2. Which theorist is most applicable to understanding work today, Marx, Weber or Durkheim?

"We often associate the notion of work with drudgery – with a set of tasks that we want to minimize and if possible escape from altogether." (Giddens, 2001: 375) Many of today's working class would probably agree, however Karl Marx views work as the means through which individual creativity may be expressed and explored. Seeing as Marx felt so strongly about work, his theory of capitalism recognized and thus criticized the dehumanizing effects and exploitative nature of work in capitalist societies. His theory is generally applicable to the understanding of work today, however after having thoroughly studied and understood his theory, I felt that he overemphasized the effect of a society's economic structure on social life. Nevertheless Marx's theory on capitalism applies to many major aspects of work today and appreciates more than other theorists, problems faced by today's division of labour. Marx, unlike Durkheim, appreciates the negative as well as the positive aspects that the division of labour imposes on work. Although it maximises productivity, Marx argues that it leads to the separation of individuals and the generation of power struggles. "Thus the existence of the division of labour means the dislocation of the human essence [and] the creation of humanity against itself" (Cuff, 1998: 17)

The change in the occupational structure in society today is based on the premise of the division of labour. Marx, unlike Durkheim, appreciates the negative as well as the positive aspects that the division of labour imposes on work. Although it maximises productivity, Marx argues that it leads to the separation of individuals and the generation of power struggles. "Thus the existence of the division of labour means the dislocation of the human essence [and] the creation of humanity against itself" (Cuff, 1998: 17)

As Marx explained, the problem that arises due to a division of labour is the division between those who do the physical work and those who engage in 'speculative thinking'. (Cuff, 1998) Those who do the thinking appear to be doing the valuable work while the workers doing the physical production are ignored. Consequently, the former group, portraying themselves as more important, gain larger proceeds than those who do the physical work. It's important to note, however, that Marx does not argue that thinking is not important. He agrees that it is involved in the labour process however he argues that ultimately, the physical part is less valued. This appears to be occurring in work today, therefore is transformed into a capitalist society (one similar to the society we live in today), as Marx explained it would, has altered many aspects of society, including the notion of freedom. It is said that capitalism provides workers with the choice of work but this is an illusion because people are controlled by money. Increasingly, our lives revolve around money as very little is possible without it. Thus workers may legally be free but due to their desperate need for work, they are coerced by the owners of the means of production' into exploitative work.

As Marx argued, although capitalism is said to be mutually beneficial to the worker and the owner, in reality it isn't. Owners earn more than the workers performing the physical tasks and this is what appears to be occurring in the world today. (Noble, 2000) Marx argues against those who do not work saying their 'achievements and privileges are acquired at the expense of other human beings.' (Cuff, 1998: 18) This is true of owners of large firms today who simply enjoy the profits, but do little or no work in reality. This issue of inequality arouses

Therefore less value is placed on physical work today. Workers who engage in this, as Marx explained, earn half of what 'thinkers' earn.

conflicts due to opposition between different social groups. The capitalist class (or the owners of the means of production), as Marx refers to them, and the working class have different economic interests. (Cuff, 1998) While an employee is concerned with earning to make a living, the employer is simply concerned with employing cheap labour to minimise costs and thus maximise profits, and with achieving a powerful position in society. Therefore workers and owners will never reconcile this conflict of interests.

Work today has taken on a different meaning than in the past. Marx helps us understand it more clearly using the labour theory of value developed by British economists. The theory states that 'all forms of wealth, created for purposes of exchange, get their value from the work put into producing them' (Kettle, 1963: 32). It distinguishes between use (or intrinsic)-value and exchange-value. In the past use-value was important. People simply exchanged objects or used money to exchange goods however, in capitalist societies, exchange value is prioritised. Capitalists aim to turn commodities into money. In other words, owners are generating wealth out of human labour. For example, production by labour is exchanged for an unequal exchange of wages. Capitalists trade of workers work and the desires (of consumers) are satisfied based on the amount of money the consumers are willing to pay. This is displayed in societies today where dominance lies with those with the most money. Hence Marx argues that exchange value is dangerous and increasingly, everything will be dominated by exchange value, that creates value, arguing that it should not be reduced to exchange value because we are purchasing an individual's time and generating use value out of it. Today it often appears as though labour is reduced to its exchange value and exploited through a concept that Marx defines as surplus value. In such a situation, 'capitalists' try to generate as much surplus value (or extra work time) in order to earn more profit. This is done using either of two approaches; one is by means of increasing absolute surplus value which involves extending labour work hours, the other is by increasing relative surplus value which is achieved by increasing the productivity of work. Marx refers to the rate of surplus value as the 'rate of exploitation'. (Mclellan, 1975) The rate of surplus value is one of struggles between capitalists and workers. Capitalists are constantly trying to increase it and evidently this is done through the exploitation of workers.

