

Marxism and Method
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Introduction

This essay is concerned with Marxist method in the twentieth century. Before proceeding far, however, we have to ask the question—what sort of method are we considering? It is a fact that Marxist thought has inspired research frameworks in many fields—art history, literature, culture studies, philosophy, historiography, and the social sciences. And these influences have proceeded through many different tropes within Marx's thought—the theory of alienation, the concept of mystification, the labor theory of value, the theories of class conflict and exploitation, the theory of the forces and relations of production, or the theory of the mode of production. So the question of Marxist method is complicated in a many-many way: there are many areas where Marxist methods have been employed, and there are many strands within Marx's thought that have given rise to these various approaches.

My focus will be on methodology for the social sciences (within which I include much of historical inquiry). This choice sets two basic parameters to our study. We will be concerned with the ways in which Marxist methods have in the past century helped to shape our understanding of the social world. And we will be concerned with these influences within the domain of empirical research (as opposed to literary, philosophical, or ethical investigations).

Marx is one of the unmistakable founders of modern social science. Throughout a lifetime of research and writing he aimed to arrive at a scientific analysis of modern economic life. Throughout most of his life he emphasized the importance of engaging in a scientific analysis of capitalism as a system. And he consistently adhered to a rigorous commitment to honest empirical investigation of the facts. Marx's own goals were thus undoubtedly framed by his aspiration to construct a scientific analysis of the capitalist mode of production. And social science research and theory today is certainly strongly influenced by many of Marx's contributions—especially in the areas of social history, sociology, and political economy. Here I will survey some of the important avenues through which Marxist approaches to the social sciences have developed in the twentieth century. And I will attempt to provide perspective on the enduring contributions that Marxist social science has made for the conduct of social research.

The influence of Marx's thought in the social sciences in the twentieth century is ubiquitous: social history and the history of working people (Jones 1971); institutions within capitalism (Giddens 1973); political history of revolution and class (Soboul 1989); the lived experience of the working class (Sennett and Cobb 1972); alienation and mystification as social categories and real social phenomena (manufacturing and its culture) (Szymanski 1978), (Mészáros 1972); political economy (Mandel 1969, 1975), sociology of education (Bowles and Gintis 1976); the state within capitalist societies (Miliband 1969, 1982), (Poulantzas 1973). Marx's writings have contributed enormously to how we analyze, conceptualize, and explain social processes and social history.

However, there is no single answer to the question, "What is the Marxist methodology of social science?" Rather, Marxist social inquiry in the twentieth century represents a chorus of many voices and insights, many of which are inconsistent with others. Rather than representing a coherent research community in possession of a central paradigm and commitment to specific methodological and theoretical premises,

Marxist social science in the twentieth century has had a great deal of variety and diversity of emphases. Think of the range of thinkers whose work falls within the general category of Marxian social science: E. P. Thompson, Louis Althusser, Jürgen Habermas, Gerald Cohen, Robert Brenner, Nicos Poulantzas, Ralph Miliband, Nikolai Bukharin, Georg Lukàcs, or Michel Foucault. All these authors have made a contribution to Marxist social science; but in no way do these contributions add up to a single, coherent and focused methodology for the social sciences. There is no canonical body of findings that constitute a paradigm. Instead, there are numerous signal instances of substantive and methodological writings, from a variety of traditions, that have provided moments of insight and locations for possible future research. And so the graduate student of the social sciences who aims to acquire expertise in “Marxist theory” will find her course of study to more closely resemble that of a literature student than a student of molecular biology with an open-ended set of encounters with great works than a coherent and orderly research discipline.

“Methodology for social science research”?

