

# The future of Marxism in the Social Sciences

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At the recent International Congress of Sociology, a few members organised an unofficial discussion meeting on "The contribution of Marxism to 20th century sociology". Over a hundred sociologists turned up. The astonishing thing about this meeting was not the amount of interest shown in Marxism, but the remarkably large number of those who took part in the discussion as Marxist of one kind or another, as 'semi-Marxists', not to mention as former Marxists. This applied not only to the delegates from Eastern Europe, among whom the Yugoslav group contained about five variants of Marxism alone. The extent to which Marxism had, in one way or

another, penetrated even the 'westerners' present, was very striking indeed.

That Marxism is extremely influential in the social sciences—I include history among them—is not, of course, very startling news, and is not denied by any realist. However, it is a melancholy thought for a Marxist that this influence owes very little to the work of Marxist social scientists in recent decades, for this has been very disappointing. The traditional jibe of British academics, that Marxists have in fact produced very little work is, naturally, as untrue as the parallel jibe that what they produce is invariably second-rate. Even if we

leave aside the yield of the 'eastern' countries since the transfer of power, a large corpus of Marxist work remains. Probably nobody has read it all—indeed there is no general bibliography of it—or could have read it all. Much of it is of the highest quality. A school of thought which has in the past decade or so produced work such as that of Lukacs, Dobb, Seneri, Henri Lefebvre, George Thompson, Labrousse, Antal, Ernest Meyer or Gordon Childe—to mention only publications in a few western languages—need not apologise for itself. However, there is no denying that in recent decades the bulk of Marxist work turned out in the social sciences,

notably in the USSR, has been unenterprising, or of low quality, or uninterested in a number of important problems. Many of us feel that few attempts have been made to advance our understanding of the world by means of the Marxist method beyond the point reached by Marx and other 'classical' writers, and that efforts to establish a narrowly orthodox version of the Marxist interpretation in different fields has occasionally led not only to a failure to advance, but to some regression. Recently a different wind has been blowing through the international Marxist territory, including the USSR, but there can be no denying that the past two decades have produced a disappointing harvest of work in the social sciences, especially by Communists. Certainly it is disappointing compared not only to the period 1890-1914, a golden age of Marxist scholarship, but to those of the 1920's. The fact that in some countries, notably Britain, Marxist work has only been produced in quantity since the 1930's, has not wholly offset this.

### Shadow of Marx

The influence of Marxism in western academic circles today is thus primarily that of Marx himself, whose towering genius becomes steadily more obvious, of some writings by the other 'classics', and of a few subsequent writers, mainly, but not exclusively, Communists, whose personal brilliance, or whose attempt to push the Marxist interpretation into new territories, have been impossible to overlook. Marx's own influence has made itself felt wherever scholars have found that Marxist answers to problems are more obviously satisfactory than others, or where they have discovered that questions which Marx asked, but which academic scholars dismissed as not worth asking, are essential to the further advance of the subject. The historiography of the French Revolution of 1789 is an example of the first case. It has been transformed in our century by men who claimed to be partly or wholly Marxist: Jaures, Mathiez, Lefebvre, Labrousse. That part of the historiography of the 1848 Revolutions, which had not already been brilliantly interpreted by Marx and Engels, has also lately been greatly advanced by the use of Marxist methods. The theory of economic

fluctuations and economic growth is an example of the second case. Long neglected by most academic economists, except for a few over whom Marx's shadow hung visibly, such as Schumpeter, the discovery that one couldn't really do without theories about these subjects has led to a reconsideration of Marx. It has not led many academic economists to agree with him, but it has led them to regard him with a newfound and deep respect. Few of them would today take the traditional academic view of the 1920's, that Marx was economically negligible and could be refuted by pointing out a few elementary logical errors. None would treat him, as Keynes did, as another of those marginal cranks who sometimes hit on a good idea by accident.

