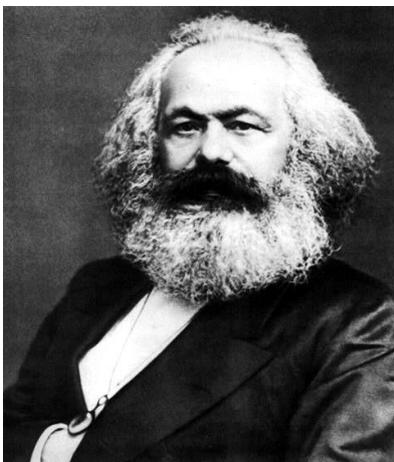


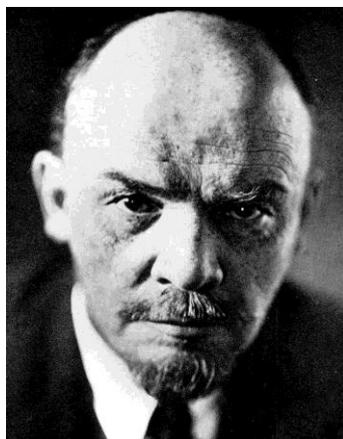
Sociological Theory: An Introduction to Marxism

By Damian E M Milton

One of the most complicated theories in Sociology is the 'Conflict theory' of Marxism. A conflict theory (unlike a consensus theory) suggests that society is based on a conflict of interests. For Karl Marx, the founding father of Marxism, this conflict was between the wealthy of society and the poor. He did not believe that the shape of society reflected the interests of a 'consensual community', but rather the power and privilege of a small well-off group of people. In his earlier work Marx concentrated on 'Humanist philosophy' and the capabilities of human beings and their potential if freed from constraint. At the heart of Marx's ideas is the notion that people need to be freed from constraints (*reminiscent of the philosophy of Jean-Jaques Rousseau – that 'man in the state of nature' was a 'noble savage'*), rather than controlled 'for their own good' (as argued by Durkheim). In his later work, he concentrated on the structure of society, economics and politics. In this work, he suggested that society was conflictual and would eventually lead to a 'revolution'. His work pre-dated that of Durkheim's and although he never called himself a 'sociologist', his work has become recognised as founding the perspective of Marxism. Yet you will find Marxist theory across various subject areas, e.g. politics, philosophy, economics etc. as well as sociology. Unfortunately for Marx, his name has become associated with the 'so-called' communist regimes of the Soviet Union and Mao's China. As will be seen later, these regimes did not always follow Marxist principles. Marx was a humanist philosopher who believed in equality and freedom. The leaders of the Russian Revolution (Lenin and Trotsky) attempted to follow his ideas, yet the practicalities of Russian and global politics and economics at the time made this very difficult to achieve. This changed yet again under the dictatorship of Stalin who manipulated the Soviet regime and led by force (including the killing of millions). What is more closely linked to the original ideals of Marxism are social phenomena such as worker strikes, trade unions, health and education that is comprehensive and free at the point of delivery.



Karl Marx



Lenin



Leon Trotsky

Unlike the positivist ideals of Functionalism, Marx argued that value-free (objective and scientific) social science was impossible and made 'no bones' about saying that people are inevitably biased in their view, due to differences in upbringing with regards to both culture and material circumstances. For example, a person born in a palace will have their ideas shaped in a different way to a person born on a council estate. Marx called this 'ideology' (a set of ideas, largely shaped by the material circumstances of a person's upbringing). Marx argued that far from trying to be objective and neutral, a researcher should be aware that their biased perceptions will always frame their work. Marx believed that this was inevitable, and could actually guide research, as he believed that society was inherently unequal (due to the gap in wealth between rich and poor) and therefore research about society was political in nature.

"Philosophy has merely interpreted the world in various ways the point is to change it!" – Karl Marx.

The Division of Labour

Marx argued that many years ago people lived in societies with a form of primitive communism (hunter-gatherers), in other words, communal tribes of equal status. As these societies grew in size and evolved technologically, then decisions had to be made as to who did what? Or in other words – the division of labour in a society becomes more complex. Marx argued that in every historical era or 'epoch', there was a different 'mode of production'. The mode of production refers to the way a society organises the process of production as a whole. Marx argued that human societies had passed from one to another throughout history, due to conflicts and struggles between groups leading to revolutions and new forms of society.

It is said that Marx saw two main classes (e.g. Upper Class) in early capitalist society – in a sense this is true as we will see, but it belittles the theory by omitting some key points! Marx identified as many as 18 social classes in early capitalism throughout his writing! At times he talked of financial capitalists, industrial capitalists etc. as different groups with different interests. However, the biggest divide in early capitalist society identified by Marx was ownership and non-ownership of the means of production (the means by which products are produced e.g. tools, factories, land etc.) – and this created the two 'major' classes of the early capitalist mode of production.