The extend of private ownership in wage labour is made evident in the labour theory of value. Marx classified labour as a unique commodity, that creates value, arguing that it should not be reduced to exchange value because we are purchasing an individual's time and generating use value out of it. Today it often appears as though labour is reduced to its exchange value and exploited through a concept that Marx defines as surplus value. In such a situation, 'capitalists' try to generate as much surplus value (or extra work time) in order to earn more profit. This is done using either of two approaches; one is by means of increasing absolute surplus value which involves extending labour work hours, the other is by increasing relative surplus value which is achieved by increasing the productivity of work. Marx refers to the rate of surplus value as the 'rate of exploitation'. (Mclellan, 1975) The rate of surplus value is one of struggles between capitalists and workers. Capitalists are constantly trying to increase it and evidently this is done through the exploitation of workers.

Another factor leading to the exploitation of workers in societies today is continuous competition. Competition is resulting in fewer firms dominating global production and ownership is becoming concentrated. This again has led to exploitation. Although competition undoubtedly leads to more innovation and the production of numerous new products, ultimately, it is all made possible by our willingness to pay. This is a current issue in the world today where firms are continuously producing new products and providing advanced, convenient services in order to attract potential consumers. The result is that consumers are manipulated into purchasing desired commodities rather than necessities. In addition, the division of labour becomes increasingly

complex as workers are de-skilled. This is carried out in order to maximise productivity using cheap labour and to create new world markets, as in the case with McDonalds. Therefore capitalists are in constant search for global markets and cheap labour to facilitate production at the expense of workers.

As Marx believed, the exploitation of workers or the conflict of interests between owners and workers leads to a sense of alienation from aspects of our lives. To Marx, productive work was the time during which humans expressed their individual creativity and achieved their potential; however after the development of industrial societies in the 19th century that notion of human essence changed. Work became a mere means to survival. It became unpleasant and simply a bother. This concept, known as alienation is defined as 'the separation of human beings from their very essence'. (Cuff, 1998) Workers become alienated from the product therefore they become unconcerned with what it is they are producing. As long as they are earning the money, it is meaningless to them. This distorts Marx's idea of human essence. In addition, they become alienated from their work. It loses its artistic sense and becomes unrewarding. It is purely done for the sake of survival. At the same time, we, as members of industrial society lose our sense of humanity. For example, when purchasing food from McDonalds, people behave selfishly. They are only concerned with the food to be consumed and not with all the workers that are unfairly paid and injured in order to produce such cheap food (Schlosser, 2002). Therefore in an industrial world, we lose sight of many humanitarian considerations. Finally, members of society also face alienation from our community. In my opinion, Marx's theoretical interpretation of capitalism coincides well with the society and the workforces that we encounter today. In my opinion, his focus on the treatment of human labour is fundamental to understanding work today. Nevertheless, Marx's thought overemphasizes the economic structure of society and its influential role on social life. I agree that as a result of competition, innovation and several other capitalistic features in society, many have become increasingly economic-minded and work has had de-humanising effects on many of us, however, for some, work is still an expression of individual creativity. Despite that, I found that I agreed with most of Marx's theory and developed a better and a more realistic understanding of work today. Although I agree with Weber's theory of rationalisation and feel that his interpretation of capitalism is somewhat similar to Marx's, I feel as though Weber neglected to focus adequately on the issue of the exploitation of work today. Marx seemed to appreciate the most the essence of human labour.

People's relationships revolve around money and the exchange involved between members of society. Our social community has very little importance in many of our lives. Eventually humans begin to behave like economic animals.

Bibliography

Bottomore T. (1979) *Karl Marx*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford

Cuff E.C., Sharrock W.W., Francis D.W. (1998) *Perspectives in Sociology*, Routledge, London, 4th edition

Giddens A. (2001) *Sociology*, Polity Press, United Kingdom, 4th edition

Kettle A. (1963) *Karl Marx*, Pathfinder Biographies, Great Britain

McLellan D. (1975) *Marx*, Fontana Press, Great Britain, 2nd edition

Noble, T. (2000) *Social Theory and Social Change*, Macmillan Press Ltd, London

Schlosser, E. (2002) *Fast Food Nation*, Penguin Group, London

Watson, T.J. (1995) *Sociology Work and Industry*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, London, 3rd edition