However, both the works of Marx and the problems with which he deals have been in the public domain for a long time. If they have been read or re-read, it has not been for purely academic reasons, but for political ones. Let us be frank about this, for any estimate of the future of Marxism in the social sciences is valueless without a political assessment. Marx in isolation did not produce the first general wave of academic marxism in the 1880's-90's; the apparent failures of capitalism (the 'Great Depression') and the rise of mass Marxist parties provided the stimulus. The slump. Fascism and the rise of the USSR in the 1930's produced the first wave of British academic marxism, not a simple contact with Marxist books. But for the rise of the USSR to industrial and later to world military power, marxism would not be half as influential, and certainly not a tenth as widely discussed as it is today. Even as it is, the form of marxism which has exerted most influence in our time is the orthodox Communist, even though a good deal of Marxist academic writing has always belonged to dissident (generally 'revisionist') forms. In Britain at any rate, the great majority of academics who claim to be Marxists consists of present or former members and supporters of the Communist Party, or of some continental party with a strong tradition of Marxist ideology.

The future of marxism in the social sciences thus depends largely on the one hand, on the success of capitalism in solving its problems, on the other, on the future of 'ortho-

dox' Communism, i.e. of the group of states clustering round China and the USSR. For though other centres of marxism may exist—Yugoslavia may be instanced—the sheer numerical preponderance of the two great Communist powers in world affairs must continue to make their influence — whatever its nature — much the most important. This is a statement of fact, not a value-judgment. It means simply that the amount and nature of Marxist intellectual influence elsewhere will continue to depend on the part played by the Sino-Russian sphere more than on that played by anyone else. It does not mean that marxism will automatically become more or less influential, or influential in its Russian form. Obviously its influence will not now fall below a certain level: Marxism is as much part of the general corpus of scientific thought as Darwinism, and will remain so whatever happens. But how and in what form it will expand—or perhaps contract—must depend on a number of variables which it is not my business to investigate here. The political situation in individual countries will, of course, affect its prospects greatly. This is patent even today, to anyone who surveys the extent and nature of Marxist influence among academics in, say, India, Japan and Latin-America, France, Western Germany and Britain. All that need be said, without going into the business of prophecy, and that can be said with any hope of general agreement is, that there is no prospect of marxism disappearing — as non-marxist academics sometimes expected it to do in the years after 1897 and, in the West, after 1925—and that in general it is likely to remain at a much higher level, even without counting officially Marxist countries, than it ever was before the 1930's.

### The elementary influence

Granted that it will continue to be lively, what form is it likely to take in the social sciences? It has already made its initial impact on most of them, generally by means of a few fundamental reflections which obliged scholars to look at their material in a new light, revealing unsuspected and exciting discoveries and connections. Thus the analysis of historical phenomena in terms of economic and class structure proved remarkably fruitful, even when it

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took the form, as sometimes among early Marxists, of an oversimplified economic determinism. Again, as Ernst Troeltsch handsomely admitted "the Marxist teaching on basis and superstructure gripped with immense force", by linking ideological phenomena with the forces and relations of production. The vast literature on the relations between Protestantism and capitalism thus goes back to a few passing remarks in Marx' *Capital* vol. I (esp. 1938 edn. p 51). For what it is worth, the 'sociology of knowledge' also derives from Marx who first showed the need for such investigations. Badly oversimplified though it was Hesse's paper on the social roots of Newton's *Principia* electrified the history of science.

This initial impact is by no means exhausted, even in subjects like history, which have long been under Marxist influence. Thus Vilar has lately shown that what is generally valid in the conclusions of Earl Hamilton and the 'inflationist' theories of history of capitalism, is already contained in a few observations of Marx in 1847 (*Past and Present*, 10, 1956), while a reading of Mehring's writings of the 1890's makes the interpretation of Frederick the Great in the 1956 Rome Historical Congress (*Relazioni V*, Mousnier & Hartung) appear less novel than may be thought. Plenty of good ideas are still to be got, even from the study of Marx' *obiter dicta*. The original impact has hardly yet been made at all in some subjects about which the Marxist classics happened to have written little, or of which Marxist have fought shy because of the large element of phoneyess in them (e.g. social psychology), or in which Marxist influence has been side-tracked. This is partly the case, for instance, in social anthropology, where much harm has, I think, been done by latter-day Marxists who insisted on defending literally Lewis Morgan's (and Engels') views on primitive family structure, matrix archy etc., thus diverting attention from more fundamental contributions of marxism to the subject<sup>3</sup>.

