

Marx, weber, and durkheim

[Sociology](#), [Communication](#)



For hundreds of years people have tried to find ways to understand the changes in our society. How have we evolved from a hunting and gathering society about 12, 000 years ago, when humans lived totally without technology, searching continuously for food, to today's fast-moving society, where we have modern technology at our fingertips? This paper will argue that three of sociology's founders, Karl Marx, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim help us understand how and why society changes.

These three social thinkers, who all lived in the 19th Century and thus were witness to the greatest change in society, the industrial revolution, have all studied societies in different ways and have come up with their own theories for social change. This paper will help us answer questions, which are puzzling us in today's modern world. Why is there such a large and ever-increasing divide between the rich and the poor?

Why, when globalisation has enabled access to modern technology and information worldwide, are some countries still not embracing modern technology, e. g. computers, fax, e-mail, at the same level that Europe and USA are? Is material wealth a guarantee to happiness in today's society and why are traditional family values declining in modern society? With the help of Marx, Weber and Durkheim's theories we will try to answer these questions and understand today's society. Karl Marx (1818-1883) interpreted modern society as a largely capitalist society, where profit is made for capitalists or bourgeoisie, who have means of production (factories, land, money), by exploitation of manual labour from the working class or proletariat.

Marx maintained that economic production underlies and shapes the entire society. He called technological and social process of economic production the infrastructure on which all additional social elements like religion, education, family, ideas and values are built to form the superstructure. In other words, he would explain that people's values, ambitions and ideas are related directly to their economic position, i. e. their function in capitalist society. Marx found that " conflict between economic groups is the major engine of change" (Macionis & Plummer, p. 9). " Marx's analysis centers on destructive aspects of industrial capitalism, especially the ways in which it promotes class conflict and alienation" (Macionis & Plummer, p. 79). " Alienation is the experience of isolation resulting from powerlessness" (Macionis & Plummer, p. 80). Marx's theories are relevant in today's world when we consider the problem of class division. There is an increasing gap between unskilled working class people (e. g. factory workers, labourers) and middle/upper class people (company directors, land/property owners).

Marx's " struggle between classes" is very evident today, where working class people who want to better themselves and move out of their lower social class, find it difficult to do so. They may not be given the same opportunities as people who, for example, live in richer, more developed areas, with better facilities, i. e. education, training, employment etc. Marx's theory on class division is also evident when we consider crime. There seem to be different social rules applied to class. We are familiar with the term " white collar crime" and the fact that this often carries lesser punishment than crime carried out by lower classes.

Marx's theory on alienation can help us understand why people who are ambitious and strive to be successful and therefore work long hours are feeling alienated from society. Workers are told what work they should do, have often no real input on the outcome of the product, often work alone and by doing repetitive work, are alienated from their own human potential. This problem is being addressed by establishing company unions and work societies who represent workers interests and combat alienation, but the industrial capitalist societies as Marx saw them are still evident in many parts of the world today.

Where Marx studied social change from a capitalist angle, Max Weber (1864-1920) considered human ideas, beliefs and values to be the cause of social change. For him, people's ideas have transforming power. He found that modern society is a product of people's way of thinking as opposed to Marx's views that modern technology and capitalism brought about change.

Weber argued that pre-industrial societies' views are mainly traditional, i. e. "sentiments and beliefs passed from generation to generation" (Macdonis & Plummer, p. 1), whereas people in modern societies act rationally, "deliberate matter-of-fact calculation of the most efficient means to accomplish a particular goal" (Macdonis & Plummer, p. 82). He viewed the industrial revolution as a rationalisation of society. "People tried to replace tradition with reason and law as the basis for societal organisation" (Tovey & Share, p. 14). Weber argued that the main form of rationalisation was bureaucracy as a way to control larger organisations.

He also found that industrial capitalism was based on Calvinism, where it is pre-destined, God's will, that some people will do well in this world and that they are given the opportunity to enjoy the materialist, monetary wealth this brings. Like Marx, Weber believed that a problem of industrial capitalism is widespread alienation. But in his view, this was due to disenchantment with the world rather than oppression and false consciousness, i. e. that " social problems are grounded in the shortcomings of individuals rather than the flaws of society" (Macionis & Plummer, p. 78).

We can see Weber's theory that rationality wears away traditional ties of kinship when we look at today's modern societies. There is evidence that family values are decreasing with long working hours and with, in a lot of modern families, both parents being career-orientated. Modern technology has also affected traditional family values. The introduction of TV, stereos, computers, telephones, have all decreased the time we spend in direct personal contact with family members and friends. It can be argued that modern technology has enabled us to carry out tasks quicker and save time, but that extra time is seldom ever spent with family.

Rationalising society has given rise to alienation. We are classed as numbers and cases, rather than individuals. Loss of identity is often the result when we consider large-scale organisations, which, as Weber found, may work very well and efficient in their bureaucratic way, but at the cost of our own individuality. This may be the reason why so many countries do not see modern societies, e. g. Europe and USA as advanced and are therefore not willing to embrace modern technology with all its' problems like alienation.

Emilie Durkheim (1858-1917) viewed society as a structure of social facts. Society has a life of its' own and can shape our thoughts, ideas and actions. Durkheim argued that society makes us who we are. He saw social change due to division of labour. Like Weber, Durkheim argued that in pre-industrial societies, strong tradition was the main societal influence. He added that this tradition bound people together and termed this " collective conscience".

From this he concluded that people of the same social beliefs are part of " mechanical solidarity" i. e. social bonds, based on shared morality, that unite members of pre-industrial societies" (Macionis & Plummer, p. 89). He saw that with the advancement of modernity, this mechanical solidarity was increasingly replaced by " organic solidarity" i. e. " social bonds, based on specialisation, that unite members of industrial societies" (Macionis & Plummer, p. 89). Therefore, this solidarity is based on differences as opposed to likeness. As jobs became more specialised to promote efficiency, we have to rely on others, mainly strangers, to ensure the successful completion of tasks.

This may create a lack of morality, due to the increased freedom people of modern society have. They are no longer held together by strict traditional moral social regulations. Another term which Durkheim coined is " anomie", which is " a condition in which society provides little moral guidance to individuals" (Macionis & Plummer). Fewer restrictions are imposed on people in modern societies and whereas Durkheim acknowledges the advantages of modern freedom, he warned of the negative effect of anomie.

Anomie can be seen in modern society when we look at why some famous, successful, rich people are unhappy, have mental breakdowns and sometimes even commit suicide. Durkheim's study of suicide is very relevant today, as he found that people with little attachment to society (anomie) or over attachment to society are more likely to commit suicide than others. Durkheim saw the decreasing importance on morality as a result of modernisation and we can see its' effect in today's world, e. g. increase in crime and deviance.

This paper has now considered three different theories, which can explain and help us understand industrial capitalist societies and have looked at how these theories are relevant in today's world. We have argued that the advancement of technology, which is at the heart of our modern world, is not necessarily good for our society. It has brought its' own problems, like do we enjoy our high standards of living at the expense of others? Inequality will remain a huge problem. Marx has seen class division to be a major negative result of modernisation.

Weber's view that modern society is wearing away traditional ties and the loss of individualism is evident in today's contemporary world, when we consider social problems like crime, decreasing family values, family structure breakdown etc. Durkheim's theory is that modernity has decreased close moral ties and has led to increased isolation and anomie. There is no question that modern technology has benefited societies in many ways, but the price we have to pay for this technological advancement may be the loss of human community, moral values and beliefs.