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## Prospects for the Marxist Agenda

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For more than a century "Marxism" has designated a vital current in the political culture and intellectual life, first of Western Europe and then of the entire world. For many people today, however, including many who would have called themselves Marxists not long ago, this tradition seems largely spent. As a political tendency, Marxism is so deeply in crisis that many erstwhile Marxists nowadays eschew even the label. And after two decades of analytical scrutiny, Marxist theory has emerged shorn of nearly everything that once appeared to distinguish it methodologically from rival views and deflated in its explanatory pretensions. It is therefore appropriate to ask what, if anything, remains of what once seemed the principal alternative to "bourgeois" theory and practice.

We believe that a great deal remains. Thus in focusing on Marxist themes in preceding chapters, our aim was not, as Marx said of his own critique of Left Hegelianism in *The German Ideology*, "to settle accounts" with a no longer tenable tradition. Rather, in clearing away what evidently cannot be sustained, our intent has been to expose, as Marx might also have said, the "rational kernel" that remains. By way of conclusion, we shall try to specify how this "rational kernel" points towards a reconstructed Marxist agenda.

Two stylized analogies between Marxism as an intellectual tradition and medicine will be useful in framing our discussion. The first concerns the distinction between medicine as clinical practice and medicine as scientific research; the second involves the distinction between disciplines within medicine that are organized primarily around organic systems and those that are organized around diseases.

### Clinical vs. Scientific Marxism

Clinical practitioners treat illnesses by relying on available accounts of the mechanisms that generate disease symptoms. They are "scientific" in the sense that they apply scientific knowledge. But as clinicians they are not primarily concerned with advancing or transforming the theories they deploy. Instead, they use existing theories to understand disease and to cure or treat ill patients. It may be that, for some ailments, no existing theories are of much use. Such failures in clinical practice provide a powerful motivation for new discoveries. But clinical medicine *per se* does not aim at the generation of new knowledge. Clinicians regard existing theories as tools in their clinical practice, not as objects of interest in their own right.

Scientific medicine, in contrast, is committed to advancing understanding. To this end scientists typically seek out cases that do not fit the predictions of existing theories. Observations that constitute *anomalies* for existing knowledge provide a basis for reconstructing—and advancing—received views. To this end, rather than looking for the theory that best "fits" the data, as in clinical medicine, the task is to look for data that challenges the best available theories.<sup>1</sup>

By analogy, we can distinguish *clinical* from *scientific* Marxism as analytically distinct poles of Marxist theoretical practice. Clinical Marxism attempts to diagnose and address the "pathologies" of social situations using the tools in the Marxist medicine bag. While clinical Marxism employs the achievements of scientific Marxism—and is therefore "scientific" in the way that clinical medicine is—it does not aim to develop or reconstruct Marxist theory, but to understand the (class) forces and (systemic) constraints at work in specific cases, and to prescribe treatments and, where possible, cures. Scientific Marxism, in contrast, is concerned precisely with the development and reconstruction of Marxist theory. As scientific Marxists, theorists actively look for cases that pose problems for existing theory. To this end, anomalies are challenges indispensable for deepening theoretical insight, not embarrassments to be denied or willfully ignored.

The distinction between scientific and clinical Marxism is not identical to the distinction between academic and political Marxism. There are many academic Marxists whose scholarship is essentially clinical in nature. When a Marxist historian or sociologist, for example, studies a

particular revolution or labor movement, and tries to understand why it occurred and why it succeeded or failed, much of the work uses the repertoire of Marxist concepts and theories to diagnose the facts of a particular case. As with doctors diagnosing the illness of a patient, the academic clinical Marxist may learn a great deal *about* the particular case in question, without learning very much of a more general nature *from* the case.

Marxism espoused the ideal that these clinical and scientific modes should mutually reinforce and enrich each other. The clinical practice of Marxism, particularly when it is deployed politically in the actual practice of socialist movements, helps to identify anomalies, failures of the scientific theory to diagnose social situations adequately. These anomalies provoke reconstructions of the theory through the scientific practice of Marxism. And the reconstructed theory is then applied more effectively in future struggles. This "dialectic of theory and practice" should engender an open and creative dialogue between these two sides of Marxist practice. However, as already remarked, Marxists have often tended to deny or ignore anomalies. Even Marxists who proclaimed allegiance to scientific norms typically defended existing theory with a zeal more characteristic of religion than science.

