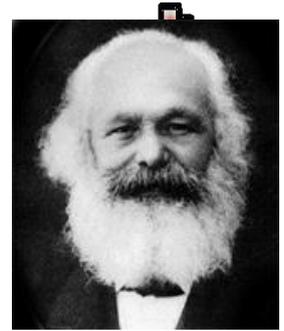


Marxism: Structural Conflict Theory

Marxism: Structural Conflict Theory/23/4/98/P.Covington/blue disc, 1994



Introduction, A Reprise of Functionalism

How Functionalists See the World

Functionalists stress the **importance** of **value consensus** in society, and do not recognize that **conflict** may occur. Any conflict that does occur is seen as **temporary** and counteracted, as **society** becomes **better**. Functionalists **accept** that there can be **conflict** but these are of small importance compared to the general need for consensus and stability.



Examples of Functional Analysis

Shils and Young, for example, note how **ceremonies** and **rituals** serve to promote **social integration**. The rituals concerning **monarchy**, **church**, **government leaders**, involve public promise. Whilst the **family**, can be seen as the **role** in plays for members of society, such as the **stability of personality** and **socialization**.

Comparison to Marxism Interpretation

Introduction

For Marxists, there is **fundamental** conflict between **different groups in society**. This conflict is on **going** and **persistent** and **not temporary** as **claim Functionalists**.

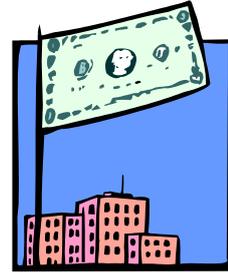
Marxism became particularly popular during the 1970's as the realization that Functionalism was flawed became apparent. It takes its name from its founder **Karl Marx (1818-83)**. There are many accounts of Marxism I will attempt to give you a simplified approach in the notes that follow.



Basic Ideas

1. How is Society Constructed?

Marx noted that in order to survive we enter relationships in order to **ensure production**. The **forces of production** and the **social relationship** to this form the economic basis or **infrastructure** of society. The other aspects of society, known as the **superstructure** is shaped by the **infrastructure**. So for example, **The Education system** is shaped by **economic factors** according to Marx. Any change in the infrastructure will thus lead to changes in the superstructure.



Marx claims that all societies today contain **contradictions**. Another exploits what he means by this is that one social group. This creates **conflict of interests**, as one social group, **the owners of the factors of production** benefits on the back of the **others** (the workers). He believed that such a position could not continue.

According to Marx, society is constructed from **classes**. In all societies, except the simplest, there are **two major classes**. It is people's **relationship to the means of production** that determines which **class** they belong to. The most powerful class is that which **owns the means of production**, (land, labour, factories) and the **least powerful** is that which has to **sell its labour to make a living**.



How does society operate or function? Explaining the Contradictions

1. The First Contradiction: Wages versus Profit Achieved by the Bourgeoisie

In Marx's view, society operates mainly through **class conflict**. In particular he argues that capitalistic society the **bourgeoisie** and the **proletariat** are fundamentally opposed. Marx believes that **real wealth** was only created by the **labour power of the workers**. Yet the **wages** that are paid to them is well below that taken in **profit** by the people who own the factors of production. This is a major **contradiction**.



2. The Second Contradiction: Organization versus the Nature of Ownership

In capitalism large numbers of workers, acting collectively achieves production. In **contrast**, just one individual owns the factors of production and the profits **do not flow** to the **workers** who have organized themselves collectively.



2. What Causes Social Change?

Major changes according to Marx are a result of **new forces of production**. He used the change from **Feudal** society run by the **noblemen**, **clergy**, and **commoners** and based upon **heredity**. So there was little movement within the system. Feudalism was based upon ownership of the land. The commoners who worked the land have to give part of their produce to the landowners; in return, the landowners protected them to rival noblemen. Therefore, the change between **this system** and **capitalism** resulted in **contradictions**. For example, **capitalism** is based upon **wage labour**, whereas feudalism was based upon **mutual obligations**. The new order, capitalism took over, it swept out the old social relationships of feudalism and replaced them with the new. Marx called this a new **Epoch**.

Eventually Marx believed there would be a **final Epoch** where a **communistic** or **socialist** society would **take over** from capitalism. This will not be the **result** of a **new force of production**, but will get rid of the **contradictions** that so far **characterized** change between **Epochs**. Collective production would remain but **ownership** would change dramatically. Instead of the Bourgeoisie, owning the factors of production **ownership will be by all**. Members would **share wealth** that their labour produces. This new **infrastructure** would not be based upon **exploitation** and **contradictions**, instead a new **final epoch** would be born, one, which would have **no need to change**. It would thus result in the **end of history**.



