Michael Burawoy and Erik Olin Wright

Sociological Marxism

CHAPTER 22
COMPONENTS OF MARXIST THEORY

SETTING THE STAGE: THE CENTRAL THEORIST


SOCIOLOGICAL MARXISM

Michael Burawoy and Eric Lui Bright
The expansion of the economy and the rise of capitalism

THE CLASSICAL MARXIST THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, we will explore the development of a coherent framework for understanding the relationship between capitalism and the social fabric. We will focus on the themes of alienation and exploitation, and the role of the state in maintaining the capitalist system. Through an analysis of classical Marxian theory, we will examine the concept of commodity production and the development of the labor process. We will also discuss the implications of these ideas for contemporary society.

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SOCIIOLOGICAL MARXISM

The argument that capitalist crisis tendencies have an inherent long-term tendency to intensify means that as capitalism becomes more and more developed, more and more global, it ultimately becomes harder and harder to maintain the aggregate rate of profit or to find new markets—the necessary condition for continued capital accumulation and innovation—and this, in turn, means that capitalism becomes less and less sustainable, eventually reaching limits for its own material reproduction. To use another classical Marxist formulation: the relations of production become fetters on the development of the forces of production. The first causal stream generated by the two interconnected generative processes of capitalism, then, leads to the strong prediction of thesis 1: in the long-run capitalism will become an unreproducible economic system. It cannot last forever.

The long-term fragility and problematic reproducibility of capitalism, however, does not in and of itself say much about what kind of social order would emerge in its place. Here the important issue is the logic of the effects of capitalism on class structure and class formation: capitalism not only develops the productive forces and expands into a worldwide system of capitalist markets and competition, it also creates social agents—the working class—with a specific set of interests opposed to capitalism and a set of capacities that enable them to challenge capitalism. Workers have interests opposed to capitalism for a variety of reasons. Most fundamentally, they are exploited in capitalism. But capitalism also renders the lives of workers insecure, subject to unemployment, work degradation, and other hazards. Workers’ material interests thus would be advanced if the social relations of production could be transformed from relations based on private ownership of the means of production—capitalism—to relations based on democratic, egalitarian control over the organization of production, or what came to be called “socialism.”

Having a class with anticapitalist interests, however, still is not enough for the natural transition to socialism thesis. That class must also have a capacity to challenge capitalism. Capitalism as an economic system may be increasingly crisis-ridden and irrational, but capitalist societies also contain an elaborate array of institutions to defend and reproduce capitalist class relations (see the discussion of social reproduction below). These institutions develop in tandem with capitalism in response to class struggles and other threats to capitalist reproduc-

through innovation leads to ever-deepening crises of overproduction, which leads to the concentration of capital, and eventually the state itself becomes a capitalist—capitalism is brought to a head and once brought to a head it topples over.

This formulation is part of the larger, more abstract theory of historical trajectory in historical materialism. In historical materialism the bold thesis is advanced that it is a property of every class-based system of production relations that (1) within each type of class relations there is a limit to the possible development of the forces of production, (2) that the forces of production will eventually develop to reach those limits, (3) when those limits are reached—when the relations fetter the further development of the forces—the relations will become increasingly unstable, and (4) eventually this instability will lead to a transformation of the relations of production, enabling the forces of production to develop further. It is this “dialectic” between forces and relations of production that provides the basic dynamics for the theory of historical trajectory and gives it a specific kind of directionality. For a systematic exploration of the logic of this theoretical structure, see Cohen (1978).

Like many Marxist terms, the term “socialism” has many competing meanings. Often socialism is identified with a specific institutional design, such as centralized state ownership of the means of production and central planning. State ownership, however, is not an inherent feature of the concept understood as the “socializing” private ownership. The pivot is rendering social relations of production egalitarian and democratic. Many possible institutional forms could accomplish this. Capitalism as well comes in many different institutional forms: family firms, joint ventures, large multinationals, corporations, worker self-management, state-regulated firms, and so forth. Socialism—understood as an egalitarian, democratic control over production—can also be envisioned in many institutional varieties: centralized state ownership, centralized ownership with decentralized control, market socialism, and workers co-ops.

12The intensification of class struggle thesis does not imply that revolution is only possible at the point when capitalism becomes completely moribund and unsustainable. Since the relevant anticapitalist forces come to know that capitalism is moving toward unsustainability, they have the possibility of organizing to overthrow before it reaches the point of complete internal collapse. Unsustainability is still important in this revolutionary transformation for two reasons: first, the apparatuses that defend capitalism are weakened by the intensifying crises of capitalism even before complete unsustainability has been reached, and second, the knowledge of the eventual demise of capitalism plays a significant role in mobilizing people against capitalism.

13In Volume III of Capital (Part III) Marx (1976) argues that competition drives capitalists to innovate, especially through the introduction of new technology, which simultaneously brings down the rate of profit and generates crises of overproduction. In “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific” Engels (1978) argues that the pursuit of profit

thrown. Two additional claims are often attached to this thesis: (1) that the destruction of capitalism must be ruptural rather than incremental (i.e., that the destruction takes place in a temporally condensed historical episode), and (2) that the rupture requires violent overthrow of the state rather than democratic capture. Neither of these claims, however, are inherent in the intensification of anticapitalist class struggle thesis itself and should be regarded as historically contextual propositions rather than fundamental theses of Marxism.

