Berkeley Sociology 298
Lectures 1 - 3
The Broad structure of Marxist Theory
January 29-31

The Problem: Many Marxisms, Why Marxism

There are four broad stances that people typically take with respect to Marxism.

First, *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. The central issue is that Marxism must be made accessible and internalized as a subjectively salient belief system.

Then second, there is *Burying Marxism*: this is an antiquated, outmoded ideology, at most a curiosity of the intellectual history of the West, at worse a pernicious doctrine that has poisoned the minds of people – especially youth! – for 150 years. It survived for so long because it was backed by political parties, not because it ever had any scientific merit. It is time to bury it once and for all.

Third, there is the stance of most sociologists: *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.

Finally, there is *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.

In this course I will approach the Marxist tradition in this third way. We will not treat Marxism as a finished body of thought, as a bounded doctrine, but as a theoretical tradition of ideas and debate that in order to remain relevant and powerful continually needs to be challenged and reconstructed.

Now, any effort at reconstructing Marxism must start with some kind of account of what it is that is to be reconstructed – what are the core ideas of this theoretical tradition that provide the raw

materials for this theoretical enterprise. This turns out to be not such an easy task, because there are many Marxisms and much dispute over what indeed constitutes its central core. It is for this reason that I will generally use the expression "The Marxist Tradition" rather than "Marx*ism*". [Parenthetical note on the term "Marxism" and why this is unfortunate – cf creationism and Darwinism].

In this lecture and the next I want to lay out a series of theses which I think define the core ideas of classical Marxism and the basic contours of the kind of reconstruction I will be developing in this course. Most of these theses we will revisit later in the course where we will elaborate the ideas to a much greater extent. Here my main goal is to give you an overarching view of the argument.

I. Diagnostic Theses: What is Wrong with Capitalism?

First there are a series of theses that can be called "diagnostic theses", these which attempt to specify what is wrong with capitalism. We look around the world in which we live and we immediately confront the juxtaposition of extraordinary wealth and prosperity along with continuing human misery**,** particularly when we look at the world as a whole but also when we look at conditions within our country. In significant ways this misery revolves around material conditions of life, but it also extends to what might be termed spiritual misery – the loss of meaning in people's life, loneliness, alienation. So, we see a range of ills, symptoms of some underlying disease. The diagnostic theses of Marxism attempt to provide an account of the underlying process which generates these problems.

> **Thesis 1. The conditions for Human Flourishing thesis:** *Human flourishing for the broad masses of people would be broadly enhanced if they lived (a) in conditions of a radically egalitarian distribution of the material conditions of life and (b) within solidaristic communities of mutual support and reciprocity.*

This thesis is captured by the classical distributional slogan advocated by Marx, "To each according to need, from each according to ability" and by the ideal of a "classless" society. This is the way material resources are distributed within egalitarian families: children with greater needs receive more resources, and everyone is expected to contribute as best they can to the tasks needed by the family. This is also the way books are distributed in public libraries under conditions of progressive taxation: you check out what you need, not what you can afford, and you contribute to the support of the library through taxes based on ability to pay. This distributional principle also affirms an ideal of community and reciprocity: I serve you because of your needs, not because of what I can get out of it. The radical egalitarianism of the Marxist tradition affirms that human flourishing in general would be enhanced if these principles could be generalized to the society as a whole.

The radical egalitarian claim in the conditions for human flourishing thesis as stated here is not, in and of itself, a thesis about *justice*. The claim is that human beings will generally flourish better under such egalitarian conditions than under conditions of inequality and hierarchy, and

therefore it is in the interests of most people to support moves towards egalitarianism, but this need not imply that it is a requirement of justice that such flourishing be promoted. Marx himself, and many Marxists, have been quite skeptical of arguments about social justice, seeing these as inevitably embedded in various class ideologies, and therefore preferred to ground their arguments in starker claims about interests. I believe that this is a question of social justice, but that belief is not necessary in the present context.

