

Functionalism and marxism essay sample

[Politics](#), [Marxism](#)



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Functionalism and Marxism are traced back to theories adopted by sociologists in the nineteenth century. Marxism came from the German philosopher Karl Marx (1818-1883), whereas Functionalism was originally derived by Auguste Comte (1798-1857). It was then developed further by Emile Durkheim (1858-1917).

Functionalist theories portray society as a structured system, which have a set of interconnected parts (or units) which together form a whole. These units are the institutions within society such as the family, religion and education. These institutions are essential for maintaining that society works harmoniously and orderly. Early functionalists such as Durkheim often drew an analogy between society and an organism like the human body. As the body is reliant on all organs working properly, so is society. Functionalists argue a consensus theory, that social values are learnt through different people and institutions e. g. schools and the family, these values are passed on from generation to generation.

Marxist theories are about class conflict rather than consensus. Similar to Functionalism Marx acknowledges the structural integration of societies institutions such as political, legal or religious groups, which he describes as the superstructure. Unlike functionalism however Marx argued that rather than having a harmonious effect on society the superstructure is constructed upon an economic base (capitalism) this being the infrastructure. This causes a difference of interests among social groups which in turn leads to conflict.

A similarity between Marxism and functionalism is that they both usually adopt a positive approach and related methods. Positive sociology can be traced back to Auguste Comte who believed that science could provide the objective truth about the world.

While functionalism believes that individuals were created by society and believes that people need to be controlled, through a “ collective conscience” this provides a shared indoctrination for norms and values. Likewise Marxists believe people are guided by external forces but differ in that the constraints of the social structure restrict the rationality of the subject class (Proletariat) who are kept in a state of “ false conscience” by the dominant ruling class (Bourgeoisie) ideology. Taking the workplace as an example of external forces controlling the individual Marxism feels that control does not lead to unity. Marxists view the role of the labourer as unproductive and unfulfilling thus leading to the alienation of the worker. Functionalists on the other hand view the workplace as fulfilling a purposeful role for “ socialisation” helping to create the feeling of solidarity for the workers.

Social change is also something that both Marxist and functionalists have very different views on. Marxists see social change as revolutionary. Change will result because of the action of individuals due to the inequalities in the capitalist’s society, through the awareness of a “ class consciousness.” Functionalists view change as evolutionary, an example is if an institution within society fails to fulfil its purpose it would be replaced by another institution that will.

The social institution of the family is viewed by functionalists to be the best organisational basis for society; Talcott Parsons (1955) insists that the family retains two “ basic and irreducible functions”. These are the “ primary socialisation of children” and the “ stabilisation of adult personalities.” The Marxist perspective asserts that the family is a product of capitalism and is an exploitive institution.

Marxism sees society consisting of two classes, a subject class and a ruling class in opposition to this the functionalists argue that there are many classes in society, and point towards a division of labour. From a functionalist view the inequality in society is seen to be functional and that authority is given to those who can satisfy social needs and high rewards to those in functionally important positions.

Talcott Parson argued that any social system has “ functional prerequisites” that must be met for society to function properly. He came up with the GAIL model, goal attainment, adaptation, integration and latency. These four needs he explains “ must be met adequately if equilibrium and/or continuing existence of the system is to be maintained.”

There are quite a few criticisms on both the functionalists and Marxists theories. Max Weber, an action theorist opposed the idea that society could be studied as a natural science and he took a micro perspective of society. Action theorists also criticise the functionalists consensus theory saying that it idealises institutions like the family and legitimises inequality.

Functionalisms is also teleological, it does not produce testable hypothesis

and is therefore unscientific. It fails to explain social change and it tends to justify the status quo.

The structuralist theory is also criticised and this can apply to both theories. It offers an over socialised view of individuals. The deterministic nature of structuralism concentrates on external social causes and ignores the importance of individual actors and their subjective experiences. A criticism of the Marxist theory is that it tends to place too much emphasis on the economy. Consensus theorists also maintain that conflict is abnormal and undesirable.

It can be concluded that although functionalism and Marxism do share some similarities these are outweighed by their differences. Each theory offers insights, which illuminate some “ problems” to a degree, and although both are legitimate theories neither has proven to be more acceptable than the other.

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