

Sociology 621
Lecture 2
January 28, 2008
The Three Nodes of the Marxist Tradition

In the last lecture I explained what distinguishes critical social science from empiricist social science. In this lecture I will map out the broad contours of Marxism as a specific type of critical emancipatory social science.

I. Preliminary Remarks

1. Three strategies for exploring/studying a theoretical tradition

There are three broad ways that people approach the task of teaching theoretical frameworks for social analysis:

(1). **Development of ideas, history of thought.** In this approach you begin with precursors, then explore the origins of a specific body of ideas, and then chart the subsequent development. The exposition of the ideas therefore follows the historical sequence of their elaboration. In a way this is the approach that, to the greatest extent possible, takes the theoretical tradition on its own terms. For Marxism this would mean beginning with the *Early Manuscripts* and then moving forward through the *German Ideology*, the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx's great historical essays, and then *Capital* and related works, followed by subsequent Marxist work.

(2). **Sociology of Knowledge.** Here the animating principle is less the sequence of ideas as such than the social context of their production. Earlier ideas are only one relevant factor here; as important is exploring the institutional, social and political settings within which ideas and arguments are forged.

(3). **Analytical Reconstruction of the structure of a framework.** This is a very different approach. It begins at the end of the historical process, examines the full range of theoretical arguments and breaks them down in various ways:

- an inventory of theoretical tasks the framework attempts to solve
- a menu of basic concepts used to pose questions, build arguments, construct specific theories
- theoretical modules – systematically integrated explanatory theories

This is the approach I will use. This approach is inherently the most controversial, since there are many different ways of reconstructing a theoretical terrain as complex as Marxism.

2. Marxism as a Modular system of concepts and theories

I regard Marxism as a kind of modular theoretical framework rather than a unitary, fully-integrated and comprehensive capital-T Theory in which the entire edifice rises or falls together. To call it a modular theoretical framework means that it has a variety of agendas and conceptual clusters, some of which are more robust than others.

As we will see in future session, for example, the overarching theory of history in the Marxist tradition – historical materialism – is a less defensible part of this framework than is the specific class analysis of capitalism. One can accept Marxist class analysis and the Marxist critique of capitalism as powerful theoretical tools without also accepting the specific theory of historical trajectory in classical historical materialism which attempts to chart the destiny of capitalism. One way of capturing this is to use the expression sociological materialism as a contrast to historical materialism.

II. The Three Nodes of the Marxist Tradition

Marxism as an intellectual tradition has three basic theoretical nodes, which I will call:

- Marxism as class analysis
- Marxism as a theory of history
- Marxism as class emancipation.

One way of thinking about the contrast between class analysis and the theory of history is with an analogy with medicine: Consider endocrinology and oncology as two different nodes of medical science. Endocrinology is what you could call an independent variable discipline: if you are an endocrinologist you can study any disease or biological process so long as you examine the effects of hormones. As an endocrinologist you can study growth or pimples or cancer or sexuality. You are monogamous on the independent variable but promiscuous on the dependent variable (so to speak). An oncologist, on the other hand, has permission to study any possible cause so long as it helps explain cancer. You can examine viruses, toxins, genetics, etc.

Class analysis is like endocrinology -- think of this as independent variable Marxism: it is promiscuous on the explananda, disciplined on the explanatory mechanisms (thus: you can do a class analysis of art, religion, sexuality, poverty, war, etc.).

Theory of history is like oncology: it is defined by the object of explanation = the overall trajectory of human history. That is quite an extraordinary “dependent variable” – the long term pattern and trajectory of historical transformation. This is what we will focus on for the next few weeks.

Marxism as class emancipation is the third node: the moral dimension of the Marxist tradition rooted in radical egalitarianism as a moral ideal. This is captured in the aphorism “to each according to need, from each according to ability.” Classical Marxism did not devote a great deal of energy to elaborating this moral dimension. Marx, in fact, was fairly scornful of the ideal of social “justice” and felt that philosophical defenses of conceptions of justice were basically just ideological ways of defending particular

interests. Nevertheless, the Marxist tradition has always been deeply affected by moral fervor, and implicit in Marxism is a theory of social justice and moral conception of human emancipation.

Classical Marxism embodied a unity of these three nodes: class analysis supplied the necessary concepts to explain the trajectory of history; the theory of the trajectory of history provides the justification for the moral ideal. The moral ideals animated class analysis. That unity is now fractured; there is relatively independent and somewhat disjoint development of the three nodes.

III. Analytical Marxism as one kind of Marxism.

Central ideas:

(1). conventional scientific norms: there is nothing distinctive epistemologically or methodologically about Marxism. All supposedly special methodological features can be expressed in less arcane ways. Take "contradiction" as an example. Here are two simple ways of understanding the idea:

i. a contradiction = a situation in which the unintended consequences of action subvert the intended ones

ii. contradiction = a situation in which (a) a particular institution or social relation has two conditions necessary for its reproduction, and (b) to the extent that one of these conditions is satisfied, the other condition becomes less likely to be satisfied

(2) emphasis on clarity of conceptualization

(3) fine-grained, explicit steps in arguments

(4) the importance of micro-foundations to macro-explanations.

(5) The importance of choice in micro-explanations: conscious choice-making agent-centered micro-analysis.