

## Describe and analyse briefly three major trends of sociological theories

Sociological theories and perspectives seek to explain or understand the way in which society functions. (Haralambos 1995, p7) defines a sociological theory as “a set of ideas that claims to explain how society or aspects of society work”. This essay will examine the similarities and differences between three of the main theories Functionalism, Marxism and Interactionism. All three are traced back to theories adopted by sociologists in the nineteenth century. Marxism came from the German philosopher Karl Marx (1818-1883); Functionalism was originally derived by Auguste Comte (1798-1857). It was then developed further by Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and Interactionism was developed by Max Weber (1864-1920).

Each theoretical approach has to some extent been shaped or influenced by the approach of others and many sociological perspectives display marked similarities, or a range of differences that can be traced to a reaction against previously held ideas. It would be foreseeable that such a broad subject as sociology should give rise to a variety of approaches: it would be impossible to categorise the vast amount of social change that has occurred over centuries by attempting to apply a single theoretical approach.

Functionalism, or structural consensus, was developed as a concept by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim. He believed, like Comte on whose work he drew, that sociology should be viewed as a precise science, and that a sociologist should approach their work with an open mind (value freedom), and that society should be studied objectively. Durkheim was himself one of the first sociologists to make use of scientific and statistical techniques in sociological research. Durkheim placed great emphasis on ‘social facts’ which he saw as ‘ways of acting, thinking or feeling that are external to individuals and have their own reality outside the lives and perceptions of individual people.’ This is also known as the macro approach, and places a greater emphasis on the structure of society and detracts from the individual who operates within that society. To illustrate this viewpoint, Durkheim used the ‘organic analogy’ of the human body. In order for the whole (body) to flourish and prosper, all parts (organs) must work cooperatively and efficiently. The desirable end product would be, he argued, the body as the structure of society in perfect harmony – maintaining order and stability which would arise from the socialisation of individuals into a value consensus. The ‘social facts’ on which Durkheim places such emphasis on have a ‘coercive power’ – they mould the individual.

Marx on the other hand stresses that the links which bind sectors of society are economic and linked to the modes of production. Social conflict is created by the differing interests of competing social groupings, known as classes. A writer in the Marxist tradition would emphasise that the links between groupings within society are very weak and marked by very diverse interests of each particular group. Marxists argue that the functionalist view is a misapprehension to think of modern society as one which is in a continuous state of harmony. On the contrary, every society is characterised by continuous conflict. There exists a struggle between the various groups and classes of society. The struggle for power, prestige and economics goods gives rise to competition between the various sectors of society. Therefore, what we consider as society is the outcome of this continuous social conflict.

Like Functionalism, Marxism places emphasis on society as an external structure and shows the individual as contained by that structure, but whereas from the functionalist perspective social structure can be seen as a unified caring influence, from the Marxist perspective it is seen as a troublesome and malicious influence. If the starting point of the two approaches is the same, the way in which the ideas of each are explored and expressed is completely opposite.

For example functionalism views the social institution of the family, which offers the twin ideologies of primary socialisation and personality stabilisation, as central to the maintenance of society, as the heart within the body. The Marxist perspective rejects this idea, seeing the family as a continuation of the imbalance of power by producing unequal relationships and suppressing the individual as well as maintaining the major ideology of the ruling class. Functionalism views education, which becomes linked with the family, as maintaining social structure through what has been called 'secondary socialisation' of children into the desirable set of values, norms and customs – i.e. a state of value consensus. Durkheim himself wrote extensively about education, calling the school environment a 'society in miniature' which introduces children to and prepares them for the adult world. On the other hand a Marxist perspective would take the view that this discounts the vast amount of conflict inherent within society, and that it is not a value consensus which is being reached, but a state of oppression and once again the continuation of the dominant ideology, where children learn their obedience to capitalism.

Functionalists as opposed to Marxists dispute that social balance is achieved, most importantly, through the socialisation of members of the society into the basic values and norms of that society, so that compromise (consensus) is reached. Where socialisation is insufficient for some

reason to create conformity to culturally appropriate roles and socially supported norms, various social control mechanisms exist to restore conformity or to separate the nonconforming individuals from the rest of society. These social control mechanisms range from sanctions imposed informally (sneering and gossip, for example) to the activities of certain formal organisations, like schools and prisons.

Marx concentrated more on the conflict that arises between different social classes. Marx defined conflict as 'the motor of history' and is quoted as saying 'All human history thus far is the history of class struggles.' Marx believed that what ultimately shaped society and in turn controlled the individual was economic power, and that all other social institutions were influenced by it. Although Marx was discussing history in general he referred particularly to modern times and the rise of the Industrial Revolution that had generated massive and radical social change. The most important stages for Marx's argument were feudalism, capitalism, and socialism. For Marx, the central institution of capitalist society is private property, the system by which capital (that is, money, machines, tools, factories, and other material objects used in production) is controlled by a small minority of the population. This arrangement leads to two opposed classes, the owners of capital (called the bourgeoisie) and the workers (called the proletariat), whose only property is their own labour time, which they have to sell to the capitalists.

Finally, symbolic Interactionism has led on from Weber's theories on the superiority of bureaucracy. Unlike Functionalism and Conflict theory Symbolic Interactionism is a micro perspective, unlike macro perspectives (Looks at the whole of society) micro perspectives function at an individual level of social interaction.

Weber believed that individuals were the key to society. He developed social action theory, the purpose of which was to find out why individuals function in certain ways. He thought that every social action performed by an individual had a meaning attached to it. Social actions are the result of conscious thought processes that take into consideration the reactions of other individuals. Weber identified four types of social action which include, reason (an instrumentally rational or calculated action), value or rational action (determined by belief), emotion or effectual action (dependent upon the feelings of the individual), and traditional action (determined by habit).

In order to investigate society and the role of the individual within it, Weber developed a method of understanding called Verstehen. There are two types of Verstehen. Aktuelles Verstehen is a process of direct observation, and Erklarendes Verstehen, which is a process by which you try to understand the motives of the individual from their own perspective. The main concept of Verstehen is to look at society through the eyes of the individual to try to interpret things in a similar manner to which they would themselves.

Interactionists tend to study social interaction through observation, rather than surveys and interviews. They argue that close contact and interest in the everyday lives of the participants is necessary for understanding the meaning of actions, the definition of the situation itself, and the process by which individuals construct the situation through their interaction.

Verstehen has various criticisms. It is possible that observation may be influenced by personal bias. Direct observation also requires prior knowledge of the culture being studied. Also, Verstehen assumes that people in society rationally consider their actions, which may not always be the case.

Weber believed that class would diversify (instead of the polarisation that Marx predicted) and that society would become increasingly fragmented. He thought that ownership of goods, wealth or skills was more important than the ownership of the means of production. These properties could be exchanged for money in the economic market – he was of the opinion that this position in the economic market place determined class position so that in theory there would be as many class positions as economic positions. Therefore the class structure of society is essentially an occupation structure.

Social action theory recognises other divisions apart from simply class and also recognises that consumption of goods (by which status groups are stratified) is just as important as the production (by which class is stratified). It also draws attention to the importance of the individual and their conscious actions. It does not however place enough emphasis on class divisions, as it tends to concentrate more on status.

Sociological perspectives can 'borrow' from each other or react against each other – for example, much of feminist sociology can be linked to Marxism. Difference in opinion is inextricably linked to the human capacity for social change, and the need to explore and explain. What was applicable to the society which Marx was discussing might not necessarily be

applicable to another type of society. Each different society should be examined objectively and from a basis of 'value freedom'.

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