3. Why has Capitalism Survived given These Massive Contradictions?

Capitalism has remained **durable**, in the West it has survived for 200 years. Marx claimed this is the result of the role of the **superstructure**, which is shaped by the **infrastructure**. So for example, the ruling elite has **monopolized political power, laws**, and other **institutions** to maintain their control. They have thus managed to **legitimate** their power and hide from the people the **true nature** of their **exploitation**. Propagating the ideas of equality and freedom has done this. For example, the relationship between the worker and the owner of the factors of production is seen as **equal exchange**. **However**, in reality it is not, although there is a degree of choice of who to work for, in reality we must work to survive. In Marx's words, *all we can do is exchange one form of wage slavery for another.*



More importantly, the ruling elite is able to dominate the **ideology** of the time. They are able to produce a **false picture** of the world as it is. Moreover, to **stop us seeing the contradictions**. We see our exploitation as **just, natural, and proper**. Marx calls this a false **consciousness** of reality. Marx believes this false consciousness will only work so long. Eventually people will see behind it.



Comparison with Functionalism/Structural Consensus Theory

Functionalism

Whereas **functionalism** emphasizes **consensus**, **shared norms** and **values** and uses concepts like **order**, **harmony**, **cohesion**, **integration** and **equilibrium**,

Marxism

Conflict theorists take a different view. This perspective emphasizes the **differences** between interest groups, and uses concepts like **control coercion**, **power**, **constraint**, **disensus** and **change**. The central theme or thesis of conflict theory is that **conflict** is an inevitable fact.

Weber and Conflict Theory

Max Weber's contribution to conflict theory, like Marx before him, represents only one part of his enormous contribution to sociological theory. He is sometimes referred to as '**the bourgeois Marx**' because so much of his work was concerned with **testing**, reassessing or **developing** Marx's ideas. Like all the major theorists of class structure, Weber began with Marx's formulation of the question and accepted that **class** is **economic** in its origin. For Weber however, **stratification** was much more than an **economically** determined class positions, it also involved a consideration of **status**, **power** and **political parties**.

Some Critics of Social Conflict Theory

Dahrendorf suggests the following changes of the social structure have been sufficient to produce **post-capitalist society**.

1. The decomposition of Capital.

With the **growth** in the **scale of business** companies due to technological advances and the development of **joint stock limited companies**, the link between ownership and control of industry has been weakened. People can effectively own the factors of production via the share issues they own.

2. The decomposition of Labour

The workers have become more **differentiated**. Far from becoming **homogenized** in terms of **class-consciousness**, the workers have become increasingly aware of **differences** between **themselves**. The class groups have thus become split and disunited.



3. The development of a New middle-class

The **new middle class** is a category rather than a class in terms of Marx's use of this concept and is made up of white-collar workers, such as teachers, accountants, surveyors, nurses, and clerks. A middle group has emerged to further complicate the class system.

4. The Growth of Social Mobility

Mobility is much more inter-generational between occupations. The class system does appear to have some form of meritocracy. People can move between classes. Although in reality, this movement is rare.



1. The Growth of Equality

Social and economic inequalities have been reduced. Although, in the 1990's, these inequalities have been increasing rather than decreasing.

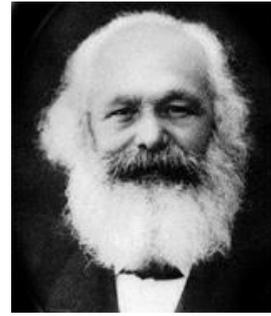


Dahrendorf concludes that society can be characterized correctly in terms of conflict between competing interest groups. In the light of these arguments Dahrendorf point out what he considers the weaknesses of Marx's theories. For him, the basic weakness of Marx's approach is that the way ties **power - economic and social, political to the ownership of the means of production**.

Dahrendorf argues that most people in society are unlikely to be engaged in one mighty political-economic-social-industrial conflict, which is generated from one structural source, property relationships. Instead, changes in social structures create the social structural basis for a plurality of interest groups and hence a plurality of bases for conflict.

Exercise One

Match the following statements to the appropriate theory....



1. Capitalism
2. Contradictions
3. Bourgeoisie
4. Factors or Means of Production.
5. The Two Main contradictions.
6. Surplus Value
7. Class Consciousness
8. Hegemony
9. Feudalism
10. The Final Epoch
11. Proletariat
12. False Consciousness
13. Alienation.