This tendency towards dogmatism was due in part to the peculiar institutional relationship between the scientific and clinical practices of Marxism. Imagine a medical system in which clinicians controlled both clinical and scientific medicine and in which their power and privileges institutionally depended upon the production of particular diagnoses and the implementation of particular treatments. In such a situation one would predict suppression of anomalies and theoretical stagnation.

The Marxist tradition has been subjected to just such pressures. Throughout much of the twentieth century, clinical Marxists, or, more precisely, the political elites in state socialist societies and Communist parties who were the official guardians of clinical Marxism, have institutionally dominated scientific Marxism. The result has not only compromised the scientific status of Marxism, but has also undermined the usefulness of scientific Marxism for clinical practitioners.<sup>2</sup>

The contemporary renaissance of scientific Marxism is, in part, a consequence of the greater autonomy accorded the development of Marxist theory as the role of Marxist officialdom has waned. It is difficult to imagine the theoretical advances within Marxism of the 1970s

1. Thus when there are well-formulated, contending theories of specific diseases, it is well to look for data that discriminate between the rival explanations. Adjudication between rival theories consists, in part, in finding data that constitute an anomaly with respect to one explanation but not another.

2. It does not follow, of course, that all of the diagnoses clinical Marxists have produced are wrong. Because of the explanatory power of even dogmatic, "vulgar" Marxism, it has been a useful tool for clinical Marxism in at least some settings (e.g. in highly class polarized third world societies).

and 1980s occurring if Marxist theoretical work had been produced primarily within the organizational structures of political parties that required party discipline of their members. The heightened autonomy of Marxist scientific practice from direct subordination to political requirements has contributed to the opening up of Marxist discourse to wider theoretical influences and debates. This is strikingly the case in the emerging school of analytical Marxism, which self-consciously engages a variety of traditions of "bourgeois" social science and philosophy. But even among Marxists critical of analytical Marxism, there is a much less intimate relationship between the production of Marxist theory and active participation in Marxist political parties than in earlier periods, and this has facilitated the new directions that theoretical developments have taken.

To understand the nature of these new developments it will be useful to turn to our second analogy between Marxism and medicine: the distinction between disciplines rooted in independent variables and those designed by dependent variables.

### Independent- vs. Dependent-variable Marxisms

Compare endocrinology and oncology. Endocrinology is defined by its study of a particular organ system in the body—the endocrine system. Endocrinologists investigate and treat the glands that comprise this system, and anything else—from personality to human growth, from cancer to sexuality—in which the endocrine system plays a role. For some of these concerns, the hormones produced by the endocrine system play an important role; for others, their effects are peripheral. While most research by endocrinologists revolves around problems for which it is already known that the endocrine system is important, there is no embarrassment in investigating issues in which hormones turn out to be only marginally involved. Progress in endocrinology results, in part, from demarcating precisely the causal range of the endocrine system, and from understanding its effects even in cases where hormones play only a small role.

Oncology, on the other hand, is defined by the collection of ailments it investigates and treats—cancers. Oncologists explore processes implicated in the generation and development of cancer: from genetic factors to environmental pollution, from viruses to smoking. Some of these determinants may be massively important for some cancers and not others; some may be relatively unimportant for any. While most research on the causes of cancer revolves around causes that are already known to be important, there is no embarrassment in investigating

causes that turn out to be relatively unimportant. Progress in oncology involves understanding the specificity of the impact of both more important and less important causes.

These two kinds of medical specialities could be called, respectively, "independent-variable" and "dependent-variable" disciplines. A similar distinction is implicit in the Marxist tradition.

### Independent-variable Marxism

Independent-variable Marxism is defined, in the first instance, by its preoccupation with a particular cluster of interconnected mechanisms: class, property relations, exploitation, mode of production, economic structure. This list might be expanded or contracted, but at the core is the concept of class, understood in a distinctively Marxist way. Thus, independent-variable Marxism can be called *Marxism as class analysis*.

In addition to studying the internal properties of these phenomena, Marxism as class analysis investigates a variety of problems in which class is thought to be consequential. Thus there are Marxist class analyses of religion, art, social conflict, war, poverty, electoral politics, the trajectory of capitalist development, and many other topics. For some of these explananda, class, understood in the Marxist way, turns out to be massively important; for others class is important along with a range of other causes; and for still others, class is not very important at all. The progress of Marxism as class analysis comes, in part, from understanding the scope and limits of the explanatory capacity of class.