Clarifications:

The meaning of "human flourishing". The problem of the relationship of the distribution of the material conditions of life to human flourishing obviously depends on precisely what is included under the rubric "flourishing". In the Marxist tradition the notion of flourishing is fairly limited, centering on the problem of the realization of the potential for human creativity. This could be extended somewhat to the idea of "self-actualization" in a more psychological sense as well, but generally above all what is unleashed under radically egalitarian conditions is the cultivation of talents and creative activity, the realization of each person's creative potentials. Other dimensions of human welfare – contentment, a sense of meaningfulness, love, perhaps even a sense of spirituality – might also be enhanced by radically egalitarian material conditions of life, but these have not been as central to the Marxist tradition.

Mechanisms through which radical egalitarianism promotes flourishing. A variety of mechanisms linked to a radical egalitarian distribution of the material conditions of life can be seen as promoting this kind of human flourishing:

(1). *Elimination of poverty, material misery*: The creative potential of people is enhanced when people are not preoccupied with mere survival, where they are well fed, housed, etc. To the extent that egalitarianism itself reduces deprivation, it promotes flourishing. Of course, the elimination of absolute deprivations is consistent with relatively high levels of inequality, so logically it need not be the case that poverty-elimination is contingent on radical egalitarianism. Nevertheless, socio-logically it is the case that more egalitarian conditions will tend to foster more stable reductions in human misery.

(2) *Minimization of "necessary labor," of toil*: High productivity with egalitarian distribution makes it possible, in principle, for everyone to "toil" very few hours a week – to engage in labor strictly for the purpose of providing the wherewithal to live. High productivity liberates *time* for creative activity. Inequality under conditions of high productivity means that some people must toil much more than others and thus are deprived of the time for such activity.

(3) *Dealienation*. Egalitarian distributions of the material conditions of life include egalitarian distribution of control over the process of production. This means empowering people by giving them a direct say in a central aspect of their lives, both as individuals and as members of communities. The claim here is that human beings will flourish better when they are empowered in this way than when they are under the control of others or of impersonal forces.

(4). *Reduction of competitiveness*: A more subtle argument about the ways a radical egalitarian distribution of material conditions of life promotes human flourishing centers on the problem of individualistic competition. Within capitalism, a good argument can be made that competition does spur creativity, innovation, etc. for those people who triumph and perhaps for those who fail but were realistically "in the race". But it is also clearly the case that many people do not realize anything close to their creative potential because of a belief in the futility of trying. Particularly when inequalities generate winner-take-all outcomes, competition as the basis for realization of one's goals will tend to under-reward all but a few. The empirical issue is thus whether the extent to which most people can live lives in which they realize their potentials to the fullest extent would be greater in a much less competitive setting, where people are less concerned about beating out others than simply achieving their best. The radical egalitarian argument is that taking the material conditions of life out of competition – having these conditions distributed in a radically egalitarian way – will have the net effect of enhancing the realization of human potential across the relevant population: whatever loss in motivation-for-achievement that occurs because of the reduction in the pay-offs for being the best will be more than compensated by the encouragement to the masses of people who are marginalized from the hierarchies of success under inegalitarian conditions.

(5). *Community*: A final, and perhaps more problematic, mechanism through which equality promotes flourishing concerns the ways in which the possibility of living within solidaristic communities of reciprocity and helping is enhanced under egalitarian compared to inegalitarian conditions. Community is a value in itself, but it also underwrites the kind of flourishing we are talking about here. The claim here is that human creativity and the realization of individual potentials is spurred by living in a supportive, nurturant environments nurturance and support rather than living in an atomized environment of fragmented communities and weak reciprocities, and further, that such vibrant community is fostered by radical egalitarianism. But, of course, strong community can also enforce conformity and stifle creativity, and thus it is important to think through the specific institutions through which community is built on egalitarian foundations.

