

CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

by LEE HARVEY

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PART 2 CLASS

2.2 Class, production and culture

Class, in one form or another, was the key analytic concept in sociology. Marxism has, of course, consistently critiqued the oppressive nature of class under capitalist forms of production and has a commitment to overthrowing capitalism.² Any student of sociology will be aware that Marx offered what is taken to be the first thoroughgoing critical analysis of the class oppression endemic in the capitalist mode of production. Marx's work was more than a critical study of capitalist production; through his engagement with epistemology he pioneered critical methodology. In many respects Marx's lifetime work established a basis for class-oriented critical social research. Most, if not all, subsequent work in this area has been a development of, or at least referred to, the work Marx undertook. Furthermore, a considerable amount of work on both gender and race oppression have also drawn heavily on Marx.

Marxist class analysis is not so much concerned to show that class is an oppressive mechanism than it is to show how such a mechanism works and how class conflict leads to a set of productive relations and consequent superstructure. The oppressive nature of class is, in the main, taken for granted by Marxists, even if capitalism has worked systematically towards concealing class differences and proclaiming the end of ideology (Bell 1962; Dittberner, 1979; Abercrombie, 1980). Marxism is not monolithic and is characterised by ongoing debate and reconstruction. Debates that divide Marxists revolve around the analysis of capitalist production and the role of classes; the nature of socialist economy; the tactics for revolutionary activity; and the potential for gradual non-revolutionary transformation to socialism.

Marx (1845) developed a materialist conception of history and argued for the historical primacy of the economic basis over the ideological superstructure. Drawing on contemporary analyses of the emerging landless proletariat, Marx developed a theory of the evolution of the working class as integral to his analysis of capitalism. In essence, the inevitable crises of capitalism will only be transformed into a post-capitalist order through the agency of the active proletariat. Such praxis is at the core of historical materialism. Working class action will overcome the alienated condition of labour. The working class, Marx argued, must dismantle the State, not just take it over. Marx's 'scientific' socialism is thus not based on utopian ideals but linked to the agency of the working class.

Marxism, since Marx, has, however, addressed the accuracy of Marx's own analysis of capital and applicability to changed circumstances. Four lines of development have occurred. The first is based on the view that Marx's fundamental critique of capitalism and the role of the working class in revolutionary overthrow is essentially correct

(Luxemburg, 1900, 1906; Lenin, 1902, 1905; Stalin, 1924; Varga (undated)). The second is that Marx's analysis was correct but that changed social and economic circumstances require its revision (Lenin, 1916; Bukharin, 1924; Habermas, 1970) The third is that Marx's original analysis was flawed and has to be radically rethought especially in view of changing circumstances (Althusser, 1969; Gramsci, 1971). The fourth is one that concentrates on methodology and argues that Marx's historical materialism and its intrinsic dialectical analysis constitutes a basis for social analysis that continues to be salient irrespective of his particular analyses (Sayer, 1980; Zeleny, 1980; Schmidt, 1981; Wolff, 1985; Resnick and Wolff, 1982; Delphy, 1977, 1980, 1985).

The criticisms of Marx's analysis of capitalism and the role of the working class take four forms. First, that Marx overstated the political mission of the working class. Marx was mistaken in expecting capitalism to continue the polarisation of classes with capitalism forcing wage earners into ever-greater poverty. Through the creation of wealth the working class are neutralised as a revolutionary force. Extending parliamentary democracy thus becomes the way forward (Engels, 1895; Bernstein, 1899, Kautsky, 1918). Second, that Marx saw the state as a coercive instrument of the bourgeoisie and ignored the role of the state in capitalist societies. Political power is not invariably subordinate to economic relations. The state has played an important and relatively independent role (Althusser, 1971, Gramsci, 1971;). Third, that Marx exaggerated the importance of property ownership as a source of social cleavage and conflict and gave insufficient consideration to ideological and superstructural aspects such as occupation, education and culture (Thompson, 1963; Anderson & Blackburn, 1965; Williams, 1965; Petrovic, 1967; Gramsci, 1971; Lukacs, 1971; Berger, 1972; Lefebvre, 1984). Fourth, a specific development of the superstructural view found in humanist Marxism is the argument that Marx underplayed the role of the human agent especially in his later work (Marcuse, 1964; Gortz, 1982).³

