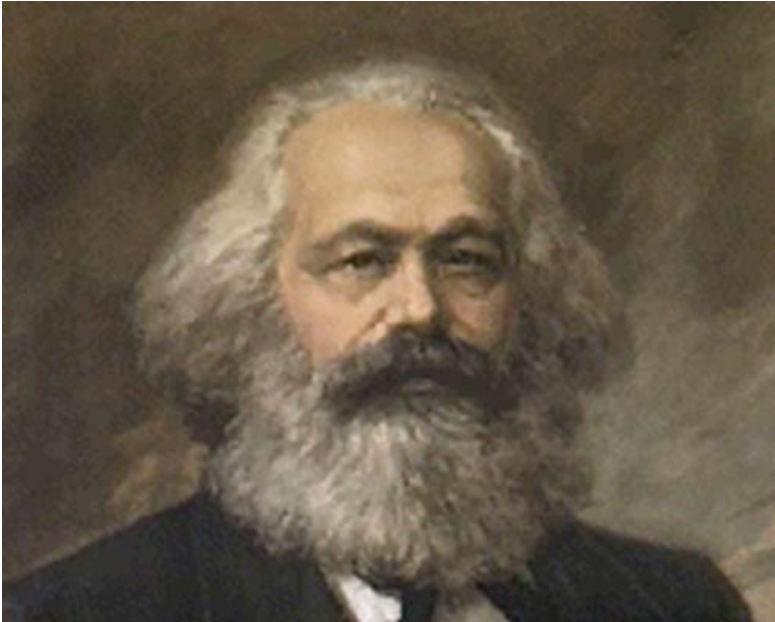


Social Inequality

Unit 04



What are Marxist theories of inequality?

Learning targets:

- Marxism is concerned for the poor and powerless.
- It claims that society is in conflict between the rich who control everything and the poor who must work for the rich and gain little in reward for their work.
- The rich are able to maintain their position of power through control of the law, the police and other forms of authority.
- The rich also control the manufacture of ideas about society through controlling the media and education so poor people are taught to believe that capitalism is a good thing.

Key questions

(AO1) What is the Marxist view of society?

(AO1) What causes inequality according to Marxists?

(AO2) What are the strengths of the Marxist view?

(AO2) What are the weaknesses of the Marxist view of inequality?

Summary of Key Points

Karl Marx (1818 - 1883) was an economist, philosopher and journalist who was motivated by concern for workers who were experiencing terrible poverty while all around was great wealth and power. He was a revolutionary who believed in working for a classless society.

Marxism was not a powerful force in sociology until the 1960s and 1970s when it formed the basis of a challenge to functionalism. It offered a better account of the divisions of society at that time than functional sociology did. Marxism also triggered many of the ideas that were adopted by feminists later in the 1970s.



Marxism is often referred to as a conflict theory.

Functionalists see society as consisting of shared values.

Marxists see society as being divided by conflict between the social groups, or classes who make up society. Marx believed that social change is the natural order of societies. In each form of society there are those who control property and those who work for them. In our society, which he called capitalist, and which is based on industrial production or goods, there are two basic classes of people. These are the bourgeoisie who own property, factories, wealth, technology and knowledge. Those who work for them are the proletariat and they own nothing but their own ability to work.

The bourgeoisie are able to control the proletariat through two mechanisms. These are the direct control through the exercise of power and the indirect control of people's minds through the use of ideology or ideas. It is the second means of control, ideology that is the most dangerous, because people come to accept certain ideas as being true or self-evident without really questioning them. We accept that some people are rich and others poor as being part of daily life and so there are very few challenges to the idea that the greed and selfishness of the rich are acceptable and should be copied by the rest of us.

How do Marxists explain inequality?

Karl Marx was a very prolific writer who changed his views as his life progressed. His most famous work of analysis, *Das Kapital* (or *Capitalism*) was never completed. In addition, Marx was writing about a late Victorian culture and our culture is technologically and socially rather different.



Gramsci

Although many people work within the basic framework of his ideas, there are significant debates and discussion taking place between Marxists who do not agree on the details.

Antonio Gramsci was an Italian journalist and politician who suffered enormous physical hardship before he died in prison under the rule of the Fascist dictator of

Italy, Benito Mussolini in 1937. Gramsci used the term hegemony to describe a culture in which the values of the ruling class become the common sense ideas of a whole culture. People who are part of the working class accept these ideas and instead of challenging the rich, accept their right to rule and to make important decisions for the rest of us. He saw religion as being one of the most important forms of mental control because it teaches people that they should seek reward in heaven and not equality on earth. He also said that if people challenged the dominant ideas, then the state would impose physical social control on people. Inequality exists because the people are led to believe it is inevitable, but once people see through this illusion, then it exists because the state will impose its power on people.

