

Welcome to Sociology A Level

The first part of the course requires you to learn and understand sociological theories of society. Read through the following theories and complete the tasks as you go through.

Sociological theories of society

Modernist theories are divided into two main perspectives — **structural** approaches and **social action** approaches:

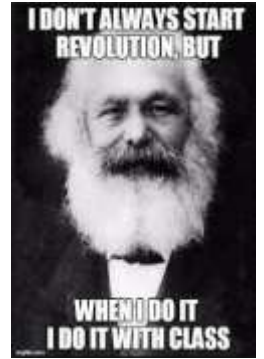
- **Structural approaches** attempt to provide a complete theory of society. They begin their analyses from the 'top', by looking first at society as a whole and then working down to the individual parts, and finally to individuals. There are three main structural theories:
 - **Marxism** or *conflict theory*
 - **Feminism** or *conflict theory*
 - **Functionalism** or *consensus theory*.

These theories may start from the same position, but they come to very different conclusions.

Marxism

Karl Marx

A hugely influential revolutionary thinker and philosopher, Marx did not live to see his ideas carried out in his own lifetime, but his writings formed the theoretical base for modern international communism.



Karl Heinrich Marx was born on 5 May 1818 in Trier in western German, the son of a successful Jewish lawyer. Marx studied law in Bonn and Berlin, but was also introduced to the ideas of Hegel and Feuerbach. In 1841, he received a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Jena. In 1843, after a short spell as editor of a liberal newspaper in Cologne, Marx and his wife Jenny moved to Paris, a hotbed of radical thought. There he became a revolutionary communist and befriended his life long collaborator, Friedrich Engels. Expelled from France, Marx spent two years in Brussels, where his partnership with Engels intensified. They co-authored the pamphlet 'The Communist Manifesto' which was published in 1848 and asserted that all human history had been based on class struggles, but that these would ultimately disappear with the victory of the proletariat.

In 1849, Marx moved to London, where he was to spend the remainder of his life. For a number of years, his family lived in poverty but the wealthier Engels was able to support them to an increasing extent. Gradually, Marx emerged from his political and spiritual isolation and produced his most important body of work, 'Das Kapital'. The first volume of this 'bible of the working class' was published in his lifetime, while the remaining volumes were edited by Engels after his friend's death.

In his final years, Karl Marx was in creative and physical decline. He spent time at health spas and was deeply distressed by the death of his wife, in 1881, and one of his daughters. He died on 14 March 1883 and was buried at Highgate Cemetery in London.

Task 1

Research Marx's ideas on each of the bullet points above and jot down a few notes

- Class society and exploitation
- Capitalism
- Class consciousness
- Ideology
- The state, revolution and communism

Criticisms of Marxists

The deception of capitalism and its inevitable move towards a crisis has simply not occurred. Yes capitalism has grown stronger and through globalisation has spread across the world. Yet in most parts of the world, communist systems have either been replaced by capitalism or have adopted many capitalist characteristic

The polarisation of people into a rich minority and an extremely poor majority has not occurred in the way Marx envisaged. There is huge inequality but there has also been a massive growth of the middle class in society (the group Marx predicted would disappear)

Capitalism changed significantly after Marx's death, with the introduction of a wide range of health, pension, housing and welfare benefits, all of which were missing from Marx's analysis.

Marx paid little attention to other significant social divisions including gender divisions, ethnic differences, age differences, differing sexualities etc

Feminism

Liberal Feminists –

- Does not seek revolutionary changes: they want changes to take place within the existing structure
- The creation of equal opportunities is the main aim of liberal feminists
- e.g. the Sex Discrimination Act and the Equal Pay Act
- Ann Oakley – sex (biological differences) and gender (socially constructed roles)

Radical feminists –

- Society is patriarchal, dominated and ruled by men
- Men are the ruling class, and women the subject class.
- Rape, violence and pornography some of the key tools through which men control women; separatism can be part of the solution.
- Firestone (1974) – patriarchy is universal and it lies in women's biological structure to care for infants and they're then dependent on men
- Brown Miller – rape is the reason women do not go out alone at night

Marxist feminists –

- Capitalism rather than patriarchy is the principal source of women's oppression, and capitalists as the main beneficiaries, through the housewife role
- For example; overthrowing capitalism remains the main objective.
- Barrett – main sociologist. Ideas of housewives etc.
- Ansley – women are takers of rubbish and they soak up the frustration their husbands feel of the workers exploitation.

