

Marxism

An Introduction

Ruth's Sociology Resources

Marxism – the basics

- Karl Marx – founder – 19thC
- Many different versions and thinkers
 - Has developed into neo-Marxism
- Marxism is a Structuralist theory and a Conflict theory

Society

is based on economic production & can be split into
2 parts:

■ Economic Base

- The Economy is the basis of society – what society is built upon
- Modes of production – how things are produced
- Relations of production – who has power
- These are interlinked and change over time

■ Superstructure

- Made up of the other aspects of society
 - Education, politics, value systems, family
- These are determined by the economic base – they are moulded to fit it and to keep the economy working

Conflict

Conflict is built into society:

- Production by many v. collection of profits by a few
 - **Proletariat** v. **Capitalists/bourgeoisie**
 - There is a conflict of interests between these groups
 - Workers are not paid the full value of their labour, allowing the capitalists to make profits
 - **Exploitation** – the proletariat are therefore exploited, they get less than they give
 - Marxists argue that ownership of the means of production should be collective rather than private, as private ownership leads to conflict between the “haves” and “have-nots”

Maintenance of Exploitation

So why don't the proletariat rebel against exploitation?

- The ruling class keep power through their use of a **Ruling class ideology**
 - They impose their norms & values on society
 - They create a **false consciousness** through socialisation
 - So the proletariat believe that they have equality and freedom and that society is meritocratic
 - This is where the role of the superstructure comes in:
 - Institutions like Education and Religion teach people the ruling class ideology

Change

- There have been changes in modes of production through history
 - From cottage to factory production, from factories to service industries
- New modes of production = new relations of production
- Marxists believe that Ruling class ideology can only slow down the disintegration of capitalist society and that the proletariat will eventually rebel
 - This will lead to the creation of a socialist society where there is collective ownership and equality

Problems

- Economic Determinism
 - Marxism assumes that everything in society is based on the economy and production
- Over-emphasis on class conflict
 - Is it really that severe?
- Over-emphasis on the working class
- No revolution??
 - The proletariat have not yet rebelled
- Failure of communism?
 - Communist states have failed and returned to capitalist systems

Further reading

- Sociology in Perspective, Kirby et al (2000) pp.505-508
- Introducing Sociology for AS Level, Browne, K. (2002) pp.13-16
- Sociology in Focus, Taylor, P. et al (1995)
 - pp.15-16
- Sociology Themes and Perspectives, Haralambos & Holborn (1995, 2000)
 - Ch.1 – section on Marxism