

Special Thematic Section on "Societal Change"

When Inequality Fails: Power, Group Dominance, and Societal Change

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Abstract

Social dominance theory was developed to account for why societies producing surplus take and maintain the form of group-based dominance hierarchies, in which at least one socially-constructed group has more power than another, and in which men are more powerful than women and adults more powerful than children. Although the theory has always allowed for societies to differ in their severity of group-based dominance and how it is implemented, it has predicted that alternative forms of societal organization will occur rarely and not last. This paper revisits aspects of the theory that allow for the possibility of societal alternatives and change. We also consider boundary conditions for the theory, and whether its current theoretical apparatus can account for societal change. By expanding the typical three-level dynamic system to describe societies (micro-meso-macro) into four levels (including meta) to consider how societies relate to one another, we identify political tensions that are unstable power structures rather than stable hierarchies. In research on institutions, we identify smaller-scale alternative forms of social organization. We identify logical, empirical, and theoretical shortcomings in social dominance theory's account of stability and change, consider alternative forms of social organization, and suggest fruitful avenues for theoretical extension.

Keywords: societal change, power, inequality, group dominance

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Societies do change. Historians have examined the interlinked economic, social, and political arrangements that characterize types of societies and how they change to other types (e.g., Kheng, 1994; White, 1975). Social psychologists' closest colleagues, sociologists, have also postulated changes in societies' economic-social-political arrangements as stages. Marxist theory posits that societal advancement occurs through five stages: primitive community to slavery to feudalism to capitalism to communism (Marx & Engels, 1848/1952). Lenski (1966) also proposed a stage theory of societal evolution through economic change, technological advancement, and social differentiation. Social dominance theory, however, has claimed that all surplus-producing societies inevitably will be structured as group-based dominance hierarchies, and that alternative societal organization, or shifts from and to such organization - what we term *societal change* - rarely occurs or persists. For example, Sidanius and Pratto (1999, p. 38) state that "While age and gender-based hierarchies will tend to exist within all social systems, arbitrary-

set systems of social hierarchy will invariably emerge within social systems producing sustainable economic surplus” and Sidanius and Pratto (1993, p. 207) state that “any ... social policy effort directed at eradicating inequality and discrimination ... will not only fail to achieve their publicly-stated goals, but the efforts themselves will be ultimately unsustainable.” A probabilistic version of this claim can be refuted if a plethora of counter-cases exist, but the theory could be found inadequate for other reasons as well. Social dominance theory has also provoked condemnation and controversy for meta-theoretical reasons (e.g., Huddy, 2004; Turner & Reynolds, 2003). Much of this controversy derives from misinterpreting what social dominance theory actually proposes, but some of the controversy stems from problematic assumptions and inconsistencies within the theory.

Nonetheless, social dominance theory, like all useful empirical theories, has developed in response to criticism and to empirical results. To do justice to the theory while being logical, considering empirical findings, and avoiding theoretical dogmatism, we detail the theory’s contemporary perspective on societal change by highlighting misunderstood or neglected parts of the theory and by extending it to analyze when inequality fails. We further delve into the theoretical apparatus by considering the logic of its assumptions and conclusions, particularly whether they are testable and internally consistent. We also, for the first time, identify factors outside the theory that contribute to the stable or unstable organization of human collectives and which may be boundary conditions. This allows us to reconsider social dominance theory’s claims about the inevitability of group-based oppression.

Our paper is organized into four major sections. The first details social dominance theory’s apparatus and how it accounts for societal change by revisiting neglected territory in its original theorizing. We also describe contemporary research and ideas that describe the complex societal processes that maintain societal stability or disrupt that stability. The second section explores how different levels of analysis described by social dominance theory interact to sustain intergroup inequality. The third section describes how social dominance theory explains when inequality fails or when group-based dominance hierarchies become challenged, contentious, or untenable. The last section outlines problematic assumptions and logical problems concerning social dominance theory’s explanation of societal change, and discusses how the theory can be extended to correct these problems.

Social Dominance Theory’s Apparatus

Social dominance theory was developed to account for how societies with economic surplus maintain stability, viz., retain the *form* of group-based dominance hierarchies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1993). Social dominance theory defines group-based dominance hierarchies as societies in which at least one group, such as Whites in South Africa, has substantially more material privilege (i.e., control of and access to resources, broadly defined), social legitimacy (i.e., general acceptance as shown in status, predominant point of view in shared cultural ideologies, influence on social discourse), and control of the societal apparatus of force (such as legal and military institutions), than at least one other group, such as Blacks and Coloureds in South Africa (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 31). The linkage of socially-constructed groups with power is created by the actions of people over time vis-à-vis each other. People in the same community can consensually associate power with a variety of social distinctions, such as nationality, ethnicity, religious sect, or “race.” Due to this apparent *arbitrariness* of (as opposed to “naturalness” or biologically-based) group distinctions in their capacity to hold or wield power, such groups are labeled “arbitrary set groups.”

Social dominance theory posits that group-based dominance societies have intersecting organizations of power regarding gender and age categories. However, the tenet that ideologies and discrimination follow such categories in a set fashion presumes that people use these social categories in uniform and constant ways, which is not always the case (Rosenberg, 2002). Indeed, aspects of all three of these kinds of social categories (arbitrary-set, gender, and age) are modern inventions (e.g., Kane, 2012), and they are not universal. Social categories are institutionally created and associated with power because legal systems, whether written or adjudicated by authority, categorize persons (e.g., as a person before the law, as a father, or a land-owner) and enforce people's opportunities and restrictions.

As an integrative theory, social dominance theory has described how aspects of human psychology interface with the shared meaning systems and institutions of culture to reproduce the hierarchical structure of societies (Pratto, 1999). Social dominance theory therefore makes a different assumption about the stability of group-based dominance hierarchy than the Marxist concept of revolution, and a different assumption about the possibility of bringing about equality through democracy or "social change" than much of social science does. However, some readers misconstrue social dominance theory as not allowing neither for dynamism within societies, or for change in societies over time (e.g., Huddy, 2004; Jost, 2011; Turner & Reynolds, 2003).

By detailing the processes that social dominance theory posits, we demonstrate that neither claim is accurate. We do, however, take issue with social dominance theory's assertions that group dominance is natural, inevitable, adaptive, and due to human inherencies (e.g., Sidanius, 1993).

Collectives as Dynamical Social Systems

Because social dominance theory views human societies as self-organizing and self-perpetuating systems, its view of societal change is complex. Dynamic social systems by definition have different "components" that influence each other across levels (e.g., Vallacher, Read, & Nowak, 2002). As dynamical systems, human collectives must be understood by delineating how the multiple levels of organization within group-based dominance hierarchies interact. Like many social science theories, social dominance theory has micro- (often *person*), meso- (often *group, institution, or local community*), and macro- (often *societal*) levels of analysis. Social dominance theory emphasizes the interactions among these levels and how they tend to consolidate effects, reinforce each other, correct each other, and adjust to each other. This, theoretically, is what makes group-based dominance hierarchies work as dynamic systems, resistant to substantial changes in form, but flexible enough to withstand changes in economic production and in cultural ideologies and norms. In fact, it is impossible to describe any aspect of the theory without invoking multiple levels, as the following summary will show. We will also propose a novel addition to the theory: a meta-level of relationships among and across societies.

Micro-Levels of Analysis

All designations of what constitutes a "level" are arbitrary. Nevertheless, to follow common theorizing (e.g., Silbereisen & Tomasik, 2010), let us suppose that the smallest (micro) level of organization is the person. Social dominance theory has considered how the person's social learning, cognitive, motivational, and identity processes contribute to the likelihood of a person stereotyping, feeling prejudice, and discriminating (e.g., Pratto, 1999). Extending the vast literatures on these topics, social dominance theory has added that people develop psychological orientations towards group-based dominance from their socialization in group-based dominance hierarchies, such as patriarchy within their families (e.g., Lee, Pratto, & Li, 2007) or racial segregation within their societies (e.g., Van Laar, Levin, Sinclair, & Sidanius, 2005). This general orientation is called social dominance orientation

(SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). People's level of SDO corresponds robustly to their likelihood of endorsing legitimizing ideologies, including racism, sexism, nationalism, and about powerful and weak groups in general (e.g., Lee, Pratto, & Johnson, 2011). This implies that specific ideological contexts are carried in the minds of people, reflecting their level of SDO (Pratto, Tatar, & Conway-Lanz, 1999).