1. When another exploits one social group, this develops. For example, where poverty exists alongside huge wealth.
2. The difference between what the worker is paid in wages and its selling price.
3. Where a communistic or socialist society would take over from capitalism. The end result is communism where all the people own the means of production equally.
4. This is where people work for money rather than for the satisfaction and relevance that work brings into their own lives.
5. The **wage slaves** that have to work for the bourgeoisie in order to survive. They own nothing.
6. The ruling class who own the factors of production and employ the workers.
7. We see our exploitation as just, natural, and proper
8. The situation in which workers become aware of their exploited position. They then develop this.
9. This was based upon ownership of the land. The commoners who worked the land have to give part of their produce to the landowners; in return the landowners protected them to rival noblemen
10. Wages versus Profit Achieved by the Bourgeoisie, Organization versus the Nature of Ownership
11. It is the economic system, which produces goods, and services, which satisfy the wants and needs.
12. Land, Labour and Capital.
13. The beliefs of the ruling class dominate society and as seen as 'natural and commonsensical'.

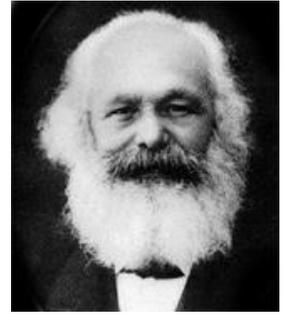
Exercise Two

In pairs write ten statements on the card provided that a Marxist would make on class and try to link this with part of the superstructure we have looked at so far, i.e. the education system. I then want you to construct a Marxist wall in 712

Another group will be asked to do a similar task for Functionalism.

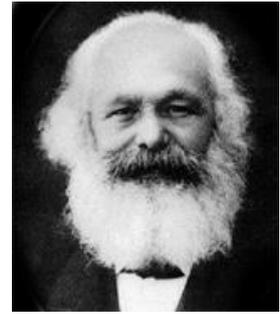
Exercise Three:

Look at the following phrases, are they strengths of Marx's argument or weaknesses of Marxism.



1. While the great inequalities in wealth and income continue to exist, the working class has not got poorer as Marx suggested. Living standards have improved vastly since Marx's day, and the welfare state and compulsory state education have given the working class a better lifestyle than Marx predicted.
2. The means of production remain mostly privately owned in the hands of a small minority of the population. There are still great inequalities of wealth and income in modern Britain, and widespread poverty. 10 % of the population owns 53% of the wealth.
3. Compulsory education has given the working class more changes of upward social mobility and the welfare state provides a safety net guaranteeing a minimum income for all. Housing standards, health and education are much improved compared with the 19th century.
4. Unemployment benefits help to reduce the severe hardships, which were associated with unemployment in Marx's day.
5. The concentration of ownership has not occurred; indeed, there has been some limited diffusion of wealth.
6. Marx ignores women and fails to analyze their particular positions in society.
7. There remains much evidence of major social class inequalities in life chances, such as in health, housing and the level of educational achievement and job security.
8. Voting rights and the formation of trade unions have given the working class more power and influence in society than when Marx was writing.
9. Unemployment is an on-going problem, and affects most severely those in working class occupations.
10. It is felt that Marx's concept of economic determinism places too much stress on the economy as determining all social life.
11. The owners of the means of production still have much more power and influence than the majority. For example, the privileged rich who have attended public schools hold the major positions in the state, industry and banking, and they own the mass media.
12. It is unable to explain the degree of stability in society other than by recourse to some notion of power and domination.

13. The polarization of people into the proletariat and capitalists has not occurred.
14. The laws are passed by a democratically elected parliament, chosen in free elections. The laws therefore may be said to represent the will of the majority.
15. The laws still favour the bourgeoisie, such as those who try to weaken trade unions and make it difficult to take legal strike action. In a Guardian ICM survey, 67% of the population agreed that there was 'one law for the rich and one for the poor'
16. There is still much evidence of opposing class interests and class conflict, such as strikes and industrial sabotage in the workplace. The 1989 British Social Attitudes Survey reported that over half of the population of modern Britain still believes that there are strong conflicts between rich and poor and between workers and managers.
17. Marx suggested that only the two opposing classes would emerge. In fact, the past century has seen the emergence of a middle class of professionals and managers, and office workers between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. While these groups do not own the means of production, they benefit from exercising authority on behalf of the bourgeoisie and have higher status and better income and life chances than the working class. They generally have no interest in overthrowing the bourgeoisie. Trade unions are basically concerned with improving pay within the system rather than promoting revolution.



