

# The Neo-Marxist Legacy in American Sociology

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## Abstract

A significant group of sociologists entering graduate school in the late 1960s and 1970s embraced Marxism as the foundation for a critical challenge to reigning orthodoxies in the discipline. In this review, we ask what impact this cohort of scholars and their students had on the mainstream of American sociology. More generally, how and in what ways did the resurgence of neo-Marxist thought within the discipline lead to new theoretical and empirical research and findings? Using two models of Marxism as science as our guide, we examine the impact of sociological Marxism on research on the state, inequality, the labor process, and global political economy. We conclude with some thoughts about the future of sociological Marxism.

## INTRODUCTION

A significant slice of the “disobedient generation” (Sica & Turner 2006) of sociologists entering graduate school in the late 1960s and 1970s embraced Marxism as the foundation for a critical challenge to reigning orthodoxies in the discipline. In the early to mid-1970s, Marxist journals, conferences, and a plethora of study groups sprang up in and around graduate sociology programs across the country. A cohort of talented Marxist sociologists completed ambitious dissertations and took academic appointments in increasing numbers across the country from the early 1970s onward, and proceeded to develop and apply Marxist theories and concepts in a large number of subfields (for early surveys of this work, see Burawoy 1982, Flacks 1982). In some ways, the impact of this intellectual movement within the discipline was immediately apparent. Almost overnight, Karl Marx became one of the founding fathers of the discipline, in both introductory textbooks (Hamilton 2003) and undergraduate and graduate social theory courses. Marxist-oriented research began regularly appearing in top journals in the field; the *American Journal of Sociology* even devoted an entire special issue to “Marxist Inquiries” in 1982 (Burawoy & Skocpol 1982a).

What impact did this cohort of scholars—and their students—have on the mainstream of American sociology? More generally, how and in what ways did the resurgence of neo-Marxist<sup>1</sup> thought within the discipline lead to new theoretical and empirical research and findings? If Marxism commands a significantly smaller allegiance of sociologists than in the early 1980s, as any systematic reckoning would conclude, why is that so?

In this review, we explore answers to these questions. Our focus is on sociological Marxism

(Burawoy & Wright 2002), not Marxist theory or politics outside the academy. By sociological Marxism, we refer to sociological work that tests, applies, or seeks to develop the core insights of Marxist theory. Our interests subsume questions about the sociology of knowledge, the recent history of the discipline, and the substantive contributions of Marxists to several key subfields in sociology, although we devote the bulk of our effort here to the latter.

We should be clear at the outset about the parameters (and limits) of our discussion. The range of any exploration of the relationship between Marxism and sociology is potentially vast (cf. Bottomore 1984). To focus our discussion, we center it specifically on American sociology, although we consider work by non-American authors that have been integral to debates in the United States. We also restrict our survey to empirical sociology rather than social theory (while recognizing that in many cases the dividing line is unclear). It is worth noting, however, that many key figures in the neo-Marxist movement in American sociology explicitly embraced the task of offering an empirical challenge to non-Marxist sociology as the appropriate test of Marxist theory (e.g., Burawoy 1982, Wright 1985). The proof of the pudding, as Marx famously said, is in the eating.

Assessing the legacies of an intellectual movement as diverse as Marxism is a daunting task. Even defining what counts as Marxist sociology (or who is a Marxist) is far from straightforward.<sup>2</sup> And just as there is no one true Marxism, so too is there no one standard for assessing sociological Marxism. However, two conceptions of Marxism as a social science have been advanced by influential sociological Marxists that, we believe, taken together provide a useful starting point. Wright (1989a)

<sup>1</sup>We use the phrase neo-Marxism to refer to Marxist scholarship from the 1970s onward, reserving “Marxist” or “classical Marxism” for earlier work in the Marxist tradition, from that of Marx and Engels through World War II. We also use the phrase “sociological Marxism” to distinguish our specific target—neo-Marxist sociology—from other disciplines as well as the broader literatures and movements associated with Marxism.