SDO, in turn, sometimes interacts with people's immediate social context to influence whether their behavior promotes or attenuates social hierarchy. One form of confluence concerns individuals' SDO and the ideologies in their social context, including ideologies shared by other people and those that are normative within institutions. People's SDO levels often correspond to how hierarchy-attenuating or hierarchy-enhancing their habitual environments, such as their jobs, are (e.g., Pratto & Espinoza, 2001; Pratto, Stallworth, Sidanius, & Siers, 1997). This implies that one's associates are likely to reinforce one's own ideological biases in influencing one's discriminatory behavior (Pratto et al., 1999).

Another kind of interaction shows that context can attenuate the effects of people's pre-measured SDO on prejudice, discrimination, and ideological endorsement. Pratto and Shih (2000) found that when they made group threat distinctions salient, people expressing high levels of SDO become more implicitly prejudiced and people expressing low levels of SDO become less implicitly prejudiced than when group threat was not salient. Hodson (2008) found that British prisoners expressing high levels of SDO especially reduced their racial prejudice when given more contact with prisoners of other races. Umphress, Simmons, Boswell, and del Carmen Triana (2008) made either White women (Experiment 1) or Black men (Experiment 2) the most qualified applicant for a job. High SDO participants were less likely to hire the most qualified candidate than low SDO participants, unless an authority figure instructed participants to hire the most qualified candidate. Levin et al. (2012) manipulated how normative three different ideologies in the U.S. concerning ethnicity – assimilation, color-blindness, and multi-culturalism – were said to be, compared with an untreated control condition. They found that the three ideologies mediated the influence of SDO on general ethnic prejudice (i.e., against Latinos, Asian-Americans, Black Americans, Arab Americans). People who expressed higher levels of SDO endorsed assimilation, which predicted more prejudice, whereas people who expressed lower levels of SDO endorsed color-blindness and multi-culturalism, which predicted lower prejudice. Making the hierarchy-attenuating ideologies of color-blindness and multi-culturalism normative eliminated the association between SDO and prejudice. Similar findings were reported by Pratto et al. (1999), who found that priming participants with either *noblesse oblige* or meritocratic ideologies in a job task reduced the influence of SDO on discrimination in allocating resources, compared to an untreated control condition. Such experiments show that the way people's current social contexts invoke their psychological habits influences how their behavior in turn shapes social hierarchy.

Further, the causal relationship between SDO and intergroup hostility can be reversed: Brown (2011) found that the experience of service-learning reduced college students' levels of SDO. Morrison and Ybarra (2008) found that realistic threat increased SDO among people who were strongly identified with their social group.

Rather than viewing bi-directional experimental effects as inconclusive, these make theoretical sense because processes at each level influence processes at other levels through feedback. That is, individual psychological processes and socio-political contexts are mutually influential within a self-perpetuating dynamical social system.

Meso-Level of Analysis

Institutions are the most influential meso-level actors in maintaining inequality (e.g., Feagin & Feagin, 1978). Institutions often control more tools of dominance (e.g., money, weaponry) than individuals do (e.g., Pratto, 1999), and institutions guarantee that certain functions are served, regardless of which individuals perform them. Institutions and legitimizing ideologies are persistent, but not unchanging. The flexibility of racist ideology (e.g., Gossett, 1997) is mirrored by how the legal system produced, mutated, and reproduced racism in different historical periods and cultures. In the U.S., for example, racism via the legal system mutated from anti-miscegenation laws to chattel slavery (e.g., Fredrickson, 1988) through Jim Crow, desegregation (e.g., Allen, 1994, 1997), and resegregation (Quadagno, 1994).

Social dominance theory adds that organizations and institutions serve different functions regarding hierarchy maintenance. This fact is a substantial reason that social dominance theory is not merely an account of processes that are regressive or bolster the status quo, as Jost (2011) has claimed. Hierarchy-enhancing institutions allocate more positive social value (e.g., money, quality health care, nice places to live) to those in advantaged positions and groups, and/or more negative social value (e.g., imprisonment, dangerous waste, sub-standard education) to those in disadvantaged positions or groups, whereas hierarchy-attenuating institutions do the opposite. These functions, rather than their domain or organizing principle, determine whether institutions are considered hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating. For example, because most financial institutions are in the business of helping people who have money to make more money, social dominance theory classifies them as hierarchy-enhancing. Some financial organizations though, like credit unions and Grameen-type banks, serve poorer people, which makes them hierarchy-attenuating. Consistent with this functional conception of institutions and the flexible view of ideologies, institutions can co-opt the rhetoric of the opposition without changing what consequences they actually have vis-à-vis inequality. For example, large commercial banks have recently adopted community lending agencies' agenda to "serve the poor," often with disastrous consequences for the poor and large profits for the banks (Rugh & Massey, 2010).

Rather than relying on their contents to determine whether ideologies are hierarchy-attenuating or hierarchy-enhancing, social dominance theory has provided an empirical standard for *testing* how ideologies function in any given context. Ideologies that positively mediate the influence of SDO on support of hierarchy-enhancing practices or rejection of hierarchy-attenuating practices are hierarchy-enhancing. Ideologies that negatively mediate support of hierarchy-enhancing practices or rejection of hierarchy-attenuating practices are hierarchy-attenuating (e.g., Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006). In the absence of data from individuals, historical analyses about the effects of ideologies can be used to classify their functions. For example, early on, the Protestant Work Ethic elevated workers against monarchs, but is now used to maintain racism (e.g., Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

Macro-Levels of Analysis

Most of the processes social dominance theory has identified operate within societies (macro-level). The cohesion of societies stems from institutions and cultural meaning systems, both of which transmit patterns of behavior and ideas over time, space, and particular people. This analysis works for functioning, stable societies. In this section, for the first time, we specify features of the broader context of societies which help stabilize or destabilize hierarchical societies. Leaving aside natural disasters, which can change societies' organization and functioning, we focus on the social aspects of people's context, including economic activity and distribution, population in relation to resources, cohesion, and trust.

Access to Resources — If societies have sufficient access to resources, they can maintain their form if they are fairly isolated or inaccessible. Both very hierarchical and less hierarchical societies have maintained lengthy stability under such isolation. For example, the Great Wall of China and several natural barriers allowed Chinese society to remain relatively unchanged for centuries.

Physical enclaves can become cultural enclaves. For example, Australia's over 600 indigenous languages indicate that hundreds of separate tribes co-existed separately and in peace for at least 50,000, and perhaps for 65,000, years—the longest continuous cultures in human history (Australian Government, 2008). Moreover, Australia did not have group-based dominance hierarchy until it was colonized by the British, a point to which we shall return.

The resource pool must serve the population at hand, but the size of communities and their demographic composition changes, sometimes rapidly. Due to increased longevity, population size and distribution is expected to have global consequences that will change the age system, and is already prompting migration from nations with younger populations to nations with older populations (e.g., Bloom & McKinnon, 2010). Demographic changes can radically alter societies, *including their structure*. For example, Tuchman (1978) argues that the Black Death, which decimated Europe, made labor so scarce that this epidemic undermined the feudal system. Labor scarcity gave individuals the opportunity to leave serfdom to obtain gainful employment in cities, where people interacted with a broader number of people, overturned the paternalistic ideology that bound serfs to the aristocracy, saw the economic and political rise of the new mercantile class, and begat ideologies favoring capitalism and individualism.

Inter-societal encounters may entail the spread of disease, technology, cultural practices, ideas, and family structure. Such changes often cause people to redefine what they consider their “society” to be and how it is organized and governed. In fact, every particular “culture” or “society” is time-bound, and all “boundaries” for identifying a distinct society, whether linguistic, cultural, ethnic, geographic, economic, or political, are blurry.

