Sociological Marxism
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Chapter 1. Why Sociological Marxism?
draft 2.1

From the middle of the 19th century until the last decade of the 20th, the Marxist tradition provided the most systematic body of ideas and social theory for radical critics of capitalism as an economic system and social order. Even those critics of capitalism who did not directly identify with Marxism relied heavily on Marxist ideas about class, exploitation, commodification, the state, ideology. And while many anti-capitalists felt that the specific political project that came to be identified with Marxism -- the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism -- was deeply flawed, they nevertheless shared the emancipatory vision of a socialist society within which class inequalities attenuated and the economy was democratically controlled in the interests of everyone. Above all it was this defense of *a vision of an emancipatory alternative to capitalism* that gave Marxism its emotional and ideological power: we might live in a world of great misery, inequality and oppression, but an alternative was both imaginable and achievable.

In recent years, particularly since the end of Communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Marxism has declined as an intellectual force. TINA – "there is no alternative" – has replaced confidence in the possibility of radical alternatives. Denouncing capitalism seems to many people a bit like criticizing the weather. Perhaps we can patch the roof to keep out the rain, but there is not much point in railing against the rain itself. Instead of being viewed as a threat to capitalism, talk of socialism now seems more like idle utopian musing, or perhaps even worse: a distraction from the dealing with tractable problems in the real world. . And with the demise of socialism as a political project, Marxism has been increasingly marginalized as an intellectual tradition.

Yet, ironically, we also live in a period in which inequality and economic polarization in many developed societies has been deepening; in which the commodification of labor has reached unparalleled heights with the entry of masses of women into the labor force; in which capital has become increasingly footloose, moving across the globe and deeply constraining the activities of states; in which giant corporations dominate the media and cultural production; in which the market appears like a law of nature uncontrollable by human device; in which politics in the United States and many other capitalist democracies are ever-more dominated by money and unresponsive to the concerns and worries of ordinary people. We live in an era in which social dynamics intimately linked to the Marxist account of the class character of capitalism are increasingly potent, and yet Marxism as a theoretical framework is increasingly marginalized.

We believe that the Marxist theoretical tradition continues to offer indispensable theoretical tools for understanding the conditions for the future advance of a radical egalitarian project of social change within capitalist societies. Marx is famous for saying in the *eleventh thesis on Feurbach* that philosophers have only tried to understand the world, but that the real point is to change it. It is equally true, however, that without effectively understanding the world we cannot know how to change it in the ways we desire. The Marxist tradition may not provide

all of the theoretical tools we need for understanding the world, but it provides some of the fundamental ingredients, and for this reason it is worth reconstructing.

The central objective of this book is to elaborate a set of concepts and arguments that we believe constitute a foundation for a compelling social scientific critique of capitalism. We identify this enterprise with the Marxist tradition because it draws heavily on a body of ideas and problems found within that tradition. But we will not worry about being faithful to any particular arguments as formulated by Marx himself nor will we hesitate to borrow from other theoretical traditions where this is appropriate.

We call this enterprise "*Sociological* Marxism" for two reasons. First, the designation is meant to distinguish the kind of reconstruction we are proposing from a range of other visions of what is most valuable in the Marxist tradition. Specifically, we are not reconstructing Marxism as a general theory of history as envisioned in Historical Materialism, nor as a theory of dynamics of the capitalist economy, as envisioned in Marxist political economy, nor as primarily a political theory centering on the state, as occurs in some currents of Marxism, especially those linked to Leninism. We are not claiming that these other endeavors should be abandoned, and certainly any reconstructed Marxism must deal with history, the economy, and the state; but we feel that the most promising way of advancing the normative and explanatory agenda of the Marxist tradition is to anchor the analysis in the problem of "the social". In a sense this means taking seriously the "social" in "socialism" – seeing socialism not as fundamentally a statist project, nor simply as a transformation of economic institutions and class relations, but as the project of empowering of civil society to impose social accountability on both state and economy. What we mean by this will become clear in the course of this book.

Second, we wish to distinguish our analysis from the task of developing "Marxist Sociology". Marxist sociology identifies the use of Marxist ideas within the discipline of sociology, thus distinguishing Marxist approaches from a range of other venerable theoretical traditions in sociology – Weberian Sociology, Durkheimian Sociology, etc. Our task, in contrast, is to develop sociological Marxism as a specific approach to reconstructing and developing Marxism. While we do believe that a systematic elaboration of sociological Marxism will facilitate the use of these ideas within sociology, our attention will not be on the broader terrain of sociology, but on arguments and dilemmas within the Marxist tradition.

