

Classical Sociological Theories

Classical Sociological Theories – Study Notes

1. Overview

Classical sociological theory refers to the foundational ideas developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that shaped the discipline. The three most influential thinkers are **Karl Marx**, **Émile Durkheim**, and **Max Weber**. Their work addresses the nature of society, the sources of social order and change, and the methodological approaches for studying social life.

2. Karl Marx (1818–1883)

2.1 Core Concepts

Concept	Meaning
Historical Materialism	Society's development is driven by material (economic) forces; the mode of production shapes social structures, ideas, and institutions.
Mode of Production	Combination of forces of production (technology, labor) and relations of production (class relationships).
Class Conflict	History is a struggle between classes with opposing interests (e.g., bourgeoisie vs. proletariat).
Alienation	Workers become estranged from the product of their labor, the act of work, their fellow workers, and their own humanity under capitalism.
Base? Superstructure Model	The economic "base" (production) determines the cultural, political, and ideological "superstructure".
Revolution & Communism	Contradictions within capitalism will lead to proletarian revolution and a classless, stateless society.

2.2 Key Works

- *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) – co-authored with Friedrich Engels.
- *Capital* (1867–1883) – analysis of capitalist economics.

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2.3 Methodological Approach

- **Dialectical Materialism** – a dynamic, contradictory process; uses a macro-level, historical analysis.
 - Emphasis on **social forces** rather than individual agency.
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3. Émile Durkheim (1858-1917)

3.1 Core Concepts

Concept	Meaning
Social Fact	Ways of acting, thinking, and feeling external to the individual and coercive; must be studied objectively.
Collective Conscience	Shared beliefs and moral attitudes that bind a society together.
Anomie	A state of normlessness that arises when social regulation is weak or conflicting; linked to deviance and suicide.
Mechanical vs. Organic Solidarity	<i>Mechanical</i> : cohesion through similarity (traditional societies). <i>Organic</i> : cohesion through interdependence (modern, differentiated societies).
Division of Labor	Functional differentiation that creates social integration but can also generate alienation.

3.2 Key Works

- *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893)
- *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895)
- *Suicide* (1897) – first major empirical study linking social integration to individual behavior.

3.3 Methodological Approach

- **Positivist** – seeks empirical, systematic observation.
 - Uses **comparative statistics** and **case studies** to identify patterns in social facts.
 - Emphasizes **social cohesion** and **institutional functions**.
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4. Max Weber (1864-1920)

4.1 Core Concepts

Concept	Meaning
Verstehen (Interpretive Understanding)	The researcher must grasp the subjective meanings actors attach to their actions.
Ideal Type	An analytical construct that abstracts essential features of a phenomenon for comparative purposes.
Rationalization	The process by