*Using material from Item A and elsewhere,* assess the contribution of Marxism to our understanding of families and households. (20 marks)

Marxists see all society’s institutions as helping to maintain class inequality and Capitalism. Therefore, the main contribution of Marxism to the sociology of families and households has been to explain how the family functions to maintain the interests of the bourgeoisie, and maintain the Capitalist system. Marxists’ contributions have drawn much criticism from Feminist and Functionalist sociologists, who question whether Marxism can help us to understand the family in contemporary society.

Marxists argue that the key factor determining the shape of all social institutions, including the family, is the mode of production. Engels (1891) argues that the Capitalist mode of production has shaped the family in many ways. He argues that Capitalism depends on the patriarchal monogamous nuclear family. In Engel’s view this family structure is essential to Capitalist society because of the inheritance of private property- men have be certain of the paternity of their children in order to ensure that their legitimate heirs inherit from them. For Engels, it is the nature of Capitalism which dictates the structure of the nuclear family, and in turn the nuclear family maintains class inequality as inheritance of private property ensures that class divisions between the proletariat and bourgeoisie are maintained. However, Engel’s view can be criticized as it assumes that the nuclear family is dominant in capitalist society. This assumption ignores the wide and increasing variety of family structures found in society today. Engels also cannot explain why Capitalism has not broken down although the lines of private property inheritance are now more blurred because of family diversity.

Another key function of the family, as outlined by Marxists, is the ideological role the family performs which maintains Capitalism. One way the family performs this ideological function is by socializing children to see hierarchy and inequality as inevitable. Children are often taught norms such as ‘respecting their elders’; such norms train children for a life being subservient and unequal to the bourgeoisie. For Zaretsky (1976), the family also performs and ideological function by offering an apparent ‘haven’ away from the exploitation of Capitalism. Zaretsky says this ‘haven’ is an illusion which distracts the proletariat from the harsh realities of the exploitation which governs their lives. Functionalists, such as GP Murdock criticise Marxists’ arguments about the ‘ideological functions’ of the family stating they ignore the positive contribution of the nuclear family. For Functionalists, the family benefits society and individuals, not just the bourgeoisie, as it is a source of intimacy and mutual support.

The final concept which Marxism contributes to sociology’s understanding of the family is the argument that the family is a ‘unit of consumption’. For Marxists, the family plays a key role in generating profits for the bourgeoisie as it is an important market for the sale of consumer goods. For example, the media targets children who use ‘pester power’ to persuade their parents to spend more. Feminists criticize this view of the family serving only the interests of the bourgeoisie. Instead they argue that Marxists are overlooking the role of patriarchy which creates inequalities between men and women. They see the family as serving the interests of men, rather than the bourgeoisie.

In conclusion, Marxism has contributed several key concepts to the sociological understanding of families and households. However, many of their ideas are based upon the assumption that the nuclear family is the norm. In contemporary Britain families are changing and the concepts of Marxism do not seem adequate to assist sociologists to understand the family in it new and diverse forms.

MARK: / 20

What would you do to improve it?:

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