3. The natural transition to socialism thesis. Given the ultimate nonsustainability of capitalism (thesis 1), and the interests and capacities of the social actors arrayed against capitalism, in the aftermath of the destruction of capitalism through intensified class struggle (thesis 2), socialism is its most likely successor (or in an even stronger version of the thesis: its inevitable successor). Partially this is because capitalism itself creates some of the institutional groundwork for socialism: concentration of ownership through trusts, massive increases in productivity liberating people from the necessity of long hours of work, increasing interdependence among workers, the removal of the capitalist as an active entrepreneur in production through the joint-stock company, and so on. But mainly socialism emerges in the aftermath of capitalism’s demise because the working class would gain tremendously from socialism and it has the power to create it. There are occasional places where classical Marxism entertained some other fate for capitalism than socialism, as in Luxemburg’s famous formula of “socialism or barbarism,” but nowhere is a nonsocialist postcapitalist future given any theoretical precision.

These theses were meant to embody real predictions based on an understanding of the causal mechanisms at work in the social world, not simply expressions of wishful thinking or philosophical speculation. The predictions are derived from an account of two causal processes that are seen as imparting the fundamental logic to the dynamics of capitalist economic systems: exploitation of workers by capitalists, and competition among capitalists in various kinds of markets. These two processes generate the causal streams that provide the fundamental explanations for the theses about the destiny of capitalism.

Exploitation of workers and competition among capitalists are the fundamental causes of the most salient properties of capitalist development: the steady increase in its productive capacity, the expansion of its global scope, the increasing concentration and centralization of capitalist production. This development dynamic, however, contains internal contradictions, contradictions that mean that capitalism has inherent tendencies to generate periodic, intensifying economic crises. Traditional Marxist crisis theory is complex and there are many different kinds of causal processes in play in explaining the disruptions of capitalist accumulation. The two most important of these for the eventual fate of capitalism in classical Marxism are the long term tendency for the aggregate rate of profit to fall and, particularly as argued by Engels, the tendency for capital accumulation to lead to ever more serious crises of overproduction.13
The socialization of production—(the ethics and practices of production)—are considered by many to be the foundation of human society. Production is the process by which people create the material conditions that sustain life. It is through production that human societies organize their relationships with the natural world, and it is the production process that shapes the social structures and cultural norms of a society.

Production is a complex process that involves the coordination of human labor and natural resources. It requires the use of tools, machines, and other technologies to transform raw materials into finished goods. Production also involves the allocation of resources, including labor, capital, and land, to different sectors of the economy. The productive process is shaped by a variety of factors, including the availability of resources, the technological capabilities of society, and the social and economic structures of the society.

The production process is not only a means of producing goods and services, but it is also a process of creating social relationships and cultural norms. Production is a social process that creates relationships among individuals, between individuals and the natural world, and between individuals and society as a whole. The production process is therefore a complex and dynamic process that is constantly changing and evolving.

Sociological Marxism

Sociological Marxism is a perspective that draws on the ideas of Karl Marx to analyze social relations and social change. Marx argued that society is organized around class conflict, and that the struggle between the ruling class and the working class is the driving force behind historical change.

Marx believed that the production process is the foundation of society, and that the relations of production—the way in which people produce and distribute goods and services—are the key to understanding society. Sociological Marxism therefore focuses on the production process and the ways in which it shapes social relationships and cultural norms.

Sociological Marxism argues that the production process is not neutral, but is shaped by social and economic factors. The production process is therefore a site of struggle, where different groups of people fight for control over the means of production and the distribution of resources.

Sociological Marxism distinguishes between two types of relations of production: commodity relations and labor relations. Commodity relations are based on the exchange of goods and services in the marketplace, while labor relations are based on the exploitation of labor by employers.

Sociological Marxism is a powerful tool for analyzing social inequality and understanding the dynamics of social change. It provides a framework for understanding how social relationships are shaped by the production process, and how the production process is itself shaped by social and economic forces.


**Class Relation as a Form of Relation of Production**

Socio-Economic Marxism

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**Richard Rawson and Eric Olsen Wright**
From Abstract Class Relation to Concrete Class Structures
The Institutional Class and Reproduction Thesis

The reproduction economic, fundamentally is a concept of reproduction. The reproduction of institutions is essential for the reproduction of capitalist production. It is through the reproduction of institutions that the social reproduction of capitalist production is secured. The reproduction of institutions is not simply a matter of legal or administrative procedures, but involves a complex interplay of social forces and social relations. The reproduction of institutions is a dynamic process that is shaped by historical conditions and social movements.

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SOCIOLOGICAL MARXISM

The concept of class struggle is fundamental to the development of critical sociology. It underpins the analysis of power dynamics within capitalist societies, highlighting how social relations are structured around the division of labor and the unequal exchange of labor power.

Class struggle refers to the conflict between different social classes, particularly the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, over the means of production and the distribution of wealth. This conflict is often manifested through economic, political, and social practices that perpetuate inequality and exploitation.

In critical sociology, the focus is on understanding how social structures and institutions reproduce and maintain capitalist relations of oppression. By examining these dynamics, sociologists aim to challenge and transform the existing order, advocating for social change and the empowerment of marginalized groups.

Critical sociology often employs Marxist and post-Marxist theories to analyze and critique the capitalist system. It seeks to understand the historical and material conditions that give rise to social inequalities and to propose alternative social arrangements that could lead to a more just and equitable society.

The methodological approach in critical sociology involves empirical research, theoretical analysis, and activism. It encourages sociologists to engage with communities, challenge dominant discourses, and work towards social transformation.

In summary, class struggle is a central concept in critical sociology, providing a framework for understanding and contesting the power relations that underpin capitalist societies. By studying the mechanisms of class struggle, sociologists can contribute to the development of more progressive social policies and the promotion of a more equitable and inclusive society.
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CONCLUSION
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