Louis Althusser was a French philosopher and Marxist. He believed that individuals were trained to become part of the capitalist state. Much training is part of the simple process of learning roles, so lawyers are trained as part of the political structure of the state. Althusser claimed that in our society a series of institutions exist whose purpose is to train us to accept the ideas of capitalism. He identified these institutions such as the family, the media, the education system and religion as being part of the Ideological State Apparatus. Their purpose is to work together to create obedient citizens. Althusser also noted the role of Repressive State Apparatus. These are the institutions that impose order, such as the justice system, the police, the law and the army. Inequality exists because the state trains people to accept the ideas that make them slaves to the system.

Althusser



Marx recognised gender inequality, but thought that the solution was to end all inequality and then gender equality would follow from having a better society. Feminists have taken Marxist ideas and have developed them into an analysis that places gender inequalities as being as significant, if not more so, as class inequality. Feminists believe that inequality exists because men oppress women as much as because the rich oppress the poor.

How has Marxism influenced politics in Britain?

There has been a long tradition of socialism in Britain. It originates from before the work of Karl Marx. However, there are very strong similarities between the two sets of ideas. The main difference is that socialism is an agenda for political action whereas Marxism is generally seen a theory to explain society and social relationships. Socialists believe that capitalism creates inequality; it concentrates all the power and wealth into the hands of a very small number of people. These are the oligarchy. Socialists argue that we all need to work for a fair society in which there is equal access to wealth and power. Just as there are debates within the Marxist tradition, there are debates in the socialist tradition as to how equality can be achieved for ordinary people.

Traditionally the Labour party has been associated with socialist policies. In 1945, the Labour Party was elected to power under the leadership of Clement Atlee. It had a strong socialist agenda and policies that would change the nature of the British state. This government set up legislation to set up the Welfare State: education, benefit systems, the Health Service, pensions and unemployment payment. It also nationalised many struggling industries to preserve jobs and improve conditions

for workers: coal mines, gas companies, steel works, telephones, transport and electricity. Less popularly, it oversaw the return of the British Empire to the populations who actually lived in those countries. In the election of 1950, there was a reduced majority and the Labour party were defeated in 1951.

The next influential Labour government was that of Harold Wilson in the early 1960s. It was responsible for a number of social policies such as the legalisation of homosexuality, abortion and the abolition of capital punishment. It pushed for comprehensive schools and also set up the Open University.

In 1979, there was a radical conservative government elected. This was led by Margaret Thatcher and much of the liberal policy of the Attlee government was dismantled. The state run industries were sold off and many people employed in those industries lost their jobs. The miner's strike of the early 1980s was bitterly fought and resulted in the loss of coal mining as an industry in Wales. The wealth that was created by the government was spent on tax refunds to wealthy people in the belief that this would reinvigorate the economy.

In 1997, the Labour Party was re-elected in a landslide victory for Tony Blair. Many people hoped that this would see an end to New Right policies, but in reality, very little changed and many of the policies of the previous conservative government were carried on through into the new government. Whilst the extreme growth in inequality of the early years of Mrs Thatcher's government has been slowed, inequality is still rising slowly.

What have been the equality policies of New Labour?

The Labour Party has developed what is known as the Respect Agenda. They say, 'Our vision is of an equal, inclusive society where there is opportunity for every citizen regardless of gender, disability, sexual orientation, age, race, religion or belief.' The important word in their sentence is opportunity. There is no claim that the wealth inequality that exists in our society will be corrected, because the Labour Party does not see wealth inequality as being an issue. Tony Blair said, on the Newsnight programme in 2001, "The key thing is not... the gap between... the person who earns the most in the country and the person that earns the least... The issue isn't... whether the very richest person ends up becoming richer. The issue is whether the poorest person is given the chance that they don't otherwise have...". New Labour do, however see poverty as a problem that requires attention from government and have targeted some groups for special consideration; the elimination of child poverty is one such target area.

Examples of New Labour legislation include the introduction of the National Minimum Wage. As they point out, two thirds of the beneficiaries are women. The Labour Party believes that this law has played a part in narrowing the pay gap. A new Equality and Human Rights Commission has been created out of a number of different government departments that addressed rights issues: the Commission for Racial Equality for example. This new agency has tackled disability discrimination and now there are strict laws to promote access to public buildings and look after the rights of the disabled. The Labour Party gave homosexuals the right to civil partnerships which

offers legal recognition to same sex couples so that they have the same inheritance, pension and next-of-kin rights as married couples.

The Labour Party has also actively pursued a series of policies known as Welfare to Work. The intention of these policies is to encourage people to take up available work. Benefits are often the target of cuts and they do not rise as quickly as average incomes. In addition many benefits have conditions attached so that if young people do not undertake training and short term work they will lose income. In addition, taxes on very low incomes have been cut, so employers are still able to pay low wages.