Thesis 2. Material possibility thesis: *Under conditions of a highly productive economy, it becomes materially possible to organize society in such a way that there is a sustainable radically egalitarian distribution of the material conditions of life.*

Egalitarian normative principles within the Marxist tradition are thought not to simply reflect some kind of timeless human value, although they may be that as well, but are also meant to be embodied in a practical political project. Central to the Marxist theoretical project is thus the attempt to understand the conditions under which these moral ideals can feasibly be translated into social practice. Here the basic idea is that radical egalitarianism becomes increasingly feasible as a practical principle of social organization as the productive capacity of a society increases and absolute scarcity is reduced. The basic thinking behind this idea is two fold: First, under conditions of low productivity, the average amount of necessary labor – toilsome activity engaged in simply to produce the basic necessities of life – is high, and thus even if such toil were

distributed equally to everyone, there would not be much scope for the full realization of human creativity and potential. It is even possible – although this is not obvious by any means – that under conditions of relatively low productivity the real choice is between some people flourishing in the required sense and no one flourishing rather than everyone flourishing. Second, under conditions of relatively low productivity, the advantages a person can gain by successfully defending a privileged position within an inegalitarian distribution are huge, and this means that the incentives for people to seek such advantages will be high. This, in turn, would make it institutionally more difficult – and perhaps costly – to block such efforts. Low productivity therefore makes egalitarian distributions of material conditions of life vulnerable to challenge and thus, in the long run, less easily sustained.

In the strongest version of this thesis, the egalitarian ideals are strictly impossible to implement and sustain until material scarcity is largely overcome; in weaker versions all that is claimed is that high productivity makes a basic egalitarianism of material conditions of life more feasible.

Clarifications

Scarcity and needs. The concept of "scarcity" is not a simple one, and as many people have observed, what counts as a "necessity" is not given by nature, but develops with human productivity. The extent to which high productivity makes radical egalitarianism more sustainable, therefore, may be vulnerable to the escalation of needs problem for two reasons: First, if needs rise more rapidly that productivity, then it is not the case that an equal distribution of toil would give everyone a great deal of time for the realization of creative capacities. Second, the stakes for the privileged for defending highly inegalitarian distributions of material conditions of life may not decline very much, and thus equality may continue to be vulnerable to subversion.

Incentives, productivity and sustainable equality. One of the standard criticisms of any form of radical egalitarianism is that it fails because of incentive problems regardless of the level of productivity of the society. This is an empirical issue and it may depend on the nature of the surrounding institutions of the egalitarian distribution of material conditions of life. Marxists have generally recognized the importance of capitalist institutions for providing the right kind of incentives to massively increase the level of productivity from preindustrial levels to the levels of highly developed "post-industrial" economies, but once that level is achieved it is much less obvious that the same kind of incentives are needed to sustain that level of productivity and advance it further, if at a slower rate.

> **Thesis 3. Capitalism's Progressiveness thesis:** *Capitalism spurs the development of the forces of production in ways that systematically increase the productivity of the economy.*

In the more teleological versions of Marxism this was characterized as the "historical mission" of capitalism: to revolutionize the forces of production to such an extent that it brings humanity to the point where super-abundance is materially feasible. Even if one rejects this kind of thinking, nevertheless, the internal dynamics of capitalism – competition, the drive for accumulation, the

extension of markets, the engine of innovation, etc. – result in a tremendous rise in the level of human productivity.

> **Thesis 4. Capitalism's Inegalitarianism thesis:** *Capitalism massively fosters material inequality, and supports institutions which block the possibility of achieving a radically egalitarian distribution of the material conditions of life.*

One of the great achievements of capitalism is to develop human productive capacity to such an extent that it makes the radical egalitarianism needed for human flourishing materially feasible, yet capitalism also continually generates and deepens inequality and, perhaps even more significantly, creates institutions and power relations that block the actual achievement of egalitarianism. This sets the stage for the great drama and tragedy of capitalist development*: it is a process which continually enhances the material conditions for an expanded scope of human flourishing while simultaneously blocking the creation of the social conditions for realizing this potential*. Capitalism perpetuates materially unnecessary forms and levels of inequality.