Further, the physical local environment can change naturally, due to human activity, or to their interaction. For example, Iraq is desertified because the long history of irrigation that produced the “fertile crescent” of Mesopotamia salinated the soil (Jacobsen & Adams, 1958). Terrestrial reflection makes clouds above it less likely to rain, producing a positive feedback loop for desertification. The current global climate change is likely to change rain fall patterns, temperature patterns, access to freshwater, and many coastlines and islands, all of which will utterly change the resource potential of those locations (e.g., O'Brien, 2011).

Cohesion — Societies must have a level of cohesion. Numerous factors enable cohesion: shared language and cultural meaning systems, means of communicating and knowing about one another, reasons to feel one belongs in the community, and socialization so that people regulate their own and other people's behavior sufficiently to maintain norms and roles. It is difficult to specify what constitutes “enough” cohesion because there is substantial cultural variability in the looseness or tightness of societies (Triandis, 1989) and heterogeneity.

Functioning Institutions — Functioning institutions foster societal stability (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012) by placing many practices on “auto-pilot.” Marriage customs or laws organize some aspects of family life, banks are supposed to protect the value of societies and provide liquidity, schools and families prepare the next generation to run the society. Societies without well-functioning institutions may fall apart, or be beset with chaos, violence, and/or unmet needs (e.g., Somalia). When institutions begin to fail, their members may self-organize replacement institutions, as many villages in contemporary Syria have done to avoid falling under the control of either the rebel

Free Syrian Army or government troops. People with failed institutions may accidentally or deliberately invite outsiders to provide for such institutions, although foreign institutions may become resented. For example, after its defeat in World War II, Japan's military security was promised by the U.S. to keep Japan disarmed, but many Japanese today protest the continued presence of U.S. bases in Japan.

Internal Security — Communities must have some physical security. Violent institutions, both formal (i.e., legal system, police, militaries) and informal (e.g., para-militaries) are often promised to maintain security, but they are frequently a threat to subordinated members of the society and to external peoples, and can destabilize societies themselves (e.g., [Sidanius & Pratto, 1999](#)). States that fail to substantially monopolize violence are beset with external military intervention and/or domestic armed groups that can produce civil (e.g., drug cartels vs. the Mexican government) or regional strife (e.g., Hezbollah in Lebanon, Syria, and Israel). However, the monopoly over violence is not always effective in either minimizing violence or maintaining stability (e.g., [Pape, 2003](#)).

In summary, social dominance theory appears to have presumed several conditions that are likely *necessary* for the perpetuation of stable, hierarchical societies: sufficient access to resources, social cohesion, functioning institutions, and security. By implication, should any of these conditions not be in place, social dominance theory should not expect the *form* of group-based hierarchical organization to be stable. Using the past to predict the future is only sensible if past conditions that contributed to dominance societies continue into the future.

However, these features, as several of our examples show, cannot be *sufficient* to produce group-based dominance hierarchies. The *management* of these features, as well as their presence or absence or degree, influence the paths societies can take (e.g., [Walby, 2009](#)).

Meta-Level of Analysis

We hold that social dominance theory must, in some way, address a meta-level of analysis concerning both relations between macro-levels and across and above macro-levels. One reason to add the meta-level is that societies are rarely autonomous or isolated in the modern age. Various forms of societal resource inadequacies and dependencies can be seen, related to the specialization and differentiation of the value of whole societies' natural, labor, and capital resources and production. In fact, [Wallerstein \(1974a\)](#) claims that autonomous societies no longer exist at all. Expulsion, genocide, migration, international trade, diplomacy and inter-state war only begin to demonstrate the lack of societal autonomy.

A second reason to acknowledge meta-relationships is to enable better theorizing about changes in group boundaries and therefore new tactics in dominance struggles. Transnational activism against subordination (e.g., [Tarrow, 2005](#)), multi-national corporations, international organizations, and other phenomena are tampering with societal and other collective boundaries. A national struggle can play out over multiple states—Kurds in Turkey, Germany, Iraq and elsewhere are organizing and acting as *if* they are a recognized people and state, and are attempting to by-pass the macro-level states in which they reside ([Casier, 2010](#)).

A third reason the meta-level is needed is that social dominance theory has assumed that classifying institutions as hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating is uniform within macro-levels. We argue that such classification depends on the social collective in question. For example, some types of foreign aid that are purported to elevate the developing world (hierarchy-attenuating at meta-level) often instead produce corruption or other ill effects, which exacerbate or create hegemonies between and within societies (hierarchy-enhancing at macro- and meta-levels, e.g., [Easterly, 2006](#)). Likewise, when Afghanistan's mujahedeen ejected the Soviets by allying with the

U.S., this enforced U.S. hegemony over the U.S.S.R, but attenuated hegemony between Afghans and Soviets, while paving the way for the Taliban's oppression of Afghan women. Militaries often oppress groups within and outside their societies, but they can and sometimes do protect emerging democracies, especially when better provisioned (Powell, 2012). Some institutions can serve both hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating functions with respect to different groups or at different levels, and this is particularly clear when meta-level effects are rigorously examined.

Coordination and Synergy of the Multilevel Components

Social dominance theory emphasizes that different components of social systems tend to work together (e.g., Pratto, 1999). For example, stereotypes and social roles are synergistic, as are organizations' hierarchy functions and their members' SDO levels (see Haley & Sidanius, 2005, for a review). Because the ideologies of the institutions and of their members are compatible for a number of reasons, there is a confluence of the micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis in maintaining hierarchy. Social dominance theory recognizes, therefore, that one cannot speak of "root causes" of hierarchy-maintenance, including any one psychological predisposition, because many of the processes identified by the theory are multidirectional and mutually reinforcing.

This is not to say that psychological processes are not important to social dominance theory. As we illustrated previously, socialization, wanting to belong and to share reality, cognitive consistency striving, group identification, group interest, desire to view oneself as moral, and social comparison are important to various social interactions that social dominance theory identifies as important for maintaining inequality and societal stability. Such psychological processes are not particular to social dominance theory. This may make it challenging for psychologically-minded researchers to identify particular psychological processes that should be invoked in empirical research that incorporates social dominance theory (but see review by Pratto et al., 2006), and indeed social dominance theory has been used in other disciplines including business, organizations, ethnic studies, international relations, and public policy (e.g., Carvalho, 2004; García, Posthuma & Roehling, 2009; Howell, Perry, & Vile, 2004; Hummel, 2012; Onuf, 2012). Adopting social dominance theory's standpoints of dynamic social-psychological systems, group position, and consideration of power dynamics may inspire new insights on common psychological processes as well as on their implications for social dynamics and organization (e.g., Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008). One strength of theoretical synergism in social dominance theory is that it does not reduce a complex phenomenon to one sole or predominant psychological goal or process (e.g., system-justification). Another strength is that social dominance theory does not reduce social inequality or social structure to psychology, while still being able to contribute original and convergent reasoning from a psychological perspective to the sociological and anthropological understandings of these phenomena.

In addition, social dominance theory argues that because there are opponent processes in all societies and power relationships, even the apparent stability of societal form does not imply that no *attempts* to change the system are occurring. In fact, we argue that any attempt to affect intergroup power that consists of putting an ideology into practice through action (praxis) is the kind of social change relevant to social dominance theory (Stewart, 2013). That is, any action that embodies a group-relevant ideology, whether progressive or regressive, and whether "effective" or not in changing particular outcomes, is social change (see Stewart, Leach, & Pratto, 2012, for a fuller discussion). Relying on temporal differences to index "social change" can mask the rich and varied forms of praxis (i.e., hierarchy-enhancing or –attenuating) that *may* stabilize or destabilize inequality. Observing

stable inequality and/or societal structure does not mean that people are not protesting, boycotting, or emigrating, nor that people are only oppressing and supporting hierarchy-enhancing institutions. People engage in both forms of praxis all the time, so social change is ever-present in human societies.

But regarding societal change, and bucking the trend among psychologists to view prejudice as decreasing, the opponent processes assumption recognizes that social systems can become more or less egalitarian, and also more egalitarian in some ways *and* less so in others. Progressive social movements may beget regressive attitudes and counter-movements (e.g., Faludi, 1991). Such backlash might halt or reverse the change of progressive movements (e.g., Fobanjong, 2003), while “modernizing” hierarchy-enhancing ideologies such as racism and sexism (e.g., Dovidio & Gaertner, 1991; Glick & Fiske, 1996). Backlash can also result in more overt and violent conflict, such as the Assad government’s repressive response to armed rebellion in Syria since 2011.