Thus Marxist analysis is still likely to yield striking results even in its relatively elementary form. This applies with equal, if no greater, force to subjects in which for various reasons old truths have been forgotten and overlaid, e.g. in economics in which, until recently, the approach of the classical school—(Petty, Smith,

Ricardo, Marx—had for some sixty years been abandoned For a much narrower and superficial one.

### The dynamic model

However, marxism has also begun to make impact in a more 'advanced' way, that is, not by the application only of certain special ideas drawn from Marx, but by that of the dialectical method in its more general form. In the social sciences this has meant chiefly an insistence on the historical character of all phenomena, and on the fact that historical change proceeds in certain complex but defined ways (e.g. the quantity/quality interrelation, the importance of 'internal contradiction' etc.). The dialectical or historical approach is particularly important today, because most academic study has advanced in the opposite direction, and looks as though it could not advance much farther in it. Its most satisfactory achievements have been static models, or models of elementary change as simple growth, whose limitations are becoming obvious.

I take two examples. Functionalist social anthropology provides very pretty models showing any society—normally primitive communities have been taken—as an elegant self-regulating system tending towards a state of adjustment. This analysis, though sometimes very complex and sophisticated, has been so deliberately static, that many anthropologists have rejected the very possibility of a historical approach, though this purism is now being questioned. But the fact that societies do change—even if anthropologists often fight shy of studying them when they do so rapidly—shows that a static analysis must be based on a dynamic one. Prof. Gluckman's able attempt to show how internal social tensions are used by societies to stabilise themselves (*cLRituals of Rebellion, The Peace in the Feud*, etc.) misses the point that they do not always succeed. But what happens when they don't? Marxist historical and social theory has been specifically designed, as no other has, to cope with this type of problem—e.g. to analyse the simultaneous dialectical play of forces constantly tending to 'de-stabilise' a society, that is to make it evolve, and those constantly tending, in whatever situation it finds itself, to keep it, sociologically speaking, a going concern. In any case practice as well as theory re-

quires a historical approach, for the chief problem facing the anthropologists today is not the stable and fairly insulated 'primitive' society,, but 'detrribalisation'; a term whose very negativeness underlines tBe limits of a static analysis.

Again, few economists concerned with the theory of economic growth have yet absorbed Marx' point that different economic systems have different 'rules of the game' or laws of development. Consequently, that the problem of such a theory is not merely to explain how, starting from nothing, we end with a fully industrialised economy, but how, starting from a feudal economy we end with a capitalist and beyond that a socialist one. In the phrase of Schumpeter, who recognised the problem though he was unable to solve it: however many stage-coaches you add together\* you will not get a railway train. This problem may be side-tracked by talking about 'institutional' or 'sociological' factors which prevent an ideal theoretical model from working out as it ought to, or make such a model impossible. But Marx at least set out to provide a theory of economic growth complex enough to explain a succession of stages, each with different rules of the economic game, and the desirability of following in his footsteps will sooner or later be recognised.

### Co-existence of Marxisms

There is thus plenty of scope for Marxist influence. However, it could be greater still if Marxists avoided certain pitfalls.

The first is the question of *orthodoxy*. Marxists are 'orthodox' like all scientists, insofar as their ideal is a single solution to any problem, which is so firmly established that no serious student would dissent from it. They no more welcome the permanent prospect of disagreement, than classics welcome permanent uncertainty on the question of the decipherment of the Minoan linear B script. But they are also concerned with singleness and purity of doctrine, because marxism is also a coherent system of thought, whose elements are interdependent, as well as, perhaps, for political reasons. They are thus extremely anxious to avoid falling into eclecticism, or into interpretations which may throw-doubt on various theoretical and practical consequences generally held to flow from Marx' own thought.