Much Marxist research focuses on the ways in which capitalism blocks the realization of radical egalitarian possibilities. It does so in two primary ways: First, much of the analysis of capitalism centers on the way capitalism itself is a massive machine for generating inequality. The core analysis of class relations as relations of exploitation and of capital accumulation as a process of amassing surplus under the control of concentrated centers of capitalist agency is an account of inequality-generating processes. Second, the Marxist analysis of the elaboration of economic, social and political institutions in capitalism focuses on the ways these institutions prevent challenges to these mechanisms of inequality. This is the core of the theory of the state and ideology, or what used to be called the "superstructure," but it is also more broadly a central theme of Marxist analyses of such things as consumerism, the ways in which market competition erodes worker solidarity, the transition costs for processes of radical change, and so on.

> **Thesis 5. The contradictory relation of capitalism to community thesis**: *Capitalism simultaneously erodes and stimulates the formation of solidaristic community: market competition erodes community, but resistence to capitalist exploitation fosters solidarity*

The central logic of capitalism as a system of production and distribution is that economic efficiency is enhanced when people are motivated by greed, maximizing their own material welfare and not worrying about the welfare of others. This is what is meant by "competition" and "profit maximization" under conditions of market competition and private property. Of course, as every economic sociologist will tell you, this greed driven search for personal gain is tempered by normative constraints, and in many contexts forms of trust and interdependence continue to play an important role, but they are always under threat from capitalism qua capitalism. This is the sense in which capitalism erodes community: it erodes the patterns of reciprocity and what some people call conditional altruism that constitute community.

But this is only part of the story, for capitalism also fosters resistence to its own processes: competition breeds individualism, but it also breeds collection resistence and these foster solidarity and community.

Conclusion *to diagnositic theses*

> **Thesis 6**. **Anti-capitalism thesis**. *To achieve radical egalitarianism and community of solidaristic reciprocity requires challenging and transforming capitalism.*

The distinctive conclusion to the Marxist diagnosis of the ills of capitalism, is that capitalism itself needs to be challenged.

II. Historical Possibility Theses: framing the problem of strategies for social change

If capitalism blocks the conditions for human flourishing – and also if it blocks the conditions for social justice (which Marxists have not traditionally argued, but socialists more generally have) – then the core of the political project of egalitarians should directed against the central principles of capitalism. This need not mean that the political project should pragmatically aim to *destroy* capitalism since that would depend on a host of other considerations – the feasibility of destroying capitalism, the costs of destroying capitalism, the conditions for creating a sustainable alternative, and so on. Theses 1-5 stipulate a politics that is *normatively anti-capitalist*, but the practical political program depends on additional theoretical and empirical claims about the real historical possibilities.

The political conclusion of classical Marxism is that these obstacles can only be overcome by destroying capitalism through a revolutionary rupture. More social democratic currents within the Marxist tradition accept the idea that capitalism is the enemy of equality, but reject the ruptural vision of change: capitalism can be transformed from within in ways which gradually move in the direction of a more profoundly egalitarian social order. The full realization of the radical egalitarian ideal may, of course, be a utopian fantasy. But even if "classlessness" is unachievable, "less classness" can be a central political objective, and this still requires challenging capitalism. Such a challenge is socialist insofar as it aims at maximizing democratically imposed, collective constraints on capital and the market in order to reduce inequalities in the distributions of power over production and consumption. Where socialists defined in this way disagree is in their beliefs about ultimate limits on this process.

