

# The development of modern social thought



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Karl Marx and Max Weber are two of the most influential thinkers in terms of modern social thought that there are. Both Marx's and Weber's contribution to the development of social thought is in my opinion second to none. Marx and Weber wrote about modernity before it was in full swing, yet their works including such classics such as Marx's Communist Manifesto which is a familiar name to most, not only attempted to explain something near impossible to explain in such a way that most modern thinkers base their works on a criticism or celebration of their work. These two writers are of particular interest to because of how prolific they are and because they have both written so much on the subject, some of which is comparable and some of which is contrastable. Both Marx and Weber looked at similar themes including the reasons for modernity occurring, though their conclusions differ. Karl Marx leans towards the economic side of modernity whereas Max Weber, who writes after Marx with his findings to improve on, believes that the impact of science, arts, and religion is a better explanation of modernity.

Firstly, I will be looking at Karl Marx's contribution to modern social thought through his book The Communist Manifesto in which he looks at class struggle. In The Communist Manifesto, Marx explains how the friction between classes has always existed, as he remarks " In ancient Rome we have patricians, knights, plebeians, slaves; in the Middle Ages, feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters, journeymen, apprentices, serfs; in almost all of these classes, again, subordinate gradations"[2]. Marx goes on to put forward the idea that the bourgeoisie have always existed and do indeed exist today. He puts class struggle down to society itself which through its nature will have classes, an order. Marx explains today's class struggle as " Society as a

whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes, directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.”[3]Marx’s understanding of class divide in the Communist Manifesto is clearly true and therefore key in understanding society today. Marx’s take on class divide can be summarised as being that class divide has always existed and will exist today, as he predicted, rather than the classes changing, he believes that characteristics of the classes change. Where as in history, the bourgeoisie would have owned farm, they will own businesses today and whereas the proletariats would have worked in farms, today they work for businesses owned by the bourgeoisie. Marx’s understanding of there being two main classes, those in power and those in not, is important in modern social thought as all Marxists will use it to argue that there is a lack of equality and too large a divide between the two classes. Marx does not distinguish between individual situations, rather is a big supporter of the belief that there is no real equality for the proletariat and his voice is therefore used today by anyone voicing such an opinion.

It can be argued that Marx’s prediction of an uprising by the working class has come true in modern times. The working class has never had as many rights as it does today, with measures such as minimum pay and benefits ensuring that an unreasonable amount of power is not held by the ruling class, and that the working class have enough rights and voice to be ensured a decent standard of life. There were plenty of revolutions between the 18thC and 19thC, which are evidence of Marx’s prediction of an uprising against the ruling class. Marx believes that the” proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class”[4]. This can be seen as a contribution to the

understanding of modern society as it is true today, no other classes are seen to be revolting nearly as much as the working class who have been working on their rights for the last few centuries. As Marx also states, the ruling class have all the power and it is in their nature to ensure power is kept for future generations. Marx says that the working class only achieve things such as a minimum wage law because the ruling class allow them to do so, in order to keep them happy and therefore deter them from revolting more.

A significant manner in which Marx contributed to the understanding of modern society is through his explanation of market expansion. Marx's argument was that for the bourgeoisie to remain in power, they must constantly work at creating links between themselves to ensure a global rule[5]. Marx argued in the Communist Manifesto that the future would see a capitalist market grow to operate on a global scale through the increase of technology and communication. This idea has perhaps been the most significant contribution to understanding modern society by Marx. It is clear that what Marx predicted has become reality, with a global economy that we have today, with transnational cooperation operating worldwide. The behaviour of the ruling class in modern society reflects Marx's theory on keeping wealth within the minority of the population. Businesses still work in a hierarchical structure whereby a few at the top benefit from many at the bottom of the hierarchy who do not benefit from increase in profit, rather receive a fixed low wage.

