

“A” Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

Theory and Methods

Unit M6: Marxism

Introduction

The main purpose of these Notes is to provide a basic overview of different sociological perspectives. Each set of notes is organised around three basic themes:

1. **A brief overview of the perspective.**
2. **An outline of the “basic principles” on which each perspective is based.**
3. **A brief evaluation of the perspective.**

These Notes are, therefore, intended to serve as a general introduction to different perspectives, although they may also be used as revision notes.

Marxist Conflict Theory.

Marxist Conflict theory originated through the work of Karl **Marx** (1818-1883) and can be initially classified as a "**Structuralist**" or "**macro-sociological**" form of analysis (always remembering that this simple form of theoretical pigeon-holing may obscure the fact that writers working within the perspective may hold very different views about the nature of the relationship between "structure" and "action").

As I've suggested above, "**Marxism**" - as a sociological perspective - has a number of **variants** and has been **developed** / elaborated over the past 100 or so years in ways that make it difficult to adequately summarise in a Pack of this type. However, what I intend to do is to **introduce** you to a number of **fundamental concepts** in this area of sociological thought, with the focus of attention initially being on the way **Marxists generally** have theorised the nature of social existence. We can begin, therefore, by looking at the way Marxists understand the **nature of social relationships** within various societies.

Marxist forms of analysis tend to begin with the **assumption** that the most **fundamental** - and hence most **socially-significant** - forms of **social relationship** are those which involve the **production of the basic means of people's existence**. This includes things like:

Food.
Clothing.
Shelter.

In **all societies**, the **provision** and **social organisation** of such things is a **fundamental social necessity** and it involves devising some means whereby such things are:

Produced by a population.
Distributed to people and
Exchanged in some way.

In addition, it is important to note that the **production, distribution and exchange** of such things as food and shelter is a **communal activity** - people have to **co-operate** in some way to produce these things. In order to produce, therefore, people are "forced" (willingly or unwillingly) to enter into a variety of social relationships.

Marx argued that, throughout human history, the way in which people "**co-operated**" - or **organised** themselves - to produce the "**means of their social existence**" (the kinds of things I've noted above) has been **different**. To understand this idea - and its significance - we need to understand the **basic mechanics** involved in the **social production of commodities** (a "**commodity**" is simply defined as something that can be produced - food, a chair, a car or whatever - distributed and exchanged).

Production of the **means of social existence** involves, according to **Marx**, three basic things:

1. The Forces of Production:

These "forces" involve such things as:

- Land,
- Raw materials,
- Tools / Machines,
- Knowledge (scientific / technical and the like),
- People (or, more correctly, their labour).

In the above, all we are noting is that such things are **necessary** - at various times in the social development of any society - if commodities are to be produced. As I've suggested, **different societies at different times** in their historical development involve some or all of the above as part of the general production process.

For **example**, in Britain in the Middle Ages, the forces of production would have involved:

- Land - since this was basically an agricultural society.
- Raw materials - basically anything that could be grown...
- Tools - but not machines, as such.
- Knowledge - but not particularly "scientific" as we might understand the term.
- People - the "labour power" of peasants, for example, working on the land.

2. The Relations of Production:

As I've noted, people cannot produce anything without entering into various **social relationships** with others and this idea simply encompasses the **different kinds of social relationships** into which people have to enter at various times in order to produce commodities.

This involves both **individual / personal relationships** (for example, in the Middle Ages the main productive relationship was between a Noble / Lord who "owned" land and the peasant / serf who worked on the land. In our (Capitalist) society, the main productive relationship is between an **employer** and an **employee**) and, most importantly, **group relationships**.

In **Capitalist** societies such as our own, for example, it's possible to identify different **broad social groupings** - groups of people who share a **basically-similar position** in the **production process**. **Marx** called these groups "**social classes**" and we will look at their theoretical significance in more detail in a moment.

3. The Means of Production:

The third, very significant element, relates to **those parts of the Forces of production** that can be **legally owned** - for **example, land and raw materials**, but **not** such things as "**knowledge**" or "**labour power**" (the ability to put people to work for you). The concept of "labour power" is significant, in terms of Capitalist forms of society because it means that an employer does not own an employee; all an employer buys is the labour power of the employee, which means that the latter is "free" to sell their labour power to the highest bidder – an important idea that has considerable economic and political consequences...