The next section provides examples of how the theoretical apparatus of social dominance theory can be used to understand societal changes of various sorts. Again, because social dominance theory views societies as dynamical systems, we organize this section by explicating interactions between at least two levels.

Micro, Meso, and Macro-Level Interactions

The idea of socially-shared meaning systems is essential in anthropological understandings of how human groups organize themselves (e.g., Johnson, 1994; Sanday, 1981), and in social representations theory (see Rateau, Guimeli, & Christian Abric, 2012, for a review). Similarly, social dominance theory views ideologies as the linkage between shared meanings, consensually expected practices, and institutionalized practices (e.g., Pratto et al., 2000). Ideologies connect individual psychology, including SDO, to roles, institutions, and shared legitimizing myths or ideologies. Pratto (1999) reviewed how processes link individuals to institutions and to societal inequality through ideology. These processes are in confluence, with ideologies flowing through the system by which people via institutions allocate resources in ways that maintain inequality.

Although social dominance theory’s theoretical analysis and related empirical research demonstrate the elasticity of such systems, the theoretical apparatus of social dominance theory also points to how this system might break down. For example, organizational procedures can disrupt confluence (e.g., Michinov, Dambun, Guimond, & Meot, 2005; Umphress et al., 2008) at the meso-level. But at the macro-level, social dominance theory has not examined the conditions under which this kind of change within the system reduces inequality, and when such changes are halted by backlash.

Micro, Macro, and Meta-Level Interactions

At the macro level, much of the world now considers “society” to be the nation-state (e.g., Greenfeld, 2011), although exceptions, including the many occupied peoples (e.g., Palestinians), migratory peoples (e.g., Roma), and ethnic groups whose residence does not correspond to or have recognition by nations (e.g., Kurds) should not be overlooked. Nation-states only recognize other societies if they are nation-states (e.g., Greenfeld, 2011). At the meta-level, the U. N. Declaration of Human Rights (UNHDR) presumes that the rights of individuals (micro-level) are granted or curtailed through national citizenship (macro-level). For example, Article 15 (1) of UNHDR states that, “Everyone has the right to a nationality,” Article 14 states that everyone may reside and move within his or her country and to leave and re-enter his or her country, and Article 8 states that everyone has the right to redress through a competent national tribunal (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). The right to redress of individuals (micro-level) is only realized by governments (macro-level). People who are not recognized as citizens of nations

in which they live (within a macro-level) may also not be recognized as persons with rights by other nations (meta-levels). For a person to leave his or her country, another country must be on good enough terms with the home country to allow that person entry. Micro-level rights only exist when recognized at the macro-level (national) and at the meta-level (international).

This interlocking of the micro-, macro- and meta-levels does not prevent societal change. A number of individual- and social- psychological processes (micro-level) contribute to change at the societal level (macro-level) and also to global (meta-level) changes. Conversely, societal and global changes are influencing people's values and expectations.

Both directions of influence can be seen in several studies that consider global trends and compare nations and people in them. [Firebaugh \(2003\)](#) documents that with greater international trade, nations are growing more economically equal to each other but inequality within them is markedly increased. Such global (meta-level) and within-nation (macro-level) changes, in turn, influence meso- and micro-level group and psychological changes. A meta-analysis of group differences in SDO found that differences between men and women and between dominant and subordinate arbitrary set groups were *larger* in societies with more individualist and egalitarian values ([Lee et al., 2011](#)). This finding suggests that where norms are egalitarian, salience and disapproval of inequality make people in subordinated groups more cognizant of and more overtly opposed to their subordinated positions than in societies in which inequality is more normative (see also [Leach, 2002](#)).

Societal-level objective movements towards equality and people's rejection of inequality as a value have a positive feedback loop. [Seguino \(2007\)](#) showed that as gender egalitarian norms increased around the world during the 20th century, gender disparities in power within societies have decreased. Hence, feminist ideals put into action (social change as praxis) have increased women's power. Similarly, [Guimond \(2008\)](#) argued that as gender equality norms spread, women are more likely to view men rather than women as their social comparison standard and demand better treatment, higher wages, and more power.

More broadly, [Bou Zeineddine and Pratto \(in press\)](#) argue that as wealth, popular sociopolitical influence, and egalitarian values have increased, peoples' aspiration standards also have increased. These changes make people more apt to support change in the direction of greater access to wealth and voice for the masses. Thus, there is a positive feedback loop in the direction of greater equality both objectively and in people's values and aspirations. These are global phenomena.

Interactions among All Four Levels

Considering four-level interactions, it is easy to see that substantive societal change is possible through the dynamic interactions between levels.

Individuals, families, and groups (micro- and meso-levels) have basic needs and desires, such as for livelihoods. In nations in which the government does not provide social services, political factions, informal communities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often serve such functions as security, health care, and education: for example, Hezbollah in Lebanon (e.g., [Flanigan & Abdel-Sadr, 2009](#)) and the International Committee of the Red Cross/Crescent (ICRC) in Afghanistan (e.g., [Webster, 2011](#)), Iraq (e.g., [Faber & Saggurthi, 2013](#)), and elsewhere. There is no uniformly hierarchical or even stable relationship between NGOs and national governments or other institutions. In some places, the functioning of an NGO allows governments not to provide for the basic social contract, and in others, they become part of the government. In some locations, governments respond to compet-

ition from NGOs by adopting some of their functions, and in other places, governments respond by expelling them. The assumption that individuals have rights lends ideological support to the legitimacy of such groups to override legal government sovereignty, often through meso- and meta-level means. These examples show that societal change in a variety of ways is possible at the interplay of meso- and macro-levels, some of which are transnational (meta-level).

Using Social Dominance Theory's Apparatus to Understand Societal Change

Social dominance theorists have made the point that progressive movements and revolutions against hierarchical systems sometimes fail (e.g., [Sidanius & Pratto, 1999](#), pp. 35-36), and admit several kinds of changes in form: (1) progressive or regressive 'tweaking' that maintains the current hierarchy and may re-legitimize it; (2) high levels of conflict that de-stabilizes, divides, or destroys societies; (3) separatism; (4) imperialism; (5) genocide; and occasionally, (6) intractable conflict. However, consistent with its aims, social dominance theory has not addressed any of these possibilities in any detail, except hierarchy-maintenance (1), partly because it has not addressed the meta-level. Omission of these cases can be considered a major limitation of the theory. Further, the pre-existence of a group-based dominance hierarchy may be a substantially different context in which to effect both social and societal change than other forms of societal organization. Priors, historical and cultural, must be taken into account.

More constructively, there is an important theoretical opportunity to explicate what conditions and psychological processes may lead to alternative forms of social organization. We first elaborate how the theoretical apparatus of social dominance theory implies several novel hypotheses about how "societal" or collective levels of change may arise. We then consider what forms of societal organization that are not group-based hierarchies tell us about erroneous assumptions in social dominance theory.

Ecological Change

Earlier, we explicated the ecological conditions that appear necessary for hierarchies to become stable. It follows that changes in these conditions can provoke change in how societies are organized and what resources are available to them. When individuals cannot obtain material necessities through the legitimate and common channels in their societies, their alternative means of obtaining those necessities may well destabilize their society, or produce a parallel set of institutions and practices. One common solution to insufficient economic opportunities is to migrate. Migrants often bring different cultural practices, languages, skills, and expectations into receiving societies and sometimes lead them to reconsider their collective identities. Another very common, though undercounted solution to under-employment is to work in 'shadow economies' or 'informal economies' – what some term "black markets" ([Schneider, Buehn, & Montenegro, 2010](#)). This economic activity may stabilize societies, in much the same way as illegal immigration meets changing demands for inexpensive farm labor in the U.S. ([Massey & Taylor, 2004](#)). However, such alternative practices and institutions may also destabilize their societies in a variety of ways. The competition between public (e.g., police, politicians) and private (e.g., commercial cartels, organized crime syndicates) parties that distribute valuable and/or illicit substances (e.g., petroleum, alcohol, cocaine) is common to many nations, and it often re-arranges and upturns local group-based hierarchies and sometimes whole nations (e.g., Colombia, Mexico). Naturally, the meta-level of trade in drugs, people, and so

forth further complicates these phenomena as well, and has implications for dominance hierarchies across multiple levels.