In order to figure out the strategic implications of the diagnostic theses of socialist theory, we need additional theoretical propositions about the contradictions within capitalist systems and the future possibilities posed by those contradictions. Classical Marxism had a clear and powerful

set of arguments on these issues, arguments that had compelling implications for long-term strategic thinking. The validity of the diagnostic theses of Marxism, however, does not ride on the cogency of the strategic theses of classical Marxism. We will first examine the classical Marxist response embodied in Marx's theory of history – historical materialism – and the accompanying theory of capitalist development. This will be followed by an alternative way of thinking about the strategic response to the diagnostic theses, what we will call sociological Marxism.

Alternative I: Historical Materialism as a Theory of the Future

> **Thesis 7. The long-term nonsustainability of capitalism thesis:** *In the long-run capitalism is an unsustainable social order. Its internal dynamics (laws of motion) will eventually destroy the conditions of its own reproducibility.*

This means that capitalism is not merely characterized by episodes of crisis and decay, but that these episodes have an inherent tendency to intensify over time in ways that make the survival of capitalism increasingly problematic. Understanding this trajectory of capital accumulation and crisis tendencies was the central objective of Marx's political economic theory of capitalist development.

> **Thesis 8. The intensification of anticapitalist class struggle thesis**. *The dynamics of capitalist development systematically tend to (a) increase the proportion of the population – the working class – whose interests are pervasively hurt by capitalism while at the same time (b) increase the collective capacity of the working class to challenge capitalism. The result is an intensification of class struggle directed against capitalism.*

This intensification of struggle thesis depends upon a specific theory of the long-term trajectory of transformations of capitalist class structures. G.A. Cohen expresses this very well. Let us define four categories of people:

(1) the exploited
(2) the poor
(3) the producers of the wealth of society
(4) The vast majority of the population

What Marx argued was that over time these four categories increasingly correspond. The first two provide the motivations for struggles, the interests against capitalism. The last two explain the capacity to challenge capitalism.

Thesis 9. The revolutionary transformation thesis. *Since capitalism becomes increasingly unsustainable (thesis 7) while the class forces arrayed against capitalism become increasingly numerous and capable of challenging capitalism (thesis 8), eventually the social forces arrayed against capitalism will be sufficiently strong and capitalism itself sufficiently weak that capitalism can be overthrown.*

There is no time horizon on this thesis. It is simply a derivation from the claims about two temporal trajectories: the long term trajectory of increasingly problematic capitalist sustainability and the trajectory of increasingly powerful opposition. At some point this means that capitalism is not merely weak because of its internal crises and contradictions, but it is vulnerable.

Two additional claims are often attached to this thesis:

Thesis 9.1: *The necessity of rupture thesis:* the destruction of capitalism must be *ruptural* rather than *incremental* (i.e. that the destruction takes place in a temporally-condensed historical episode)

Thesis 9.2: *Revolutionary violence thesis*: Because of the institutional power of the defenders of capitalism, any radical rupture with capitalist social relations requires *violent overthrow* of the state rather than *democratic capture*.

Marxism, as embodied in revolutionary movements, especially after it was joined with Leninism, came to be strongly identified with the theses of violent, ruptural change, but this does not really follow from the logic of the theory that generates the revolutionary transformation thesis. Marx himself, at times, believed that the transformation of capitalism might be possible through democratic means. In any case, these propositions about the actual process of transformation should be regarded as historically contextual propositions rather than fundamental theses of Marxism.

Thesis 10. The transition to socialism thesis: *Given the ultimate non-sustainability of capitalism (thesis 7), and the interests and capacities of the social actors arrayed against capitalism (thesis 8), in the aftermath of the destruction of capitalism through intensified class struggle (thesis 9), socialism, defined as a society in which the working class collectively controls the system of production) is its most likely successor (or in an even stronger version of the thesis: its inevitable successor).*

Marx never really provided a theory of socialism as such – of the institutional properties of the successor society to capitalism. Basically he felt that under conditions in which thesis 9 would be fulfilled socialism would be what he called an "historical necessity". There were would be powerful, collectively organized agents with an interest in constructing a society within which the system of production was organized and controlled by the direct producers, and they would have

the capacity to begin the construction. Through some kind of trial-and-error process of what is now called "democratic experimentalism" the design of socialist institutions would be creatively discovered. "Where there is a Will there is a Way" and "Necessity is the Parent of Invention" would be the watchwords.