In elaborating sociological Marxism we use the term "Marx*ism*," with some trepidation, since like other "isms", the expression suggests a doctrine, a closed system of thought, rather than an open theoretical framework of scientific inquiry. It is for this reason, for example, that "Creationists" (religious opponents to the theory of biological evolution) refer to evolutionary theory as "Darwinism". They want to juxtapose Creationism and Darwinism as alternative doctrines, each grounded in different "articles of faith". It has been a significant liability for the Marxist tradition that it has been named after a particular historical person and generally referred to as an ism. This reinforces a tendency for the theoretical practice of Marxists to often look more like ideology (or even theology when Marxism becomes Marxology and Marxalatry) than social science. We feel that the broad Marxist tradition of social thought remains a vital setting

for advancing the critical understanding of capitalism and the possibilities for radical egalitarian social change, but we do not believe it provides us with a comprehensive doctrine that automatically gives us the right answers to every question. Marx himself, after all, once quipped, "Je ne suis pas un Marxist" (I am not a Marxist). Still, since "Marxism" is the way this tradition of thought is labelled by most people, we will use the expression "Sociological Marxism" to identify our particular effort at reconstructing a theoretical agenda within that tradition.

The Central Structure of the Argument

This book, then, will try to elaborate a general framework for a sociological Marxism. While there will be many complications and qualifications, the overall structure of the argument is built around four intersecting agendas of theory-construction.

Agenda 1. *Constructing a theory of the material and social conditions for and obstacles to human flourishing.*

All emancipatory theories, either explicitly or implicitly, contain some notion of the conditions for human flourishing. The idea of "emancipation" implies that, if certain social conditions are transformed, people will be liberated from forms of oppression in the existing world that harm them in various ways and prevent their lives from flourishing. The "utopian" form of this agenda asks: what are the social conditions under which human lives will flourish to the greatest possible extent. The more pragmatic form of the agenda asks: what transformations of existing social conditions will increase the extent of human flourishing. Both questions are legitimate: the former helps to clarify an overarching vision of social change, the latter the practical tasks of changes of existing institutions. This first agenda, then, involves elaborating the idea of human flourishing, and specifying the conditions that enhance and obstruct flourishing so defined.

The central conclusion of this part of our analysis will be that capitalism enhances the *potential* for generalized human flourishing, but *blocks the full realization* of that potential. On the one hand, *capitalism perpetuates eliminable human suffering*. Capitalism develops human productive powers to the point that no one needs to be malnourished, badly housed, and in other ways suffering from material deprivations, but it also generates systematic obstacles to the universal elimination of those material deprivations. Capitalism also perpetuates what could be called eliminable *social* deprivations: forms of social stigma, marginalization and denigration that are linked to capitalist class relations. The systematic perpetuation of socially eliminable forms of material and social deprivation we will call the *oppressions critique of capitalism*. The *positive flourishing critique* adds to this the claim that capitalism creates the material conditions for people to cultivate their talents and engage in creative, fulfilling activity with a minimum of toil, but blocks the extension of those conditions to large portions of the population. Much of humanity unnecessarily live lives of toil and tedium in which their individual human potentials remain substantially unrealized. Capitalism also blocks the realization of the potential for what can be termed *social flourishing*: the development of more extensive and universalistic forms of social reciprocity and solidarity. The fundamental punchline, then, is that universalizing the

conditions for human flourishing requires a fundamental transformation of capitalism.

Agenda 2. *Constructing a theory of the obstacles to the radical transformation of capitalism*.

If the conclusion from the first agenda is sound and capitalism is causally responsible for obstructing the universalization of human flourishing, then a central task of a sociological Marxism is understanding the obstacles to and possibilities for the transformation of capitalism. The second agenda focuses on the problem of obstacles. What makes capitalism such a robust social order? How do we explain its reproduction? How do we explain variations across time and place in theses processes of social reproduction and stability?

The central conclusion from this second agenda is that the robustness of capitalism is to be explained both by the dynamism of its economic processes – its capacity to generate innovations and economic growth and to comprehensively organize the daily life of people, both within work and within consumption – as well as by a range of specific institutional arrangements which deflect challenges and forge what we will call "class compromises." There are times and places where these mechanisms work extremely effectively, generating forms of consent and popular incorporation that Gramsci analyzed as hegemony, but there are also times and places where these processes of social reproduction are fragile and conflict ridden, and capitalism is sustained more by repressive forms of domination than deep social integration.

Agenda 3. *Constructing a theory of the possibilities for emancipatory transformation of capitalism.*

In many ways, this is the most important agenda of sociological Marxism, since the fundamental point of the whole enterprise is not simply to understand why the world is the way it is, but to contribute to its emancipatory transformation. If universalizing human flourishing is obstructed by capitalism, and capitalism itself is sustained by powerful processes of social reproduction, the problem then is to understand the conditions under which those processes can themselves be challenged. This is the task of the third core agenda.