Destabilization can also be an unintended consequence of innovation, whether this replaces necessities or not. The European invention of moveable type helped produce broad literacy, greater awareness of one's own position, more vicarious contact with other cultures (through reading), exposure of men to the interior lives of women through novels, and a host of other social changes that helped produce modernity (e.g., Eisenstein, 1979). The necessity of U.S. women to hold paid jobs while men were at war during World War II prompted inventors to automate household chores, such as dishwashing and laundry, that were previously done by hand. Such innovations enable people to spend time on other pursuits. Birth control pills allowed couples to space and limit their family size, which has numerous large-scale consequences for their societies, including an inversion of the typical age hierarchy (i.e., more older than younger people)—which, in turn, has large-scale financial implications for funding social security programs (Bloom & McKinnon, 2010). Although such dynamics fit the systems assumptions of social dominance theory, many such changes do not reinforce group inequality because they change how people get resources and which people do, and often alter the meaning and boundaries of gender, age, and arbitrary set groups.

Changes in Legitimizing Ideologies

Ideological Failure

People do not always, nor do they all, acquiesce to legitimizing ideologies. In a recent international study, Pratto, Saguy, et al. (in press) found people low on SDO to reject long-standing ideologies that legitimize the oppression of Arabs. Rejection and replacement processes, however, are not well understood. Social dominance theory argues that ideologies will function to stabilize hierarchies to the extent that they are embedded in cultural worldviews and practices. Ideological inconsistencies can provoke change in what ideologies and practices are accepted. Pointing out the hypocrisy between feminine ideals and how racism was enacted for enslaved women in the U.S. gave credence to the feminist and abolition movements (White, 1999), just as pointing out the hypocrisy of exploitation under feudal paternalism incited rebellion (e.g., Sandall, 2012). When ideological violations are associated with collective identities, then motivations for moral identity striving can prompt change in the acceptability of ideologies or practices. Glasford, Pratto, and Dovidio (2008) showed that pointing out that the U.S. had violated humanitarian principles in Iraq led people toward political action to halt such practices, unless they first disidentified as Americans.

Other societies can provide change-inducing social comparison points (Bou Zeineddine & Pratto, in press; Guimond, 2008). For example, when U.S. Americans began to understand the horrors of racism by learning about what Nazis had done in their concentration camps, White sympathy with the Black-led civil rights movement increased significantly (Pettigrew, 2008). These examples show that cognitive consistency striving and striving to maintain a moral collective self-image can prompt even people in dominant positions to adopt different ideologies and practices that attenuate group-based hierarchy. When ideologies conflict with other ideologies, become blatantly inconsistent with social facts, are considered from alternative points of view, or compared with other societies' practices and ideologies, they may not function as well and are altered or rejected. The simple facts of human migration, cross-cultural contact, and the flow of information providing alternative comparison points and ideologies suggest that ideological change and change in praxis are chronic and may be increasing.

Recognizing New Possibilities

Social identity theory identified belief in the *possibility* of social change as important in prompting action toward it (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). One important way societal change seems possible is learning examples of other societies, as has occurred with liberation movements within and between societies (e.g., Alquwaizani, 2011; Lynch, 2012). The bunching of protest movements in time suggests that they inspire each other as people recognize the similarity of their oppressions. For example, eastern European rebellions against the U.S.S.R in 1956 and in 1989 were chained in time, as are the Arab uprisings starting in 2010.

Another means of recognizing new possibilities is to reinterpret dominant ideologies. The re-analysis of Christian tenets once used to legitimize the African slave trade made it reprehensible and helped to prompt the abolition movement (Lysack, 2012). True ideological innovation, not just cross-fertilization or reinterpretation, is also possible (e.g. political Islam, transnationalism), though potentially much more difficult given hegemonic statist liberalism among the most powerful states and international organizations (Ikenberry, 2011). But even when such innovation fails or disappoints or is destroyed by opponent forces, it leaves mainstream traces, as minorities and subordinates often do (e.g., continuing support for socialism in Europe and elsewhere after the demise of communism as a global ideological contender).

Change in Policies and Institutions

Social dominance theory recognizes that within societies and even across societies, some institutions serve a hierarchy-enhancing function and others serve a hierarchy-attenuating function. However, it has not detailed how people change institutions, nor the mutual influence between hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating institutions, although it predicts oppositional adjustment and spreading consequences. For example, Khavul, Chaves, and Bruton (2013) describe how people who rejected the ideological assumption that the poor are “unbankable” established microfinance organizations in Guatemala. By providing small loans to very poor people, who rarely defaulted, these non-profit organizations demonstrated to large, regulated commercial banks that they were missing a market share. The banks then began to compete with microfinance organizations both in customer services and by demanding that microfinance organizations be regulated like banks. These institutional interactions with poor people are prompting them to establish savings accounts for the first time. Change in both hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating directions, at micro-, meso-, macro-, and meta-levels, are apparent. Social dominance theory predicts that Guatemala’s overall wealth and ethnic hierarchy will be maintained. The complexity of how people and institutions interact fits the dynamic systems and historical change views of social dominance theory, but these are not compatible with assuming that societal structure will not change substantially. At the very least, the non-hierarchical nature of the microfinance organizations and Christian base communities provide people with a more egalitarian and cooperative model of an institution than their post-colonial dictators have.

Alternative ideologies are also important for prompting people societal change. During the 20th century, the alternative ideology of feminism was enacted. This *praxis* led women to fight to legalize abortion, to establish clinics and write books to educate women, and to provide health services, enacting the ideology that women should make their own informed decisions about their bodies and not have their lives hampered by unwanted pregnancies (Schoen, 2013). This change was effected by using the legal system to contest state and then federal law to provide protection for medical staff providing and women seeking abortions. Activists affected reform in existing institutions by requesting that doctors in private practice provide abortion services, but invented feminist-run clinics

as well (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007). At below-macro levels of social organization, male- and group-based domination is not always the rule.

Following the privatization of the Reagan/Thatcher era, activists increasingly use private institutions and even marketing practices to reform institutions to delegitimize dominant ideologies and to provide alternative institutions and ways of operating such institutions. A new set of “social entrepreneurs” are inventing economic institutions that have the explicit purpose of bringing about social change by the way goods and services are delivered. Further, these institutions target political capital, social capital, and human capital (e.g., Mair, Battilana, & Cardenas, 2012). Another new set of entrepreneurs of the natural environment are inventing institutional strategies and structures towards goals such as sustainability and ecological health, and may share goals and tactics with social entrepreneurs (e.g., Kury, 2012). The dynamic interplay between different kinds of institutions and their means of realizing alternative goals may enable societal change.

Micro- and Meta-Level Pressures on Stability of Meso-Level Dominance

Social dominance theory can be extended to include some intra-societal relationships as nested power structures within regional and global international relations. Consider politics in Lebanon and Syria. It would be impossible to understand the contentious domestic politics in Lebanon without considering a domestic faction with regional influence and support (Hezbollah), and Lebanon’s history vis-à-vis Israel, which necessitates understanding Lebanon’s relationship to the U.S. and to other Arab nations. Likewise, it would be impossible to understand the repressive domestic politics in Syria without understanding the hegemony of the Alawites, nor to understand U.S.-Syrian enmity without considering Syria’s alliance with Russia and Iran. Politically, citizens (micro-level) are situated in locations in which their political organizations (meso-level) are connected domestically and regionally, but those connections are also part of a layered power structure from factions to national governments to regional international relations (macro-level) within the global hegemony of the U.S. and the properties of international organizations such as the Security Council (meta-level). Using this conceptual analysis, Pratto, Sidanius, Bou Zeineddine, Kteily, & Levin (2013) examined Lebanese and Syrian citizens’ attitudes towards Hezbollah and their own governments as a function of their belief that their governments provide for them and their concerns about U.S. oppression. These mediators were both predicted by citizens’ SDO levels, which differed by the socioeconomic and political positions in which these citizens and their sub-groups were situated. Participants’ support of political factions reflected not only their psychological orientation to group dominance (micro-level), but also *their* understanding of the relations between meso-, macro- and meta-level political entities.