> **Thesis 11. The Communism Destination Thesis**. *The dynamics of socialist development will lead to a strengthening of community solidarity and a progressive erosion of material inequalities so that eventually classes and the state will "wither away", resulting in the emergence of a communist society: "to each according to need, from each according to ability"*

The final thesis of the classical Marxist theory-of-the-future specifies communism as the ultimate destination. This is the thesis which gave revolutionary socialist parties their name: Communist Parties. It should be regarded as a visionary speculation rooted in a utopian imagination rather than a truly scientific proposition, for unlike the overthrow of capitalism thesis it is not really grounded in arguments about causal processes that generate actual possibilities and tendencies. Nevertheless it is important as defining some of the central normative principles of the goals of anticapitalist struggle.

Assessment

Taking these arguments together generates the fundamental predictions of classical Marxism about the destiny of capitalism: capitalism has an inherent tendency to create the conditions both for its own destruction and for the triumph of socialism as an alternative. As the economic reproduction of capitalism becomes more and more problematic and precarious, agents with an interest in transforming capitalism increasingly have the capacity to effectively struggle against capitalism. Eventually these curves cross – capitalism becomes sufficiently weak and the challengers sufficiently strong, that it can be transformed. When this happens, socialism is the predicted outcome because of the creative capacity and interests of the challengers.

This theoretical argument has a strongly deterministic quality to it: the transition to socialism is a genuine prediction about the future, not just a speculation or a fond wish. It is meant to be a scientific prediction of the form: given these tendencies, which are generated by the inner workings of this kind of society, we can predict with a fairly high level of confidence that capitalism will lead to socialism. This determinism provided Marx with a solution to a very knotty problem: how to render credible the idea of a radical emancipatory alternative to the existing structure of society? The idea that the world could be fundamentally different than the way we experience it and, above all, that it could be freed of the oppressions and miseries of the world in which we now live, is a fantastic thought. To most people it will seem fantastically implausible. How to make this idea of alternative credible? One way is to build a careful positive argument for the institutional design of the alternative, explaining how it would work and how it would alleviate various problems. But given the magnitudes of the changes and the uncertainties of the

consequences of any specific institutional arrangement in the absence of empirical observation, this is a very problematic task. The alternative is to develop a convincing deterministic theory of the longrun nonviability of capitalism and then postulate a kind of where-there-is-a-will-there-is-a-way and neeecity-is-the-mother-of-invention theory of building socialism. If the theory of the demise of capitalism is compelling, then there would be little need to speculate on the institutional design of this alternative. Given the interests and capacities of the relevant social actors, socialism would be invented through a process of pragmatic, creative, collective experimentalism when it became an "historical necessity."

Note the contrast with feminism and the theory of the radical egalitarian alternative to male domination. In the lived experience of women, once consciousness has been raised about the nature of gender inequalities and oppression within male dominated societies, there is little worry about the credibility of the alternative. Whereas many Marxists and socialists wonder whether or not a society without class domination is really feasible, few feminists believe that male domination is necessary for social life. The egalitarian alternative may be difficult to achieve, but its feasibility is generally viewed as unproblematic. As a result, feminism doesn't need a deterministic theory of the demise of patriarchy as a way of rendering the alternative credible.