What, it might be asked, justifies the use of the term "Marxism" juxtaposed to "class analysis"? There are, after all, a variety of non-Marxist traditions of class analysis in sociology, each anchored in the study of a particular cluster of explanatory mechanisms. Marxism as class analysis is distinguished from these other class analyses on two grounds: first, because of the way class is conceptualized, and second, because of the substantive theory of the effects of class.<sup>3</sup>

"Class" is a contested term in social science. For some sociologists, class simply designates rungs on a socioeconomic status ladder; for others, classes are any social groups that stand in a relation of authoritative domination and subordination. Marxism as class analysis is grounded in a distinctive way of conceptualizing class: classes are

3. To say that Marxism as class analysis implies a substantive commitment to contested theoretical positions somewhat weakens the analogy with disciplines within medicine. In medicine, one can treat endocrinology as a *topic*, a subject matter defined by its concern with a particular causal system, since it is not highly contested whether this causal mechanism exists. Marxism as class analysis cannot plausibly be viewed simply as a topic of inquiry.

defined *relationally*; those relations are *antagonistic*; those antagonisms are rooted in *exploitation*; and exploitation is based on the social relations of production (or, as is sometimes said, on social property relations).<sup>4</sup>

The justification for using the term "Marxism" in Marxism as class analysis also derives from substantive theoretical commitments about the effects of class. If one believed that class, defined in the above way, had little or no explanatory importance for any of the problems traditionally studied by Marxists, it would be odd to identify the resulting class analysis with Marxism simply because of the formal conceptual criteria used to define class. *Marxism* as class analysis (as opposed to class analysis that uses class concepts with a Marxist bent) implies some commitment to positions that bear a conceptual affinity with traditional Marxist theses about the causal importance of class and related concepts for understanding social change and social reproduction.

In these terms one might want to distinguish between three degrees of commitment to the Marxist content of class analysis:

*Orthodox* Marxist class analysis approaches specific problems with the presumption that class and related concepts are the *most important* causal processes at work. An orthodox Marxist need not insist dogmatically that class is always of paramount importance, but will be surprised when it is not.

*Neo-Marxist* class analysis adopts the presumption that class and related concepts are *important*, but not necessarily the most important, causes. A neo-Marxist will not be surprised, in general, to find that other causes have considerable importance for some problems, but will be surprised if class is of only marginal relevance.

*Post-Marxist* class analysis presumes only that class is a *relevant* factor in any analysis; there is no general expectation that it has considerable importance.

In all of these forms of Marxist class analysis, the *concept* of class is understood in the distinctively Marxist way, but the presumptions about

4. For discussion of these conceptual parameters, see Erik Olin Wright, *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985), pp. 34–7. John Roemer has questioned whether, even within a strictly Marxist concept of class, "exploitation" is an essential element. However, Roemer's principal concern is with the relevance of exploitation to the normative indictment of capitalism, not with the explanatory role exploitation plays in class analysis. See Roemer, "Should Marxists be Interested in Exploitation?" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14:1 (1985), pp. 30–65.

the explanatory importance of class differ. In these terms, one can, without inconsistency, be an orthodox Marxist with respect to certain questions, a neo-Marxist with respect to others, and a post-Marxist with respect to still others. Post-Marxism can be an exit-point from Marxism altogether, but unlike anti-Marxism it does not summarily reject the explanatory importance of Marxist class concepts.

To define Marxism in terms of its use of class as an independent variable does not mean that Marxist explanations are restricted to class. Even Marxism's core explanatory concepts involve factors that are not simply derivations from class. Consider, for example, the term "economic structure", which appears in many Marxist explanations. Typically, references to economic structures are not restricted to the set of class relations within production. The distribution of employment across industrial sectors, the geographical distribution of different kinds of production, the relative importance of import-oriented and export-oriented firms, and the size of units of production are all aspects of economic structure that figure in Marxist explanations. Nevertheless, what gives the use of these concepts a distinctively *Marxist* character is the focus on their linkage to the class aspects of a society's economy.

