

Evaluating Marxism

Core Activity: Marxism on Trial

Cambridge OCR A Level Sociology
Understanding Social Inequalities

Students stage an evidence hearing in which they defend Marxism and challenge it using gender, ethnicity, age, social mobility and Weberian criticisms.

The activity is designed to help students move from AO1 description to AO3 evaluation by requiring balanced judgement rather than simple agreement or rejection.

Assessment focus

- AO1: knowledge of Marxism and key concepts such as class conflict, exploitation and ideology.
- AO2: application to social class, gender, ethnicity, age, mobility and Weberian ideas.
- AO3: evaluation of strengths, limitations and alternative explanations.

Key concepts

Capitalism; bourgeoisie; proletariat; class conflict; exploitation; surplus value; false class consciousness; ideology; patriarchy; social closure; status; power; life chances; social mobility; intersectionality.



Teacher guide

Divide the class into hearing groups of four to six students. Each group stages a hearing where Marxism is defended and challenged. The teacher acts as court supervisor, timekeeper and examiner, prompting students to use sociological concepts and evidence.

Resources needed

- Printed role cards
- Printed challenge evidence cards
- Judgement sheet
- Pens and highlighters
- Optional: timer on board

Suggested timing

Stage	Time	Task
Preparation	10-15 mins	Teams read role cards and prepare opening arguments.
Opening statements	6 mins	Defence and prosecution outline their case.
Witness questioning	20 mins	Witnesses give evidence and respond to questions.
Challenge round	10 mins	Teams use evidence cards to strengthen or weaken Marxism.
Closing statements	5 mins	Each side summarises its strongest point.
Judgement	10 mins	Judge completes a balanced verdict.
Plenary	5 mins	Class compares verdicts and evaluation points.

Classroom set-up

- Each hearing group should include one judge, two prosecution lawyers, two defence lawyers and at least one witness.
- Smaller groups can combine witness roles; larger groups can split the witness roles between several students.
- The judge should be reminded that the final judgement must be balanced rather than a simple win/lose verdict.



Student task instructions

Marxism is being put on trial. The defence will argue that Marxism remains a powerful explanation of social inequality. The prosecution will argue that Marxism is limited because inequality cannot be reduced to class and capitalism alone.

Your task

- Prepare your role using the role card.
- Use at least two sociological concepts during the hearing.
- Use evidence cards to support your arguments.
- Challenge opposing arguments with questions.
- Help the judge reach a balanced conclusion.

Sentence starters

- Marxism remains useful because...
- This evidence supports Marxism because...
- A limitation of Marxism is...
- A feminist / Weberian criticism would be...
- Overall, Marxism is partly useful because...



Printable role cards

Defence Lawyer Role Card

Your job is to defend Marxism.

Argue that capitalism creates major inequalities in wealth, income, work, housing, education and health.

Use concepts such as class conflict, exploitation, surplus value, ideology and false class consciousness.

Strong defence point: Marxism remains useful because class still shapes life chances.

Question to prepare: Why is class still central to social inequality?

Prosecution Lawyer Role Card

Your job is to challenge Marxism.

Argue that Marxism focuses too heavily on class and does not fully explain gender, ethnicity, age, status, power or social mobility.

Use concepts such as patriarchy, social closure, status, life chances and intersectionality.

Strong prosecution point: inequality is multidimensional and cannot always be explained by capitalism alone.

Question to prepare: Which criticism of Marxism is strongest?



Judge Role Card

Your job is to listen carefully and reach a balanced judgement.
Do not simply decide that Marxism is right or wrong.

Consider how useful Marxism is when compared with feminist, Weberian, ethnicity, age and mobility explanations.

Your final verdict must include one strength, one limitation and one comparison with another theory.

Judgement focus: Is Marxism still useful, partly useful, or too limited?

Witness 1: Marxist Sociologist

You believe Marxism is still useful.

Capitalist societies are unequal because wealth and power are concentrated among those who own businesses, property and capital.

Workers may appear free, but they must sell their labour to survive.

Class position affects education, housing, health and employment.

Possible challenge: Can Marxism explain gender and ethnicity as well as class?



Witness 2: Feminist Sociologist

You argue that Marxism is too focused on class.

Women experience inequality through patriarchy, gender roles, unpaid care, domestic labour, sexism and gendered violence.

These inequalities may occur across social classes.

Class matters, but patriarchy cannot simply be reduced to capitalism.

Possible challenge: Does capitalism benefit from women's unpaid labour?

Witness 3: Weberian Sociologist

You argue that Marxism is too simple.

Weber argued that life chances are shaped by class, status and party.

People's market situation, qualifications, skills, status and power affect their opportunities.

Social closure allows privileged groups to protect rewards and exclude others.

Possible challenge: Is economic class still the strongest influence?



Witness 4: Ethnicity Researcher

You argue that Marxism needs to take racism seriously.

