

Sociology 621
Lecture 1
September 2, 2009

Marxism as a Critical Emancipatory Social Science

INTRODUCTION

The history of this course

I have given this course in one form or another since I first arrived in Madison in 31 years ago. In fact, in some sense this course began as a course I helped organize as a graduate student in Sociology at the University of California in Berkeley in the early 1970s. It was then called “Current Controversies in Marxist Social Science.” This was a time when radical social theory was at the core of student life in universities, especially in sociology. Marxism was a dynamic, exciting, contested terrain of vigorous debate, infused with intellectual and political passion. Students were actively at the center of this fervor, starting new journals and helping to define the agenda. I was involved in three of these journals: The insurgent *Sociologist*, now called *Critical Sociology; Politics & Society*, originally founded by grad students at Columbia and still a lively if somewhat more mainstream journal; and *Kapitalistate*, an international journal concerned with theories of the state founded by James O’Connor and involving student collectives in the Bay Area, Madison and West Germany. It was actually through my work with *Kapstate*, as we called it, that I become closely involved with students in Madison, especially Roger Friedland and Gosta Esping Anderson. They wrote a paper for the journal which I read in draft form. I wrote them back twenty pages of comments and suggestions for new sections. They wrote back and asked me to be a co-author, and so we wrote the paper together, eventually published in 1976 as “Modes of Class Struggle and the Capitalist State”. When I went on the job market in 1976 I was thus already connected to this department, so it was a very easy transition to come here.

Anyway, as a grad student in Berkeley I coordinated a seminar that went on for three years called Current Controversies. In the course of the seminar students would assemble bibliographies for particular topics which we would discuss for a couple of weeks. Some of the supplementary topics in this syllabus come directly out of that effort. When I arrived in Madison in September 1976 there was a big demand here for such a course, so I organized it as a two semester sequence in Marxist sociology. I think it was called something like Theoretical and methodological Problems of Historical Materialism, or something like that. It remained a two semester course until about 1988, but then because a decline in the demand for two full semesters on this material and because of increasing need for me to teach other things as well, I condensed it into a one semester course. Since around 1993 or so the material has been pretty stable. From time to time I monkey about a bit with the structure and organization, but not much.

Lectures. One result of having taught this so many times is that I have a quite refined set of lectures. Now, I do modify these a bit every year, but basically I have pretty much worked out what I want to share with you. In the past I have made my lecture notes from these lectures available to students after I give them. I somehow didn’t want to spoil my punchlines by handing them out ahead of time. This time I want to try an experiment and make the lectures available to you ahead of time. This is **NOT** an invitation to skip class. Rather, I see this as a way of intensifying our discussions in class.

So, here is the plan: I will put all of the **OLD lectures from the last time I taught the class – Spring 2008** -- that correspond to present topics on the class website, <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/Soc621-course-page-2009.htm>. They will have a 2008 date on them. As I revise the lectures – which will usually be a few days before the lecture – I will then replace the old lecture with the new one and change the date on the page. I encourage you to read the lecture notes ahead of time. I will not read them in class, but I will follow them as a guide for the presentation.

Reading: you need to learn to mix skimming with studying. There are no exams. I am not going to catch you out for not reading something. You will not be punished. If you find something impenetrable, skim ahead, perhaps it will get easier, then try rereading the hard bits.

Sometimes sections of a particular reading are assigned in more than one place; and sometimes part of a chapter might be assigned for one lecture and the rest of the chapter for another lecture. I still recommend that you read a particular chapter or article straight through.

Written Assignments: The task you are being given is very open-ended. You can write on any subject touched on in the core readings for any session. I will give you very careful feedback *if you hand in the papers on time*. What do I care about in these papers?

(a) *clarity*: I hate to have to struggle to figure out what you are saying;

(b) *seriousness*: I care less whether or not you have come up with some novel solution or twist than whether you have struggled with the ideas;

(c) *analysis*: I do not want these papers to be mainly summaries and expositions. If you write an 8 page paper, in general no more than two pages should be straight exegesis. I want you to work through your ideas, reactions and analysis.

3. **Co-Mentoring:** Every undergraduate will be assigned a graduate student mentor. One of the assignments in the class is that every mentor & mentee meet for one hour each week to discuss the material. Because there are 20 grad students in the class and only 8 undergrads, these mentoring groups will have 2 or 3 grad students and one undergrad in them, but remember: the undergrads have priority in defining questions to discuss. The Principle = teaching is the best way to learn.