Poststructuralist/Postmodernism feminists –

- Butler and Scott 1992
- Concerns with discourses (seeing or speaking about something) and power and knowledge
- Enables feminists to deconstruct discourses because they can lead to different forms of oppression
- Child birth – medical condition and defines how the women has patience which empowers doctors rather than the women.
- Concerned with language rather than politics and opportunities

Black feminists –

- Dissatisfaction form radical, Marxists and liberal.
- Regarded as an endocentric – address all women but focus on a white women experience
- Don't adopt a 'victim ideology' like other feminists
- Gloria Jean Watkins (Bell Hooks 1981)
- White women cannot properly explain a black woman experience.
- Analysed how colonialism affected women with AIDS/HIV

Criticisms of feminism

Liberal – over optimistic, they do not offer an explanation for the structure of gender inequality. Marxists and radical say they fail to recognise the underlying causes of subordination and naïve to believe changing laws will be enough

Radical – Marxists say that its to do with class not patriarchy and they do not offer an explanation to why female subordination takes place in different places in society. They see patriarchy as being maintained by male violence so it is maintaining itself. Neglect domestic violence towards men and lesbian relationships.

Marxist – Can't explain women's subordination in none capitalist societies. They place a lot of emphasis on working class men and it is not proven that domestic labour is the cheapest way of reproducing labour power

Postmodernism – differences among women and criticised for abandoning any notion of real objective social structures.

Black feminism – emphasising difference between women at the expense of others. Overlook age and class etc

Task 2 - Research the work of Ann Oakley as a feminist sociologist. Use these headings

- Studies
- Findings
- Criticisms

Functionalism

A **consensus theory** is a theory in which society is seen as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability.

Originated from the work of 19th - Century French sociologists, particularly Auguste Comte (1789-1857) who first coined the terms 'sociology' and 'positivism', and Emile Durkheim (1858-1917).

In the 20th Century, Functionalism was dominant in sociology from the 1940s to the 1970s in the USA and was also very influential in Europe.

Emile Durkheim

Organic analogy – he imagined society as similar to a living being that adapts to its environment and is comprised of component parts which each perform functions to help it exist.

Institutions exist in terms of the function they perform, similar to organs in the body.

Advocated positivist research methods based on looking for correlations in statistical data.

Was known for his study of suicide rates in different European countries.

Task 3

Research Durkheim's study of suicide. Use these headings

- Studies
- Findings
- Criticisms

Talcott Parsons

Structural Approach: He aimed to provide a theoretical framework that combined Durkheim's work with a systematic attempt to understand the structures of societies and how they function.

Suggested in 1951 that there are 4 basic needs for functional prerequisites that all societies have to satisfy:

- Adaptation (the economic function)
- Goal Attainment (the political function)
- Integration (the social harmony)
- Latency (individual beliefs & values) – pattern maintenance and tension management

Criticisms of Functionalists

Conflict sociologists claim functionalism overemphasises the level of agreement and consensus in society. It ignores class/gender/ethnic inequalities and power differences.

Parsons suggests society is like a living organism which is untrue – organisms are biologically natural whereas society is an entirely social construct.

Does not explain why or how some institutions exist or that some can be dysfunctional to society as well as functional e.g. religion which both brings people together and drives them apart.

Task 4 – Final task

Now summarise the main points from these notes into a table on all 3 schools of history

Sociological Theory	Sociologists & ideas	Studies	Findings	Criticisms
Marxist				
Feminist				
Functionalist				