Finally, I have chosen Marx's contribution to the understanding of modern society through his literature on technology. In the Communist Manifesto, <https://assignbuster.com/the-development-of-modern-social-thought/>

Marx looks at the effects of an introduction of technology and how it effects the labour market. The introduction of technology such as machinery ultimately means that a human's job is done by a machine. Robert J. Antonio describes machines as something that ultimately does jobs that " were formerly done by the workman with similar tools"[6]. This will decrease the need for human labour, which will ultimately mean there are more people for fewer jobs. An increase in availability of market labour and a decrease in need for market labour results in the ruling class being at liberty to alter the wages of the workforce. This sees as the workforce become a commodity[7]. Linked with a need for fewer labourers, the type of work changed to less laborious, jobs were suddenly possible to carry out through the pushing of a button. This meant that a new work force was available for the ruling class to be exploited, women and children. This availability of a new workforce meant that the ruling class were more powerful than ever, as the family of a working man had now become the work force of the ruling. An introduction of a new labour force means that the ruling class suddenly controlled everything that matters to a working man, i. e. increasing the divide but more importantly cementing the existing control. The reduction in labour intensity of jobs due to technological and mechanical improvements meant that working hours could be increased. This brought with it an increase in productivity and if anything a reduced cost.

Max Weber was similar to Karl Marx in that he too looked at ancient Rome and the structure of the ancient economy which he, like Marx found to have certain similarities with the structure of modern capitalism. Marx believed that modern society was more of a result of the economic changes that were

seen in the 18thC and 19thC due to technological improvements. However, Weber believed that the change seen after medieval times i. e. modernity, were more so a result in a change of attitude of the world's population.

Weber noticed that if we lived in a capitalist economy before and ended up in medieval times, a change in society could not solely be due to economic change. Thus Weber looked at Eastern German agriculture in 1892. Weber's finding in this research supported his belief that it was through the genuine will power of the proletariat that a change resulted. The findings of this research can be summarised as the work force having a true desire to work for them in order to retain more of the profit created by their work. Weber's believe that the working class chose to want to do better is a key feature of modern society, the constant struggle for workers to better their situation.

Weber's understanding of capitalism, a key foundation of modernity is drastically different to that of Marx. Marx saw capitalism as a materialist economy based upon the will to acquire economic wealth. In contrast, Weber argues that the will to further one's economic standing is based on religious beliefs such as the Protestant and in particular Calvinist teachings[8]. The Protestant teachings are that everything that one does must be done in honour of God. Weber argues that it is this belief that is the cause people striving to do their best, be as productive as possible and generate as much wealth as possible. This dedication to giving everything cannot, according to Weber be " explained by ownership relations, technology and advances in learning alone"[9]. This attitude which Weber believes is a part cause for modernity itself is essential to the further existence of capitalism. In order for capitalism to survive, the working class must continue to have reason to

work hard and be productive, or the ruling class would not be able to live off of them. This need for the work force to try their hardest today and therefore another way in which Weber has contributed to the understanding of modern society. Weber goes on to suggest that the view point of Marx whereby capitalism is a result of solely economic change is "Naive"[10] and should be "abandoned once and for all"[11] this contribution to modern social thought is of interest because it offers an explanation as to why people work hard and how capitalism works i. e. capitalism depends and runs on the quality of input of the labour force.

Max Weber believed that the increase in scientific knowledge was a key factor in creating modernity and modern social thought. Weber described the level of science that we have reached as "valid"[12] but noted that it only existed in the western world[13]. This idea was based upon Weber's belief that such a structured theology was only present in Christianity, though he recognised that most fundamental knowledge did come from eastern faiths. This structured theology could be argued to have been left integrated in the religion from Roman times when a form of capitalism coincided with Christianity. This structured way of thinking brought with it rationality which was in turn branded upon the foundations of western life. It is this rationalism that Weber offers as an alternative cause for modern social thought rather than Marx's suggestion of economics.

To conclude, both Karl Marx and Max Weber have made vast contributions to modern social thought. Their works have been agreed and disagreed with since their creation, adapted and used to both prove and disprove arguments and theories. Their work is still relevant today as their

contribution to understanding modern society such as key issues including class and employment have changed the course of history. Their contribution to modern social thought will continue to influence thinkers on modern social thought for centuries to come.