Why do we need a methodology for the social sciences? Because the social world is indefinitely complex and multi-stranded—thus eluding explanation through simple observation. And because the social world as a domain of phenomena is fundamentally different from the natural world, in the respect of its degree of “law-governedness” (Little 1993). So neither the methods of ordinary commonsense nor the methods of the natural sciences will suffice to lead us to an ability to recognize the systems, structures, and causal processes that are embodied in the social world. The social world proceeds through the activities of billions of men and women. It embodies institutions, organizations, and structures that propel and constrain individual action, and these social entities give rise to processes that are neither law-governed nor random. The social world gives rise to relations of power, domination, exploitation, and resistance. It produces outcomes that advantage some and disadvantage others. It is the result of complex exchanges between agents and structures, and each pole of this conjunction influences the other. The social world, in short, is complex. The challenge of understanding social phenomena is both important and difficult. This is true in 2000; but it was not less true in 1830, when Engels took up residence in Birmingham and undertook to describe and comprehend the confusion of factories, slums, mansions, hunger, and turmoil that Birmingham represented. *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* is his result (Engels 1958); and *Capital* is Marx’s (Marx 1977).

What is involved in having a “philosophy and methodology for social science”? It is to have answers to several different domains of questions—

- inquiry—how to make use of a variety of tools of research to arrive at hypotheses and theories about a domain of empirical phenomena;
- epistemology—how to employ empirical and theoretical considerations to provide justification for the hypotheses and theories that we put forward;
- metaphysics—an account of the types of entities and processes of which the domain of phenomena are composed; and
- a theory of the structure of social science knowledge—a conception of the purpose of social science inquiry and a schematic notion of what social science results ought to look like. (Theories? Bodies of empirical findings? Statistical laws? Narrative interpretations of important social processes? Groups of causal hypotheses?)

Marx's methodological thinking, and that of many Marxist social scientists who followed, provide tentative answers to each of these questions. And, as we should expect, these answers add up to something less than a finished and consistent methodology (any more than Weber's work constitutes a tidy theory of social science knowledge and inquiry; (Ringer 1997)).

The social science aim of Marxism

Let us begin with Marx's social science contributions themselves. It is fruitful to ask the question, what are Marx's central aims as a social scientist? And in what does his central contribution consist? Does his work, and the work that followed from it, provide a theory of capitalism and history? Are there specific empirical hypotheses that are subject to empirical investigation in his work? Does it provide a paradigm or research programme, along the lines articulated by Kuhn and Lakatos (Lakatos 1970; Lakatos and Musgrave 1974; Kuhn 1970)? Does Marx adhere to a coherent conception of social inquiry and social explanation? And does Marx have a distinctive conception of social science inquiry—a theory of dialectical reasoning, for example?¹

Marx's central scientific goals include at least these: to provide an empirically well-founded description of the central institutional features of a market-based property holding economic system; to derive the social implications of these institutional arrangements; and to illuminate the historical process through which these institutional features came to exist in the several capitalist social economies. His central social scientific contribution is *Capital* (Marx 1977), and this work is a dense mélange of historical description, micro-sociological detail, reasoning about institutions and their implications, and mathematical political economy. (These points are more fully developed in (Little 1986).) Marx believed that the institutions of capitalism constituted a mode of production, and that this mode of production has a distinctive historical logic. Ordinary men and women, pursuing their lives within the institutional context of capitalism, make choices in private life, work life, and a variety of organizations (firms, unions, parties), that lead collectively to large-scale patterns of change. Processes of accumulation of capital, acceleration of technological change, and clarification of classes (proletariat, bourgeoisie) are the predictable consequence of the defining institutional setting of capitalist development. Socially constructed individuals within specific institutions behave in predictable ways—leading to a process of social change that can be delineated and explained. There is hence an institutional logic defined by private ownership in the means of production and wage labor, and working out some of the consequences of this logic is one of Marx's central goals. So Marx's social science writings are best understood as constituting a diverse set of lines of thought, explanatory models, and historical interpretations falling loosely under a guiding perspective on historical and social change.