According to **Marx**, **different historical periods** have **different dominant means of production** (which, in turn, produces different types of society).

In **Feudal** society, **land** was the most important means of production.

In **Capitalist** society, land is still significant, but the most important means of production are things like **factories, machines** and so forth.

A couple of points are important to note:

1. **Legal ownership of the means of production** is going to make you a very **powerful individual / social group**.
2. Only in **slave societies** are **workers part of the means of production** (in **Capitalist** society, as I've just noted, **employees are not owned** by their **employers** - all that the employer buys (through wages) is the ability to use an employee's labour (hence, their "labour power" - the ability to put someone to work)).

Marx argued that your **relationship to the means of production objectively determined** your **social class** and, if we accept this idea for a moment, it follows that he initially identified **two great classes** in **Capitalist society**:

1. The Bourgeoisie (Upper or Ruling class).

Those people (a minority) who **owned** the means of production.

2. The Proletariat (Lower or Working class).

Those people (the majority) who **did not own** the means of production.

For Marx, the concept of **social class** was of fundamental significance, precisely because it could be used to **explain** the basis of **social change** (in a way that Functionalist theorists could not).

Marx argued that **all societies** involved **conflict** - sometimes open but more usually submerged beneath the surface of everyday life - that was **based** upon fundamental **inequalities** and **different economic and political interests**:

The most **important** of these **conflicts** was that between **social classes** (the **Bourgeoisie** and the **Proletariat**) and it was the **constant antagonism** between these two great classes that **created social change**.

The basis of this conflict lies in the fact that although **wealth is created by the Proletariat** (the working class), it is **appropriated** (that is "taken away") **privately** - by the **Bourgeoisie** - in the form of **profits**.

In this respect, Marx noted a **basic contradiction**, within Capitalist social systems, between:

1. The **forces of production** (the things that are required to produce commodities) and
2. The **relations of production** (in basic terms, who benefits the most from these arrangements).

Thus, although the **forces of production** involve, as I've noted, **co-operation** (that is, they are fundamentally **social in nature**), in **Capitalist** societies the **relations of production** have a **private, individualistic, nature**. Although people necessarily co-operate to produce things (commodities from which everyone should, ideally, benefit), **one class effectively exploits another** by their ability to **accumulate profits in private hands**.

If, as I've suggested, the relationship between social classes is:

Unequal,
Exploitative,
Founded on a "conflict of interest",

why do the exploited put-up with this situation?

More importantly perhaps, why does society not dissolve into a perpetual civil war - a conflict between the rich and the poor, the exploited and the exploiters?

Marx argued that this was indeed a fundamental problem for the Bourgeoisie in any Capitalist society - and they **resolve** it through somehow making the Proletariat believe that the **economic system** is based upon **freedom, fairness and equality**. This is where the **concepts** of both "**power**" and "**ideology**" come into the equation - and we will look at these ideas in greater detail in a moment.

Fundamentally, therefore:

Capitalism involves both **shared endeavours** and **unequal rewards**. It is the (structural) nature of this form of economic production that produces these things.

On one level, people in any society do **share fundamental values**, but Marx argued that this "**consensus** over basic values" (which Functionalists, for example, tend to take for granted) was by no means the whole story.

In effect, Marx argued that the **Bourgeoisie** are able to use the **power** that comes from **economic ownership** to "**control**" the way in which people **think** about and "**see**" the nature of the social world.

Rather than "value consensus" being a necessary, fundamental, condition for human society, **Marxists** see this **consensus** as being **manufactured** by the Bourgeoisie (through the primary and secondary socialisation process and cultural institutions such as **religion, education** and the **mass media**).

To close this opening section, therefore, we can look briefly at the way in which Marx argued that **economic ownership produces economic power** which in turn is translated into **political and ideological power**.

As we have seen, for Marx - and Marxists generally - economic relationships are seen to be the most significant in any society because they relate to the very means of social existence itself. However, it is evident that, in any society, there are **other types of social relationship**, namely **political** and **ideological** relationships.

Marx argued that these two basic types of social relationships represented two parts of the overall nature of relationships within capitalist society:

1. **Economic relationships** - the "**infrastructure**" or "**economic base**" of society.
2. **Political / ideological relationships** - the "**superstructure**" of society.