I. Prologue: What this course is about

1. The Marxist Tradition. As I explain on the front of the syllabus, this course is intended to provide a rigorous introduction to the ideas, theories, debates and puzzles in the Marxist tradition of critical social science. I will often talk about the “Marxist tradition” rather than “Marxism” (although often I will use the expression Marxism for convenience). The term Marxism sometimes suggests a comprehensive, tightly integrated theoretical and ideological paradigm which in many ways functions more like a doctrine than a social science. In fact, I generally dislike the term itself. After all, no one calls evolutionary biology “Darwinism”, except perhaps for “Creationists” who want to treat Darwinian theory as if it were a dogma. The expression “Marxist tradition” is meant to designate a terrain of debate, a repertoire of concepts and theories over which people argue and which do not necessarily form a fully coherent intellectual system. Relatively little of the course will discuss Marx *per se*, or even the historical development of Marxism as an intellectual tradition. Instead, we will concentrate on the logic, concepts, and theories within contemporary debates.

2. My own relationship to the material. One does not have to be “a Marxist” to teach Marxism – it can be treated as an interesting and provocative body of ideas worth thinking about even if one feels that overall the flaws in Marxism outweigh its virtues. My own scholarly work falls firmly within the Marxist tradition, and much of it attempts to contribute to the reconstruction of that tradition. I am thus not a neutral bystander exploring these ideas and debates from the outside, but an active participant in the debates and – I hope – contributor to the development of this tradition. This does not mean, however, that I take a dismissive view of theoretical ideas outside of this tradition. To the contrary, I think creative forms of Marxism are constantly enriched by their systematic dialogue with other bodies of ideas. In my case, the kind of Marxism I have worked to build has been enriched by feminism, by Weberian strands of sociology, by analytical philosophy, and even by neoclassical economics and game theory.

3. Many Marxisms. There is a big problem facing anyone wanting to teach about Marxism as a critical social science: there are many varieties of Marxism, in a sense many different traditions within this broad family of theoretical ideas. This poses a particularly acute problem for me, I think, because I work firmly within one branch of this family, a branch sometimes called “Analytical Marxism.” In organizing a course, therefore, I face a choice: On any topic I could try to review a fairly broad range of different strands of Marxism. or I can stick to what I think are the most powerful and interesting ideas and develop them as deeply as possible. There are pros and cons of each approach. I have opted for the latter for two main reasons: First, there is a time constraint. If, for every topic, we explored several traditions of thought we would have to limit significantly the number of different substantive topics we could discuss. I have opted for more topics but fewer perspectives on each. Second, it is hard enough to get a deep, rigorous understanding of any one approach. I felt it would be best to concentrate on the approach which I felt was the most powerful and coherent.

4. Learning the Language of Marxism. Throughout the course we will be moving between different kinds of analyses – conceptual discussions of the basic categories we need to build radical social theories; theoretical discussions of how to link those concepts into explanations; empirical and historical discussions of a wide range of problems; and discussions of a range of

complex issues in the philosophy of science that bear on how we conduct the enterprise of radical theory. Much of this course is a bit like a language course: I make distinctions, explore concepts, worry about deploying the terminology in a coherent and consistent way. Language courses are hard: you have to know a language to read a dictionary. And like learning a language, one of the keys is patience -- not always worrying too much if you understand everything, but forging ahead and then revisiting earlier themes and ideas as you learn more complex ones.

In the rest of this lecture and the next I will lay out a road map for thinking about the Marxist tradition. I will do this by first elaborating what it means to construct what can be called an critical emancipatory social science, and then I will sketch the basic structure of Marxist approaches to building such a theory.

II. Critical + Emancipatory + Social Science

1. What is a “Critical” Theory?

It is useful to distinguish two kinds of theoretical enterprises in social sciences:

#1. Attempts to describe and explain social phenomena in terms of the *actual variations which occur empirically* in the world. Theoretical attention is thus restricted to empirically observable variations which actually occur.

#2. Attempts to describe and explain social phenomena in terms of *variation beyond the limits of what has actually occurred in the world*. Theoretical attention thus allows inclusion of states of the world which do not exist. Here the pivotal issue becomes explaining why certain values have not happened.

