

Concept developed within classical sociology

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Choose any one concept or argument developed within classical sociology. Critically evaluate the use of this concept or argument by contemporary sociology in trying to understand a current social issue. In my essay I am going to discuss the current economic upheaval, its impact on modern society and how Marx and his theory of alienation are still relevant today. The topics covered will include classical Marxist sociological thought and modern concepts with regard to the current economic situation, for example, Industrial Action, job insecurity and the erosion of the welfare state.

I will argue that people in society today, whether they are private or public sector workers or those claiming welfare are still exploited and alienated by capitalism just as they were in Marx's day. Marx saw alienation as a process in which humanity is turned into a stranger in a world created by labour (Classical Social Theory, Craib 1997) by this he meant that the worker became a commodity and part of a production line, losing themselves and their identities to the means of production. The shift away from the freedom of human interaction through to the way in which society and social relations impose themselves upon is summed up (at least as far as capitalism is concerned) in the theory of alienation. ' (Classical Social Theory, Craib 1997).

Marx was convinced that the division of labour was the reason that man was alienated from his labour. He saw the proletariat exploited for his labour by the bourgeoisie who owned the means of production. Marx defined labour as " mans self confirming essence" and noted that capitalism had transformed human labour into an object, an external thing. Classical Social Theory, Craib 1997). It is important to understand Marx's theory of alienation as I will be discussing its relevance in today's society and the impact of this theory

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when applied to modern society. Employers only employ workers if they possess skills that are of a use value to them. In essence there is no point in employing someone who produces work of a value that is less than what they are to be paid. This is the exchange value of the workers labour power. The difference between the endeavours of the worker and the pay supplied by the employer is the surplus value, which is the profit that the employer retains.

This is Marx's definition of exploitation that exists within the wage-labour relationship. In simple terms the worker is working for a wage to sustain them but also to ensure the employer gains a profit. The contrast between the two will always favour the employer not the worker. It is not that the employer overtly seeks to exploit the worker; it is in Marx's eyes a natural consequence of capitalism. The employer pays the worker not out of the goodness of their heart but as a means of increasing their own wealth. Marx therefore perceived capitalism as being in a state of constant crisis.

It is the existence of this exploitation that for Marx causes the crisis to occur. If as a worker I produce ? 10, 000 of goods in a month (value of labour power to employer) but I am only paid ? 1, 000 a month for this labour (exchange value of labour power) I do not receive sufficient pay to purchase the value of the goods I have produced. (Classical Social Theory, Craib 1997: pg94) In simple terms a crisis occurs in capitalism when goods produced by the workers are not sold. A consequence of this is that workers will be made redundant; this causes the economy to enter a depression or financial slump.

This slump is only reversed when those goods are sold and companies can begin production once more. This is a very basic economic explanation of the cycle of growth and recession that has afflicted capitalism throughout its history. (Classical Social Theory, Craib 1997: pg95) The phenomenon of recession has been a constant threat within capitalist societies, not only in Marxist terms does the worker suffer the alienation and exploitation from his labour, he or she now has to contend with many other threats caused by the unstable nature of the economic system.

The worker now faces the prospect of many other economic uncertainties, such as redundancy, pay freezes and pay cuts. The current worldwide recession that has plagued the banking financial sector has caused tremendous hardship for those ill equipped to deal with it. This has led to a number of changes within the employment market. The fear of job insecurity has never been higher; the days of a job for life are now a thing of the past. Giddens refers to a concept of 'trust and risk'.

In this instance Giddens states that trust refers to the confidence that society has in individuals and its significant institutions. We live more than ever in a globalised community and society, our lives are shaped and influenced by people and institutions; we are never likely to meet. Giddens talks about society having trust in 'abstract systems', he uses the example of food regulation and banking systems. The current financial crisis we find ourselves in has led to an all time low in the faith we once placed in the banking and financial world.

In Britain a number of large banking corporations have had to have their losses underwritten by the tax payer. The consequence of this has been for the coalition government having to implement widespread cuts and policies to curb the financial deficit. Public sector workers and those who rely on the welfare state have been hit hardest by the new financial constraints forced upon them. (Giddens 2006: 122, 123) Those responsible for the current economic crisis, i. e. the banks have not suffered as a result of their mistakes in the same way that the worker or the welfare claimant have.

As Marx would say, yet again the owners of the means of production have not been penalised but rather it is the proletariat who has had to incur financial hardship and exploitation. Recent examples of this include, Workers in two unions at Southampton City Council are to start indefinite industrial action from 23 May in a row over proposed pay cuts of up to 5.5% and Postal workers in London have voted to go on strike in protest at job losses. The Royal Mail cites the need for voluntary redundancies to increase efficiency and profitability but the unions disagree, saying that forced redundancies will have to be implemented.

These are two examples in the current economic crisis where workers are paying the price for a recession created by the actions of an unregulated banking system. The welfare state has also suffered in this harsh new financial reality, whilst those at the top of the banking fraternity have suffered no penalty or sanction, in fact quite the reverse, the city continues to hand out excessive bonuses. The glaring unfairness and difference that exists between those in control of the financial institutions and those who are beholden to them has never been more stark.

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In a bid to reduce the national debt, the coalition government has imposed budget cuts across the entire public sector. NHS, councils, the police have all had severe budget cuts. It will be the poorest in our society who will suffer as a result of these new financial constraints. This new tentative financial situation means that the worker and the claimant now face an uncertain financial future. In conclusion, if Marx were alive today he would see that nothing has changed, capitalism still retains an iron grip upon society and those who live in it.

Wealth and inequality continues to widen every year. This has a serious and detrimental impact upon those in our society who can ill afford to suffer the financial hardships that have resulted from the mistakes and risks taken by those who own the means of production. Alienation and exploitation is now so widespread and there has never been a more pressing need for the works of great sociological thinkers like Karl Marx and what he had to say regarding the exploitive nature of the capitalist state. It is of crucial importance to highlight the inequality that exists within modern capitalist society.

If we want and desire a fairer society for all we need to recognise those within it who suffer the most. The work of Karl Marx and particularly his theory of alienation has enabled society to understand the relationship that exists between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. The worker will continue to be alienated under capitalism but now the ever increasing unfairness and exploitation suffered by the many as a result of the mistakes made by capitalist institutions will insure that wealth inequality will continue to increase.

References

Giddens A, 2006, Sociology Polity Press, Cambridge Craib I, 1997, Classical Social Theory, oxford University Press Oxford [http://www. bbc. co. uk/news/uk-england-london-13508478](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-13508478)