Superstructural relationships, in effect, **develop out of** the nature of the way economic relationships are organised. It might help you to understand this idea by visualising the **superstructure** of any society as a kind of **dome** (millennium or otherwise) that rests on the ground (which represents the economic base).

Although **superstructural relationships** are important, they ultimately **rest** upon the **economic base** of society. According to **Marxists**, these kinds of relationships are **dependent** upon - and **reflect** - the **nature of economic relationships** in society. Thus, if **economic relationships** are fundamentally **unequal**, then **political and ideological relationships** will both **reflect** - and help to **reinforce** - **inequality**. For example:

Political relationships:

Capital dominates labour in the workplace (economic relationship)

Requires certain types of **law** to cement this relationship in terms of contracts, property rights and so forth.

For Marxists, therefore, those who **dominate** the **economic** sphere in any society will also **dominate politically** and **ideologically** - and, in this respect, an important idea is that the **ideology of the ruling class** is the **dominant ideology** in society.

In a **similar way to Functionalist theory**, **Marxist** conflict theorists see:

1. Institutions as significant objects of study, in terms of why institutions are created by people, the kind of purpose each (inter-related) institution serves and so forth.
2. The socialisation process as significant for our understanding of both "society" and our general position within that society.
3. Social structures - not individual meanings - as the most significant object of study.

Unlike **Functionalist theory**, however, **Marxist** conflict theorists:

1. Do not see "society" as a "living thing" that exists over and above people. Marxists do not commit what is called the "error of reification", insofar as they recognise that "society" is the product of people's behaviour. If people create the social structures within which behaviour is ordered then, of course, they are perfectly capable of changing the social order...
2. Do not see the basis of social order as being "shared values" and basic consensus over agreed social goals / ends. On the contrary, they see "shared values" and "consensus" as being mystification's - a way of manufacturing and manipulating people's perception of the social world to suit the basic interests of a ruling class.
3. See society / social systems as being in a constant - inevitable - state of conflict. Social order exists not because it is:
 - a. The "natural" state of things or,
 - b. Because everyone is in basic agreement about how order should be maintained and so forth.

Order exists because powerful social groups (or classes) are able to **impose** a sense of order, permanence and stability upon all other classes in society.

As I have suggested, therefore, **power** is a very significant concept in Marxist theory and, as we have seen, power is ultimately seen to derive from economic ownership. By **owning the "means of production"**:

- a. You exercise **personal power** over the lives of the people who work for you.
- b. You make **profits** which can be used to **wield power and influence** in a wider social setting.

In this respect, the **possession of power** gives you:

1. Economic power

Wealth,
Status.

2. Political power

Control over political institutions (government, the State).

3. Ideological power

Control over the way in which people are able to visualise and interpret the social world. This is carried-out through various forms of socialisation through the mass media, the workplace, the family, the education system and so forth.

Because economic production is so fundamentally important in any society, it follows that **all other institutions** in society **direct their efforts** towards **servicing** this institution. In so doing, they are clearly **subordinate** to this institution and hence, **those who dominate the economic sphere** will also, by default almost, **dominate in all other spheres of social life**.

However, as I've noted, this is **not** a nice, easy, peaceful process whereby a **ruling class** simply **transmits** its **interests** to all **other classes** in society. On the contrary, **subordinate classes** also have **interests** which they attempt to pursue in many different ways. For **example**,

People try to get the best education they can.

People organise in the workplace to agitate for better working conditions, increased levels of pay and status and so forth.

In short, there is always a **power struggle** in Capitalist society predominantly in terms of those who own the means of production (the Bourgeoisie) and those who do not (the Proletariat), but also across many **other areas** of social life.

One of the main ideas that should be coming through about Marxist perspectives on the social world is that **social order** is **not permanent and unchanging**. On the contrary, although it may **appear** that way in our everyday lives, the reality beneath the appearance is that people have to **continually produce and reproduce the social world** by attempting to maintain and challenge existing forms of power relationships.

Thus, the **ruling class**, for example, must continually **reproduce** capitalist forms of economic production, since it is only by "delivering the economic goods" that their **hegemony** (or "**legitimate political leadership**") can be maintained.

The **working class**, on the other hand, are **not simply passive consumers** of a "Capitalist dream" - they are continually organising and agitating for a greater share of power - both economic and political.