### Dependent-variable Marxism

Dependent-variable Marxism is defined by its concern with explaining the reproduction and transformation of class relations in different kinds of societies. More specifically, dependent-variable Marxism attempts to explain the developmental trajectory of capitalism as a particular kind of class-based economic system in order to understand the possibilities for socialism, and eventually communism. To employ a somewhat tentative expression, but one with a venerable history in the Marxist tradition, dependent-variable Marxism is *Marxism as scientific socialism*.

Like Marxism as class analysis, Marxism as scientific socialism cannot be defined apart from its substantive theoretical commitments. In particular, Marxists as scientific socialists subscribe to a distinctively Marxist view of capitalism, socialism and perhaps also communism as forms of society within the historical materialist trajectory. To be sure, Marxists in this sense need not be *strong* historical materialists (as defined in Chapter 5). But they must endorse an historical materialist view of the possibilities confronting humankind and of the obstacles in the way of epochal historical transformations. Proponents of *weak restricted* historical materialism are therefore still scientific socialists. But those who hold positions that depart more radically from the theory of history Marx proposed—to the degree that they deny altogether the existence of

the historical dynamic Marx purported to identify—would not count as “Marxists” in this sense.

The distinction between orthodox Marxism, neo-Marxism and post-Marxism is also reflected in Marxism as scientific socialism. Orthodox Marxists believe that socialism (and eventually communism) are virtually inevitable because of the contradictions within capitalism and the dynamic postulated within historical materialism. Neo-Marxists reject the inevitability of the historical materialist trajectory, but nevertheless see socialism as a probable outcome of the dynamics of capitalism. Post-Marxists see socialism as merely a possibility. Orthodox, neo- and post-Marxists are “Marxists” because they see socialism as a possible product of the materialist dynamics and contradictions of capitalism. However, they disagree about how predictable the outcome of these processes is.<sup>5</sup>

It might be thought that this characterization of dependent-variable Marxism is too restricted. Marxists, after all, investigate state policies, forms of consciousness, wars, imperialism—indeed, a host of phenomena ostensibly distinct from the epochal transformation of class structures. Still, what gives these explananda a distinctively Marxist character is their connection to historical materialist themes; it is the dynamic properties of capitalist societies and the prospects for transforming them in a socialist direction that motivate Marxist inquiries. Thus Marxists characteristically study state policies because of their effects on social relations of production; not for their own sake or for reasons distinct from historical materialist concerns. Policies that do not bear on these issues do not constitute distinctively Marxist objects of explanation. They may, of course, be of interest to a more diffuse *radical* social analysis, and Marxism as class analysis may play a role in their explanation. Nevertheless, what gives an explanandum—in contrast to an explanans—its Marxist character is its bearing on the reproduction and transformation of social relations of production.

### **The Link between Independent-variable Marxism and Dependent-variable Marxism**

Until recently, within the Marxist tradition, independent- and dependent-variable Marxism were inextricably linked. Marxism as class analysis was thought to explain the distinctive explananda of Marxism as scientific socialism. This conviction was hardly surprising for Marxists who evinced an extraordinary—and unrealistic—faith in the explanatory

5. Thus one could be a non-Marxist scientific socialist if one believed, for example, that socialism becomes possible not because of any materialist dynamic, but because of the cultural logic of moral development.

powers of class analysis. But even for Marxists who had abandoned strong historical materialism, class analysis was still seen as providing the core explanations for Marxism as scientific socialism.

Today, the unity of class analysis and scientific socialism can no longer be taken for granted. On the one hand, class analysts are more aware than before of the importance of interactions between class and other factors in the generation of social phenomena, even including class conflicts themselves. On the other hand, few theorists still believe that class analysis by itself can provide an adequate theoretical basis for transforming capitalist societies towards socialism and communism. If the current tension between class analysis and scientific socialism were to develop into a complete rupture, it might no longer be appropriate to describe either class analysis or scientific socialism (if it continued to exist at all) as “Marxist”. The Marxist pedigree of certain questions and concepts would, of course, remain beyond dispute, but Marxism as a coherent theoretical project would effectively cease to exist.

Is this tension between class analysis and scientific socialism something to be regretted by those still committed to Marxism? Or is it an opportunity for significant intellectual advance within a broadly Marxist framework? To address these questions, we need to introduce one more dimension to the discussion: Marxism as an emancipatory project.