Empiricist social science basically adopts the first of these stances. If you want to study inequality, for example, this implies that you study variations in actual levels of inequality, either by looking at variations across individuals or by looking at variations across societies. The value “complete equality” is not considered a legitimate value on the variable “degree of inequality”, since there are no empirical instances where this has occurred.

Critical social science, on the other hand, always encompasses consideration of variation outside of the range of empirically existing reality. The critical theory of communication elaborated by Habermas, for example, includes “domination-free communication” as a form of the variable “communication relations”; the critical theory of gender relations includes the value “gender equality” in the variable “gender relations”; and the critical theory of class relations -- Marxism - includes the value “communism” in the variable “social organization of production”.

2. Emancipatory Social Science

The kind of critical social science we will be discussing is not preoccupied with any old “alternative”: *the alternatives always embody some principle of human emancipation, liberation.*

- Note: much social science includes critical elements. Take studies of social mobility, for example: they often implicitly contain the idea of “equal opportunity”, expressed in the idea of equal mobility chances, as part of the analytical strategy. Normatively, at least, people study discrimination from the vantage point of nondiscrimination, and do so even if nondiscrimination has never really existed.
- Some sociologists consciously use concepts which they know are not empirically realistic. Thus Weber’s famous use of ideal types in his definition of bureaucracy. No “pure” ideal type bureaucracy ever existed or ever will exist; Weber uses this as a “heuristic device” with which to compare reality. Neoconservative economics has a model of pure capitalism which never existed and could not exist.
- A proper “critical theory”, therefore, does more than just use concepts that designate forms of variation that do not exist in practice; it organizes the whole theory around the problem of actualizing alternatives which embody principles of human emancipation.

I define emancipatory social science more formally this way:

“Emancipatory social science seeks to generate scientific knowledge relevant to the collective project of challenging various forms of human oppression. To call it a form of social *science*, rather than simply social criticism or social philosophy, implies that it recognizes the importance of systematic scientific knowledge about how the world works for this task. To call it *emancipatory* is to identify a central moral purpose in the production of knowledge – the elimination of oppression and the creation of the conditions for human flourishing. And to call it *social* implies the belief that human emancipation depends upon the transformation of the social world, not just the inner life of persons.”

3. Reflexivity

There is one final important element in critical social theory of the sort we will be discussing: it *reflexively sees itself as part of the process of creating the emancipatory possibilities themselves.* The point of critical theory is not merely to study the world, but to contribute to the process of bringing about fundamental transformations.

In these terms, the Marxist tradition is by no means the only tradition of critical theory. Feminism is equally a critical, emancipatory theory. Both Marxism and feminism identify and seek to understand specific forms of oppression in the existing world -- gender oppression, particularly of women, in the case of feminism; class oppression, particularly of workers, in the case of Marxism. Both theoretical traditions explore the consequences of the oppression on which they focus for other social phenomena, and both seek to understand the conditions which contribute to the reproduction of the oppression in question. Both believe that these forms of

oppression should be and can be eliminated. Both see the active struggle of the oppressed groups at the core of their respective theories as an essential part of the process through which such oppression is transformed: the struggles of women are central to the transformation of gender oppression, the struggles of workers are central to the transformation of class oppression. And intellectuals working within both traditions believe that the central reason for bothering to do social theory and research is to contribute in some way to the realization of their respective emancipatory projects.

4. Three forms of Critical-Emancipatory Theory:

It is useful, I think, to distinguish three possible forms of critical theory. These are distinguished in terms of how they think about the relevant “alternative” to the existing world:

- in strictly *moral* terms (utopian critical theory). Much normative political theory is of this character. You discuss what would be a perfect democracy, or what would be a perfect system of justice without regard to its practical achievability. Clarifying such ideas, however, can help one understand more sharply what is morally objectionable in the existing state of the world.
- in terms of *feasible*, but not necessarily likely, alternatives. In this sort of critical theory, the feasibility of the alternative is a central question.
- in terms of *immanent* alternatives, alternatives that are actively being posed by the causal forces at work in the existing world. Marxism, I will argue, has traditionally tried to construct such an immanent, critical theory. History not only makes class emancipation possible, but actively creates the conditions for the alternative, puts it on the historical agenda. The alternative is immanent or latent, not just desirable or even just feasible.

