

Notes for WHA “University of the Air” discussions

General Theme/possible titles:

- The Legacy of Marxism
- Marxism after Communism

CONDENSED OUTLINE

Session I. Introduction: the Marxist Legacy, 150 years after the Communist Manifesto.

1. The “Death of Marxism”?

2. What then is “Marxism?”

- 1) Marxism is the *body of thought* contained in the published work of Karl Marx
- 2) Marxism is a *revolutionary ideology*
- 3) Marxism is a *tradition of critical social science*.

4. What exactly does it mean to say Marxism in this third sense is a “tradition of critical social science”?

5. Three types of critical social theory

- *Utopian critical theory.*
- *Pragmatic critical theory.*
- *Dynamic critical theory.*

6. The most basic elements of the Marxist critique of capitalism

- (1) *Capitalism systematically generates unnecessary human suffering and misery.*
- (2) *In certain crucial respects, capitalism is irrational.*

7. the basic explanation of these problems in Marxism:

- 1) *the class structure of capitalism*
- 2) *the dynamics of capitalist markets*

8. the emancipatory vision

- 1) Democratic planning/control of the economy
- 2) Radical egalitarianism: eliminating classes

Session II. Classes

1. What do we mean by the idea of “class”?

- (1). *Gradational concepts.*
- (2) *Relational concepts* – Marxism is an example

2. Contrast between Marxist and Weberian relational views of class.

- pivotal idea of Marxist relational class concept: *antagonistic yet interdependent* classes

3. Class and exploitation: elaboration of the concept of exploitation

4. Classes in Capitalism: How does exploitation and class work in Capitalism?

5. What about the Middle class in capitalism?

Session III. The theory of history

1. What exactly is a theory of history? contrast Marx & Darwin

2. The basic character of the Marxist argument: “dialectic” of forces and relations of production

3. Revolution and historical transformations

4. Do Marxists still hold to this theory?

Session IV. Transcending Oppression and Exploitation: the legacy of socialism

1. What exactly did Marx mean by Socialism and Communism

2. Marx's theoretical defense of the idea of socialism and communism

- unsustainability of capitalism + rise of workers → destruction of capitalism → creation of socialism

3. What about the actual historical experience? The Russian or Chinese Revolutions?

4. In light of these historical failures of societies that claimed to be guided by “Marxism”, does the Marxist tradition still have anything to offer?

5. Is there any “future for socialism”? Does the failure of the USSR mean that the game is over, that the capitalism has definitively triumphed and will define the nature of class relations and economic systems forever?

6. New models of transcending capitalism:

- *Basic Income Grants (BIG)*
- *democratizing the firm*
- *democratizing society*
- *enclave communism*
- *market socialism*

DETAILED NOTES FOR EACH SESSION

Session I. Introduction: the Marxist Legacy, 150 years after the Communist Manifesto.

1. The “Death of Marxism”? With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of most authoritarian communist regime and the apparent world-wide triumph of capitalism, many people have proclaimed the “death of Marxism”.

Mark Twain once quipped upon reading his obituary in a newspaper, “Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.” I think the same can be said of Marxism. Of course, whether or not Marxism is “dead” depends in part of precisely what one means by “Marxism.” If Marxism is closely identified with a belief in the desirability and possibility of highly centralized forms of state ownership of the means of production in complex industrial economies, then I think it has probably expired. But if Marxism is identified as a with broad tradition of critique of capitalist society, and a commitment to seeking ways of understanding and advancing non-oppressive alternatives to capitalism, then I think Marxism is alive, if not quite as well as a few years ago.

2. What then is “Marxism?”

This turns out not to be an easy question. Let me give you three different answers:

1) Marxism is the *body of thought* contained in the published work of Karl Marx and his close collaborator, Frederick Engels, two prolific mid-19th century social thinkers. If this is what one means by Marxism, then the way to study Marxism is to study carefully the works written by Marx himself. The pivotal debates are over the proper interpretation of these classical texts, both in terms of what “Marx really meant” and in terms of how Marx’s claims should be understood in the context of the historical setting in which they were written. The study of Marxism becomes *Marxology*.