The traditional view of the Labour Party was that the state has a role in looking after the weakest individuals. This has given way to a policy direction in which the state supports those people who are able or willing to provide for themselves. The most vulnerable people must prove their need through being tested for eligibility. Benefits and welfare projects are targeted to problem areas. For example, the provision of childcare is promoted to bring women back into the workforce. However deprived families will have access to classes offering childrearing skills to parents. It is claimed that such classes will give children the skills and experience they need to succeed in compulsory education.

It is argued that these policies may be effective in some parts of the country, but there are large areas of the UK where work is not easily available for people. The intention of many of New Labour policies appear to be in order to keep the numbers claiming benefits small so that the bill for the tax payer is kept at a minimum. Stuart Hall, the famous sociologist and Marxist thinker claims that this is leading to a two tier society where some people have access to goods and services, but others are trapped in inescapable poverty. He claims that as richer people opt out of the welfare state, so it will become a second class service that only the very poor will use.

What is the Marxist Perspective on class?

Marxists, more than any other perspective, embrace the concept of social class. Karl Marx said all societies (with the exception of primitive hunter/gatherers) are divided along class lines. Rather than defining class by occupation, Marx adopted an economic definition based on people's relationship to the means of production. According to Marx there are always just two classes. The dominant class own the means of production (factories, mines, mills etc.) whereas the subordinate class owns nothing except its labour power. This is known as a dichotomous or two-part view of society.

These two classes are interdependent but their interests never coincide and are in conflict with each other: the dominant class benefits from society remaining as it is, the subordinate class benefits from change so that it is no longer oppressed. In capitalism these two classes are the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Because the dominant bourgeoisie class exploits the proletariat, class conflict inevitably exists, although this is not always recognised; resulting in a state of false consciousness.

False (class) consciousness occurs because economic power leads to political and social power. The economically dominant class is also the ruling class and shapes society through developing ideas (bourgeois ideology) through education, politics and especially the media that reflect their interests. Through socialisation, ideology and social control the ideas of the ruling class are internalised and accepted by ordinary people denying them awareness of their true class consciousness as an exploited group.

Marx correctly predicted that the peasantry, a legacy of preceding feudal system, would become smaller and less relevant to the central conflict of the capitalist order. He said that the rich would get richer as the poor got poorer, and this is known as polarisation as the two classes moved away from each other in terms of power and wealth. However, the greatest flaw in his analysis is a failure to foresee the growth of a middle class.

Traditional Marxists would argue that economically the middle classes are wage slaves, who sell their labour to the bourgeois capitalist class; these are no different from any other member of the proletariat. However, Weberian sociologists would argue there is a crucial status difference between middle-class managerial and professional workers and the manual workers of the working class. Sociologists have written in-depth of cultural differences between the social classes in terms of values, attitudes and behaviours. Such differences are largely academic to Marxists who emphasise the relational basis of class: that is to the means of production as paramount and the bottom line to making sense of how society operates.

The Marxist view of class has been criticized for its overemphasis upon its relational 'class consciousness' to the means of production. However, even Marx himself recognized this with the concept of 'false consciousness'. Others have portrayed Marx's two-part (dichotomous) view of society as simplistic and for ignoring the fact that reality is much more complex. The development of capitalism has not confirmed this picture of polarization and dichotomisation, but rather within the twenty-first century the sub-division and splitting up of classes (fragmentation and diversification) that Max Weber predicted. Postmodernists go even further, talking about the death of class altogether as a meaningful concept. Finally, feminists have criticised Marxist analysis as 'malestream' seeing class exploitation as the key issue that ignores other forms of exploitation, such as gender and race, as invisible.

What are Neo-Marxist Models of Class?

Marx predicted that capitalism would be overthrown as the workers revolted against their masters and created a class free society. He thought this would happen in his own lifetime, or shortly after his death. This has clearly not happened, and certainly not in Britain or Germany where Marx thought the revolution against capitalism would begin. This leaves many who accept Marxist analyses of society as being basically correct with a problem. They are required to explain why the predicted worker's revolution has never taken place. This means that they have adapted and developed Marxist ideas to explain why his predictions were incorrect. These adapted forms of Marxism are known as neo-Marxist.

Whilst many agree that Marx's model of a two-class society was a fairly accurate description of the nineteenth century capitalism he lived in, it is over-simple for the complex capitalism we live in today. Even some neo-Marxists, such as Harry Braverman and Erik Wright, have recognized that high-status white-collar employees constitute an 'intermediary class' having features in common with both the bourgeoisie and proletariat.

Braverman developed a classification of social class in the 1970s which he felt reflected modern American society. He firstly differentiated between large-scale bourgeoisie and small-scale bourgeoisie, but most significantly recognised upper-middle class occupations as an 'intermediate' class between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. His class model resembles a triangle with the bourgeoisie at the very top, and with managers and technicians forming a middle group between the capitalist classes and the true working class at the base of the triangle.