On this interpretation, Marx's contribution to the social sciences is something other than a coherent and simple theory of capitalism. He provides knowledge about capitalism as a social order; but this knowledge cannot be summarized in a formal or mathematical theory with a small number of premises. Rather, it is comprised of an irreducible variety of sociological description, historical interpretation (now often

¹ Many of these questions are explored in detail in *The Scientific Marx* (Little 1986).

superceded by better knowledge about the feudal world or early capitalism), and quasi-formal reasoning about institutions and economic relations.

Is there at least a coherent theory of social science inquiry in Marx's writings? Marx certainly provides guidance for other historical and social researchers, in terms of where to look for hypotheses. So there is a Marxist "style of inquiry" that has specific origins in Marx's own research. This style of inquiry has a number of features. It is materialist—that is, it focuses on the forces and relations of production, and it postulates that technology and power are fundamental with regard to other social formations (e.g. literature, culture, law). It is oriented to the salience of class and class conflict within historical change. It is sensitive to the workings of ideology and false consciousness in our understandings of the social institutions within which we live. And it pays special interest, and offers special concern, to the perspectives of the underclasses at any given time in history.

What about dialectics, and Marx's famous assertion that he has turned Hegel's dialectical logic on its head? Contrary to a number of interpreters of Marx (Ollman 1971), (Ruben 1979; Ollman 1993; Schaff 1970), I maintain that the concept of dialectics plays only a minor role in Marx's thinking, and no role at all in his method of inquiry (Little 1987). The role that dialectics plays is more by way of a high-level hypothesis about institutional change—that institutions have unforeseen and unintended consequences; that processes of change can bring about an undermining of the foundations of the institutions driving these processes of change; and that there are "contradictions" in historical processes. But this is no more mysterious than Mancur Olson's discovery of the contradiction between private and collective interests (Olson 1965), Kenneth Arrow's demonstration of the impossibility of a consistent voting scheme (Arrow 1963), or George Akerlof's analysis of the perverse consequences of information asymmetry in competitive markets (Akerlof 1970). Social science research has almost always made its more important contributions through discovery of unintended consequences and perverse effects; and this is very much the role that dialectics plays in Marx's writings.

Much of the most constructive work in Marxian social science in the past 20 years has taken place within the framework of "rational choice Marxism"—authors such as Elster (Elster 1982, 1985, 1986), Roemer (Roemer 1981, 1982, 1982, 1986, 1986), Brenner (Brenner 1976, 1982), and Przeworski (Przeworski 1985, 1985, 1986) who have attempted to bring together Marxian historical insights with the methodology of rational choice theory and the new institutionalism (Powell and DiMaggio 1996; Brinton and Nee 1998), (Knight 1992). On this approach, it is argued that we can reach Marxian conclusions (about exploitation, class, and the tendencies of capitalism, for example) on the basis of the assumption of individual rationality within the specific institutional setting of capitalism. What this demonstrates is that the essential Marxian contribution is substantive, not methodological; it is a set of discoveries about the social world, not an artifact of a particular conception of inquiry.

Is the rational choice approach compatible with Marx's own methodology? I believe that it is. First, Marx's use of the tools of political economy, and his central demonstrations of the laws of capitalism, depend on the assumption of individual rationality. Second, Marx's approach to method is, as argued above, eclectic. So we would not expect him to reject an approach that promises to provide rigorous empirical and theoretical support for his analysis. And in fact, it is possible to discern the workings of rational choice analysis at the core of Marx's most favored discoveries. Marx's

argument for the falling rate of profit, for example, hinges on a very Olson-like argument (Olson 1965) concerning the contradiction between the individual capitalist's interests and the interests of the class of capitalists as a whole. And this is an argument within the theory of rational choice.