2) Marxism is a *revolutionary ideology*, originating in the work of Karl Marx but developed further by numerous revolutionary theorists since Marx such as Vladimir Lenin and Antonio Gramsci. In this sense of Marxism, Marxism is an evolving body of revolutionary doctrine that became closely identified with Communist Parties and helped animate and inspire social movements, political struggles and, at times, actual revolutions. In its most dogmatic forms, Marxism as an ideology has sometimes seemed much like a religious creed, replete with sacred texts and high priests and visions of salvation. The study of Marxism in this second sense is the study of the development of these doctrines and the role they played in the history of real world struggles.

3) Marxism is a *tradition of critical social science*. The earliest formulations of this tradition were made by Karl Marx -- and thus the name, “Marxism” -- but as an intellectual tradition of social science and debate, the work of Marx himself is only a

point of departure, not a doctrine. Marxism as critical social science aspires to contribute to a scientific understanding of society, and as such it must regard all of its claims as provisional, tentative, subject to revision and rejection. The study of Marxism in this third sense revolves around the study of an array of concepts, ideas and social theories and an examination of their power to illuminate empirical problems. In a way it is unfortunate that Marxism in this third sense is called “Marxism”. We do not, after all, call physics Newtonism or Einsteinism, nor do we call evolutionary biology “Darwinism”, unless, of course, one is a Creationist and wants to suggest that the science founded by Darwin is really an ideology, a pseudo-scientific doctrine. Other names have from time to time been proposed for Marxism – historical materialism, scientific socialism, or more tamely, class analysis – but none of these have ever gained general currency.

Part of the problem of talking about “Marxism” is that these three meanings of Marxism often get mushed together. Marx himself was very uncomfortable with this and once said, “*je ne suis pas un marxist*” -- I am not a Marxist. He always affirmed that he was attempting to build a genuine social science, not a doctrine on unalterable truths; and while his own efforts may have fallen short of this goal, it is this third facet of Marxism -- Marxism as a tradition of critical social science -- that I would like to explore in these discussions. An anecdote: I gave a lecture in Poland in 1985 about Marxist class analysis. At the end a person from the audience said, “What you have said is very interesting and enlightening, but it has nothing to do with Marxism. Why do you confuse the issue by calling your analysis Marxist?” He, of course, identified “Marxism” with the official dogmas of an authoritarian communist regime, whereas I identified Marxism with an open, loosely knitted tradition of thought. It is in this third sense of Marxism that I believe has an enduring importance for the contemporary world, even in an era where revolutionary movements have waned.

4. What exactly do you mean when you say Marxism in this third sense is a “tradition of critical social science”?

In one sense, much -- perhaps most -- social science contains elements of social criticism. Many sociologists would like to improve various aspects of social life, and they see their scholarly work as in one way or another contributing to such improvement. When I speak of “critical social science” or “critical social theory”, therefore, I am meaning something stronger than simply the criticism of specific social institutions and proposals for their improvement. Rather, I mean traditions of social theory which attempt to formulate radical alternatives to the basic structures of the existing social world, radical alternatives that embody some deep principle of human emancipation or liberation. The central goal of Marxism, in these terms, is not simply to explain why the social world is the way it is, but to explain how it might be fundamentally and radically different.

5. Is Marxism the only example of a tradition of critical social theory?

No – Marxism is only one of the important traditions of critical social theory. Feminism is

another such tradition, and there are a host of less formalized bodies of thought that maintain the same kind of critical stance towards society. It think it is useful to distinguish three broad kinds of critical social theories. They all involve a critique of the existing society, but they are distinguished in terms of how they go about defending and elaborating the relevant "alternatives" to the existing world:

- *Utopian critical theory.* This kind of theory attempt to build an understanding of alternatives on strictly moral grounds. Much of what is called “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 political achievability or its pragmatic workability. Clarifying such ideas, however, can help one understand more sharply what is morally objectionable in the existing state of the world. And it can help give focus to discussions about more pragmatic alternatives.
- *Pragmatic critical theory.* Here the emphasis is on the practical feasibility of alternatives. The issue may not be immediate achievability in the political sense -- that is, whether or not the political conditions exist for instituting a radical alternative to existing institutions. But the workability of the alternative is of central concern, not simply its moral coherence as in utopian critical theory.
- *Dynamic critical theory.* This is in some sense the most ambitious form of critical social theory. Here the claim is that the radical alternative to the existing world is somehow being actively generated by the dynamics within the existing world. The alternative is not simply a pragmatically imaginable alternative; it is what might be called an “historically immanent” alternative, an alternative that is actively made possible by the dynamics of the existing world. Marxism, has traditionally tried to construct this kind of dynamic critical theory. The alternative to the existing society -- an alternative without class inequality and oppression --- is not just morally desirable as in utopian critical theory or simply a pragmatically feasible alternative; the alternative is being created “within the womb of the old society” to use a favorite Marxist expression.

Within each of these types of critical social theory there is critique of injustices and oppressions in the existing world and a vision of some kind of fundamental alternative. Marxism sees an alternative without class oppression, Feminism posits an alternative without gender oppression. But different traditions attempt to defend that vision in different ways, giving more or less prominence one or another of these. Feminism, for example, has mainly emphasized the first two of these. Marxism has given great prominence to the third.

6. The most basic elements of the Marxist critique

If I had to distill the central idea of the Marxist critique of capitalism into a few simple elements, I would emphasize two things:

(1) *Capitalism systematically generates unnecessary human suffering and misery.* This is critical: the suffering is eliminable, it is not an “act of nature” (let alone an “act of God”). Marxists analyze this suffering using words like oppression, class, exploitation, domination. We will discuss these in more detail later. The important point is that while capitalism has created vast wealth and technical progress – achievements which Marx himself celebrated in the *Communist Manifesto* and in *Das Capital*, his two most famous works – it simultaneously creates and perpetuates suffering.

(2) *In certain crucial respects, capitalism is irrational.* This is a different point from the first point of critique. Marxists have emphasized a range of different forms of irrationality: hyper-consumerism, ecological devastation, unemployment, business cycles and recessions. A good example has been developed at length in a recent book by the economist Juliet Schor, *The overworked American: Capitalism is characterized by incredible increases in productivity which for many people generates more hurried lives rather than more leisure.* Increases in productivity mean that it takes fewer hours of work to produce the same amount of stuff. This can result either in more consumption for people with the same amount of work, or the same amount of consumption with less work. Because of the capitalist drive for profits and expanding the market, capitalism generates a bias towards more consumption rather than leisure. Marxists argue that from the point of view of human wellbeing this is irrational.

7. the basic explanation of these problems

These two elements of the critique of capitalism – unnecessary suffering and economic irrationality – are explained by Marxists on the basis of two broad structural properties of capitalism:

- 1) *the class structure of capitalism:* concentration of power and wealth, exploitation
- 2) *the dynamics of capitalist markets:* excessive competition, the chaotic character of market processes, the tendency of markets to destroy the social conditions which make economic coordination possible.

8. the emancipatory vision

Marx and most subsequent Marxists thought that the evils he saw in capitalism could be eliminated – and would eventually in fact be eliminated – by reorganizing society along two dimensions:

- 1) organizing the economy in such a way that it was consciously planned rather than organized by unplanned, chaotic markets. This is what socialism was meant to accomplish: the democratic control of the basic decisions governing the economy.
- 2) eliminating classes: this is what communism was supposed to achieve.

As we will see in the fourth session of this series, many Marxists are today skeptical about both of these possibilities – about the possibility of a complex economy without markets, and about the possibility of completely eliminating class divisions. Nevertheless, the underlying values of these elements of the Marxist emancipatory vision remain important ideals – a democratic, egalitarian economy.

Session II. Classes

The concept of “class” is at the very core of the Marxist tradition of social science, both in terms of its critique of capitalism and its analysis of how capitalist society works. In this session I will try to explain the basic ideas behind Marxist class analysis.