Since the 1960s the potentially revolutionary subject, for many Marxists, has been displaced from working-class organisation to protest movements of blacks, women, and middle-class students. These movements had some successes but their basically existential critiques lacked an economic base and the movements failed both to present an alternative organisational infrastructure and to produce any broad and pervasive political change, (albeit they ultimately secured legal sanctions against gender, race and other forms of discrimination.) This failure became the challenge for the theorists of the 1970s. The New Left challenged the ability of orthodox versions of Marxism to give adequate accounts of racism and imperialism on either side of the Iron Curtain. The recent success of grass roots activities encapsulated in mass 'feed the world' charity events and organisations, however, re-awakened, in the otherwise sterile 1990s, interest in the protest movements of the 1960s and there is now a (re-)developing view that Marxism should develop along decentralised, self-critical and pluralist lines. This view was further supported by developments in the Soviet bloc and China during the late 1980s. Furthermore, Marxism, especially in Western Europe, has been affected by post-modernist, post-structuralist, feminist and radical black critiques of power as hierarchical structures of difference (racism, sexism, colonialism) that are not reducible to the model of class exploitation.

All this has led to a continued questioning of the emancipatory process: the role of the working class; the functions of intellectuals; the determining nature of the mode of

production; and the place of the state apparatus. Marxism is no longer (if it ever was) a theory in isolation from other intellectual and political positions nor apart from the wider exigencies of history. Marxism is a dynamic, evolving, critical analytic framework. By refusing to take its own categories for granted, Marxism has re-appropriated the critical power of Marx's interpretive practice. The first part of this book addresses how Marxist analysts have undertaken critiques of capitalism. The subsequent parts show how Marxism has been selectively appropriated in addressing issues of race and gender. □

Marx has had an enormous effect on critical social research, but there have also been other strands of development, particularly in the United States where Marxism has often been ignored. One such important strand in the development of critical social research is what has become known as social criticism. This was informed more by pragmatism than Marxism, although in its apogee in the work of C. Wright Mills in the 1950s, a number of traditions coalesce. However, as we shall see, Mills perspective was neither directly informed by Marx nor was it entirely congruent with a Marxian approach. While Marx saw class oppression as underpinned by economic processes (although by no means the economic reductionist he is sometimes portrayed) Mills focused on the issue of institutionally-located power in the hands of an élite. Nonetheless, Mills' social criticism represented an alternative strand to critical social research, and the style is explored in the analysis of *The Power Elite* below.

In many senses Mills can be regarded as the last of the 'founders' of critical social research. His call for critical imaginative work forcibly reaffirmed a need for a critical approach to American social science and as such he voiced the concerns that had been rumbling in various guises in American sociological circles for many years. Mills restates many of the ideas that Robert Lynd (1939) drew attention to in *Knowledge For What?* Lynd argued that social science was adopting inappropriate methods, was too fragmented into autonomous disciplines and therefore asking insubstantial questions that failed to match the tenor of the cataclysmic times. He argued that social science was characterised by technicians on the one hand and scholars on the other. They both failed to address contemporary issues, the former because of an over-concern with developing method, the latter because of an esoteric detachment of theory from practice.

The funding of social scientific research was, Lynd argued, contingent upon political factors that prescribed the nature of the enquiry; social science was expected to provide radical solutions but not to be subversive. Social science adopted an atomistic approach, the parts were not related to wholes. It is quite inadequate, Lynd argued, to address, for example, economics in isolation from the social and the political. What is needed, Lynd argued, is to restate old questions in a wider context. A fundamental shift in the concerns of social science to match contemporary issues will come about only by relating specifics to the totality. For Lynd, the totality is not the Marxian concept but one that emerges from the work of the culturologists (Ogburn, White and Dorothy Thomas). Lynd (1939, p.51) argues that one has to ground analysis in culture, that there is a 'continuous reciprocal interaction of culture with individual personalities'. Analysis of the relationship between the personal and the cultural serves to ground the dualism in material practices.