It is with this third agenda that our reconstruction of a sociological Marxism differs most sharply from Marx's own thinking and the central arguments of traditional Marxism. Marx offered a brilliant and compelling way of thinking about the problem of the emancipatory transformation of capitalism. Instead of proposing an elaborate theory of an alternative to capitalism – of its core institutional properties, of its own mechanisms of social reproduction and dynamics of development – Marx proposed a theory of the long-term demise of capitalism. What he tried to show was that because of the nature of its internal contradictions and developmental dynamics, capitalism would eventually destroy its own conditions of possibility. Not only did this imply that capitalism was an inherently crisis-ridden system, but there was a deep and systematic tendency for those crises to intensify over time, eventually to the point where the system would become unreproducible. Under those conditions, a well-organized social force – the working class – would be capable of seizing political power and, through a relatively unspecified process of trial and error, forge an emancipatory alternative. Socialism is the name

for the immediate alternative to capitalism created through this process, and communism the name of the ultimate destination.

The pivotal idea here is that capitalism itself – through its inherent dynamics and contradictions – solves the problem of creating the possibility for its own radical transformation. The actual execution of such transformation, of course, requires human agency – the collective revolutionary action of organized workers – but the possibility for the successful execution of such struggles is generated by the inherent contradictions of capitalism. As Marx once said, "History is the judge, the proletariat is the executioner."

This is the fundamental point of Marx's theory of history, historical materialism. While couched in the terms of a theory of the historical development of human society from its earliest communal forms, through early forms of class society, to feudalism and then capitalism, the real purpose of this theory is to provide what might be called an historical theory of the future. If one can show that capitalism is doomed, that eventually it simply becomes unsustainable as a way of organizing the system of production, and if one can also show that most people would have the scope of their human flourishing enhanced by an egalitarian, democratic alternative to capitalism, then it is not such a leap to imagine that through creative social experimentation in the aftermath of the predicted demise of capitalism (which would also be hastened by the political struggles animated by this prediction), an emancipatory alternative could be constructed.

We do not feel that this theory of capitalism's future is convincing, and thus we do not feel that it provides a satisfactory basis for understanding the possibilities for emancipatory transformations of capitalism. Specifically, we do not believe that capitalism has an inherent, dynamic tendency to destroy its own "conditions of possibility" thus rendering itself unsustainable, nor that capitalism has an inherent tendency to generate social agents capable of accomplishing the revolutionary overthrow of capitalist institutions and the creation of a radical egalitarian and democratic socialism in the aftermath of that destruction. It may be true that capitalism is chronically vulnerable to episodic crises of greater and lesser disruptive effects, but there is no tendency for these crises to intensify over time or for collective agents to increase in their capacity to take advantage of such crises for projects of ruptural social change. If, because of the conclusions of the first agenda, one remains anti-capitalist and believes that the universalization of the conditions for human flourishing requires fundamental transformations of capitalism, then some other conception of the process of that transformation is needed besides the one contained in the classical Marxist theory of history.

What we offer as an alternative is an approach to radical transformation that emphasizes the ways in which the *contradictory reproduction* of capitalism generates social spaces that allow for the possibility of anti-capitalist social forms to be created within capitalist society. The problem of radically transforming capitalism should thus not be viewed in terms of a *ruptural* historical discontinuity between two social orders or modes of production or social systems called "capitalism" and "socialism". Rather, the transformation should be viewed as a process of social metamorphosis through institutional innovations that take place within the contradictory

social spaces of capitalism itself. More concretely, we will argue that at the center of these transformative possibilities is the problem of strengthening the autonomy of civil society and the capacity for collective organization and action of associations within civil society. The emancipatory project of transforming capitalism is thus distinctly *social* in character: creating ways in which both the state and the economy can be rendered increasingly subordinated to organized social forces in civil society.

Agenda 4. *Envisioning Real Utopias*

The theory of the contradictory reproduction of capitalism in our third agenda argues that capitalist society should not be treated as a tightly integrated, functional totality in which all social processes fit together in ways that reproduce existing structures of power and privilege. Capitalism may contain robust mechanisms of social reproduction – and thus the durability of capitalism as a social order – but it is also a deeply contradictory social order with fractures and disjunctures within which new possibilities can be created and struggles for alternative futures can be waged.

Our fourth agenda explores the contours of these alternative institutional possibilities. The idea is to examine institutional proposals that embody both the ideals of an enlarged scope for human flourishing and are also attentive to the pragmatic problems of institutional design, political feasibility, and social sustainability. We call this enterprise "envisioning real utopias" as a way of capturing the tension between realist considerations and utopian vision. The ultimate goal of Sociological Marxism is to contribute to bringing such real utopias onto the historical agenda.