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Q2(b)

Highlight the main features of historical materialism as propounded by Marx. How far is this theory relevant in understanding contemporary societies? Explain

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx

Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx - Historical materialism, mode of production, alienation, class struggle; Emile Durkheim - Division of labour, social fact, suicide, religion and society; Max Weber - Social action, ideal types, authority, bureaucracy, protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism; Talcott Parsons - Social system, pattern variables; Robert K. Merton - Latent and manifest functions, conformity and deviance, reference groups; Mead - Self and identity.

Core demand of the question

- **State Marx's historical materialism:** base, superstructure, modes of production, class struggle, dialectics
- **Show contemporary relevance:** global capitalism, informal labour, digital platforms, ecology if tight
- **State limits:** reductionism, culture, gender, the state
- Keep Marx's own features first

Revision summary

Historical materialism explains social change from production, property and class struggle.

Base and superstructure name the constraint of material life on law, politics and ideas.

Capitalism is defined by wage labour, **surplus value** and contradiction.

The theory remains relevant for global accumulation, gig work and India's informal labour.

Weberian status, feminist unpaid labour and culture mark its limits.

Use it as a diagnostic of inequality, not as a total theory of society.

Introduction

Historical materialism is **Karl Marx's** theory of how societies change. It holds that the way people produce their material life-forces of production and relations of production-sets the broad conditions for law, politics, religion and ideas, which he called the superstructure. History moves through contradiction and class struggle, not through the march of spirit that **Hegel** had imagined. The question is whether this map still helps us read contemporary societies, including India.

Body

Main features

The **mode of production** joins technology and labour (forces) to property and surplus extraction (relations). Ancient, feudal and capitalist modes are successive, though not a smooth ladder. In capitalism the bourgeoisie own the means of production and the proletariat

sell labour power. **Surplus value** is pumped from the working day. **Class struggle** is the motor: classes in themselves may become classes for themselves. Ideology, including religion, often naturalises the existing relations; this is why **Marx** called religion the opium of the people in a precise, not merely abusive, sense. The legal and political superstructure is not a puppet in every hour, but in the last instance it is constrained by the economic base. Dialectics means change through contradiction: socialisation of production versus private appropriation, for example.

Friedrich Engels later emphasised that the superstructure can react on the base. **Antonio Gramsci's** hegemony and later Marxist cultural theory stretched the original preface of 1859 without abandoning production.

Relevance now

Global capitalism still organises life around wage labour, commodity production and crises of over-accumulation. Platform firms extract value from gig workers who look like independent contractors, a form **Marx** would have recognised as real subsumption of labour. India's vast informal sector, circular migration and agrarian distress are intelligible as combined and uneven development, not as a lag of "tradition". Ecological crisis can be read as a rift in the metabolism between society and nature, a theme John Bellamy Foster recovered from **Marx**. Caste does not vanish, but class analysis still explains who owns land, factories and platforms.

Limits are equally part of a critical answer. **Max Weber** showed that status, party and religious ethics can steer economic action, as in the Protestant-ethic thesis. Gendered unpaid labour is not a footnote, as Marxist feminists argued. The twentieth-century socialist states complicated the prediction of proletarian emancipation. Culture, nationalism and digital identity are not mere reflections. Relevance, then, is diagnostic: historical materialism remains a powerful theory of accumulation and inequality, not a complete sociology of every institution.

Flow diagram

Forces of production -> Mode of production
Relations of production -> Mode of production
Mode of production -> Economic base
Economic base -> Superstructure
Mode of production -> Class struggle
Class struggle -> Historical change

Conclusion

Marx's features are mode of production, base and superstructure, class struggle and dialectical contradiction. The theory still illuminates global capitalism, informal labour and crisis. It is less sufficient alone for gender, caste honour and meaning, which is why contemporary sociology uses it with, not instead of, other tools.

Facts & figures

1859 Preface

Marx's compact statement that the economic structure conditions legal and political superstructure, and that social revolution follows contradiction in production.

Surplus value

Value produced by labour power beyond the wage, the core of capitalist exploitation in **Marx's** analysis.

Informal and platform labour

Contemporary forms in which surplus is extracted without the classic factory, still readable through relations of production.

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