1. What do we mean by the idea of “class”? Is there anything special about the “Marxist” concept?

Class is one of the most hotly contested concepts in sociology. The concept of class in the Marxist tradition is only one of a variety of ways that this concept has been defined and used. Perhaps it would be useful to briefly define a number of different ways people talk about “class”. This may help to make it clear what is distinctive about the specific Marxist usage.

(1) *Gradational concepts*. This is the common rungs-on-a-ladder definition of classes. Names = quantitative = upper, upper middle, middle, lower middle, lower, under, etc. When politicians talk about the “middle class tax cut” they mean class in this sense.

(2) *Relational concepts*. Classes are defined not just quantitatively, but in terms of the social relations within which they exist. Take a simple case: the class of “slaves” in a slave society. You cannot even define this category without describing the social relation between slaves and slave masters. Slaves are not just “poor” and slave masters “rich”; slaves are owned, dominated and exploited by slave masters; slave masters own, dominate and exploit slaves. Those verbs – own, dominate, exploit – all define a relationship between people. The names of classes in a relational definition are always qualitative, not just quantitative: slaves and slave masters, serfs and lords, capitalists and workers.

The Marxist concept of class is, above all, a relational concept.

2. Are all relational concepts of class “Marxist” or are there nonMarxist ways of talking about relational classes as well?

- contrast between Marxist and Weberian concepts
- pivotal core idea of Marxist relational concept: antagonistic classes
- take slaves: pretty clear that the interests of slaves and slave masters are inherently antagonistic.
- but note: antagonism combined with deep interdependence *and need for cooperation*

3. One often hears the term “exploitation” used in Marxist discussions of capitalism. Capitalists are said to exploit workers.

The idea of “Exploitation” can be considered the most distinctive feature of Marxist class

analysis. If one had to pick one idea that really sets Marxist class theory apart, this would be it. Even if you are skeptical about Marxism and Marxist class analysis, the idea of exploitation is a really interesting one.

Explanation of “exploitation”

- parable of the “shmoos” (a story from the comic strip Li'l Abner which brilliantly illustrates the concept)
- contrast between simple oppression and exploitation
- illustration of treatment of American Indians (= simple oppression) and indigenous South Africans (= exploitation)

punchline of the analysis: When groups exist in an exploitative relationship their relation is characterized simultaneously by *deep antagonism* and by the need for *sustained cooperation*. This can be considered the great contribution of the Marxist tradition to class analysis: understanding how classes – or groups in general – can at the same time be bound together in ways which require cooperation and pit their interests against each other.

4. Classes in Capitalism: So, the Marxist theory of class is based on the idea of exploitation. How does this work in Capitalism?

The basic idea = capitalists exploit their employees. Again, this implies a double relation: capitalists and employees cooperate with each other, and in a sense both gain from this cooperation, yet capitalists also appropriate the labor effort of workers, etc.

5. What about the Middle class in capitalism?

That is a very good question.

- What Marx had to say about this: very little
- one way of thinking about it: primary and secondary dimensions of class relations
- the middle class as a privileged stratum within the working class
- the middle class as “caught between” the capitalist class and working class

Session III. The theory of history

One of the hallmarks of the Marxist tradition of social science and social theory is the attempt at creating a general “theory of history”.

1. What exactly is a theory of history?

- Useful contrast = with Darwin’s theory of evolution = the history of biological species
- Marxist theory of history is incredibly ambitious idea – more ambitious than Darwinian evolutionary biology: the attempt is *to create a history of the future* – a scientific understanding of the inherent tendencies in the present that chart out likely futures for humanity. Darwin’s theory is strictly of that happened in the past – how we got where we are, not where we are going.