This is an elegant social theory, enormously attractive to people committed to the moral and political agenda of an egalitarian, democratic, socialist future. Since struggles for social change are always arduous affairs, particularly if one aspires to fundamental transformations of social structures, having the confidence that the "forces of history" are on one's side and that eventually the system against which one is fighting will be unsustainable, provides enormous encouragement. The *belief* in the truth of this classical theory, arguably, is one the things which helped sustain communist struggles in the face of such overwhelming obstacles.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence for the scientific validity of the theory of the destiny of capitalism as formulated. While Marx's theory of capitalist dynamics and development contain many penetrating insights about the inner workings of capitalism in the period of unregulated early industrial capitalism with its sharp polarizations and chaotic crisis tendencies, the actual trajectory of capitalism in the 20th century does not support the pivotal claims of the theory.

First, *the non-sustainability of capitalism thesis*: While capitalism does contain inherent crisis tendencies, there is no empirical evidence that these crises have any long-term tendency for intensification. Furthermore, there are serious flaws in the principle theoretical arguments advanced by Marx that capitalism has inherent limits to its own sustainability. In particular, the most systematic argument for his predictions, the theory of the tendency of the falling rate of profit, is unsatisfactory. Marx believed on the basis of the labor theory of value that aggregate profits are generated exclusively by the labor of workers currently using the means of production (what he called "living labor"). Since capital intensity (or what Marx called "the organic composition of capital") tends to increase with the development of capitalism, and thus the costs of capital relative to labor increases over time, the profit-generating capacity of capitalism declines as a proportion of total costs and thus the rate of profit will tend to decline. This theoretical argument has been shown repeatedly to be unsatisfactory, both because of flaws in the

labor theory of value on which it is based and because of specific flaws in its argument about the impact of capital intensity on the rate of profit. The other main idea within classical Marxism for a tendency for crises to intensify in capitalism – the problem of overproduction – also does not yield any inherent intensification of crisis once it is recognized that the state and other innovative institutions are capable of generating increased demand to absorb excess production. The first fundamental thesis of the classical Marxist theory of the trajectory of capitalism – the thesis that there is an *inherent* tendency for capitalism to eventually become unreproducible – cannot, therefore, be sustained.

Second, *the intensification of anticaptialist class struggles thesis* and *the revolutionary transformation thesis*: The theory of class formation and class struggle that underpins the arguments that socialism is the future of capitalism is also problematic. There is little evidence to support the classical Marxist view of an overriding tendency for structurally-determined classes to become organized as collective actors around class interests, and for the articulated class interests of workers so organized to become increasingly anticapitalist. Instead of becoming simplified and more polarized, class structures in capitalist societies are becoming more complex and differentiated. Even within the working class, instead of material conditions of life becoming more precarious and more homogeneous, heterogeneity has increased on many dimensions in many parts of the world. Furthermore, even apart from the failures in its predictions about how the trajectory of capitalist development would affect the class structure classical Marxism did not anticipate that the various institutions of social reproduction that develop within capitalism would be so robust, flexible and effective. As a result, there appears to be much more contingency and indeterminacy in the relationship between class structure, class formation and class struggle, even in the long run, then was countenanced in the classical theory.

If capitalism has no inherent tendency to become progressively weakened and eventually unsustainable, and if the class forces arrayed against capitalism have no inherent tendency to become collectively stronger and more able to challenge capitalism, then there are no solid grounds for predicting, even in the long run, that socialism is the probable future of capitalism and posited in the transition to socialism thesis. This does not, of course, imply the converse – that socialism is not a *possible* future for capitalism, or even that it is an improbable future – but simply that the traditional theory provides no firm basis for any predictions about the likelihood of this outcome.