In simple terms, the reason for the **appearance of social order** over time (even though greater or lesser conflicts may erupt from time to time) is that **one class has fundamentally greater levels of power than other classes in society**.

Society, in this sense, may have the **appearance** of a biological organism (where no conflict between the various parts exists), but for **Marxists** this is simply an **inaccurate analogy** - precisely because conflict is all around us in our everyday lives.

Thus, whilst **Functionalist theory** tends to be both politically and scientifically **conservative** (it is difficult to see how things change since, according to Functionalist theory, the present state of political / economic affairs must be the best possible precisely because if an institution exists it must, by definition, be functionally necessary), **Marxist conflict theory** is **revolutionary**. This is not only because, as Marx made very clear, the historical triumph of communism as the only free, fair and ultimately rational way of organising social systems. It is also because it sees the (capitalist) social world as inherently based upon conflict and power struggles.

Basic Principles...

"Marxism" is a perspective that involves a number of differing "sub-perspectives" (that is, whilst there tends to be a general agreement about the need to construct a critique of Capitalist society, there are major disagreements between writers working within this perspective). Keeping this in mind, we can **summarise** some of the main Marxist ideas in the following terms:

1. Marxism emphasises the idea that social life is based upon "**conflicts of interest**". The most **fundamental** and important of these **conflicts** is that between the **Bourgeoisie** (those who **own and control the means of production** in society) and the **Proletariat** (those who simply **sell their labour power** in the market place of Capitalism).

2. Unlike the Functionalist version of Structuralist sociology, the concept of **social class** is **more than a descriptive category**; social class is used to explain **how** and **why societies change**. **Class conflict** represents a process whereby change comes about through the **opposition of social classes** as they pursue what they see to be their (different and opposed) collective interests in society.

3. Marxism is a **political theory** whose main concern is twofold:

a. To expose the political and economic contradictions inherent in Capitalism (for example, the fact that while people co-operate to produce goods, a Capitalist class appropriates these goods for its private profit).

b. To point the way towards the establishment of a future **Communist** society.

4. Fundamentally, there are considered to be **two great classes in Capitalist society** (the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat). However, at any given moment a number of **class fractions** will exist (that is, subdivisions of each main class). For example, the **Bourgeoisie** might be **subdivided** into:

The **Haute (High) Bourgeoisie** (owners of large companies),

The **Petit (Small) Bourgeoisie** (owners of small businesses) and

The **Professions** (people who, while not owners of the means of production, help to control the day-to-day running of industries).

5. Marx characterised human history in terms of the way in which **ownership of the means of production** was the most important single variable involved in the characterisation of each distinct period (or **epoch**) in history. He identified five major epochs:

a. **Primitive communism** - characteristic of early human history where people held everything in common.

b. The **Ancient epoch** (slave society) - societies based upon slavery where the means of production was owned and controlled by an aristocratic elite.

c. **Feudal society** - where land was the most important means of production. This was owned / controlled by an aristocratic class, the majority of people belonging to a peasant class (who had few, if any, political rights).

d. **Capitalist society** - where technological development (machinery etc.) has allowed a bourgeois class to exploit factory forms of production for their private

gain. The aristocracy (landowners) have either been marginalized or co-opted into the Bourgeoisie whilst the majority of people are wage-labourers (they own little or no capital). The main relations of production in this epoch are between employers and employees (those who own and use capital and those who exchange their labour power for a wage). An employer does not own his / her employee in this society and various political freedoms and equalities are able to develop.

e. **Communist society** - where the means of production are held "in common" for the benefit of everyone in society (the dictatorship of the Proletariat). In this society class conflict is finally resolved and this represents the "end of history" since no further form of society can ever develop...

6. Marxists tend to divide Capitalist society into two related "spheres of influence":

- a. The **economic base** (or **infrastructure**) and
- b. The **political and ideological superstructure**.

Those whose **own and control the means of production** (the economic infrastructure) are **powerful** in that society (because they are able to use wealth to enhance and expand their power). However, this **economically powerful class** has to translate this **power** into **political power** (control over the State, machinery of government and so forth) and **ideological power** (control over how people think about the nature of the social world, capitalist society and so forth).

