

SOCIOLOGICAL MARXISM: HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

Erik Olin Wright

Department of Sociology University of Wisconsin- Madison, USA

Michael Burawoy

Department of Sociology University of California – Berkeley, USA

Keywords: Alienation, Base, Capitalism, Class relations, Classical Marxism, Commodity fetishism, Communism, Contradictory social reproduction, Emancipatory, Exploitation, Feudal relations, Frankfurt School, Hegemony, Historical materialism, Historical trajectory of development, Ideology, Labor process, Mystification, Socialism, State, Superstructure, Utopia, Western Marxism, French Regulation School

Contents

1. Sociology's Reactions to Marxism
 - 1.1 Propagating Marxism
 - 1.2 Burying Marxism
 - 1.3 Using Marxism
 - 1.4 Building Marxism
 2. Setting the stage: the central components of Marxist theory
 3. The classical Marxist theory of the trajectory and destiny of capitalism
 4. Sociological Marxism: conceptual foundations
 - 4.1 Relations of Production
 - 4.2 Relations in Production
 - 4.3 Class Relations as a Form of Relations of Production
 - 4.4 Variations in Class Relations
 - 4.5 Class, Exploitation and Domination
 - 4.6 From Abstract Class Relations to Concrete Class Structures
 5. Sociological Marxism: the theory of the contradictory reproduction of class relations
 - 5.1 The Social Reproduction of Class Relations Thesis
 - 5.2 The Contradictions of Capitalism Thesis
 - 5.3 The Institutional Crisis and Renovation Thesis
 6. Towards a Normative Theory of Socialism
 - 6.1 Understanding State Socialism
 - 6.2 Envisioning Real Utopias
 7. Conclusion: The Three Clusters within Sociological Marxism
- Acknowledgement
Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketches

Summary

Classical Marxism developed during the early phases of industrial capitalism. It brilliantly captured the historical dynamics of that period – the extraordinary power of capitalism to transform the world, to destroy pre-existing class relations and forms of

society, but also its inherent tendency to crisis and self-destruction. This dynamic self-destructive logic of capitalism was given theoretical coherence by historical materialism.

Sociological Marxism was present in embryonic form within classical Marxism, but only later did it become an elaborate, developed theoretical framework for understanding the new array of institutions built up around capitalism, counteracting its tendency towards self-destruction. Historical Materialism and Sociological Marxism complemented each other – one explaining the trajectory and ultimate destiny of capitalism, the other the impediments towards movement along that trajectory. Together they provided a grounding for Marxist-inspired political parties who saw their mission to be overcoming these impediments – particularly those embodied in the state – and thus hastening the arrival at the destiny.

1. Sociology's Responses to Marxism

Discussions of Marxism as a social theory typically adopt one of four basic stances:

1.1 Propagating Marxism

Marxism is a comprehensive worldview for understanding the social world. It provides the theoretical weapons needed to attack the mystifications of capitalism and the vision needed to mobilize the masses for struggle. The central task for Marxist intellectuals is to articulate the revolutionary core of Marxism in such a way that its influence increases, particularly within oppressed classes. Often this has taken the form of dogmatic enunciations of Marxism as a doctrine, but making Marxism an effective ideology need not imply rigid, dogmatic beliefs. The central issue is that Marxism must be made accessible and internalized as a subjectively salient belief system.

1.2 Burying Marxism

Marxism is a doctrine with virtually no ideas of relevance for serious social inquiry. The historical durability of Marxism is entirely due to its role as a mobilizing ideology linked to political parties, social movements, and states, not the scientific credibility of its arguments. The demise of Marxist-inspired political regimes may at last signal the long overdue death of this antiquated and often pernicious doctrine. It is time to bury the corpse.

1.3 Using Marxism

Marxism is a source of interesting and suggestive ideas, many of which remain useful for contemporary social scientific analysis. Some Marxist ideas may have been deeply flawed from the beginning and others may have lost relevance for understanding contemporary societies, but still the Marxist tradition contains many useful insights and arguments, and these should be preserved as an enduring legacy. Much of what goes under the rubric of “Marxist Sociology” has this character – selectively using particular concepts and themes in the Marxist tradition to understand specific empirical problems. But one does not have to be a “Marxist” to use Marxism in this way.