If one rejects the historical destiny theses of classical Marxist theory, one might well ask: what's left of Marxism? Perhaps all that is left are some scattered, if still valuable, insights of a Marxist legacy, as suggested by the "Using Marxism" stance. I will argue to the contrary that there remains a conceptual core to Marxism which can provide the foundation upon which Marxism can be (re)built. This reconstruction also builds on some ideas found in the classical Marxist tradition, but ideas that were less fully elaborated than the theory of the destiny of capitalism. With Michael Burawoy I call this "the theory of the contradictory reproduction of capitalist class relations." We are trying to build a sociological Marxism on this basis. The strategy for reconstructing Marxism on thesis basis involves identifying salient causal processes within capitalist society which have broad ramifications for the nature of institutions in such societies and the prospects for emancipatory social change, but it will not identify an inherent

dynamic process which propels such societies towards a specific emancipatory destination. The problem of challenging capitalism will remain a central anchor to this proposed sociological Marxism, but socialism will no longer be viewed as an historical *necessity* but as the potential outcome of strategy, constraint and contingency.

Alternative II: Sociological Marxism as a theory of the contradictory reproduction of capitalism

> **Thesis 12. The social reproduction of class relations thesis:** *By virtue of their exploitative conflict-generating character, class structures are inherently unstable forms of social relations and require active institutional arrangements for their reproduction.*

This thesis leads to a specific kinds of prediction: Where class relations exist, it is predicted that various forms of political and ideological institutions will develop to defend and reproduce them. In classical Marxism these were typically referred to as political and ideological *superstructures* which reproduced the *economic base*. [The standard argument was that superstructures – particularly the state and ideology – existed to protect the economic base from challenge. This is one of the central ideas in thesis 4 – how capitalism blocks egalitarianism. Typically this argument in classical Marxism took the form of a strong functional explanation in which the form of the superstructure was explained by functional requirement of reproducing the base. I generally avoid the use of the term "superstructure" because of the tendency for this term to suggest too high a level of integration and coherence among those institutions involved in social reproduction, as well as an image of functional efficiency, which I believe is unjustified]

> **Thesis 13. The contradictions of capitalism thesis**. *By virtue of the dynamics of capitalist society, the institutional solutions to the problems of social reproduction of capitalist class relations at any point in time have a systematic tendency to erode and become less functional over time.*

This is so for two principle reasons: First, the dynamics of capitalist development generate changes in technology, the labor process, class structure, markets and other aspects of capitalist relations, and these changes continually pose new problems of social reproduction. In general, earlier institutional solutions will cease to be optimal under such changed conditions. Second, class actors adapt their strategies in order to take advantages of weaknesses in existing institutional arrangements. Over time, these adaptive strategies tend to erode the ability of institutions of social reproduction to effectively regulate and contain class struggles.

> **Thesis 14. Institutional Crisis and Renovation thesis.** *Because of the continual need for institutions of social reproduction (thesis 11) and the tendency for the reproductive capacity of given institutional arrangements to erode over time (thesis 12), institutions of social reproduction in capitalist societies will tend to be periodically renovated.*

The typical circumstance for such renovation will be institutional crisis – a situation in which organized social actors, particularly class actors, come to experience the institutional supports as unsatisfactory, often because they cease to be able to contain class conflicts within tolerable limits. These institutional renovations can be piecemeal or may involve dramatic institutional reconfigurations. There is no implication here either that the new institutional solutions will be optimal or that capitalism will collapse in the face of suboptimal arrangements. What is claimed is that capitalist development will be marked by a sequence of institutional renovation episodes in response to the contradictions in the reproduction of capitalist relations.

Thesis 15. Nonevitability of Functional Optimality thesis. *The institutions of social reproduction that are constructed out of contradictions and crises need not be optimal for the functioning of capitalism or the interests of capital. The actual form of these institutional solutions and the extent to which they intensify or mute the inegalitarian, exploitative and oppressive logics of capitalism depends upon the balance of class (and other) social forces.*

Thesis 16. The Real Utopias Thesis. *The historical trajectory of capitalist development does not create an immanent necessity of emancipatory transformation, but nevertheless the contradictory functioning of capitalism opens up the possibility for emancipatory futures. The realization of that possibility depends upon struggles within capitalism to create and advance institutional spaces for radical egalitarian redistributions of material conditions, deepened democratic forms of governance, and solidaristic communities.*