5. Science

No one, I think, questions the aspiration for Marxism to be a form of emancipatory critical theory. But many people are skeptical of its scientific pretensions. This skepticism grows out of a deep tension within the history of Marxism, a tension that comes from the dual character of **Marxism as a revolutionary ideology** and as a **would-be scientific theory**. It is very difficult for the same structure of ideas to play both of these roles. As a revolutionary ideology Marxism inspires commitment and tries to resolve skepticism. Revolutionary ideologies speak authoritatively and unequivocally, speak with certainty. Science – including critical social science – must continuously encourage skepticism and question its own received wisdom. As a revolutionary ideology Marxism often becomes Marxology and even Marxolatry, and its cognitive forms resemble much more that of religion than science. Indeed, the grand theory of history in which the future promises a paradise of plenty and harmony has a decidedly millenarian flavor to it, and revolutions often involve apocalyptic symbols. Such an ideology may be inspiring and help cement the solidarities and commitments that enable people to endure the sacrifices of struggle, but it is not smoothly congruent with the inherent uncertainties, ambiguities and skepticism that is essential for scientific practice.

I would argue, however, that the scientific aspirations of Marxism are as important as the motivational components. Marx is famous for noting that “Philosophers have only tried to interpret the world; the point, however, is to change it.” But it is also fundamental to the Marxist tradition that *in order to change the world in the way we want we must understand how it really works*, and we must do so with a method that enables us to discover the inadequacies in what we think we know. This is the fundamental core of what constitutes science: a method for figuring out what is wrong in what we think is true, a method for correcting error and pushing the boundaries of knowledge forward. In short, we must aspire to be scientific as well as critical and emancipatory. We must seek to understand the causal processes that explain why the social world is the way it is and how they create opportunities for realizing an emancipatory alternative. That is a very very tough task.

6. Summing up:

The “**Critical**” in critical social science → *choice of questions to ask* = analysis of the present from the point of view of emancipatory futures

The “**social science**” → *a methodology for producing answers* = specification of mechanisms, production of causal explanations, systematic use of evidence, etc.

7. Three tasks of Emancipatory Social Science

To fulfill this mission of generating knowledge relevant to the collective project of challenging various forms of human oppression, emancipatory social science faces three basic tasks:

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

Metaphor of a journey: the first tells us why we want to leave the world as it is; the second tells us something about where we are going; the third tells us something about how to get there.

While this course is not organized directly around these three tasks, by the end of the course we will have fairly systematically explored all of them.

In the next lecture we will sketch the basic contours of the Marxist tradition as a specific way of doing Emancipatory social science.

Addendum: Six Theses about Critical Emancipatory theory.

Let me give a little more precision to the problem of critical social science of the sort we will be considering this semester.

Several elements:

1. **Fundamental change is possible:** we can consciously transform social life in ways that expand the possibilities for human freedom, autonomy, development. Social life is not something given by nature, unalterable by our actions; it is deeply transformable.

Note difference from liberal critics = *how changeable is society*. Use image of “game”:

1. *plays* within the game = liberal/conservative
2. *rules* of the game = reformist/reactionary
3. the *game itself* = revolutionary/counterrevolutionary

Emancipatory Critical social science theorizes the game itself

2. **Agents for change come from within the game:** the working class for Marxism; women for feminism. Change is not fundamentally a question of experts or elites imposing change as benevolent kings, but of oppressed people bringing about change.

3. **Change comes through struggle:** there are powerful interests at stake in fundamental social change → *people with privileges do not spontaneously relinquish privileges* just through moral arguments → struggles for power inherent in change.

4. **Punchline:** oppressed people can transform the conditions of their own oppression through struggle.

BUT

5. **Constraints:** They do so under constraints which can thwart their efforts

6. **Knowledge:** Therefore: *to transform the world we must understand and transform the constraints* themselves. *This* requires knowledge, learning: we must learn from our mistakes and that is not easy; it requires concepts, theory, intellectual skills. **Chronic problem throughout history = learning the wrong lessons.**

example: Two possible “lessons” of the collapse of the USSR?

- Socialism is impossible
- centralized bureaucratic command of complex economies is suboptimal. Socialism must be decentralized and democratic to be dynamic.