

Conflict Structuralism - Marxism



It is important to note that there are different varieties of Marxism – each with their own little twist on the basic theme of conflict.

Karl Marx 1818-83

Marxism is a structural perspective and like functionalism sees society shaping the behaviour and ideas of individuals.

However, that is where the similarities end – Marxism does not see society as stable but rather underpinned by conflict

Key Ideas

4. Historical materialism

Marx saw 2 classes emerging in the capitalist era. The relationship to the means of production dictated which class one belonged to:

- One class own the means of production (factories etc) **The Bourgeoisie** (Capitalists – Ruling Class)
- The other class owned only their labour – The **Proletariat** - The Working Class

The mode of production forms the economic base of society. i.e how things are produced and by whom shapes the rest of society – the superstructure (institutions, ideas, beliefs etc)

5. Class Conflict and Capitalism

This is a central concept to the work of Marx. In capitalist societies the bourgeoisie (middle class / ruling class) need the proletariat to work for them. They want to pay out as little as they can – the workers want to earn as much as they can – hence they are reliant on each other but in conflict with each other.

There is polarization between the 2 groups. That is society divides into 2 distinct groups in opposition

1. Class consciousness

Capitalism is on the road to destruction according to Marx as the larger WC begin to realise that they are being exploited by the RC and realise that they can do something about the situation if they work together.

This is where class consciousness occurs – the WC develop a ‘true consciousness’ about their situation.

The RC are aware that this can happen and do every thing to prevent this true consciousness emerging. They do this by conning the WC into accepting their position – what Marx calls ‘false consciousness’.

This is done via education (those with good results deserve better jobs etc) through the family (keeping the WC worried about keeping their jobs to pay for stuff at home) through the media (creating wants/needs through adverts etc)

This helps to legitimise (make it seem right) the superior position of the RC.

Marx’s writings were very much aimed at helping the WC see through this fog of false consciousness

2. Alienation

Marx believes that a sense of control, creative work and interest is important to us. This gets bashed out of us at work where we lose control over the process and work in boring monotonous places.

Hence we become alienated – even from ourselves – a feeling of helplessness. Consequently religion, alcohol, Etc help us to escape (partially)

3. Communism

For Marx the solution arrives when the WC realise that they are bigger than the RC, can unite to overthrow them and consequently via revolution implement a communist society

In communism every one owns the means of production (every one has a slice of the cake!). Private ownership is outlawed, alienation is alleviated as workers take control of their labour and the products.

Exactly how this revolution was to come about was not really developed by Marx and has led to much debate amongst neo-marxists

Criticisms Of Traditional Marxism

- Seen as too simplistic. Society is more complex than 2 classes. Weber argued that status and power are important factors too
- Others argue that there are more than just 2 classes. The WC can be divided into skilled and unskilled and the MC has grown as a group between the ruling class and the WC.
- Class polarisation has not occurred – The new MC has grown and the old industrial WC has shrunk (apart from countries like China and India where the WC has grown)
- Economic determinism – many disagree that the economic controls all other aspects of society. Action theorists focus more on the free will of individuals to bring about change via ideas, new inventions etc
- Revolution hasn’t happened – Only in some countries like Russia in 1917 has anything like Marx’s predicted revolution occurred.
- Focuses on class and ignores other marginalised groups such as women, ethnic minority groups etc

• Neo Marxism – 2 main schools

Since the death of Marx there have been many attempts to update his work. 2 examples are shown below

Gramsci 1891-1937 Humanistic Marxism	Althusser 1918-90 Structuralist Marxism
<p>Gramsci’s key concept is hegemony – i.e. the ideas and values used to ‘persuade’ the WC that the status quo is good and fair e.g. education is a meritocracy! Coercion (force) goes along with this –e.g. Police Gramsci believes that the WC can see through the false consciousness of hegemony – like Willis’ lads did in school. And the WC can do something about it – by organizing behind intellectuals who can lead the masses in radical change.</p> <p>Critics say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He underestimates the role of coercion. • Workers may want to overthrow system but scared of consequences - losing jobs etc. 	<p>Althusser is critical of humanistic marxism He disagrees with the base/superstructure model of Marx For Althusser the economic works alongside the political and ideological levels – not forming them He looks at how capitalism keeps going –it regenerates every generation via socialization The ‘ideological state apparatus’ (ISA) transmits the values via the family, education, media etc. Also there are ‘repressive state apparatuses’ (RSA) to keep is further in line –the police, army etc We are products of this conditioning.</p> <p>Critics say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too much emphasis is placed on structure rather than action • Individuals are seen as powerless puppets • It is seen as abstract with little empirical evidence to back it up • Humanists Marxists see it as discouraging human political action against the unfair system