Marx's method of inquiry, then, is unexceptional; it is not sharply distinguished from non-Marxist social science. Marx emphasizes the importance of careful empirical and historical inquiry. He values explanatory hypotheses that can be rigorously developed in such a way as to explain and predict social outcomes. He is not antecedently wedded to particular interpretations of history (for example, recall his agnostic statements about Russian economic development to Vera Zasulich; (Marx and Engels 1975 : 319-320)). And he constructs his own inquiry around a set of high-level research hypotheses—the salience of class, the importance of the material foundations of social institutions, and the workings of ideology. Finally, Marx offers what might be called a “galilean” model of social explanation: to explain phenomena in terms of underlying causal conditions rather than crude associations among observable variables. This perspective leads him to engage in careful hypothesis-formation—again, a perspective that is highly consistent with contemporary social science research standards.

Does Marx have a distinctive epistemology for the social sciences? As suggested in this treatment of theory and inquiry, I take the position that he does not. His epistemology is comparable to what we might today call a realist empiricism: that scientific knowledge can arrive at statements about unobservable structures that are approximately true, and that the basis of evaluation of such hypotheses is through appropriate use of empirical methods (observation, experimentation, and historical inquiry). Marx's own writings do not support a relativistic “sociology of knowledge,” according to which the validity of knowledge depends on the social class perspective of the investigator; instead, his theory of knowledge is premised on the notion that well-founded beliefs about the social world can be arrived at on the basis of empirical methods and theoretical reasoning.

What about metaphysics and ontology? Here Marx's work is somewhat more distinctive. He presupposes a number of metaphysical assumptions about societies and historical processes: that the social world is a causal order, that social structures have properties and causal characteristics, that individuals constitute social structures through their actions and choices, that “social formations” fall under the categories of “modes of production,” that modes of production consist of sets of forces and relations of production, and that classes exist. Each of these assumptions serves as a part of Marx's social ontology. They represent assumptions about the kinds of entities and relations that exist in the world that are, in a sense, prior to specific empirical discoveries. (This does not imply that they are beyond the reach of empirical inquiry, however; the test of the ontology is the empirical success or failure of the more specific theories that are launched within its terms.)

Marx's ontology includes several more specific ideas as well. The ideas of the forces and relations of production are critical to his inquiry; these ideas capture the level of technology and the institutional context in which the technology is utilized that are current within a given society. (This pair of ideas can be summarized as “technology and power.”) The concept of exploitation is also crucial in Marx's ontology; it describes a relation within the context of which some individuals and groups are enabled to control the labor time of others and to derive benefit from their labor without compensation. The labor theory of value, and the theory of surplus value, provide an analytical framework

within which to theorize about exploitation. Marx's concepts of alienation, fetishism, and mystification are also foundational in his social ontology. Individuals have consciousness and freedom, but they find themselves always within the context of institutions and ideas that structure their understandings of the relations that govern them. ("Men make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own making;" (Marx 1964).)

Marx's influence on 20th century social science

Let us return now to the "style of research" that is embodied in Marxian social science. These points will serve to capture Marx's main contributions to social science inquiry (from at least my perspective). Marx's writings constitute a "style of research" for subsequent researchers that consists of a related family of assumptions and perspectives. Let us now attempt to identify some of the most important contributions of Marx's work for the social sciences in the twentieth century. Seen in broad strokes, important themes would include:

- Emphasis on the significance of class—for people and for social change
- Focus on institutions of production, technology, property (modes of production, forces and relations of production)
- Concept of alienation
- Theory of value and surplus value
- Formulation of an economic theory of capitalism
- Theory of exploitation
- Framework for understanding the pre-capitalist history of Europe and sketches of Asia
- Sketches of alternatives to capitalism—socialist institutions

These points can be transformed into a series of substantive methodological maxims for social research; as such, they have wielded enormous influence on social scientific and historical research throughout the twentieth century:

- Seek out the "material" institutions—property, technology, labor
- Examine non-material institutions from the point of view of their role within a social system of production and control. Ideology, state, culture.
- Examine the nature of inter-group exploitation; the schemes of domination that these require; and the forms of struggle that result
- Pay attention to the lived experience of persons within social institutions
- Examine the centrality of class structures—lived experience, exploitation, behavior and incentive, social change
- Identify enduring structures—economic, political, cultural—through which the activities of individuals within society are channeled

