize people around different forms of belonging. A conflict that appears religious or ethnic may also involve disputes over land, public employment, political representation, or access to state resources. Conversely, economic inequality does not always align neatly with identity boundaries.

A comprehensive analysis must therefore examine how economic divisions intersect with social identities and political institutions. It should also investigate whether cross-group cooperation weakens antagonism or whether political competition encourages groups to interpret resource allocation as a zero-sum struggle.

Justino's emphasis on social mobilization provides a useful contemporary extension of this argument. Where groups maintain cooperative relations and can coordinate peaceful demands, inequality-related mobilization may support institutional change. Where relations are dominated by antagonism and groups possess the capacity to coordinate confrontational action, the risk of violence may increase (Justino).

Why inequality does not always produce violence

One of the most important conclusions emerging from the comparative analysis is that inequality is not a sufficient explanation for violent conflict. If inequality alone determined violence, societies with similar distributions of wealth and opportunity would be expected to experience similar patterns of unrest. Yet political outcomes vary considerably.

The three theoretical perspectives help explain this variation. Marx and Engels emphasize the organization of class interests, Galtung highlights the wider institutional context, and Gurr directs attention to perceptions and political mobilization. Contemporary research further identifies the importance of cooperation between groups, organizational capacity, and institutional responses.

Several conditions may reduce the likelihood of violent escalation.

First, accessible and credible political institutions can allow disadvantaged groups to express grievances and pursue reform. Electoral participation, independent courts, local representation, and meaningful consultation may provide alternatives to confrontation when these mechanisms function fairly.

Second, social protection and equitable public investment may reduce the material hardships that intensify perceptions of exclusion. Policies addressing unequal access to education, healthcare, housing, and employment can help weaken the structural foundations of grievance.

Third, cross-group cooperation can reduce the tendency to interpret social differences as antagonistic competition. Organizations that bring together communities across economic, ethnic, or regional divisions may facilitate negotiation and reduce the appeal of collective blame.

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Fourth, responsive governance can prevent localized grievances from becoming wider crises. Transparent resource allocation, accountable law enforcement, and credible mechanisms for resolving disputes may strengthen public confidence in peaceful institutions.

These conditions do not eliminate every source of conflict. Violent conflict can also arise from strategic calculations, territorial disputes, ideological competition, security dilemmas, and state repression. Nevertheless, the analysis suggests that institutions capable of managing grievances fairly can influence whether inequality-related tensions remain peaceful or become violent.

Theoretical limitations and critical evaluation

Although the three foundational texts provide valuable explanations, each has limitations when applied independently to contemporary conflicts. The Marxian perspective offers a powerful account of economic domination and class antagonism. However, class relations alone may not explain conflicts in which identity, political exclusion, territorial claims, or security concerns play a major role. A rigid application of class theory risks overlooking the diversity of motivations and alliances that shape contemporary collective action.

Galtung's concept of structural violence broadens the analysis of injustice, but its breadth creates a methodological challenge. Researchers must distinguish between structural conditions that restrict human potential and the specific mechanisms through which such conditions influence political behavior. Without clear analytical criteria, structural violence may become too broad to distinguish among different forms of disadvantage or to explain variations in conflict outcomes.

Gurr's relative deprivation theory explains how perceptions shape political discontent, but perceptions are difficult to measure and may change over time. People experiencing similar material conditions may interpret them differently. Moreover, frustration does not necessarily lead to violence; it may result in peaceful activism, withdrawal from politics, or other responses.

Contemporary scholarship helps address these limitations by emphasizing the processes that connect inequality to collective action. Justino's analysis of social mobilization, for example, draws attention to the relationships between groups and their ability to coordinate action (Justino). Research on horizontal inequalities similarly encourages the examination of both violent and nonviolent strategies rather than assuming that group disadvantage inevitably results in civil war (Hillesund and Østby).

The most defensible approach is therefore an integrated one. Economic inequality, structural injustice, and perceived deprivation should be treated as analytically distinct but potentially interacting conditions. Their effects must be investigated alongside political institutions, collective identities, organizational capacity, and the availability of peaceful mechanisms for change.