### **Marxism as an Emancipatory Theory**

Our discussions in this book have centered on Marxism as a social science, not as a normative theory. We have seen how longstanding beliefs about an unalterable opposition between Marxist and “bourgeois” social science are deeply flawed; how Marxism is not, as was once believed, a “paradigm” incompatible with all aspects of mainstream social science. Nevertheless, we have argued that there is a distinctively Marxist explanatory apparatus and a distinctively Marxist focus on certain social phenomena.

In much the same way, until quite recently it was generally assumed that Marxist normative theory, if it existed at all, was at odds with liberal social philosophy and perhaps even, in crucial respects, incommensurable with it. However, in light of recent work by analytical Marxists and liberal social philosophers, this understanding too has been put into question.

The term “Marxism” has always led a double life: designating both a theoretical project for understanding the social world and a political project for changing it. Traditionally, these objectives were thought to be complementary: Marxist theory was to direct political practice, and

Marxist politics was to direct the orientation and perhaps even the content of Marxist theory. In this sense, historically, Marxism has always had an “emancipatory” dimension. In its subject matter and its explanatory apparatus, it aimed to comprehend aspects of human oppression and, by theorizing the conditions for eliminating this oppression, to advance the struggle for human freedom.

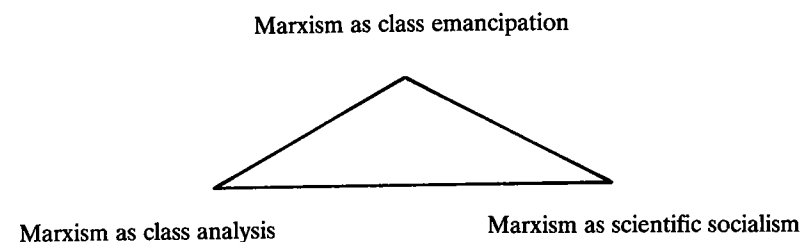
“Oppression”, however, is a normatively contentious idea. Is a particular form of inequality or domination an instance of oppression and therefore an impediment to human emancipation? Or is it an inevitable condition of human life or a by-product of normatively neutral (or perhaps even desirable) arrangements? Any theoretical practice with emancipatory objectives must eventually confront such questions.

Different emancipatory theories can be defined by the different forms of oppression that they seek to understand and transform: feminism constitutes a tradition of emancipatory theory built around gender oppression; Marxism around class oppression. Some Marxists have claimed that Marxism constitutes a fully general emancipatory theory, not simply a theory of the transformation of class oppression as such, but of all forms of socially constituted oppression. As we discussed in Chapter 7, such arguments usually take the form of insisting that class oppression is the “most fundamental” and that other forms of oppression—based on gender, race, nationality, religion, etc.—are themselves either directly explained by class, usually via a functionalist form of reasoning, or operate within limits narrowly circumscribed by class considerations. We do not think that there is any reason, in general, to support such comprehensive claims of class primacy, and in any case, the legitimacy of the distinctively Marxist emancipatory project does not depend on class oppression’s being more “fundamental” than other forms of oppression.

The core normative ideal underlying the Marxist emancipatory project is *classlessness*, or radical egalitarianism with respect to the control over society’s productive resources and the socially produced surplus. We believe that this ideal underlies Marx’s claim that under communism the distribution of the social product will proceed to each according to need, from each according to ability. We shall not attempt to provide philosophical foundations for this value here, but the essential idea is that the existence of classes is a systematic impediment to human freedom, since it deprives most people of control over their destiny, both as individuals and as members of collectivities. In these terms, class relations in general, and capitalism in particular, violate values of *democracy*, in so far as the existence of classes blocks the ability of communities to allocate social resources as they see fit, and they violate values of individual *liberty* and *self-realization*, in so far as class inequal-

ities deprive many individuals of the resources necessary to pursue their life plans.

While, traditionally, the philosophical defense of this emancipatory project was relatively underdeveloped, nevertheless, it is an integral part of the Marxist tradition. We can thus view Marxism as a whole as containing three interdependent theoretical nodes: Marxism as class analysis (independent-variable Marxism), Marxism as scientific socialism (dependent-variable Marxism), and Marxism as class emancipation (normative Marxism). These form a kind of triad.