On this approach, Marx does not offer a distinctive method of social science inquiry; rather, he provides an eclectic and empirically informed effort to describe and explain the phenomena of capitalism. Marx provides a "style of inquiry" based on a family of hypotheses, hunches, and ontological commitments. Through this inquiry he provides a substantive contribution to social science, in the form of a series of descriptive and

theoretical insights; particularly about the institutional anatomy and dynamics of capitalism and social behavior. Dialectical thinking is not a part of Marx's method of social inquiry; at most, a source of hypotheses about "finding contradictions". Finally, the tools of rational choice theory and neo-classical economics are highly consonant with Marxist thinking.

On this approach, Marx's body of research does not represent a catechism; it does not constitute an "organon" in its leather case. It is more akin to a research programme in Lakatos's sense: a body of large hypotheses, suggestions for fertile areas to examine, paradigm explanations, theories, and interpretation; some bits of formal theory (e.g., the labor theory of value). To work within the programme is to acquire the "tacit knowledge" that emerges from careful study of the many examples of fertile inquiry (Thompson, Bloch, Morishima) and then pursuing social inquiry on one's own domain in a way that is creatively informed by the body of work—but also by the best non-marxist work—for example, Sabel, *Work and Politics* (Sabel 1982).

"Method" implies a prescriptive body of doctrines to guide inquiry. Certainly Marx does not offer such a body of doctrines. If anything, he would subscribe to a fairly ordinary prescription—familiar from Mill (Mill 1950) or Whewell (Whewell and Butts 1968)—along these lines:

- formulate theories and hypotheses
- engage in careful study of existing empirical and historical data
- discern "patterns" in data that suggest hypotheses
- evaluate hypotheses through empirical and factual inquiry

The more directive parts of Marx's methodology—but now loose and heuristic—look more like this—

- Examine material institutions
- Look at class, power, exploitation, domination
- Don't be blinded to effects that violate the materialist dicta
- Be mindful of "contradictions" that work themselves through historical contingencies
- Look for underlying causes and structures

How, then, should we think about the professional preparation of the young social scientist and historian? Is it similar to that of the young biologist or physicist? No, it is not. The social sciences differ from natural science in being inherently more amorphous and eclectic, and this derives from the nature of social phenomena (Little 1998). There are highly specific research strategies, lab procedures, and foundational theories in the natural sciences. So the young molecular biologist must master a very specific paradigm of precise theories, mechanisms, and structures; as well as authoritative strategies of experimentation and inquiry. But the case is quite different in the social sciences. There we will find no general theory of society, or privileged mode of inquiry for social research. So the best advice for young researchers in the social sciences is to be eclectic and open-minded: learn a variety of tools, explanatory strategies, and foundational hypotheses and powerful examples of social inquiry. And pursue a strong understanding of some of the most imaginative social scientists and researchers of the past generation,

whatever their paradigm (e.g. Hirschman or Skinner; Sabel, Tilly, or Scott). Then address the phenomena of interest with an open mind.

Conclusion

Here we have surveyed some of Marx's central contributions to social science research, and some of the most important ideas that twentieth century thinkers have brought to bear on Marxist social inquiry. Is there such a thing as "Marxist social science"? No, if the point of reference is molecular biology as a paradigm of research. But yes, if we are thinking instead of a loose research programme, inspired by a congeries of hypotheses, insights, and salient powerful interpretations, which the researcher can then have in mind as she sorts through her own research problems.

The root cause of this eclectic nature of the best social research lies in the nature of social phenomena themselves. The social world is not well ordered. It is not a law-governed system of cause and effect. Instead, it is a sum of many different and cross-cutting processes, structures and institutions, mediated by the purposive meaningful actions of persons, within given cultural and material institutions that bear contingent and sometimes accidental relations to each other.

And Marxist thinking, appropriately eclectically construed, has much to offer as we try to make sense of that plural world.

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