In the radical perspective, the most important quality of society is a deep class cleavage between an elite or wealthy class and the much larger class of working people (Marx et al., 1998; Lasswell, 1958). The radical perspective argues that we should be profoundly cynical about institutions that claim to provide human services such as police, schools, health care, charities and philanthropies, religious institutions, and public welfare. In general, these further the interests of the elite more than those of the needy they claim to serve. Whether or not we accept the radical theory of society, this cynicism is important for making sense of human services because so often they do in fact work against the interests of their clients. Indeed, most of the body of social science research on services is devoted to demonstrating this unpleasant truism. Whether or not Marx was right about the inevitable collapse of capitalism and the final emergence of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Marxist analysis of human service institutions is powerful because it is descriptively accurate. Often these institutions seem more effective at using their authority to prevent sensible interventions than at solving problems.

Pragmatic liberalism draws three insights from radical theory and these are the focus of the present chapter. First, it is important to distinguish between the manifest or explicit functions performed by human services and their latent functions. Latent functions are sometimes unintended consequences of organizational activity. This is a major sociological insight about the central irony of social life. More importantly, radicals teach us that there are systematic reasons why the latent functions of service institutions are hidden. These have to do with their usefulness in maintaining the dominant position of elites and for controlling workers and the poor (Merton, 1968b; Smith A., 1967).

Second, pragmatic liberalism draws from the radical perspective that it is important to recognize how the activities of human service institutions advance moral goals at the same time that they address need. Some of these moral objectives
fit easily in the manifest statement of organizational purposes, as is the case with the goal in public schools to teach citizenship and beliefs related to American democracy. Other moral objectives represent moral entrepreneurship that would make many of us cringe. Some services manifestly billed as humanitarian efforts to help the needy, such as some homeless shelters, latently seek to promote religious ideology and deny services to those who reject their moral guidance. Others use moral language to hide efforts by elites to dominate or exploit the poor. The moral functions of human service institutions sometimes make us uncomfortable or even angry. Nonetheless, pragmatic liberalism acknowledges that fostering an ideology of the collective support for core social values is a key function performed by these institutions.

Third, pragmatic liberalism accepts that radical analysis is innately polemical and political. It fosters a political analysis of human services and it implores people to bring a larger critical, analytic perspective to bear on activities within the limited sphere of a particular organization; C. Wright Mills (1959/2000) called this "the sociological imagination." It represents an important moral principle for those concerned with furthering civil society. This political orientation also provides an important incisive tool for analyzing and understanding organizational behavior. The political orientation of the radical approach thus provides analytic tools every bit as powerful as the market metaphor offered by conservatives.

How (and Why) Elites Influence Human Services

The basic assertion of the radical view is that the state and human service institutions serve the class interests of the elite. This is as true of nonprofit organizations, which may act as a sort of shadow-government, as it is for public institutions. The people who make the most important decisions for the state are either members of the elite or people who owe their positions of influence to support by members of the elite (Mills, 1956/2000; Domhoff, 2002). Because of this, the theory goes, political decision makers generally are more responsive to demands made by economic elites and members of wealthy families than those made by ordinary citizens. Further, since these social and economic leaders often assume positions of civic leadership—being elected to the school board or being asked to join the board of the United Way or the Symphony—they are in a position to claim the legitimate right to speak for the community.

What are elite interests and why would they undermine the formal or overtly stated goals of human service institutions? In the radical view, capitalism undermines whatever natural human inclination to altruism there might be in humankind. Once a class of owners emerges to seize control of the means of production, the essential nature of society becomes exploitative. This not only means that owners appropriate surplus value from employees’ labor, it also means that all social action by capitalists is rationalized and legitimated in terms of a desire to maximize self-interest. If a member of the elite is to act as a community leader, the only reason for doing so is that community leadership furthers personal interests in accumulating and protecting their wealth.