Exercise Four**Match the following statements to Marxism or Functionalism....**

1. Society or the social system is constructed of various institutions, the most basic of which is the family. A social institution is a group of people organized for a specific purpose – the nuclear family, for example, is organized to produce and rear children. As societies develop, the number and complexity of social institutions increase. The civil and industrial corporations are examples of modern institutions. Institutions can be grouped together into four sub-systems, which are all inter-related. Economic, Political, Kinship, Religion.
2. This group regards the individual as formed by society through the influence of such institutions as the family, school and workplace. They leave little room for the view that the individual can significantly control her or his own life, let alone change society.
3. According to this group social change occurs when it is functionally necessary for it to do so. For example, in modern societies educational systems tend to expand because such societies require a more literate and numerate population than less ‘advanced societies’. Change may occur through adaptation or integration. Adaptation occurs when an existing institution readjusts to meet new needs. Integration occurs when a society adopts a new element and makes it part of itself. Thus, a society may successfully integrate a group of immigrants.
4. The primary purpose of sociology is to analyze and explain the normal and abnormal functioning of society. This involves studying the relationship between the different parts of society to one another, and of the parts to the whole.
5. According to this theory, society is constructed of classes. In all societies except the most simple, there are two major classes. It is people’s relationship to the means of production, which determines which class they are in. The most powerful class is that which owns the factors of production and the least is that which has to sell its labour in order to make a living.
6. This group assumes that it is practically necessary that some individuals and groups are more powerful than others, because only a limited number can take important decisions. Thus they argue that there must be leaders in organizations and in society otherwise there would be chaos.
7. This group thinks that the individual is powerless to affect either her or his own life or that of others. Those who hold this view regard class conflict and socialist revolution as inevitable, regardless of what any single individual may do.
8. Society is in a state of fundamental conflict between the classes. However, this group recognizes that social order and equilibrium can occur, in which class conflict is temporarily submerged. He argued that such periods benefit the rich and powerful more than other groups.
9. Society operates like a biological organism. So social institutions function in combination with one another and for the benefit of society as a whole, just as the various parts of the human body function in relation to one another and to the whole body.
10. Society operates mainly through class conflict. Each Class normally pursues its own interests, and this brings it into conflict with other classes. In particular, he argued that in capitalist society the bourgeoisie and proletariat are fundamentally opposed.
11. This group considers that order and equilibrium are normal to society. Disequilibria is an abnormal social state. They compare Disequilibria in society to sickness in a living organism. The basis of social equilibrium is the existence of moral consensus. Moral consensus means that everybody shares the same values in society.

12. Class is the basis for power. Some classes are more powerful than others because they own more property and wealth, and this gives them the means to defend and keep what they hold. He did not believe that this state of affairs was inevitable and necessary.
13. Social change occurs as a result of class conflict. Class conflict is the dynamo of history. In the latter middle ages there was conflict between the landed aristocracy and the rising bourgeoisie, and in capitalist society there the major conflict is between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The victory of a new class introduces a new historical period.
14. The purpose of sociology is to describe, analyze and explain class conflict. This group also wants to change the world in their direction.

Exercise Five

Brainstorm the following idea...with each theory; Marxism and Functionalism give an analogy (a phrase or word) that sums up how this theory sees the world. For example, Functionalism could be compared to the human body.... Then link the following to an appropriate theory...Make some up of your own.

Football league, a war, a play, exam results,

Resources Used in this Handout

A level Sociology Letts Study Guide: Stephen Moore.
Introduction to Sociology: Mike O'Donnell, 4th Edition
Sociology Themes and Perspectives: Michael Haralambos
Sociology in Focus: Taylor et al
An Introduction to Sociology: Ken Browne
Sociology for A level: A Skills Based Approach: Tony Lawson
Sociology: Developing Skills through Structured Questions: Kirby et al

Marx/2/10/96/P.Covington/

Exercise Six: Complete the Following table....

| Basic Idea | Functionalists | Marxists |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------|
| How is Society Constructed | | |
| How does Society Operate or Function? | | |
| Why are Some groups in Society more powerful than others? | | |
| What Causes Social Change? | | |
| Is Society Normally in Orderly balance or Conflict? | | |
| What is the Relationship of the Individual to Society? | | |
| What is the primary purpose of Sociological study? | | |