However, expanding the layered power structure notion to the meta-level reveals ways in which stable dominance both within and between nations can fail. Pratto, Sidanius, et al. (2013) accounted for why, given even a handful of the nation’s preferred allies, there could not be stable group dominative relationships in this region under the circumstances at the time. Employing structural balance theory, one can see that Syria had fairly balanced (before the revolution), and therefore stable *international* relationships: it was a mutual “enemy” of the U.S. and Israel, two allies, and a mutual friend of Iran and Hezbollah, two allies in enmity against Israel. Generally, Syria’s international regional and global relationships were balanced. However, given this configuration, Lebanon could not have had balanced relationships without making an enemy of the U.S. or of Syria, which seems undesirable given that both have contributed to severe military attacks on Lebanon. These external relationships made Lebanese internal politics contentious, as Lebanese were essentially forced to choose which set of enemies they preferred, which we view as setting up a destabilizing internal situation for Lebanon. By addressing the interplay of levels for whom meta-levels are most salient and potent politically (i.e., in subordinated countries), we were able to make a social

psychological point regarding the factional (meso-level) preferences of citizens in relation to their SDO levels (micro-level), which could only be explained by national (macro-level) circumstances, given regional and international (meta-level) influences. We were thus also able to challenge hegemonic stability theory in political science and extend social dominance theory by showing that hegemony does not necessarily provide for or maintain societal stability, and indeed may have the opposite effect. Extending social dominance theory to the meta-level and to circumstances different than those encountered by WEIRD populations (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) has potential for generativity not just in social psychology, but across disciplines.

Problems with Social Dominance Theory's Understanding of Societal Stability

The preceding sections help to identify some of the implicit assumptions social dominance theory appears to hold about the kinds of factors that enable societal stability. This analysis provides the means to qualify the theory. The next section identifies factual, definitional, and logical problems in social dominance theory's understanding of societal change and suggests alternative explanations for some of the theory's conclusions.

Group-Based Dominance as Adaptive

Social dominance theory has some logical flaws as scientific theory. First, it starts with the "observation" that human societies tend to be group-based dominance societies, but also concludes that the theory's apparatus demonstrate that such societies will predominate (e.g., Sidanius, 1993). A premise cannot also be a conclusion.

Second, social dominance theory has often argued that dominance hierarchies are functional, or more functional than alternatives, and therefore adaptive. Evolution does not guarantee that existing features were selected or adaptive; an argument for functionalism is not an adaptive argument.

Third, the theory claims that "the many forms of group-based oppression are as common as they have been [because] of survival value for the human group throughout its evolutionary history" (Sidanius & Pratto, 1993, p. 173). If the propensity for human groups to form hierarchies has survival value, this implies that group selection is at work, which relies on culture and is flexible (Richerson & Boyd, 2005).

Fourth, if hierarchies do enable group survival in times of economic scarcity, then why does the theory pertain to societies with economic surplus?

Fifth, even if some collective procedure is used to prioritize who gets scarce resources in times of famine, it is not clear why this must or should stem from a pre-existing dominance hierarchy. In fact, prioritizing dominants is arguably less adaptive for the society than not doing so. Whenever members of different groups have different capabilities, eliminating one set of capabilities eliminates potentially adaptive group resources and variations within the group. Women, arbitrary set subordinates, and children are often the food producers, so eliminating them could hardly have survival value for others. Decimating either men or women not only prevents reproduction, but eliminates physical capabilities that each offer. Prioritizing any one age set eliminates the variability in adaptive assets for the group that people of different ages have: youth have flexibility and longevity, young adults have strength and zeal, and older adults have wisdom and skills. Privileging particular people is less useful to their collectives, not more functional.

Broadly speaking, biodiversity and mutation are the first essentials in life's ability to adapt to catastrophe and change, not natural selection. Natural selection winnows diversity to optimize life in present, stable, even chronic conditions. It cannot, and does not, provide the reservoir of alternative forms and adaptations that can deal with fluidity or rapid change. Given the extremely rapid pace, from an evolutionary standpoint, of ecological, social, technological, intellectual, cultural, and economic change in human history, it stands to reason that social diversity and flexibility, not hegemonic dominance or homogenization, are what has supplied human societies with resilience and continuity. At the institutional level, diversity also aids societal survival. Nations within which financial systems were excluded or subordinated or deliberately differentiated from some of the dominant practices (e.g., speculative trading on mortgages) in the international monetary system were relatively insulated from the 2008 economic crisis (e.g., China, Islamic banks, etc.). And the least hierarchical states today tend to be the healthiest, best educated, and most socially secure, even when compared to others with comparably high degrees of wealth and influence (e.g., [Walby, 2009](#)).

The Hierarchy-Enhancing/Hierarchy-Attenuating Oppression Equilibrium Theorem

Another argument social dominance theory has offered for the stability of group-based hierarchies is that the tension between hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating forces provides flexibility for societal adjustment, while their balance maintains stability. This argument is sometimes propped up by the argument that balance legitimizes and tempers oppressive practices to keep a society from becoming so exploitative or genocidal that it is unsustainable, but also from becoming so egalitarian that it loses the ability to survive resource stress (e.g., [Sidanius, 1993](#)). In other words, balance prevents dominance-societal dysfunction.

To argue that if dominance societies did not maintain oppressive equilibrium, they would fail, is to presume that they do not fail in the first place. But of course dominance societies (e.g., ancient Rome) have failed, so they evidently *can* fail. Societal stability cannot be taken as evidence for the oppression equilibrium hypothesis or indeed for any other tenet of social dominance theory. One cannot infer from a period of stability that oppressive equilibrium is present without resorting to tautology.

Devising empirical tests of the oppression equilibrium theorem requires a researcher to operationalize "balance" and "imbalance" independently of what a "society" is, and to identify the appropriate time scale and method of sampling societies or matched cases for the test. Further, the research should control for the boundary conditions for societal stability we identified earlier, such as societal autonomy and adequate access to resources. More tenable, the theory and research should be extended to detail how hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating forces each adjust to the other without resorting to pre-ordained outcomes.

A similar critique can be made concerning how institutions operate internally. In focusing on institutional stability, social dominance theory has not specified boundary conditions for when an organization's processes change. And yet it could—by situating organizations within ideological cultures, and considering how influences outside organizations interact with those inside to change organizations and their hierarchy-enhancing/ -attenuating functions within their societies.

Let us provide one small example. With the increase in women's education levels and career aspirations, more women have entered previously male-dominated occupations in industrialized societies. The composition of organizations helps to influence how members of different gender or arbitrary-set groups fare in those institutions (e.g., [Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993](#)). [Kellogg \(2012\)](#) compared whether two highly similar hospitals implemented

practices that would especially benefit lower-status interns, reducing the number of hours worked per week in surgical units from over 100 to about 80. She argues that to accomplish this hierarchy-attenuating policy change, it is often the case that members of lower- and higher-status groups must form alliances or coalitions and be willing to defend others across such status divides. She found that one of the major forms of resistance to the policy change was to use feminine stereotypes to denigrate and humiliate residents and interns who left work “early,” or those who promoted the policy change. In the hospital with a larger number of female chief surgeons, their support made the implementation of the change effective. In the hospital with the smaller number of female chief surgeons, the coalition across job status eventually fell apart because individuals’ status for both men and women was undermined by showing loyalty to the alliance and accepting rather than resisting gendered behavior in the workplace. In other words, the extent to which a national increase in the number of women surgeons was instantiated in each hospital influenced the degree of cooperation across status and power positions within the organizations, and whether they adopted more hierarchy-attenuating practices.