<sup>2</sup>A good example of these complexities can be seen in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Although Bourdieu had an early engagement with Marxism, and class reproduction was one of the abiding themes of his work, we make the somewhat arbitrary decision not to include him (or his American followers) as Marxists, however much his work has contributed to the understanding of class and class dynamics that lie at the heart of sociological Marxism.

suggests what he calls a realist model of knowledge in which Marxist theories can and should be adjudicated with non-Marxist theories to assess which provides a sounder basis for the explanation of key social phenomena. Burawoy (1990) suggests, by contrast, a post-Kuhnian model of Marxism as social science, building principally on the writings of Lakatos (1978). Here, Marxism's status as a scientific body of thought depends on whether it can effectively respond to the challenges, or puzzles, thrown up by history or theoretical competitors. Taken together, we believe that these two contrasting models provide a fair standpoint for assessing neo-Marxism's legacy.

Our discussion is organized as follows. In Part One, we present a brief overview of the historical context and development of Marxist sociology in the United States, situating the resurgence of interest in Marxism within the discipline in the broader turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s. Part Two provides a detailed analysis of the impact of Marxist scholarship in four key subfields in the discipline [following Burawoy's (1982) original specification in the early 1980s]: the political sociology of the state, inequality and class analysis, work and the labor process, and global political economy. In Part Three, we turn to a consideration of some reasons why sociological Marxism declined significantly in the 1990s. Here, we explicitly consider the larger political environment and the analytical shortcomings of neo-Marxist models. Part Four offers some brief speculations about the possible futures of sociological Marxism, considering some of the pathways that leading Marxists of the 1970s generation have charted, and where and in what ways younger Marxists seem poised to continue to make robust contributions.

## **I: RESURGENT SOCIOLOGICAL MARXISM: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

The historical relationship between Marxism and sociology is complex. It is plausible to assert that the rise of sociology in Europe is inconceivable without a sustained dialogue in

opposition to Marxism (e.g., Bottomore 1984). But the origins of the discipline in the United States, by contrast, are largely found elsewhere, in the worlds of theology and the progressive reform impulse in the aftermath of the social Darwinism of Spencer and his followers (cf. Calhoun 2007b, Breslau 2007).

In some respects, it is hard to imagine a place less likely to have experienced a major Marxist revival than the United States. At no point prior to the 1960s was there a significant Marxist presence in American sociology or major engagement (even if critical) with Marxist ideas. The combination of the Cold War, a nearly complete lack of a socialist tradition, and robust non-Marxist radical currents (in sociology, for example, in the work of social critics such as C. Wright Mills and his followers) made it unlikely that a significant group of American sociologists would turn toward Marxism as a source of radical renewal. Yet large numbers of the 1960s generation of social scientists did embrace Marxism, at least for a time, and made serious commitments to developing its insights. Sociology was but one of many academic disciplines challenged by this neo-Marxist revival (on the spread of Marxism in the American academy, see Ollman & Vernoff 1982).

The surge of interest in Marxism in American sociology beginning in the late 1960s is less surprising in retrospect than it would appear. Disciplinary fragmentation—long the bane of conservative critics of sociology (e.g., Horowitz 1993)—made infiltration of alternative paradigms possible. Further, the size of the American higher education sector is unique on a global scale, and careers can thus draw on alternative theoretical movements and intellectual currents. The New Left, strengthened immeasurably in the United States by opposition to the Vietnam War, helped spawn a new critical intelligentsia that entered the academy and found opportunities to extend their commitments to social justice into professional careers. Sociology proved an especially receptive disciplinary environment for the exploration of radical thought and the development of research programs pushing the boundaries [see the

biographical essays in Sica & Turner (2006) for examples].

