

Two concepts of
society are
functionalism and
marxism



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Sociologists approach the study of society in different ways. Two concepts of society are functionalism and Marxism. Functionalists believe that different parts of society work together to keep the society running whereas Marxists believe societies are unequal and unfair. Both concepts differ in their views of how society operates for instance a Marxist would claim that there are only 2 classes and it is very hard to progress up a class whereas a functionalist would disagree and claim the harder you work, the more you achieve and the better your social position.

Functionalism came from Emile Durkheim. Durkheim focused on the Consensus theory. Functionalists believe that the harder you work, the better standard of living you will have and the higher up the social class system you will go. They disregard any differences there are from person to person. They overlook, race, religion social background, gender and age with the strict understanding that where you reach on the social ladder is entirely dependent on the work and effort you put in.

On the other hand, Marxism is understood as the theory and practice of working class self-emancipation. Marxists believe that there are two classes; the Bourgeoisie and the proletariat where class membership depended upon ownership (Bourgeoisie) or non-ownership (Proletariat) of the means of production. These two social classes depend upon each other as a means of employment or as a source of profit.

Functionalists however, believe society works in a similar way to a human body. Every part of society has their own function just like organs in a body, they all need to be fully functioning together to ensure the body/society

maintains health. The human body also grows and develops over time as does society. They also believe that society is more important than the individual and that social control agencies exist in order to keep social order.

For example, the education system socialises us into the culture of society by telling us that a good education and hard work is rewarded. This provides us with our values which support the society. A Marxist would disagree with this view, they see social control agencies being used by the bourgeoisie to control the working class and that education gives people their values which support the bourgeoisie exploitation. For example, in a child's learning life they are taught to strictly obey rules which follow them into working life.

Marxists see society as a hierarchy with the bourgeoisie at the top and the proletariat being at the bottom. They see society aiming towards the benefit of the bourgeoisie. Although the bourgeoisie are a minority in society, they control society by owning the wealth, i. e. the land and the major corporations that generate employment. The social control agencies are there to protect the bourgeoisies and their wealth. The simplest way to describe the way Marxists view society is that the proletariat work for their money and the bourgeoisie's money works for them.

Although both theories are very different they both see crime as coming from society as a whole rather than from the individual. But whereas functionalists see crime as coming from a breach of the shared norms and values of society, Functionalists would see crime as a good thing because it employs police who make people feel safe and secure. Marxists see crime as a breaking of the rules imposed by a ruling minority, the bourgeoisie. For

functionalists laws are created from shared values. For Marxists these laws are not created out of a consensus but by the bourgeoisie to benefit themselves.

Functionalists view a lot of the social control agencies, such as the media, religion and the government, as means for a society to bring social order even if the issues involved are somewhat negative. The clearest way of showing this would be media stories on something very negative, functionalists would see this as a good thing because it brings society together and makes everybody feel they are on the ' same page'.

A. K Cohen conducted a study in 1955 called ' delinquent boys'. It was a study on why a group of boys committed non-utilitarian crimes. He came to the conclusion that because they felt inadequate and lacked status within society, they instead gained respect and status within their gang by committing these crimes. Functionalists would argue that even though these delinquent boys are breaking rules and causing crimes without profit, they still have their place in society. They would say their function is bringing people together by giving a general consensus through the media and other social control agencies that it is not the way to behave, causing people to share the same norms and values. Marxists on the other hand would say they are breaking the rules set by the bourgeoisie and should be punished.

Marxist Ivan Illich's book ' Deschooling society' raises some good arguments. Illich suggests that by closing schools, the bourgeoisie are forcing the proletariat into low society and labour filled jobs, such as factory work or mining, which in turn feeds the bourgeoisie's wealth. This idea goes

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completely against an ideal Functionalist society as they believe that by going through the schooling system, you enable yourself to get a better education to earn a higher wage.

The main similarity between the functionalist theory and the Marxist theory is they both look at the overall structure of society rather than looking at views of the individual. They also both see human behaviour being directed by an external force. For the functionalists, it is functional prerequisites that society is based around, whereas for the Marxists, it's the economic situation and money that affects the way society works. That being said they are both majorly different views on society with the main difference being the class system. In a Marxist society there is a major class difference between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat with no room to transfer between the two. Functionalists on the other hand see class as not so definitive as with the right education you can progress to earn a higher wage regardless of your background.

In conclusion, Marxism is a conflict theory where the bourgeoisie and proletariat are at war with one another constantly and functionalism is a consensus theory where society is in equilibrium and work together as one. People work in harmony such as the healthy look after the sick and the rich look after the poor.

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