2. The basic character of the argument

- The name Marxists traditionally give to the theory of history = “historical materialism”
- the basic character of the argument has several steps:
- *first step* = forces of production develop over time. This is particularly true in capitalism: Marx saw capitalism as an historically unique “engine of development” – as a social machine for massively and rapidly developing societies economic powers
- *second step* = only certain social relations of production are compatible with a given level of forces of production. Basically this means that with a given level of technological development, you pretty much can tell what kind of society you are likely to have.
- *third step* = if the relations become incompatible with the development of technology, then they will eventually be forced to change. Sometimes this takes a “revolution”, other times it is more of a metamorphosis. This condition is called a “contradiction between the forces and relations of production”. Contradiction is one of the favorite words on Marxists. All that it really means is that we have an unstable situation in which the social relations within which a society organizes its economic activities no longer supports the technologies which are available in that society.
- Now here is the point which really matters for turning this into a theory of history: Marx predicted that as a general rule, such “contradictions between forces and relations of production” are eventually almost inevitable in societies in which one class exploits another. There may be long periods of stability and compatibility

between class structures and technology, but eventually – Marx predicts – incompatibilities will occur and something will have to give. He predicts that in the long run, what gives is the relations of production, the class relations: they will change to restore stability and compatibility.

- A great deal of Marx's analysis of capitalism and the dynamics of the Market are devoted precisely to this problem: explaining how the underlying dynamics of capitalism itself destroys its own conditions for sustainability, how it leads to stagnation and crisis, and how this in turn creates the conditions for its transformation.
- Here is an irony for you: In the analysis of the defenders of capitalism, the collapse of the USSR follows precisely this logic: the technology of the USSR developed to the point where the forces of production could no longer develop under the constraints of the existing relations of production. Bureaucratic command socialism is a particular type of social relations of production with particular kinds of class relations. This was very successful in developing the USSR from a backward agrarian society to an advanced industrial society, but then these relations "fettered" the forces. The result: transformation of the relations.

3. Revolution? Why does it sometimes require a revolution to change the relations of production?

The basic idea is this: exploiting classes also are almost always powerful classes. That is: they are able to use the resources they command not merely to exploit slaves or peasants or workers, but also to influence the state, the police, the laws, the military, maybe even the churches and ideology of a society. In many times and places this creates a kind of self-reproducing system – exploiting classes are able to exploit other classes because they own and control economic resources; exploitation gives them control over the social surplus; this gives them power over the state; and the state protects their

4. Do Marxists still hold to this theory?

Mostly Marxists have moved away from strong historical materialism for a several reasons:

(1) it is too deterministic: few Marxists now believe that there is an "inevitable" fatal contradiction between class relations and technological change in capitalism or other societies. There may be tendencies towards crisis, but not a deterministic system-destroying contradiction.

(2) it is too confident about its predictions for the future

(3) it tends to minimize the range of variations in society that are possible at any given level of the development of technology

Here is another fantastic irony for you:

We hear a lot about the globalization of the economy and how this has dramatically reduced the “options available” for state policies, etc. Why can’t we spend more money on schools or medical care? Why can’t we redistribute income to the poor? Why can’t we have a higher minimum wage? Because of globalization: if we did these things capital would move away. But notice: this kind of globalization theory = incredibly Marxist! Free market economists are much more Marxist in their view of capitalist markets than are most Marxists today.

Session IV. Transcending Oppression and Exploitation: the legacy of socialism

1. What exactly did Marx mean by Socialism and Communism

Socialism and communism fit in neatly with Marx's theory of history. These were his predictions about the "history of the future" of capitalism. Basically he felt that capitalism would eventually exhaust its capacity to use and develop its technologies, its forces of production. When that happened, eventually the capitalist class would be eliminated – either by force or (less likely in his view) by some gradual process of erosion of its privileges and status. This would create the conditions for a transformation of class relations in ways that would, once again, restore harmony between a society's technology and its way of organizing its economy. "Socialism" is the name he gave to the early stages of this transformation; "communism" to its final stages.

One important thing to note about these concepts: In Marx's own work, and in the view of a significant current within the Marxist tradition, socialism was seen as a profoundly democratic form of society. While it was true that the state would own the means of production, the belief was that the state would be transformed in much more radically democratic form than exists in contemporary capitalist democracies. The idea that state ownership would go along with authoritarian, tyrannical centralized bureaucratic domination would have been anathema to Marx himself, and has always been criticized by a democratic forces within the Marxist tradition.