7. Marxists use the concept of **hegemony** (in basic terms, "leadership with the consent of the led") to express this relationship. According to a Marxist such as **Althusser** there are two ways in which a ruling class can consolidate its hegemony over other classes:

- a. Through the use of **force** (the police and army, for example).

Althusser called these "**Repressive State Apparatuses**" (RSA's)

- b. Through the use of **ideology / socialisation** (the mass media, social workers, teachers and the like - a form of "soft policing")

Althusser called these "**Ideological State Apparatuses**" (ISA's).

In Capitalist society, **hegemonic control** will always be a **mixture** of the above, but in **Capitalist democracies** the **latter** will be most important since a ruling class seeks to control and exploit the Proletariat by trying to **convince** them that this society is the best of all possible worlds...

8. Marxist theory emphasises the **total critique of Capitalist society**; in order to understand the way things appear we have to understand how social life is produced through a **combination** of economic, political and ideological conflicts.

9. **Individuals** are **not** the focal point of Marxist theories (Marxists are mainly concerned with understanding **social structures**); "individuals" are only significant when they **act together as a class**. That is, when people develop a **consciousness** of themselves as belonging to a particular social class (a "**class in itself**") and **act** upon that awareness to produce social change (a "**class for itself**").

10. Some Marxists use the concept of **false consciousness** to explain how the Proletariat is co-opted by a ruling class into the values of Capitalist society (a member of the working class is **falsely conscious** of their **true class position** when they fail to see themselves as a member of an exploited, oppressed, class).

11. The concept of **alienation** is used to refer to the way in which Capitalist society **degrades** both the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat.

The **Proletariat** are **alienated** from society because although they are responsible for producing goods co-operatively (for the potential benefit of society as a whole), the fruits of their labour are appropriated by the Bourgeoisie (in the form of profit) for their private use.

The **Bourgeoisie** are **alienated** from their fellow human beings because of their **exploitation** and **oppression** of the rest of society. This condition of alienation is used to explain why such things as crime occurs in society - the social bonds that should tie people together are fatally weakened by the exploitative relationship between Capital and Labour.

Some General Points of Criticism...

1. The “**over-concentration**” on economic relationships (considered by Marxists to be the most important basic relationships in society) has led to a number of criticisms:

a. Marxism is accused of being “**economically determinist**”. That is, the idea that Marxists **over-exaggerate** the importance of economic relationships; relationships that are seen to determine the shape taken by all other relationships (family, education, friendship, religious and so forth).

b. By concentrating upon economic relationships and conflicts Marxists tend to either overlook other forms of (**non-economic**) **conflict** or attempt to explain these conflicts as ultimately having economic roots.

Radical feminists, for example, argue that the roots of male - female conflict are not simply economic (to do with social class) but patriarchal.

2. The **subjective interpretations** of individuals is **under-emphasised** when looking at the way in which people see and act in the social world. A person's subjective interpretation of their class, for example, might be quite different to their objective class position.

3. Capitalism, as an economic and political system, has proven to be more durable and flexible than Marx maintained. In modern social systems, for example, the advent of Communism does not appear imminent.

4. Many forms of **Neo-Marxism** have been criticised (usually by other Marxists) as being little more than a “**left-wing**” **variety of Functionalism** (“**Left Functionalism**” as Jock **Young** has termed it). In place of society existing for “the benefit of all”, Young argues that many Marxists simply substitute the idea that society exists for “benefit of a ruling class”).

5. Some forms of Neo-Marxism resemble little more than a giant “**conspiracy theory**”, whereby a Capitalist Ruling Class are able to manipulate other classes in society for their own ends / benefits.

6. Critics like Sir Karl **Popper** have claimed that **Marxism** is **unscientific** in its **methodology**. In particular, he argues that **Marxism** is **not a theory** that can be **tested** and **possibly falsified**, mainly because it sees the replacement of Capitalism by Communism as “historically inevitable”. In this respect, Popper classifies Marxism as a “**faith**”.

7. The Marxist perspective lends itself to always examining social relationships in terms of their conflictual basis (just as the Functionalist perspective tends to look at those same relationships in terms of their consensual basis). This emphasis might be misplaced.

8. Much Marxism - both old and modern - has tended to **ignore** the role and position of **women** in society. Women tend to be **marginalized** to the periphery of much Marxist theorising, possibly because of the focus upon work relationships. This criticism is probably not as valid now as it once was.