

# The Key Ideas of Marx and Durkheim

## You must be able to:

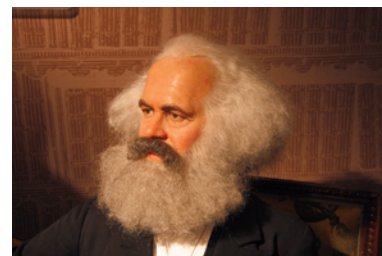
- Describe the key ideas of Karl Marx
- Describe the key ideas of Emile Durkheim
- Outline the criticisms of Marxism and the functionalist approach.

## The Key Ideas of Karl Marx

- Karl Marx's ideas inspired the Marxist perspective, or **Marxism**. He wrote at an early stage in the development of **capitalism** and wanted to explain the **social changes** taking place at that time.
- Marx argued that to understand the development of societies, it is necessary to examine how people produce the things they need to subsist. The term 'mode of production' refers to the way people produce the means of their subsistence.
- Marx identified two key aspects of a mode of production: the **means of production** and the social relations of production.
  - The means of production are the materials that people use in production. Under the **capitalist** mode of production, these include capital, big businesses, machinery, factories and land.
  - The social relations of production are the relationships between people as they engage in production. Under capitalism, the two main social classes are the **bourgeoisie** and the **proletariat**.

### Social Classes under Capitalism

- The bourgeoisie – the capitalist or ruling class – own the means of production and private property.
- The proletariat – the working class – own nothing other than their ability to work as wage labourers.
- Other classes include the **petty bourgeoisie**, who own small businesses, and the **lumpenproletariat**, the 'dropouts' who sometimes sell their services to the bourgeoisie.
- The bourgeoisie exploit the proletariat by profiting from their labour. Marx argued that the gap in the resources of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat would widen over time. The petty bourgeoisie would be unable to compete with bigger companies and would sink into the proletariat.
- Marx argued that the **class struggle** between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie was the key to social change. Eventually, members of the proletariat would come to see themselves as a social class with common interests and would overthrow the capitalist class. This would lead to a period of social revolution and the move to **communism**.
- Under communism, the means of production would be held communally rather than by a minority. In this situation, there would be a **classless society** with neither private ownership nor exploitation.

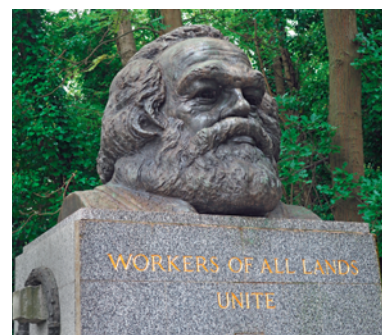


### Key Thinker

Karl Marx (1818–1883)

### Key Point

Capitalism is an economic system in which private owners of capital invest money in businesses to make a profit. Marx was critical of capitalism and wanted a fair society.



## Criticisms of Marx

- Marx saw social class as based on economic divisions. However, critics argue that class is also based on status (social standing or prestige) differences between groups.
- Marx overlooked social divisions based on gender and ethnicity.
- Critics argue that a revolution has not occurred in capitalist societies such as Britain and that Marx's ideas are now outdated.

## The Key Ideas of Émile Durkheim

- Durkheim was a main figure in the origins of **functionalism**.
- Functionalism sees society as made up of different parts that fit together. It examines institutions such as the family, education and religion in terms of their functions, that is, the job they perform to help society run smoothly. These institutions meet the needs of society by performing functions to ensure its survival.
- Durkheim studied crime, religion and education by focusing on the functions they fulfil in meeting the needs of society.
  - For example, the punishment of criminals has an important function in helping to bring people together. Punishment reinforces the values and beliefs that the majority of people in society hold. By binding people together in this way, crime can contribute to **social cohesion**.



Punishing criminals can bind the majority of law-abiding people together.

## Criticisms of the Functionalist Approach

- Functionalism overlooks the dysfunctional (or negative) aspects of things like crime and religion. In reality, crime and religion do not always perform positive functions for society.
- Critics argue that functionalist theories are now outdated.

### Quick Test

1. Identify one difference between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.
2. Identify one function of punishment, according to Durkheim.

### Key Thinker

Émile Durkheim  
(1858–1917)

### Key Point

Marx and Durkheim are two of the founders of sociology. They wrote during times of rapid social and economic change (such as the development of capitalism and industrialisation) and their work attempts to make sense of these changes. It is important that you are familiar with their key ideas and perspectives.

### Key Words

Marxism  
capitalism  
social changes  
means of production  
capitalist  
bourgeoisie  
proletariat  
petty bourgeoisie  
lumpenproletariat  
class struggle  
communism  
classless society  
functionalism  
social cohesion