Societal Organization that is Not Group-based Dominance Hierarchy

Social dominance theorists have claimed that group-based dominance hierarchies are the most common and stable kinds of societal organization in societies with economic surplus. Evidence for this assertion would be that group-based dominance hierarchies last longer than other forms of societal organization. Australian aborigines demonstrate that cultures that are *not* group-based dominance hierarchies have already lasted longer than all known ones. Another empirical falsification is that there are at least two kinds of societies that produce economic surplus but are not group-based dominance hierarchies. Autonomous agrarian and hunter-gatherer societies can co-exist in slightly separate spaces (e.g., Australian aboriginal tribes) or migrate seasonally to plant, harvest, fish, and hunt, coming together with other groups in trade, alliances, and war (e.g., the Iroquois, Algonquin, Huron, Mohican confederacies; e.g., [Leacock, 1978](#)). Given that many such societies are found on many continents, trade, and that agricultural societies can have specialization of labor, it is untrue that agrarian, hunter-gatherer, and other “pre-modern” societies with other means of production do not acquire surplus (e.g., [Bowles, Smith, & Bergerhoff Mulder, 2010](#)). According to social dominance theory, such societies should be group-based dominance hierarchies, but some of them are classless and gender-egalitarian (e.g., [Collier, 1988](#); [Leacock, 1978](#)).

Forms of Societal Organization and the Contagion of Proto-Imperialism

Nonetheless, as social dominance theory has pointed out, group-dominance societies are quite prevalent despite being found in rather different physical ecologies (e.g., Europe, South America, Asia) and employing different ideologies (e.g., classism, nationalism, colonialism, religious superiority). The concentration of economic resources and violence in certain hands is common to nomadic societies, feudal societies, monarchies, empires, nation-states, and the current global world order. Group dominance is enacted by constricting economic and forceful power, regardless of the collective’s economic basis, type of government, and ideological apology, likely because economic resources and the need for safety and security are survival needs (see [Pratto, Lee, Tan, & Pitpitan, 2011](#)). It seems reasonable to describe such societies as proto-empires, and this appears to be the kind of societal organization social dominance theory addresses best.

Nonetheless, we reconsider whether the commonness of proto-empires is good evidence either for their functional “survival” value or their inevitability. Each actual empire was stable over hundreds and even thousands of years, perhaps because they had the boundary conditions we described previously, but all have come to an end as

empires. Many other proto-empires have also ended, sometimes with *increased* power to subordinates (e.g., Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Tuchman, 1978).

Despite the similarity of proto-empires across historical periods, continents, economic bases, and governmental forms, the assertion that the imperial model of human societies is the most common in history is demonstrably false (e.g., Amin, 1993). Many people may be more aware of proto-empires than other forms of societies because their sheer size spread them around the globe, and their cultural creations such as writing and stone architecture have left substantial records of their existence, so they seem more common than they are.

Another reason proto-empires are common is because of transmission. Social dominance theory considers rule by elites (e.g., Confucianism, feudalism, Venetian doges) to be akin to group-based dominance hierarchy and many societies have properties of both. Thus, manors are like autonomous tribes in that each division of land conferred rights of residence, provisions, and ownership to separate groups, but they also had asymmetric interdependence with more privileges to the landowner than to the tenants. The manor system is not unlike tenant-farming and plantations. History shows vestiges of manor systems in feudalism (e.g., White, 1975), but family inheritance of land and privilege and mutual recognition of that by chieftains is what created the category of “nobility” or “ruling class.” Some feudal systems became monarchical and/or imperial (e.g., Japan, Britain, Ottoman Caliphate), and some mutated towards statehood (e.g., France), or became colonies of empires (e.g., Philippines). Although imperialism arose independently on separate continents (e.g., Frank & Gills, 1993), the emergence of group-based dominance was not always independent. Some empires emerged from the spread and merging of empires from Mesopotamia (D. Wilkinson as cited in Goriunov, 2012) or sixth-century Europe (Wallerstein, 1974b, 1990), together with the spread of racism (e.g., Gossett, 1997). Proto-imperial histories demonstrate that many ideologies of hierarchy, such as nationalism, sexism, and military glorification, can be trans-societal.

Given that social organizations and societies almost never start from scratch, proto-empires may leave residual components, including ideological and role memes, residual institutions and economic systems, that help to seed changing societies with hierarchical components of the old ones (Pratto, 1999). Even neoliberal statism and adherence to the notion and forms of international regulation were largely adopted across the world due to both active enforcement and passive modeling by the West (Agnew, 2009; Ikenberry, 2011). The transmission of the control, as well as the *ideas* and *technologies* of dominance is consistent with parts of social dominance theory, but also provides a strong alternative explanation to the idea that group-dominance hierarchy arises independently in each society through a societal evolution that best solves humans’ adaptive problems. As such, we view social dominance theory as better at explaining *how* dominance can be maintained than *why* it exists or is common.

There is reason to question whether group-based dominance hierarchies will remain common as societies. At present, revolt, ethnic and religious “nationalism,” and globalization threaten the nation-state as the most viable societal form (e.g., Herbst, 1997). The current trend is toward the break-up of large nations (e.g., U.S.S.R.) into smaller, more homogenous nations that gain power (Herbst, 1997). Many of them not only gain more autonomy from hegemonic rule, they also seek closer integration and cooperation within looser regional federalisms (e.g., devolution and decentralization of provinces in Spain concurrent with integration with the E.U.).

Fluidity of Group Boundaries

Another unaddressed issue in social dominance theory is change in the boundaries of groups and societies. Decolonization and its aftermath have brought about many changes in national borders. Within and among nations,

boundaries around national, racial, ethnic, gender and religious groups and their meaning have also changed drastically, both objectively and subjectively. For example, [Wilson \(1978\)](#) demonstrates that more opportunities for African-Americans have enabled integration of some of them into middle- and upper-class institutions and neighborhoods, such that race is not as associated with class as it once was. Migration is changing the conceptions of what it means to have particular nationalities in many places in the world and has brought about several fundamental changes in human history, ranging from expansion to colonization to cosmopolitanism (e.g., [Portes, 2010](#)). Expectations about one's gender, and what counts as a "gender" are neither global nor static. Because increased international trade is increasing wealth inequality within nations while reducing wealth inequality between nations, the interplay of macro- and meta-level economics is changing the category boundaries of "rich" and "poor" ([Firebaugh, 2003](#)). And the age set of emerging adulthood (between adolescence and late twenties) was not a separately defined category until aspects of educational and other socioeconomic systems gave this age set unique properties, including new psychological, social, economic, behavioral, and legal characteristics and problems (e.g., [Arnett, 2000](#)). Social dominance theory should further clarify how the "arbitrary" nature of ethnic, class, and other social categories pertains to gender and age categories.

What is a Society or Social System?

Boundary questions pertain above the meso-level as well. [Sidanius and Pratto \(1999\)](#) use "society" and "social system" interchangeably, but some social scientists reject this equation (e.g., [Goriunov, 2012](#)). Arguably, this equation confuses what we have called the macro and meta levels of organization. More problematic is how broadly the Durkheimian conception of society continues to be useful. At present, with increased international migration, cross-border alliances of individuals and of ethnic communities and nation-states, the separateness of each "society" is weakening. Human beings have organized and reorganized the collectives in which they live in numerous ways throughout human history, and are continuing to do so. Would we consider a given chiefdom in feudal Japan to be a society, or would a set of those chiefdoms which interacted be the society? At present, given the Palestinian diaspora and their statelessness, what can be called the Palestinian society? Is the "Muslim world" a society, or is the "Arab world?" Although people in a given time and place may mutually recognize a particular collective, if we also understand these to be systems, then all but the most isolated have "edges" that interact with other communities outside them. All physical borders are porous, and most human communities interact with several others in ways that affect them, and in that regard can be considered part of their social system. Limiting social dominance theory to the Durkheimian conception of society exempts it from having to deal with this conundrum, but substantially limits its scope. But if one considers a social system to be a collective, composed of many specialized roles and occupations and sharing a common set of ideologies, meaning systems, and values, then a collective as large as "Western civilization" fits the definition as well as any nation or arbitrary set group does. Broadening and specifying in more detail what collectives the theory addresses would be useful.