1.4 Building Marxism

Marxism is an analytically powerful tradition of social theory of vital importance for scientifically understanding the dilemmas and possibilities of social change and social reproduction in contemporary society. Particularly if one wants to change the world in egalitarian and emancipatory ways, Marxism is indispensable. This does not mean, however, that every element within Marxism as it currently exists is sustainable. If Marxism aspires to be a social scientific theory it must be continually subjected to challenge and transformation. Building Marxism also means reconstructing Marxism. Marxism is not a doctrine, a definitively established body of truths. But neither is Marxism simply a catalogue of interesting insights. If the goal is to enhance our ability to understand the world in order to change it, building Marxism is a pivotal task.

The first two of these stances both treat Marxism as an ideology: a system of beliefs to which people adhere and which provides interpretations of the world and motivations for action. Neither takes seriously the aspiration of Marxism to be a social science – the first stance because it views Marxism as incontestably true, the second because it views Marxism as unequivocally false.

Sociology has mainly engaged Marxism in the third of these modes. There are, of course, instances of calls to bury Marxism by sociologists, and certainly there were periods in sociology in which Marxist ideas were almost completely marginalized. Building Marxism has been an important intellectual current within Sociology, but mostly sociology has simply accepted Marxism as one of the sources of the “sociological imagination”. Courses in sociological theory typically include respectful discussions of Marx, Weber and Durkheim as “founding fathers” of central currents in the history of sociology. Durkheim is identified with norms and problems of social integration; Weber with rationalization and the cultural sociology of meaningful action; and Marx with class and conflict. Studies of politics and the state routinely borrow from the Marxist tradition a concern with business influence, economic constraints on state action, and the class bases of political parties and political mobilization. Discussions of the world economy typically talk about the globalization of capital, the power of large multinational corporation and the ways international markets impinge on local conditions, longstanding Marxist themes going back to Marx. Discussions of work frequently talk about the labor process, the problem of extracting effort from workers and the impact of technology on skills. Discussions of social change talk about contradictions. And, perhaps above all, discussions of social conflict are influenced by the core Marxist idea that conflicts are generated by structurally based social cleavages, not simply subjective identities. Often the Marxist pedigree of these themes and ideas gets completely lost. Instead of using Marxism as Marxism, these ideas are simply absorbed into the diffuse mainstream of sociology. But using Marxism can also be a self-conscious practice of deploying these ideas in ways which affirm the continuing relevance of the Marxist tradition for sociological scholarship.

Building Marxism is the most ambitious stance towards the Marxist tradition, going beyond simply deploying Marxist categories explicitly or implicitly to tackle a range of sociological problems. Here the goal is to contribute to the development of Marxism as a coherent theoretical structure by understanding its shortcomings and reconstructing its

arguments. In practice, this engagement with Marxism involves strong normative commitments, not simply beliefs in the scientific virtues of Marxist ideas. Without a serious normative commitment to the radical critique of capitalist institutions and to the political vision of an egalitarian, emancipatory alternative to capitalism there would be little incentive to struggle with the demanding intellectual task of building and reconstructing Marxism as a coherent theoretical structure. Building Marxism as an intellectual project is thus deeply connected with the political project of challenging capitalism as a social order. This article primarily elaborates the basic contours of this fourth stance towards Marxism.

2. Setting the Stage: The Central Components of Marxist Theory

This section outlines the central components of the traditional Marxist theory of capitalism, the point of departure for building sociological Marxism. While there is little consensus, either among Marxists themselves or among non-Marxist commentators on Marxism, over what constitutes the essential elements of Marxism, most commentators would agree that whatever else it is, the centerpiece of Marxism is a theory of capitalism as a particular kind of class society. This is the aspect of Marxist theory that is most intimately linked to the Marxist political project of radically challenging capitalism.

The central arguments of the theory of capitalism within the Marxist tradition fall under three theoretical clusters:

1. A theory of the trajectory and destiny of capitalism;
2. A theory of the contradictory reproduction of capitalism;
3. A normative theory of socialism and communism as the alternative to capitalism.