Evidence of the growing interest in Marxism in the 1970s abounds. The journals spawned by Marxist-inspired scholarship provide one angle to consider its impact. While *Monthly Review* and *Science and Society* were the only active Marxist social science journals of any significance publishing in the United States before 1968, between 1968 and 1980 the following sociological or social science journals with explicitly Marxist agendas began publishing: *Politics and Society*, *Kapitalstate*, *Telos*, *Socialist Revolution* (later *Socialist Review*), *Critical Sociology*, and *Political Power and Social Theory*. Another sign of the growing interest in Marxism was the rapid translation of European (non-Soviet) Marxist works into English. The classics of Western Marxism were published in an astonishingly short period, enabling American social scientists to begin to absorb the full range of critical Marxist thought (Long 1980).<sup>3</sup> But the publication of Marxist scholarship was hardly limited to specialized journals or presses. In 1982, a special issue of the flagship *American Journal of Sociology*, edited by Michael Burawoy and Theda Skocpol, was devoted to “Marxist Inquiries.” The 10 papers it published featured empirical research applying or developing Marxist concepts to topics as varied as artisan labor, the patterning of military expenditures, proletarianization of the American class structure, the political economy of food, and intellectuals in state socialist societies. The editors reported receiving more than 150 submissions for the special issue (Burawoy & Skocpol 1982b). Landmark scholarship that explicitly or implicitly had a Marxist pedigree abounded throughout the 1970s, and leading university and commercial presses regularly published many of these studies. Three of the five annual book awards given by the

American Sociological Association (ASA) between 1975 and 1980 were given to works that were explicitly or essentially of neo-Marxist origin: Wallerstein’s (1974) *The Modern World System*, Paige’s (1975) *Agrarian Revolution*, and Skocpol’s (1979) *States and Social Revolutions*.

Significant milestones and markers of professional influence of sociological Marxism can be identified throughout the 1980s. However, by the late 1980s and into the 1990s, interest in Marxism within the discipline clearly and unambiguously declined. McAdam (2007) notes that Marxism had already begun losing ground among younger scholars and graduate students in favor of other inequality schools by the mid-1980s. Major Marxist studies would continue to be recognized in the ASA’s annual book competition [e.g., Wright 1997, Lachmann 2000; Chibber 2004 received honorable mention as the runner-up]. But even a cursory review of leading American sociological journals in recent years reveals a paucity of Marxist-inspired scholarship in the 1990s and 2000s compared with the 1970s and 1980s.

## II: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF NEO-MARXIST SOCIOLOGY

Although no major subfield in American sociology was untouched by neo-Marxist ideas during this heyday, several key subfields commanded the bulk of Marxist research. In his 1982 introduction to the special issue of the *American Journal of Sociology* devoted to Marxism, Burawoy identified four such subfields as key areas of the neo-Marxist resurgence: (a) the capitalist state, (b) class structure and class analysis, (c) work and the labor process, and (d) international political economy and global development. We review each in the next sections of the article.

### The Capitalist State

Perhaps the most widely debated concept associated with the resurgence of Marxism from the late 1970s onward was the state, or

<sup>3</sup>The role of the journal *Telos*, founded by sociologist Paul Piccone in 1968, deserves special note in this regard. In its cramped pages appeared numerous translations of classical and previously unavailable works of the Western Marxist canon.

more particularly the capitalist state (for reviews, see Carnoy 1984, van den Berg 1988, Barrow 1993). Classical Marxism viewed states as important arenas of dominant class rule, and in the case of the capitalist state an institutional ensemble dedicated to preserving capitalism. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx & Engels famously described the state as “a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie” (Marx & Engels 1978 [1848], p. 475). This model contains both subtlety and ambiguity: If it is to represent the capitalist class as a whole, the state has to remain at least partially autonomous from the narrow interests of particular segments of the bourgeoisie and defend the system as a whole, without specifying how. Other formulations provided similar kinds of accounts. In Marx’s (1978 [1859]) famous summary of the logic of historical materialism in his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, he emphasizes that political institutions are “conditioned” by the dominant economic system and “correspond” to it, without asserting that they mechanically represent particular capitalist interests.