In classical Marxism, these three elements mutually reinforced each other. Marxism as class emancipation identified the disease in the existing world. Marxism as class analysis provided the diagnosis of its causes. Marxism as scientific solution identified the cure. Without class analysis and scientific socialism, the emancipatory critique would simply be a moral condemnation, while without the emancipatory objective, class analysis would simply be an academic speciality.

The enormous appeal of Marxism came in part from the unity of these three elements, for together they provided a basis for the belief that eliminating the miseries and oppressions of the existing world was not simply a utopian fantasy, but a practical political project. The dissolution of that unity is an important part of the “crisis of Marxism”.

### The Crisis of Marxism and the Prospects for the Marxist Agenda

The expression “the crisis of Marxism” nowadays designates two distinct realities: the political, economic and ideological crisis of states and political parties that adopted Marxism as an official ideology; and the crisis within the intellectual tradition of Marxism. The first of these crises is rooted in the stagnation and decay of authoritarian state socialist

societies.<sup>6</sup> The second, however, comes not from the stagnation of Marxism as a theoretical tradition, but has accompanied a period of considerable vitality, openness to new ideas and theoretical progress within each of the three poles of the Marxist tradition—class analysis, scientific socialism and class emancipation. Class analysis has registered plain and durable successes, but the idea that social science in general ought to devolve into class analysis no longer appears plausible. The jury is still out on Marxism as scientific socialism, but it is now beyond dispute that the strong historical materialism that formerly motivated Marxist concerns with capitalism, socialism and communism is untenable. The jury is out too on socialism's and communism's place in the broader struggle for human emancipation.

More tellingly, the link between these theories, once unquestioned, can no longer be assumed. We have already discussed the disjunction between Marxism as class analysis and Marxism as scientific socialism. It is now plain that a similar disjunction also looms between these dimensions of Marxism and Marxism as an emancipatory theory.

Classical Marxism was a marvelously ambitious endeavor. It aspired, first of all, for unity between theory and practice. Theory was to guide practice; practice was to transform theory. Its clinical and scientific aspects were inextricably interdependent. In addition, classical Marxism aimed to construct an integrated and comprehensive framework for the analysis of social phenomena. This framework was no eclectic combination of distinct theoretical elements rooted in different explanatory principles; it was a unified theory with a fully integrated conceptual structure. Thus classical Marxism embodied a unity of class analysis and scientific socialism, forged around a general emancipatory project.

This vision of Marxism can no longer be maintained. The disjunction between Marxism as class analysis and Marxism as scientific socialism has fractured the prospects for a "unified field theory" of emancipatory possibilities, and the high degree of autonomy between clinical and scientific Marxism that has developed since the 1960s has eroded the "unity of theory and practice". For better or worse, Marxist theory today

6. It is ironic that the collapse of authoritarian state socialisms should be a stimulus for proclamations of the "end of Marxism" as a social theory by anti-Marxists, and for self-doubt by Marxists and their sympathizers. From the perspective of *classical* Marxism, the collapse of these regimes and their return to a "normal" path of capitalist development is eminently predictable. If anything, the long detour from the Bolshevik Revolution to *perestroika* was a challenging anomaly to historical materialism. The restoration of capitalist property relations in relatively underdeveloped industrial economies, on the other hand, actually corroborates the theory. If Marx was right, socialism is not achievable until the forces of production have developed massively under capitalism, and further development is fettered by capitalist property relations. The attempt to construct revolutionary socialism by an act of will in violation of this "law of history" was therefore doomed from the start.

is seldom directed by immediate political exigencies, and institutional links with political parties or movements have declined along with those parties and movements themselves.

While the traditional model no longer seems tenable, even in principle, many Marxist intellectuals are unhappy with the emerging alternative—a social theory with less ambitious explanatory scope and with less certainty about its explanatory capabilities. The sense of crisis that results reflects a deep ambivalence over the implications of this transformation of a comprehensive emancipatory theory to a more restricted account of particular social processes and tendencies.

It is clear that a retreat to earlier Marxist aspirations is no longer possible. The world has changed and those earlier forms are irretrievable. The fragmentation of the once unitary triad of Marxist theory undoubtedly erodes its appeal as an ideology. Yet in many respects these three components of the old Marxist triad have flourished as their interconnections have weakened. We are optimistic that a reconstructed Marxism, even if less integrated, is feasible and that what is now experienced as a crisis will come to be seen as unavoidable growing pains.