Olin Wright

Erik Olin Wright says that managers and supervisors have factors in common with the bourgeoisie since they are responsible for controlling the workforce in a way that maximises the return for capital, yet at the same time, they are employees and as wage slaves are subject to exploitation by capital. The self-employed do not have wage slave status but are vulnerable to the exploitation by the capitalist class (bourgeoisie). Small employers may be viewed as small capitalists and exploit the workers they employ, but Wright argued they too occupy a contradictory class location because they are vulnerable to power of larger capitalists. Finally, semi-autonomous workers, such as university lecturers who can exercise considerable control over their work activities such as when and how they do their research, are included because their class position is also within both modes of production simultaneously.

The work of neo-Marxists, Braverman and Wright have gone some way to address the criticisms of the traditional Marxist approach to class by recognising the intermediate and contradictory position of the middle classes. In addition, their neo-Marxist analysis of class and exploitation manages to touch upon many aspects of contemporary capitalism. Despite the Postmodernist view that class is dead, political divisions still often reflect class divisions. The impact of globalisation on domestic employment may lead to deskilling and pauperisation anticipated by Marx.

What should you have in your folder of notes on this topic? (AO1)

Key concepts

Define the key concepts and ideas.

Bourgeoisie
Conflict view of society
Hegemony
Ideological state apparatus
Ideology
Malestream
Marxism
Nationalisation
Oligarchy
Proletariat
Radical
Repressive state apparatus
Respect Agenda
Revolutionary
Sexual orientation
Socialism
Targeted benefits
Welfare state

Independent study

Compulsory

- Make separate revision cards for each of the researchers and theories mentioned in these notes
- Create a list of the strengths of Marxism, using textbooks and the Internet to help.
- Create a list of weaknesses and criticisms of Marxist views of inequality using textbooks and the Internet to help

Extension work

- Create revision cards for the new language that you are learning.
- Create a mind map or poster to promote Marxist ideas and explain them in simple terms
- Use a textbook to find out more about Braverman and Olin Wright.

Useful websites and sources of information (AO1):

All of the Sociology textbooks in the LRC will have a large amount of material on this topic and you should read as much as you can.

You should use the website of the NGfL Cymru and look at the ebook to develop your notes

<http://www.ngfl-cymru.org.uk/sociology-as-ebook-a2>

With all the usual warnings, Wikipedia has a detailed page on Marxism

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxism>

There is a YouTube video on Marxism, and you might want to read the discussion forum as well

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ztVeUX8Hpo>

Here's a biography of Karl Marx on a history site <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/marx.html>

You can download the Communist Manifesto, written by Marx and Engels as audio or text. It's easier to understand than you would expect and is fascinating to think about

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/>

Here's a page of quotes from Marxist writing

http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/k/karl_marx.html

Here's Youtube material based on a Radio 4 programme about Marxism

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7lgXteZ4g0>

Answer these questions in your notes

1. Explain the term 'conflict view of society'.
2. How is capitalist society organised?
3. How do rich people (the bourgeoisie) maintain their control over the workers (the proletariat)?
4. Why are there disagreements within Marxist thought as to the cause of inequality?
5. What do all Marxists share in common when thinking about inequality?
6. To what extent do we accept the ideas of the powerful without challenging them?
7. Summarise the principles of the socialism.
8. What criticisms can be made of socialist thinking?
9. Suggest reasons why socialist policy is sometimes unpopular with people?
10. How has New Labour attempted to solve issues of poverty in the UK?
11. Is it the role of the state to look after the weakest and poorest people?
12. Are the equality policies of New Labour Marxist in intention?
13. What is meant by Marxists having a relational view of class?
14. Why can the interests of the two social classes never coincide?
15. How is false consciousness promoted in society?
16. Are there significant differences between the middle class and the working class?
17. How can the middle class be viewed as an intermediate class?
18. What did Wright mean by 'contradictory class location'?

Outline and evaluate Marxist explanations of social inequality.

Essay Plan

Explain theory, concepts, issues or key debates. Say what you mean by key terms. Indicate probable conclusion
Strength 1 of theory explained
Strength 2 of theory explained
Strength 3 of theory explained
However
Weakness 1 of theory explained
Weakness 2 of theory explained
Weakness 3 of theory explained
Wrap the essay into a final conclusion related to the command that was given

Research Methods

As an A level Sociologist, you have been to discover qualitative differences between how working class and middle class students see their class position.

Suggest a simple research design and justify your choices. Explain the difficulties that you might experience in carrying out your design and suggest how you would avoid them

The design	The justification	The problems
Operationalise key terms		
Select the method		
Ethical considerations		
Sample population and procedure		
Pilot study		
Process of research		
Analysis of results		