The subtlety of Marx & Engel’s original treatment of the state would, however, largely be lost to second and third International Marxists, who routinely reduced the capitalist state to a tool of the dominant class and derided the development of democratic political institutions as what Lenin described as a mere “shell” designed to protect capitalism by giving workers the illusion of equal political rights (Lenin 1975 [1918]). Lenin was reflecting on the peculiar conditions of Russia, but his writings on the state were soon canonized to apply everywhere. American Marxist Paul Sweezy, for example, claimed in 1942 that the state is “an instrument in the hands of the ruling class for enforcing and guaranteeing the stability of the class structure itself” (Sweezy 1968 [1942], p. 243). Dissenting voices, such as that of Gramsci (1971 [1929–1935]), postulated a vision of the state as contributing to the hegemony of capitalist interests in part by making meaningful concessions of one kind or another. This implied a radical departure from instrumentalist views of

classical Marxism, but one that would remain largely forgotten until the massive international rediscovery of Gramsci in the 1970s (see especially Poulantzas 1973, 1978).

The rediscovery of the state by neo-Marxists in the 1970s was part of a much larger movement in the social sciences in which the forgotten state suddenly became the focus of considerable theoretical and analytical work (see Alford & Friedland 1985, Almond 1988; for an overview of how the state disappeared in the first place, see Ciepley 2000). For a time in the 1970s and 1980s, vigorous debates across a range of issues concerning the state were routinely found in leading social science journals.

The contribution of neo-Marxism to reigniting the state debate was considerable. To do so, neo-Marxist political sociologists had to break out of the straightjackets of the classical instrumentalist view of the state that was the hallmark of twentieth-century Marxist thought. The vehicles for this analytical move were widely read commentaries on radical theories of the state in the early 1970s that emphasized the upper-class backgrounds of key personnel at the top of contemporary capitalist states (Poulantzas 1969; Gold et al. 1975a,b). The targets of their attack—principally Domhoff (1967) and Miliband (1969)—were said, rather unfairly in retrospect, to offer an instrumentalist model of the state because they focused attention on the social origins of the personnel staffing key positions within the state apparatus. The critics postulated a structuralist alternative in which, rather than the actors and state managers playing key roles, a capitalist state is compelled to protect the long-run interests of capitalism given the centrality of the economic system in the social order irrespective of who is in charge (see, e.g., Poulantzas 1973, Therborn 1978).

The critical idea from the structuralist neo-Marxist theory of the state was the notion that the capitalist state had to have relative autonomy from the dominant classes if it was to protect capitalism as an economic system. This autonomy could only be relative in that the capitalist state is always constrained to

adopt policies that are supportive of the needs of capital accumulation. In other words, the state is autonomous from individual capitalists but not from capitalism as a system.

The structuralist Marxist accounts of the early to mid-1970s received a great deal of acclaim, and work in political sociology on the state and related topics almost universally contained ritual citations to Poulantzas (1969, 1973, 1975, 1978), O'Connor (1973), Wright (1978), Therborn (1978), and others. Ultimately, however, interest in the structuralist account waned. Among its shortcomings was the lack of clear mechanisms to account for how relative autonomy could occur over and over. In other words, why would the capitalist state always end up reproducing capitalism? This work came to be seen as both functionalist and ultimately empirically empty [see van den Berg (1988) for a hostile but serious critique].