While each of these theoretical clusters is interconnected with the others, they nevertheless have considerable autonomy, and at different times in the history of Marxism, one or another of these has been given greater prominence. In Marx's own work, the most elaborated and systematic theoretical arguments were in the first of these three clusters. The central achievement of Marx's work in political economy was an account of the "laws of motion" of capitalism and how these propelled capitalist development along a trajectory towards a particular kind of destination. Marx devoted very little energy to elaborating a real theory of the destination itself – socialism – either in terms of the normative principles which socialism should embody or the problem of what institutional designs would render socialism feasible and sustainable. Instead, the normative dimension of Marx's writing primarily took the form of the critique of capitalism as a social order characterized by alienation, exploitation, fetishism, mystification, degradation, immiseration, the anarchy of the market and so on. The transcendence of capitalism by socialism and, eventually, communism, was then posited as the simple negation of these features, an implicit unelaborated theoretical utopia which eliminated all the moral deficits of capitalism: a society without alienation, without exploitation, without fetishism, etc. While there are brief places in Marx's work in which a more positive discussion of socialism is engaged – some passages in the Critique of the Gotha Program broach issues of normative principles, and the writings on the Paris commune are evocative of some possible design principles for socialist institutions – nowhere are these issues given sustained, theoretical consideration.

Marx gave more attention to the problem of the contradictory social reproduction of capitalism as it moved along its historical trajectory of development. There are important, suggestive discussions of the role of the state and ideology in reproducing class relations, most notably perhaps in the bold programmatic statement about base and superstructure in **The Preface to a Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy**, and a few places where the contradictory quality of this reproduction is touched on. More significantly, Marx elaborates significant elements of a theory of social reproduction within capitalist production itself in his analyses of the labor process and commodity fetishism. Still, taken as a whole, the theory of the contradictory reproduction of capitalist relations remains extremely underdeveloped within Marx's own work: there is no real theory of the state, only fragments of a theory of ideology, and only the beginnings of a theory of the reproduction of class relations within production itself.

20th Century Western Marxism, confronting the enduring failure of revolutionary movements in the West, became much more focused on the problem of the social reproduction of capitalism. Gramsci is the most significant early contributor to these discussions, particularly in his writings on hegemony and the problem of the material basis for consent. The theme of social reproduction was further developed, in especially functionalist ways, by Frankfurt School critical theorists in the middle third of the century. But it was really only in the Marxist revival of the 1960s and 1970s that the problem of the contradictory reproduction of capitalism became the widespread subject of theoretical and empirical debate among Marxists. The problem of the normative theory of socialism also grew in importance, first in the context of the fierce political debates among Marxists over the character of the Soviet Union and later in the less impassioned attempts at diagnosing the causes of stagnation and eventual collapse of the attempts at building state socialism. Still, as in Marx's own work, much of the normative dimension of Western Marxism – particularly in the work of the Frankfurt school – took the form of the negative critique of capitalism rather than the positive elaboration of an emancipatory alternative. In the context of the collapse of Communist regimes and the apparent triumph of capitalism, the development of a serious positive normative theory of socialism has become even more pressing.

We will first lay out the central theses in the traditional Marxist theory of the destiny of capitalism and examine why these theses are unsatisfactory. We then turn to the theory of the contradictory reproduction of capitalism which we will argue constitutes the foundation of sociological Marxism. Finally we will discuss the problem of developing a normative theory of Marxism's emancipatory project.

-
-
-

TO ACCESS ALL THE 28 PAGES OF THIS CHAPTER,
Visit: <http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx>

Bibliography

Arrighi, G. (1994) *The Long Twentieth Century* London: Verso. [Analysis of long waves pattern in development of Western capitalism.]

Bowles, S. and H. Gintis (1990) *Democracy and Capitalism: Property, Theory, and the Contradictions of Modern Social Theory* New York: Basic Books. [Extended discussion of class and exploitation specifically in terms of principal/agent issues].

