

Sociology 621
Lecture 2
September 10, 2009
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. They are loosely woven together; different modules are attempts at solving different kinds of theoretical and empirical problems. Sometimes the solution to a problem within one module is found in another, so it is not the case that there are no ramifications across modules. Still, this is a loosely coupled theoretical structure.

Now, there may also be something we could call the indispensable “core” to the theory”: some of the modules, or some elements of them, if abandoned, would really constitute a break with the tradition as a whole, not simply with some currents within it. I find it pretty hard to unequivocally identify this core and most efforts I have seen at doing this have the effect of excluding work that I feel remains part of the “tradition”. Still, if I had to say what for me is the irreducible core which, if abandoned, would mean that it no longer made any sense to proclaim the work as part of the tradition, it would be this: *class analysis as the central axis of the critique of capitalism + a normative vision of a democratic-egalitarian alternative to capitalism.*

As we will see at the end of the semester, 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 *explanada* [a.k.a. dependent variable], disciplined on the *explanans* or 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. This is the set of ideas that I explored in my discussion of social and political justice in chapter 2 of *Envisioning Real Utopias*.

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.

In my analysis in *Envisioning Real Utopias* I argued that Marxism is a particular form of emancipatory social science and that, like other forms of emancipatory social science, it faced three core tasks:

1. diagnosis and critique of the world as it exists;
2. envisioning viable alternatives; and,
3. a theory of transformation

This triplet does not map directly onto the three nodes of the Marxist tradition. These are really different ways of mapping the theoretical space. There are, however, some loose connections here: Class analysis, is particularly closely connected to the diagnoses the character of capitalism and the harms it generates. In classical Marxism the normative vision of class emancipation is rarely explicitly elaborated, but is found in different ways in the critique of capitalism and the occasional discussion of the transcendence of capitalism (socialism and communism). The theory of history in classical Marxism plays a fundamental role in trying to establish the credibility of viable alternatives by seeing socialism not as a moral ideal but rather as the immanent future of capitalism created by the contradictions of the trajectory of capitalist development. The theory of transformation takes some of the core elements of the theory of history, especially those

which elaborate the ideas of social reproduction and contradiction, and some of the ideas of class analysis, especially the theory of class formation.

III. Analytical Marxism as one kind of Marxism.

Central ideas:

(1). *conventional scientific norms*: there is nothing distinctive epistemologically or methodologically about Marxism. Some Marxists, like Lukacs, have argued that the most fundamental thing about Marxism is its “method”, sometimes called the “materialist method,” sometimes the “dialectical method,” and further than this method sharply distinguishes Marxism from “bourgeois” social science. I do not really agree with this. I would argue that if they are to be genuinely useful for understanding the world, the methodological principles in the Marxist tradition that are generally associated with “dialectics” can be expressed in less arcane ways. Or to put it a slightly different way: either these principles can be reformulated in the ordinary language of scientific explanation (causes, effects, mechanisms, systems, interactions, etc.), or they end up impeding rather than facilitating understanding how the world really works.

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: Macro-phenomena may have the status of emergent properties of micro-interactions, but they are never disconnected from micro-processes, and our scientific understanding of how macro-processes really work is always deepened by understanding these connections – that is what micro-foundations are all about.

(5) The importance of choice and *strategic action in micro-explanations*: conscious choice-making agent-centered micro-analysis. This is sometimes seen as the most objectionable element in Analytical Marxism, and has led some people to call it “Rational choice Marxism.” The accusation has been encouraged by some of the rhetoric by some analytical Marxists like John Roemer who relentlessly insists of rational actor models or Jon Elster who insists on methodological individualism. But I think this is really misleading. There is no reason why analytical Marxism implies rational choice models or methodological individualism, but it does focus on the importance of (a)

micro-foundations, and (b) strategic action – the conscious action by social actors, individual and collective, that take into account the reactions of others. “Strategy” is fundamental to any theory that hopes to influence the transformation of the social world, and a theory of strategy requires an account of choosing actors.