Social Class

Marx coined the term social class, and described it as the relationship an individual had to the means of production. The 'bourgeoisie' owned the means of production. This gave them immense power over the rest of society, as they had the power to employ and sack workers. The petit-bourgeoisie being small-business owners, e.g. shopkeepers and the like. The proletariat were the mass of people who had to sell their labour power to the capitalist owners for wages in order to survive. This meant they were dependent on the Bourgeoisie, who exploited their 'surplus value'. Marx coined the phrase 'the surplus value of labour' to refer to the extra value a worker performs for a company that they never receive in wages. This surplus value is then taken as profit by the bourgeois owners. This situation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat creates a contradictory tension within the 'dialectical relationship' (see below) between the two groups. Hence, this inherent contradiction in

the 'economic infrastructure' is played out as battles between the classes in the cultural sphere – strikes, trade unions, etc. The last major group identified by Marx he called the 'lumpen-proletariat'. These people had no relationship to the means of production at all, and thus no power. In Marx's day there were no welfare state benefits or NHS. People without work were often called 'vagabonds, pickpockets and street urchins' due to the intense poverty they lived in. Due to this tension, Marx envisaged that one day the workers of the world would unite in their common cause against their oppressors (the employers) and overthrow them in a revolution.

The Dialectic

"For the dialectical thinker, social influences never simply flow in one direction as they do for cause-and-effect thinkers. To the dialectician one factor may have an effect on another, but it is just as likely that the latter will have a simultaneous effect on the former." (Ritzer, *Sociological Theory*, 1996)

The philosopher Hegel originated dialectical thinking when describing the history of ideas. Hegel argued that an idea could have an effect on another idea and that idea would have a simultaneous effect back on the original idea. Hegel referred to this as a dialectical relationship. Hegel argued that sometimes there will be a contradiction between the two ideas, and they will eventually be replaced by a new idea. Marx went a step further however and tried to imbed this logic in the relationship people had with the environment or 'material' world. There are a number of repercussions from this point that will be discussed further as we go through his concepts.

Dialectical or historical – materialism

"The changes in the economic foundation [infrastructure] lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life."

(Marx, *The Critique of Political Economy*, 1859)

(A translation of this can form a potential discussion – see below):

A change in the economic conditions of society, will lead to a change in the cultural conditions of society. It is important to distinguish between economic production (producing products), and cultural production (e.g. a TV program). People can become aware of inequalities in the economic sphere, as culture will reflect the economic conditions of society, and vice versa. Yet we should not judge a society by its culture, but by its economic conditions, as we can be more accurate in our analysis. For example: it is easier to measure how much someone earns, than to measure someone's cultural status by their accent.

This analysis suggests that the economic and cultural conditions of society are intimately linked through a 'dialectical relationship'. If a society changes in one area, then the other area will change to reflect this. For Marx, the best way to describe social change was instead of looking at culture, we should instead look at the economic base or infrastructure of a society, and how it has changed over time. This type of theory is often called 'historical materialism'. For Marx, one could see the seeds of present societies in the economic transformations underlying the societies of the past. In other words without the past being the way it was, the present could never have happened – simple really! The consequence of this Marx argued, was that in order to predict or influence the society of the future, we must look at the contradictions and tensions in the economic infrastructure of society today.

Interpretivist sociologists (see later classes) criticise Marxists for being 'economically deterministic' – this means the theory relies too heavily on descriptions of economics and large (or macro) social structures, rather than the ability of individuals to shape society. However, Marx would argue that his theory allows for cultural and individual influences, yet sees them as bound in a dialectical relationship to the economic infrastructure of society. This can be seen in the following quote:

“Men make their own history [*social action*], but they do not make it just as they please [*social structure constraining the individual*]; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances encountered from the past [*social structures of the past*]. The tradition of all the dead generations [*social action in the past*] weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” (Karl Marx, 1852, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*).

For example, a proletarian who becomes class conscious can anticipate a society [*social action*] where the means of production (factories, tools etc.) are not owned by a few elite bourgeoisie, but by everyone in the abolishment of private property. An example of political moves in this direction can be seen in the policies of old labour politicians, who were against the privatisation of trains, gas, electric, water etc. under Thatcherism. Some have said that Marx's theory suggests a 'march of progress' toward a communistic utopian society through the world proletarian revolution (unlike the postmodernists who believe in a more chaotic movement with no utopian end in sight – see later lesson). However, Ball (1991, cited in Ritzer, 1996) rightly points out that Marx is a 'political possibilist' rather than a 'historical inevitabilist' – as Marx was only too aware that social phenomena are constantly acting and reacting.

We should not ignore Marxist theory therefore, on the grounds that the revolution hasn't happened as he wanted or that attempts at communistic societies often end in failure. Marx's predictions which are often criticised can largely be found in a rather small document called the 'Communist Manifesto' – which was a political call to arms. He saw it as imperative that the proletariat must work to become emancipated – and that the ruling class would never just give over privilege and power easily to this politically motivated group. However, he did argue that by producing this unequal relationship and causing this contradiction in the infrastructure of capitalist society between owners and workers that the capitalist owners were producing their own 'gravediggers'.

Revision Questions: What is meant by the following terms?

1. A Conflict Theory
2. Ideology
3. The Division of Labour
4. The Mode of Production
5. The Means of Production
6. Social Class
7. The Bourgeoisie
8. The Proletariat
9. The Dialectic
10. The Lumpen-Proletariat

Discussion point: Can you think of any examples of how these theories can be applied?