

# Compare and contrast two sociological theories essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

This essay will compare and contrast and contrast two leading sociological theories: Marxism and Functionalism. Marxists predominantly believe that within society inequality and prejudice are rife, whereas Functionalists live under the impression that society operates in a state of social equilibrium wherein class and social status are necessities which we allow to transpire. This essay will explore the different viewpoints each theories take on subjects such as religion, community, family and education.

Marxism is a conflict theory founded by German Philosopher and Sociologist Karl Marx in the 19th Century. It brings forth the idea that society is imbalanced and biased. ' Marx maintained that, with the possible exception of the societies of prehistory, all historical societies contain basic contradictions, which means that they cannot survive forever in their existing forms. These contradictions involve the exploitation of one social group by another: in feudal society, lords exploit their serfs; in capitalist society, employers exploit their employees.

This creates a fundamental conflict of interest between social groups, since one gains at the expense of another. This conflict of interest must ultimately be resolved, since a social system containing such contradictions cannot survive unchanged. ' (Haralambos & Holborn 2013 - Page 11) Marxists believe that two opposing classes are at the heart of the conflict within society; the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie in Marxist, and general sociological terms, defines a person of wealth and capitalistic means whose concern would typically be wealth, production and capital.

The proletariat population conversely would be the general wage earners. The proletariat's only noteworthy asset is that of their ability to work, they are usually industrial workers, selling their labour for the best price they can get in a stereotypical capitalist society. Functionalism, or structural functionalism, in stark contrast to Marxism, is a theoretical perspective which promotes the idea of societal stability and order through many complex processes taking place, all of which can be observed and analyzed scientifically. Haralambos & Holborn says of Functionalism that: 'Various parts of society are seen to be interrelated and, taken together, they form a complete system. To understand any part of society, such as the family or religion, the part must be seen in relation to society as a whole' (Haralambos & Holborn 2013 - page 10) A common analogy coined by Herbert Spencer, a prominent English sociologist, is to label important parts of society such as norms, traditions and family as 'organs', contributing to the overall wellbeing and health of the 'body'.

Many of the key ideas found in Functionalism can be traced back to renowned sociologist Emile Durkheim from the 19th century. Durkheim was a pioneer of sociology in all aspects, fighting for its acceptance as a recognized science long into his academic career along with being one of the first sociologists to introduce scientific and statistical data into his theories. Emile Durkheim also believed that sociology should be a purely holistic study, that it should be an analytical study of the entirety of society and not just individual components, data should be of a quantitative nature rather than qualitative.

This is a rare example of where the two theories opinions align: Marxism also generally trusts in quantitative studies, believing a study of the masses is the only way to truly gauge social effects. Both methods have their merits in equal right. Quantitative data allows for much better averages to be taken, given that the research base is so much broader. However Qualitative methodology allows the researcher to delve into a certain subject in far greater detail and perhaps glean something that could be overlooked when taking a Quantitative approach.

Both Sociological theories take very different viewpoints on most general societal subjects such as family for instance. At its most basic platform Marxists see the stereotypical nuclear family as a tool for the ruling class. Early on Marx realized the ability to pass down property through generations was a brilliantly useful mechanism for controlling wealth and capital. Marxists see the family as a potential assembly line of workers: the head of the household being the proprietor and ' CEO' whilst the children are being prepared to receive their inheritance and maintain their family's wealth and capital status.

Functionalists, however, take a much more harmonious approach. They believe: ' The family performs important tasks that contribute to society's basic needs and helps perpetuate social order. ' (Anthony Giddens 2006 - Page 238) Functionalists believe a family's paramount purpose is to raise and support their children within society. ' According to the American sociologist Talcott Parsons, the family's two main functions are primary socialization and personality stabilization.

Primary socialization is the process by which children learn the cultural norms of the society into which they are born. Because this happens during the early years of childhood, the family is the most important arena for the development of the human personality. Personality stabilization refers to the role that the family plays in assisting adult family members emotionally.

Marriage between adult men and women is the arrangement through which adult personalities are supported and kept healthy. '

Religion is another topic rife with controversy where Marxists and Functionalists are concerned. Functionalists once again take a more practical view in the sense that they believe religion must fill some sort of societal need otherwise it wouldn't exist within society. In ' The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life' (1912) Emile Durkheim offered what is probably the most influential Functionalist view on religion today. An extract from Haralambos & Holborn tells us: ' Durkheim argued that all societies divide the world into two categories: the sacred and the profane (the non-sacred).