2. How did Marx defend theoretically the idea of socialism and communism given that such societies did not exist when he wrote?

This is where historical materialism "came to the rescue". Marx's theory of history had one great advantage: it relieved a burden on the critique of capitalism of having to develop a systematic blueprint for an alternative. Marx felt that he did not really need to defend socialism as a practical program of reform. The classical argument was this:

- 1) capitalism was ultimately unsustainable: it was doomed to chronic crisis and stagnation by its own contradictions. The free market and private profit seeking were to blame for this.
- 2) capitalism generates a social class – workers (or the proletariat as it was sometimes called) – whose interests are thwarted by capitalism and who thus have an interest in creating an alternative
- 3) As capitalism develops, workers become more numerous and powerful just as capitalism becomes more crisis ridden and thus more vulnerable
- 4) given chronic crisis and a powerful opposition class, eventually capitalism will be overthrown and an alternative constructed.

What Marx thought he proved, therefore, was the eventual demise of capitalism and the existence of actors who would want to create an alternative. But he rejected any attempt at building “blueprints” of this alternative in advance. The alternative would emerge through trial and error, discovery of new forms. The only thing he really insisted would characterize “socialism” (i.e. the society that would replace capitalism) was:

- a) radical democracy governing the economy, and
- b) eliminating concentrations of wealth – highly egalitarian material conditions of life

3. What about the actual historical experience? The Russian or Chinese Revolutions?

This, of course, raises an enormously complex array of issues. Whatever else one might want to say about these regimes, the historical experiments that have occurred under the banner of Marxism hardly live up to these ideals. Instead of radical democracy and egalitarianism we got highly centralized, bureaucratic, authoritarian regimes with unequal privileges and new forms of exploitation. Socialism was not social ownership, but centralized state ownership. Few people find this model attractive today.

4. In light of these historical failures of societies that claimed to be guided by “Marxism”, does the Marxist tradition still have anything to offer?

I believe that the Marxist tradition remains an essential source of ideas for thinking deeply about emancipatory social change. This is certainly not because Marx got it right, although he had many insights that remain durable. It is because this tradition helps us ask the right questions and contains a range of concepts that are crucial for thinking through coherent answers. I believe that the concepts of exploitation and class remain essential critical tools for understanding the dilemmas of modern American society, even if they do not provide simple formulas for predicting or designing the future.

5. So, is there any “future for socialism”? Does the failure of the USSR mean that the game is over, that capitalism has definitively triumphed and will define the nature of class relations and economic systems forever?

I personally do not think that there is much of a future for the vision of socialism that was embodied in the Communist regimes of the 20th century. But this does not mean that the underlying values and principles which many people hoped models would achieve are equally to be put in the “dustbin of history”. There are a whole variety of innovative, new ways of thinking about transcending the class inequalities and oppressions of capitalism. Here are some of the ideas that are being discussed today:

New models of transcending capitalism:

- *Basic Income Grants (BIG):* unconditional grants of a minimal, but socially acceptable, standard of living to all citizens as a matter of right.
- *democratizing the firm:* decomposing capitalist property rights and redistributing them among *stakeholders*. Not just the investors, but the workers and members of the community could have rights to sit on boards of directors and participate in governance of firms, since investing choices affect them all.
- *democratizing society:* deepening the ways in which ordinary people are empowered to deal with collective problems – enhancing democratic problem solving capacities instead of strengthening privatized retreats from community. Lots of examples of this, some grandiose, some small scale.
- *enclave communism:* We already have some communist institutions inside of capitalist society. Consider public libraries. How are books distributed within a public library? To each according to need, with rationing (waiting lists) being the device for the most demanded books. This model could be extended to a much wider range of forms of consumption.
- *market socialism:* This is a more radical vision – somehow combining various forms of collective ownership of production with vibrant markets. Cooperatives are an example, but there are many other possibilities.