

**Sociology 621**  
**Lecture 1**  
**September 7, 2011**

**Marxism as an 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 Marxist Social Science. 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.** I will post on the course website my lecture notes after the lecture. For many of these lectures, earlier versions are available on my website, and you should feel free to look at these ahead of time if you like.

**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 under grad 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. Emancipatory + Social + Science**

There are a lot of different terms that are used as the overarching kind of theory we will be exploring this semester: Critical Theory and Radical Theory, for example are often used. I have settled on “emancipatory social science”, but this should not be taken as a restrictive term – it is meant as an encompassing one.

### **1. Foundations: an Empirical Claim, a theoretical proposition, a normative orientation**

#### **A foundational Empirical Claim and a Foundational Thesis**

##### **Foundational Empirical Claim:**

Many forms of human suffering and many deficits in human flourishing are the result of existing institutions and social structures.

##### **Foundational Thesis:**

Transforming those institutions and structures has the potential to reduce human suffering and expand the possibilities for human flourishing.

Note: this is not a trivial thesis, and it does not follow simply because the empirical claim is true – path-dependency, locked-in equilibria, etc.

#### **Marxian Variant**

##### **Foundational Empirical Claim:**

Many forms of human suffering and many deficits in human flourishing are the result of capitalism.

##### **Foundational Thesis:**

Transcending capitalism has the potential to reduce human suffering and expand the possibilities for human flourishing.

These provide the point of departure for building an emancipatory social science.

### Normative foundations:

There are very difficult issues here bound up with what is usually called the problem of social justice. In the most general terms, emancipatory social science in the Marxist tradition is rooted in normative foundations that can be called radical democratic egalitarianism. This rests of two basic ideas:

*Social Justice: In a just society all people have equal access to the necessary material and social means to live a flourishing life.*

*Political Justice: In a politically just society all people have equal access to the necessary political means to participate meaningfully in decisions which affect their lives. This includes both the freedom of individuals to make choices that affect their own lives as separate persons and their capacity to participate in collective decisions which affect their lives as members of a community.*

## 2. Emancipatory Social Science

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 additional important element in 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 emancipatory social science 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 emancipatory social science. Feminism is equally an 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. 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, or even more strongly, reject the desirability of seeing it as “science”. Many people argue that the claim to science underwrites the authoritarian tendencies of some Marxist-inspired political parties and (even more seriously) states to claim to know what is in the interests of the masses and impose that vision on the society. While it has at times been the case that repression and authoritarian domination have been defended on scientific grounds, authoritarian absolutism is actually the antithesis of science. Scientific knowledge depends on open debate, continual revision, continual self-skepticism. In a sense science is fundamentally democratic in the sense that it is based on the cultural norm of arguments being won by the best arguments and evidence, not force and bullying.

Still, within the Marxist tradition there is a deep tension which is bound up with controversies over its aspirations to being scientific, 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 “**emancipatory**” in emancipatory social science → *choice of questions to ask* = analysis of the present realities of oppression from the point of view of emancipatory alternatives

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.