Religion is based upon this division. It is ' a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden. ' (Haralambos & Holborn 2013 - Page 432) Durkheim also emphasized the importance of collective worship, he believed one of the main purposes of religion was to organize and unite society with a common goal. Karl Marx also believed religion was an essential part of societal life; however he disagreed with the majority of sociologists, such as Durkheim, who believed religion to be a generally constructive force.

Marx called religion the 'opiate of the people,' he was of the opinion that religion lulled people into a dull acceptance of the situation around them, that instead of challenging supposedly unjust things people may revert to praying or relying on their faith to help them through tough times. Although religion was a minor issue compared to what Marx called 'The means of production.' 'Marx believed that understanding society was fundamentally about understanding power, and that power was fundamentally tied to what he called 'the means of production.'

If I own the field that you need to grow food, or the machinery you need to build a home, or the company you need to work at to earn money, I have power over you. It doesn't particularly matter what you believe about the situation; what matters is the material reality of the situation, which is that you will starve unless you do as I want.' (Jay Gabler 2010 - Page 176)

Ultimately Marx thought that religion was a tool in favour of the oppressors rather than the oppressed.

If you believe that in the hereafter you will receive divine justice for all the maltreatment and suffering in your present life, you will not fight tooth and nail for fair treatment in the present. Once again both Functionalists and Marxists take very different stances on the subject of education.

Functionalists generally believe that education plays a vital role in the upbringing and socialization of children. Durkheim was of the opinion that through the teaching of subjects such as history children came to understand common values within society and learn accepted behavior.

He thought that a form of critical social solidarity stemmed from a young populace being forced into the same circumstances. However not all sociologists within the same theory had the same academic approach.

Talcott Parsons was a Functionalist who argued that the main purpose of education ' was to instill the value of individual achievement in a child. ' (Anthony Giddens 2006 - Page 686), Arguing the opposite to Durkheim's belief of group focus rather than individuality. Marxism, conversely, teaches that education is just another means of control enforced by the ruling class.

Louis Althusser, a French Marxist Philosopher, believed that education was essentially a conveyor belt, another cog in the great proletariat machine, a machine built and operated by the bourgeoisie. Althusser thought that in school children are taught that capitalism is righteous and just, that it is natural to submit to a chain of command. This prepares students to become future employees in a capitalist workplace, to take orders from a boss, to submit to authority because it is the natural order of things.

Ultimately Marxists believe that education is a breeding ground for future capitalist proletariats, a place where a mind can be potentially molded into believing that it is natural to obey without question and that if you work hard enough you can rise to the top of the pile on the back of your own hard work. This highlights the stark contrast between the opinions of Functionalists and Marxists on this subject: Functionalists see education as a vital part of socialization and solidarity for children, whereas Marxists believe it is nothing more than another device to prepare the proletariat to yield to authority in a capitalist society.

To conclude, both theories have many applicable qualities to them and it is easy to understand the attraction to both veins of thought. Functionalism is appealing to an extent because of the generally positivity it provides, believing that society operates in the way it does because it must, because we, as societies inhabitants, allow it. However a general pitfall in the functionalist theory is: if the belief exists that society is shaped for the best naturally, and that we as people shape it, why strive to make anything better?

If every living person helps mould the skeletal structure of society, does that condone injustice like poverty and starvation? Do those people that suffer also have a place in society? Many people argue Functionalism is too naive, however many people believe it is generally correct and that naturally society is shaped to meet the needs of the many; although there will always be the few, who suffer as a result. Marxism, in conclusion, is a much more controversial theory than Functionalism, a conflict theory; it predominantly focuses on the belief that society is unjust.

Many countries and politically movements in the past have embraced chief concepts endorsed by Marxism, even famous political figures such as Fidel Castro are self-confessed Marxists. It is a very appealing ideal to someone setting forth in a fight against conceived injustice, however so far all attempts at large scale communism and Marxist societies in practice have been unsuccessful, the redistribution of wealth and all men being equal is a noble idyllic but whether or not it is achievable in the real world remains to be seen.



However the credibility of the theory itself isn't called into question at all. Ultimately it falls to what each individual believes based upon what they have seen and are influenced by in their own lifetime. What is undisputable is that both theories have been founded and developed by intellectual behemoths years ahead of their times and that, without a doubt, together they have birthed a new breed of modern social science.