Developing Social Dominance Theory's Dynamism

Although, as we have shown, social dominance theory has part of the theoretical apparatus to explain societal change via dynamic systems, there are significant unaddressed issues. First, although social dominance theory has stated that hierarchy-attenuating and hierarchy-enhancing ideologies and institutions are not always what they seem, there is considerably more research and theorizing necessary to understand how dominative or liberal ideologies get disguised as something else, how particular ideologies (e.g., meritocracy) change functions, how ideologies get co-opted, and how institutional functions get modified. Incorporating theories of rhetorical strategies, communications, and norm changes may be theoretically useful and prompt new research (e.g., [Liu & Mills, 2006](#)).

Another unaddressed issue is to *explain* power dynamics between groups in more detail. Power basis theory (Pratto et al., 2011), which was partly inspired by a social dominance theory perspective on parallels between the nature of arbitrary-set and gendered power (Pratto & Walker, 2004), provides at least part of a theoretical way to explain power dynamics. Power basis theory explicitly recognizes that there are different *kinds* of power (e.g., access to resources, violence), and that they are fungible (i.e., can be transformed). The extent to which one is free to use power in this way, or is relatively unhampered by fungibility constraints, is a new metric for power. Integrating this new perspective to examine intergroup relations as social dominance theory does would prioritize discovering which kinds of power are most available to dominant and subordinate groups, and how transferable, fungible, and fertile different kinds of power are for dominant and subordinate groups. The interlinkages between kinds of power that power basis theory specifies could lead to a more accurate understanding of the complexity of intergroup power dynamics. For example, by exercising border control, Israel also exercises economic control over the Palestinian territories, so its use of force power also enacts economic power over Palestinians. By tactic, resource control and violence are linked. But although Israeli violence can be met (more weakly) by Palestinian violence, the same reciprocation cannot be achieved in terms of resource control. And yet, when Israel exercises resource control, as it has to extremes in the siege of Gaza, it loses international legitimacy, a source of diplomatic power. Power basis theory thus specifies a more fine-grained way of theoretically describing and measuring power dynamics as they pertain to human lives across levels (Pratto, Pearson, Lee, & Saguy, 2008) than social dominance theory's opposing forces tenets.

Dominance Produces Counter-Dominance

Although there is considerable evidence that in proto-imperial societies, group dominance is maintained by institutional discrimination, cultural ideologies, and force (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), these do not *guarantee* that dominance is maintained. Rather than viewing failures of dominance as aberrations, we suggest considering what aspects of dominance systems set the conditions to destabilize dominance.

Some of these have already been identified. Pratto and Stewart (2012) argued that power differences between groups prompt salience of own-group identity, and attachment to groups, which lead subordinated people to reject group dominance. Likewise, capitalism increases inequality, and increased inequality may de-stabilize social systems. For example, stock market "bubbles," from the first (Dutch) stock market to the 2008 global crash, prompted large changes in popular acceptance of rulers and in international relations between creditors and debtors (e.g., Graeber, 2011, pp. 341-342, 371-373). When meso-level groups tire of being subordinated in macro-systems, they sometimes have been able to gain more autonomy (e.g., First Nations, Quebec), separation (e.g., Sudan), and even independence (e.g., U.S., Afghanistan, Congo).

Even the institutionalization of group favoritism through law can beget opposition to dominance. Although law has produced definitions of group-boundaries, it has failed to keep up with changing individual, group, and systemic properties relevant to group boundaries and equality at any given moment and society (Ruhl & Ruhl, 1997). In part because of their built-in self-perpetuation and institutionalization, statist governments, whether managed constitutional democracies or not, are insufficiently *flexible* and *responsive* compared with popular demand to people's changing circumstances, and to identified problems in governance/management such as special interests (Bou Zeineddine & Pratto, in press; Ruhl & Ruhl, 1997; see also public choice theory). For example, young adults in many areas of the world increasingly suffer from psychological and behavioral problems relating to socio-economic, cultural, and political problems and frustrations that did not exist for previous generations (e.g., Japanese hikikomori). Some others in this age set have reacted differently, engaging in various protests and civic actions,

migrating, or constructing alternative structures at a rapid pace. This age set is facing new burdens that have clearly not been properly prioritized and managed by many nation-states. As a result, these states often suffer economically and socially from young adults' coping strategies (e.g., brain-drain migration, drug abuse), and their curtailed human capital (e.g., job training through employers).

Egalitarian Change Begets Egalitarian Change

As pointed out earlier, [Bou Zeineddine and Pratto \(in press\)](#) argue that greater influence, wealth and freedom, some available even to people at the bottom rungs of hierarchies, appear to raise people's aspiration standards and enable greater and more active pursuit of those standards. Indeed, other research shows that when a particular group's members achieve a certain level of power, hierarchy is *not* an optimal solution to group stability; rather it is linked to increased conflict ([Greer & van Kleef, 2010](#)). Thus, although inequality persists, it is difficult to say that the degree of it or even group-based form of it will persist, given the trajectory of increases, even among the poor and subordinated, in wealth, education and availability of information, technological innovation, communication channels, and political influence, among other affordances. The rise of more homogeneous societies, popular civic and political mobilization, and collective autonomy-seeking, generally demonstrate that group-unequal societies do fail, or change form, or remain unstable, each under a different set of circumstances.

Conclusion

The present review has critically examined social dominance theory's original and contemporary view of societal change. We accomplished this in several ways. First, we reviewed and reiterated social dominance theory's apparatus to argue that social dominance theory has never stated that societies are unchanging. In fact, social dominance theory has always allowed for ideological change, institutional change, change in which particular groups are dominant, and to some extent in what constitutes a society (i.e., an empire or nation). By exploring processes at multiple levels of analysis (i.e., micro, meso, macro, and meta), we highlighted the immense social and cultural activity that characterizes large-scale human collectives. The multilevel dynamics of these clearly demonstrate that social change is always occurring, even when societal forms persist. Second, we explored how these multiple levels of analysis interact with one another to exacerbate, sustain, or alleviate intergroup inequality. We made clear that social dominance theory must further explore the interface of psychological processes, societal institutions, and intersocietal relations to further our understanding of societal change, or indeed to grasp what the boundaries of a 'society' are. Third, we expanded on social dominance theory's analysis of ideologies, ecologies, and institutions to describe when inequality fails – that is when group-based dominance hierarchies undergo societal change. Highlighting the importance of aspiration standards, failing institutions, new policies and practices, and other factors can allow social dominance theory to describe the conditions under which societies transform. This suggests ways to extend social dominance theory to address more detailed problems and exceptions.

We also critiqued social dominance theory in several ways. We provided evidence counter to its claim that group-based dominance hierarchies are the most common and enduring societal form, and pointed out problems with empirical tests of this assertion. We also identified problems with the standards of evidence for the oppression equilibrium theorem, and with conceptual definitions of society and group (which are problems not unique to social dominance theory). We pointed out that if the assumption or observation that group-based dominance hierarchies

exist is a starting point or assumption, then logically it cannot also be an ending point or prediction. Social dominance theory can explain how group-based dominance hierarchies can be maintained, but cannot use these processes to conclude that they are likely or inevitable, tell us *why* group-based dominance hierarchies might be enduring or prevalent, nor even to describe how they are formed. What we pointed out that is consistent with the theory is that ideologies and institutional structures can spread and be imposed, but this is a cultural-historical explanation of a plethora of group-dominance societies, and not evidence that dominance “naturally emerges” to solve a common, human adaptive problem. These critiques provide several agendas to further social dominance theory, chiefly by acknowledging its implicit exemplars of what kind of society is normal, of the boundary conditions, logic, and the meta-level of inter-societal interactions.

Nonetheless, social dominance theory has been useful in several disciplines for several reasons. First, it has drawn attention to backlash against progressive movements and to persistent inequality in spite of global trends towards democratization, and normative ideological changes towards objective equality. Second, it is one of the few true multi-level theories in social psychology and social science generally. One virtue of this approach has been to prevent problems of inequality and power to be merely psychologized and essentialized. Third, even if it has boundary conditions because of meta-level considerations, it provides a starting point for considering even more complex kinds of social organization and power dynamics. Fourth, the willingness of those who use social dominance theory to be informed by data means that it can actually function as a theory rather than as a dogma. Ridding the theory of its “inevitability,” “adaptiveness,” and “oppressive equilibrium” claims will ensure that research into problems of inequality and the uses of power can continue more accurately and productively.

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