Though these anxieties are justifiable, I do not think that they need be seriously discussed in an article on the academic future of marxism. So far as the non-Marxist academic world is concerned, marxism is not a single detailed doctrine, but a family of interpretations, based on a common method. *Politically*, the differences between Hilferding, Lenin, Luxemburg, Henryk Grossman, Sweezy and Dobb are often great. *Academically* they are all people who have positively advanced the study of certain economic problems from a Marxist point of view, even though some of their views may prove wrong, and have certainly been affected by their politics. Plekhanov's and Renner's contributions are no less real, because politically they diverged from Lenin; Lukacs' and Caudwell's, because they have occasionally been criticised by other Marxists. Insofar as a work claims to be based on Marx' method and advances the extent to which this method is used in academic enquiry, we might as well treat it as Marxist, whatever our reservations, at least for the time being. Marxists ought, especially among themselves, to argue out their differences, or the difficult border-lines which divide them from non-Marxists, or which separate the Marxist and non-Marxist phrases of scholars who have passed through both, in whatever order. There has been far too little opportunity for what a speaker at the Sociological Congress plaintively called 'peaceful coexistence of Marxisms'. But in the universities of Britain anything which leads people to use Marxist methods is to be welcomed, whatever its other drawbacks.

The second pitfall is the attitude to non-Marxist work, to which Marxists have often objected because of the political uses to which it is put, as non-Marxists have rejected theirs. But this is unreasonable. Insofar as it has been competently done by scientific methods, the findings of any scientific work are valid. They may not be important or realistic; they may deal with special cases masquerading as general ones, or lead up blind alleys, but Marxist criticism of it ought not to be that it is 'false' (unless, of course, it is), but that it does not recognise its limitations. Within these limitations it may be valid, and can serve to fill in the details of a wider analysis. Of course, the limitations may be so narrow that it may be practically useless, as in the case of the classical marginal utility analysis, but there are very many Non-Marxist achievements which it would be foolish to dismiss thus. Nor is their objective value as science destroyed by the uses to which they are put by propagandists: Darwinism cannot be written off because of the antics of the 'social Darwinists'. Soviet scholars have recently become aware that the rejection of Non-Marxist work has not advanced theirs. Often, indeed, it has deprived them of the chance of integrating new techniques and approaches developed elsewhere into marxism, and advancing it. On the whole there will be plenty left to reject with few qualifications—for Marxists as for sensible non-Marxists. There are the plainly phoney parts of social science, such as many of the excursions of psychoanalysts into the historic or sociological 'theories' which merely dress self-evident statements in long

words; the simple pieces of metaphysics and apologetics, such as much of what is written about politics.

These warnings are not directed only to Marxists, or to Marxists of any special brand. They are necessary, simply because any social science is so entangled in the web of ideology, apologetics and political agitation, that the elements of what is objectively valid in it are abnormally difficult to detach from the rest. Moreover, even its valid elements—at any rate when isolated and given special importance—have an immediate *political* application, and have often been designed for this purpose. It might be simplest—many Marxists have succumbed to the temptation—to regard all that is not actually contained in the works of their 'classics' and their 'authorised commentators' as bad. Simpler, but also stultifying. One can only survey with melancholy the vast and repetitive literature of polemic between Marxists and non-Marxists, which has rarely advanced our understanding of the world, though it has occasionally clarified a few ideas. It might be equally simple—but only non-Marxists have taken this easy way out—to deny the possibility of any objective social science at all. But though the search for social sciences which can compare in quality with the natural sciences is exceptionally difficult, we have no choice but to conduct it. And the Marxists, who know that Marx's own thought is far and away the most important step hitherto made by humanity towards the achievement of proper social sciences, must see to it that it is conducted in the manner most likely to lead to success.