Ethnic inequalities in employment, housing, education and health cannot always be explained by class alone.

Racism, discrimination, stereotypes, migration history and social closure can affect life chances.

Class matters, but ethnic inequality has specific causes.

Possible challenge: Does capitalism use racism to divide workers?

Witness 5: Age and Social Mobility Researcher

You argue that Marxism does not fully explain age or mobility.

Young people may face low pay, insecure work and limited housing access.

Older people may face age discrimination, exclusion from training or pressure to retire.

Social mobility shows that some people move between class positions.

Possible challenge: Are age inequalities still shaped by the capitalist labour market?





Challenge evidence cards

Card 1: Patriarchy

Feminists argue that women's inequality is rooted in patriarchy, not only capitalism. Gender inequality can be seen in unpaid care, domestic labour, violence against women, gender pay gaps and workplace discrimination.

Challenge question: Can Marxism explain gender inequality without reducing it to class?

Card 2: Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminists argue that capitalism benefits from women's unpaid domestic labour because women help reproduce the labour force by caring for workers and children.

Challenge question: Does this strengthen Marxism or show that Marxism needs feminism?



Card 3: Social Closure

Weberians argue that privileged groups protect their advantages by controlling access to qualifications, jobs, networks and professional status.

Challenge question: Is social closure better than Marxism at explaining elite jobs and professions?

Card 4: Status Inequality

Weber argued that status can shape life chances independently of class. Some groups may have low status even if they are not the poorest.

Challenge question: Can class alone explain inequality in respect, identity and social honour?



Card 5: Ethnic Discrimination

Ethnic minorities may face discrimination in recruitment, housing, policing and education. These experiences may be shaped by racism as well as class.

Challenge question: Does Marxism explain racism, or does it treat ethnicity as secondary?

Card 6: Age Inequality

Young people may face low pay and insecure work, while older workers may face exclusion from training or pressure to retire.

Challenge question: Does Marxism explain age inequality, or is a life-course approach needed?



Card 7: Social Mobility

Some individuals move up or down the class structure through education, employment, marriage, business ownership or changes in income.

Challenge question: Does social mobility weaken the Marxist idea of class conflict?

Card 8: Wealth Inequality

Large differences in wealth, inheritance and property ownership continue to shape people's life chances.

Challenge question: Does wealth inequality support Marxism?



Card 9: Poverty and Life Chances

People from poorer backgrounds often have worse outcomes in health, housing, education and employment.

Challenge question: Does poverty show that class remains central?

Card 10: Fragmented Working Class

The working class is not one united group. Workers may be divided by occupation, income, ethnicity, gender, age and migration status.

Challenge question: Does this weaken the Marxist idea of proletarian class consciousness?



Card 11: Ideology

Marxists argue that ruling-class ideas can make inequality appear normal, natural or deserved.

Challenge question: Does meritocracy operate as an ideology that hides class inequality?

Card 12: Intersectionality

People may experience inequality through combinations of class, gender, ethnicity, age, disability and sexuality.

Challenge question: Can Marxism explain intersectional inequality, or does it need other theories?



Judgement sheet: Marxism on Trial

Complete the verdict using balanced sociological evidence. Do not simply state whether Marxism is right or wrong. Explain its strengths and limitations.

1. What is Marxism accused of?

2. Strongest evidence for the defence

3. Strongest evidence for the prosecution

4. Comparison with another perspective

5. Balanced conclusion



Final verdict

Tick one verdict and explain your reason in the box below:

- Very useful
- Quite useful
- Partly useful
- Limited
- Weak

Because...



Teacher answer guide

Strong defence arguments

- Class still shapes life chances.
- Wealth and property ownership create major inequalities.
- Poverty affects education, housing, health and employment.
- Capitalism creates unequal power between employers and workers.
- Ideology can make inequality appear fair or natural.
- Many other inequalities are worsened by economic inequality.

Strong prosecution arguments

- Feminism shows that patriarchy shapes inequality.
- Weberian theory shows that status, power and social closure matter.
- Ethnicity cannot be reduced only to class.
- Age inequality affects people across the life course.
- Social mobility complicates the idea of fixed class positions.
- Modern societies have complex and fragmented class structures.

Model conclusion

Marxism remains useful for explaining social inequality because class, wealth and ownership continue to shape people's life chances. It is especially strong when explaining poverty, exploitation, unequal power in the workplace and the way ideology can make inequality seem fair. However, Marxism is limited because it can place too much emphasis on class and capitalism. Feminists argue that patriarchy creates gender inequality, Weberians argue that status and social closure affect life chances, and ethnicity and age inequalities cannot always be explained by class alone. Overall, Marxism is still a powerful theory, but it works best when combined with other explanations of inequality.

Exam-style follow-up

Question: Evaluate Marxist explanations of social inequality.

Students should include a clear explanation of Marxism, examples of class inequality, at least two criticisms, comparison with at least one other perspective and a balanced conclusion.

