

Sociological theory

- Sociological theories attempt to create a **model** of society. When creating these models, what is perceived as the important point is emphasised.



- What a Marxist perceives as an important point may not be seen as such by a Functionalist but both standpoints emphasise important areas to be considered.
- Every theory has its strengths and weaknesses. Remember that by **emphasising** a particular point another one is being **distorted** making it hard to decide on the truest reflection.

Evaluating Sociological theories continued

- **Logical evaluation** is concerned with the validity of the argument being examined. Do the pieces of the argument fit together logically or do they contradict one another?

All birds have wings, wings enable flight therefore all birds can fly

Although this statement appears logically correct there is evidence contradictory to this. Chickens for example cannot fly but they do have wings



Useless fact: - The longest (attempted) recorded flight of a chicken is 13 seconds

Evaluating Sociological theories

It is logically impossible for two differing theories to be equally valid. The idea that they can be is known as **Relativism** sometimes referred to as the problem of **incoherence**.

For example it is incoherent to say that the fundamental divisions of society are both that of class, put forward by Marxists, and that of gender put forward by Feminists.



Every theoretical standpoint differs from the next; therefore the **propositions** (arguments put forward within them) need to be evaluated so a choice can be made between them.

Still evaluating Sociological theories

- **Empirical evaluation** is interested in the **truth** behind the propositions in the argument. To determine what the fundamental differences in society are the different claims must be compared with social reality.
- Initially this seems straightforward but it must be noted that the theorists have put their **own interpretation** into what they claim to be true.
- A piece of empirical evidence put forward and accepted as **valid** from one theoretical stance may well be disregarded by a theorist taking another standpoint.
- In simplest terms it is not always possible to test a Sociological theory using empirical evidence as those who support a contrasting theory may oppose it.

Marxism

“... The production of the means of subsistence forms the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art and even the ideas of religion, of the people concerned have been evolved.”

- For Marx, understanding social structure is dependent upon the understanding of how production is organised within that society. He called it the **Infrastructure** or **economic base**.
- All other elements of society (those that are not economic production) he terms the **Superstructure** such as political actions and ideology.

These terms convey how one set of activities is built upon to determine another.

Still Marxism

Marx believed that all non-communist societies are concerned with **2** main classes. Remember, in non-revolutionary times Marx highlighted the presence of the petit bourgeoisie (small shop owners etc).

1. The **Bourgeoisie** – do not take part in the means of production. They are Capitalists who own the factories.
2. The **Proletariats** – otherwise known as the masses. These are the people who work in the factories to benefit of the owners.



Marxist theorists suggest that the bourgeoisie for their own gain exploit the proletariats. This is where the idea of class conflict has arisen.

More Marxism

Karl Marx (1818-1883) the founder of Marxist theory argues that there are **3** central elements to consider when studying society.

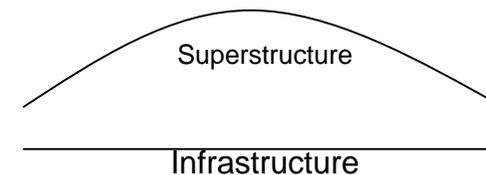
1. The **material conditions of production** – how the production of goods and services is organised
2. **Class conflict** – seen by Marx as the vehicle for **social change** that propels society forward from one system of production to another



3. Scientific identification of the conditions that will enable the **working class** to replace the modern oppressive production system with a **classless** system

Marxism again

Marx's idea of the structure of society can be seen better using the following diagram.



- Marxist perspective is a **macro** or **structural** approach. This means that Marxist theorists analyse how society fits together



- **Remember** for Marx the structure of society was determined by the economic base or infrastructure