Findings and Implications

The textual analysis produces five principal findings.

First, economic inequality can establish structural conditions for conflict. Marx and Engels demonstrate the importance of unequal economic power and competing class interests. Their framework encourages researchers to examine the distribution and control of resources rather than treating disadvantage as an exclusively individual problem.

Second, institutionalized disadvantage extends beyond income inequality. Galtung's theory shows why conflict analysis must consider the ways in which social arrangements restrict access to essential resources and opportunities. Formal peace may coexist with enduring forms of exclusion that undermine social justice.

Third, perceived injustice helps explain the transformation of disadvantage into collective

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grievance. Gurr's relative deprivation theory indicates that objective inequality does not automatically produce violence. Expectations, social comparisons, political interpretations, and beliefs about available opportunities shape how individuals respond to their circumstances.

Fourth, mobilization and institutional responses influence conflict outcomes. Recent scholarship suggests that inequality-related grievances can produce either peaceful or violent collective action, depending partly on intergroup cooperation, organizational coordination, and political conditions (Justino). Consequently, the escalation of violence should be explained through the interaction of structural and political processes.

Fifth, sustainable peace requires more than the suppression of violence. Galtung's distinction between negative and positive peace highlights the importance of addressing underlying injustices. Conflict prevention should therefore combine immediate security measures with longer-term reforms aimed at equitable participation, accountable governance, and fair access to resources.

These findings have several implications for policymakers and peacebuilding institutions. Conflict prevention strategies should identify patterns of group-based disadvantage before they develop into severe political crises. Public spending, employment opportunities, educational access, and political representation should be monitored for systematic inequalities. Grievance-resolution mechanisms should be accessible, transparent, and trusted by affected communities.

Peacebuilding initiatives should also distinguish between peaceful mobilization and violent escalation. Protest and collective demands are not necessarily signs of impending armed conflict; they may provide opportunities for dialogue and reform. Treating all forms of dissent as threats can undermine institutional legitimacy and narrow the space for peaceful political participation.

Finally, future empirical research should examine these theoretical relationships through comparative case studies, longitudinal data, and mixed-methods designs. Such research could investigate whether specific forms of inequality predict different types of mobilization and how institutional responses influence the transition from grievances to violence.

Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between social inequality and violent conflict through a critical textual analysis of Marx and Engels's The Communist Manifesto, Galtung's "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," and Gurr's Why Men Rebel. The comparative analysis demonstrates that these works provide complementary explanations of how unequal social arrangements can contribute to conflict. Marx and Engels emphasize the antagonisms generated by unequal economic relations; Galtung identifies the institutional structures that restrict human potential; and Gurr explains how perceived deprivation can develop into collective grievance and political action.

The central conclusion is that social inequality should be understood as a potentially important condition of violent conflict rather than an automatic or sufficient cause. Its consequences depend on how disadvantages are distributed across individuals and groups, how they are interpreted, and whether institutions provide credible opportunities for peaceful change. Recent research reinforces this conclusion by highlighting the importance of social mobilization, intergroup cooperation, and collective coordination in shaping whether inequality-related grievances result in peaceful resistance or violent confrontation (Justino).

The study also demonstrates that conflict prevention requires attention to both immediate political tensions and the structural conditions that sustain social exclusion. Reducing economic disparities, ensuring equitable access to public resources, strengthening institutional

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accountability, and expanding meaningful political participation may help prevent grievances from developing into violent conflict. Nevertheless, such measures must be adapted to the specific historical, political, and social conditions of each society.

Ultimately, the combined insights of Marx and Engels, Galtung, and Gurr provide a valuable theoretical foundation for understanding the relationship between inequality and violence. Their work remains relevant because it directs attention to the connections among economic power, institutional injustice, and collective perceptions of deprivation. By integrating these perspectives with contemporary research, the study advances a more nuanced understanding of conflict emergence and escalation and underscores the importance of social justice, inclusive governance, and sustainable peace building.

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