Lynd saw a mediation of Marxism and Freudianism as central to the development of the social sciences. He argued for the assessment of the extent to which 'economic pressures analysed by Marx are controlling, and where and to what extent the individual

motivations studied by Freud operate' (Lynd, 1939, p. 41). A key concern, reflecting the culturologists, is the idea of a cultural gap: the disjunction created by attitudes and opinions being out of synchronisation with changing social practices that manifest themselves in rapidly changing modern society. Lynd talks of 'assumptions' and 'contradictions' by which to address this cultural gap. Assumptions are prevailing norms, and closely resemble dominant ideology although Lynd does not ground them in material practices in the same way that Marx does. Similarly, Lynd's contradictions are the contradictory values that individuals find hard to resolve, rather than the structurally-embedded contradictions of Marxist analysis.

For Lynd, social science must address the issue of power and the related divisions in society, including age and gender divisions. Social science should address cross-disciplinary problems that relate to cultural wholes and that are located in their specific historical milieu. History, rather than an autonomous discipline should become a method of the social sciences. In the end, social science must face its responsibilities and not avoid major questions by hiding behind value neutrality. Social science must shoulder its responsibilities and ask substantial and radical (although not revolutionary) questions that address prevailing values and have political implications.

In his seminal book *The Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills (1959) felt obliged to restate the existence of, the need for, and the principles behind, critical social research. Working at Columbia University gave him a clear insight into how sociology in the late 1950s had polarised into two tendencies, which he labelled 'grand theory' and 'abstracted empiricism'.

Mills couched his reassertion of critical social research by invoking the 'intellectual craftsmanship' embedded in the classic sociological tradition of Weber, Durkheim, Veblen, Marx and Mannheim. For Mills, this intellectual craft had been all but suffocated by Liberalistic scientism since the 1930s. Sociology had become abstruse abstract theorising on the one hand and microscopic method-driven empirical study on the other. Substantive issues of consequence were no longer the focus of social scientific enquiry; phenomena were extracted from their dynamic history, dissected and never discussed in macroscopic terms.

Mills maintained that the growing concern with making sociology scientific, expressive of 'truths' rather than meanings, and independent of value judgements, meant that the classical method, with its 'exaggerated historicism' had become a less acceptable approach to sociology in America. The Second World War and the McCarthyism of the 1950s effectively diluted most radical thinking in the social sciences and there were no well-known 'schools' of critical social research. Critical social research was manifested, for Mills, in 'intellectual craftsmanship', directed towards macroscopic historically-situated concerns.

Mills acted as a focal point for a brief revival of critical social research in the United States (Stein and Vidich, 1963) which became known (ironically) as 'The New Sociology' following the publication of a book of that title (Horowitz, 1964) in honour of C. Wright Mills. His approach further became codified, for a while, in the early 1970s as 'social criticism' and various attempts were made to construct a broader notion of social criticism incorporating a wide spectrum of pragmatic radical social theorists (Fletcher, 1974; Stone *et al.*, 1974; Brown, 1977).

² To attempt to provide a schematic account of different critical perspectives on class is to court disaster. No classificatory scheme is likely to please everyone, not least because key terms in such a schema are far from unproblematic. Three concerns are of particular interest to the following analysis of critical research methodology and these will be briefly commented on. First, the broad notion of class, whether or not class is perceived as a relationship to the means of production. Second, the way in which ideology is approached. Third, the extent to which history or structure inform the perspective.

³ Of course there have been innumerable discussions about the extent to which Marx addressed the role of the working class, the state, and superstructural aspects. Considerations of space preclude the analysis of these in detail here.