Burawoy, M. (1985) *The Politics of Production* London: New Left Books. [Ethnographic study of workplaces analysing ways in which workers organise work behaviour to fit in with demands of capitalist enterprises.]

Cohen, G.A. (1978) *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a defence* Princeton: Princeton University Press. [An analytically rigorous functionalist exploration of the implications for a general theory of the reproduction of capitalism of Marx's brief statement in his *Preface to a Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*.]

Elster, J. (1985) *Making Sense of Marx* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [Discussion of problem of functional explanations within Marxism and development of an analytical Marxist account.]

Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* New York: International Publishers [Inspirational account, written while in prison, which provide the foundations, albeit in relatively fragmentary form of Sociological Marxism: he covers the concept of hegemony, the state in relation to civil society, ideology and intellectuals, common sense and good sense, class struggle as a war of position and of movement etc.]

Lipietz, A. (1987) *Mirages and Miracles: the crisis in global fordism* Cambridge: MIT Press [Seminal account of French regulation theory of interrelation between economic and social forms and changes.]

Lukacs, Georg (1971) *History and Class Consciousness* Cams.: MIT Press [Analysis of the ways mass media and consumer culture lure the working class into acceptance of capitalism and obliterate all forms of resistance to it through the psychological processes generated by the system.]

Marcuse, H. (1984) *One Dimensional Man* Boston: Beacon Press [Analysis of the ways mass media and consumer culture lure the working class into acceptance of capitalism and obliterate all forms of resistance to it through the psychological processes generated by the system.]

Marx, K and F. Engels (1848) *The Communist Manifesto*. [Analysis of how capitalism sows the seeds of its own destruction by creating the proletariat whose struggles escalate from scattered attacks on capital, to trade union representation to the setting up of national political parties representing the working class and finally the seizure of state power amidst deepening economic crises.]

Marx, K (1967) *Capital* New York: International Publishers [Fundamental text of Marx's analytical economics].

Poulantzas, N. (1973) *Political Power and the Social Classes* London: New Left Books. [Application of Althusser's philosophy of social science to the analysis of classes, with an emphasis on separation of base and superstructure.]

Roemer, J. E. (1994) *A Future for Socialism* Cams.: Harvard University Press. [An analytical Marxist account.]

Willis, P. (1977) *Learning to Labour* Farnborough: Saxon House [Ethnographic account of way working class youth are socialised into fitting within the capitalist structure.]

Wright, E.O. (1997) *Class Counts* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [Review of Wright's class analysis schema to date.]

Biographical Sketches

Erik Olin Wright (born 1947, in Berkeley, California) is an American analytical Marxist sociologist, specializing in social stratification, and in egalitarian alternative futures to capitalism. His work is concerned mainly with the study of social classes, and in particular with the task of providing an update to and elaboration of the Marxist concept of class and in the use of this to compare and contrast the class

structures and dynamics of different advanced capitalist and 'post-capitalist' societies. Erik Olin Wright's work includes *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis* (Cambridge, 1997), which uses data collected in various industrialized countries, including the United States, Canada, Norway and Sweden, and *Envisioning Real Utopias* (Verso, 2010), which explores the problem of alternatives to capitalism. He is a professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the President of the American Sociological Association, 2011-12.

Michael Burawoy has been a participant observer of industrial workplaces in four countries: Zambia, United States, Hungary and Russia. In his different projects he has tried to illuminate -- from the standpoint of the working class -- postcolonialism, the organization of consent to capitalism, the peculiar forms of class consciousness and work organization in state socialism, and, finally, the dilemmas of transition from socialism to capitalism. Over the course of four decades of research and teaching, he has developed the “extended case method” that allows broad conclusions to be drawn from ethnographic research. No longer able to work in factories, more recently he has turned to the study of his own workplace – the university – to consider the way sociology itself is produced and then disseminated to diverse publics. His advocacy of public sociology has generated much heat in many a cool place. Throughout his sociological career he has engaged with Marxism, seeking to reconstruct it in the light of his research and more broadly in the light of historical challenges of the late 20th and early 21st. centuries. Professor of Sociology at University of California, Berkley, and President of the American Sociological Association 2003-4.