The most innovative neo-Marxist attempt to suggest mechanisms that account for state autonomy is the work of Block (1987). In a series of essays published in the 1970s, Block argued that the state's tendency to act in employers' interests is an outcome of the struggle between three actors: capitalists, workers, and state managers. State managers tend to act in the interests of capitalists because their position depends on the maintenance of high levels of economic investment and output, both to insure adequate tax revenues and to maintain public support for the government's ability to manage the economy. This manifests in an abiding concern for business confidence on the part of state managers, independent of anything else. However, Block also asserted that antibusiness reforms can occur in moments of economic crisis, war, or working-class mobilization from below. Under any of these conditions, business confidence is said to become less salient and the class bias of the state is reduced.

Block's thesis about state managers as actors presaged the even sharper pathway out of Marxism for Skocpol (1979, 1980, 1992). Although overtly critical of Marxism in her famous prolegomenon to her 1979 classic *States and Social Revolutions*, her account of the

relationship between states and dominant classes in that book can certainly be read as a Marxist account [as Wright (2006, p. 334) has recently noted]. But as she moved toward studies of the American New Deal and the history of American social policy (Skocpol 1980, 1992), Skocpol pushed much further in emphasizing the idea that independent state managers and other polity insiders played decisive roles in achieving reforms that were frequently opposed by both capitalists and working-class organizations.

The most wide-ranging debates about the state from the mid-1980s onward, and the context in which the neo-Marxist theory of the state ultimately lost ground, was the evolution of theoretical and empirical work on the welfare state. Political context here is especially important. With the rise of Reagan/Thatcher in the Anglo-American world and the increasing struggles of social democratic parties in Europe, welfare state retrenchment was suddenly on the agenda. Even if these threats would prove far less serious than they appeared at the time, there was clear evidence that the golden age of welfare capitalism was ending (Esping-Andersen 2001). This generated a newfound appreciation among many Marxists and non-Marxist radicals alike of the potential for welfare states to permanently transform capitalist economies.

This represented a fundamental, if often unremarked, shift. Early neo-Marxist welfare state theories offered a logic strikingly similar to that of the then dominant "logic of industrialism" model from the modernization paradigm (e.g., Cutright 1965, Wilensky 1975). As Myles (1984, p. 93) put it, radical theorists sometimes adopted a "logic of capitalism" model that largely substitutes capitalism for industrialization. Where the "logic of industrialism" thesis posited that industrialization generates social problems necessitating welfare state institutions, the "logic of capitalism" position is that market capitalism generates crisis tendencies and surplus workers that welfare states are required to ameliorate and placate, respectively. For example, in O'Connor's (1973) famous formulation of the fiscal crisis of the state, the



welfare state arises because of the need for the capitalist state to manage the contradictions between accumulation and legitimation (with social provision facilitating legitimation).

From this early Marxist foundation, an increasingly mainstream “power resources” model of the welfare state eventually became one of the dominant models of social provision. The incorporation of class political factors in the making of welfare states provided a key point of departure for “power resources” scholarship (see Korpi 1983, 1989; Esping-Andersen 1990). The “power resources” model thus started from a set of Marxist assumptions: Unequal class relationships facilitate the formation of social groups with distinct and competing interests, and the resulting political inequalities shaped the formation of state interests (for early examples, see Stephens 1979, Esping-Andersen 1985, Pontusson 1992). Because elections and unions provide the numerically larger working class with some degree of political power, workers and their middle-class allies were ultimately able to exert significant policy influence. Class conflict—the democratic class struggle in Korpi’s (1983) influential early formulation—is thus a central mechanism in the development of welfare states. Because the capacities of core classes such as industrial owners, farmers, and manual workers vary over time and across national context, the subsequent development of welfare states reflects the institutionalization of different patterns of class alliance. At one level, the “power resources” model is deeply indebted to Marxism. But over time, scholars within the power resources tradition have paid increasing attention to the role of nonclass forces, such as political institutions, gender relations, and the strategic dilemmas of social democratic parties, that go far beyond anything in classical Marxism (for a recent summary, see Brooks & Manza 2007, ch. 1).

The most lasting legacy of the “power resources” model is the development of an elegant typology of welfare state regimes, first advanced by Esping-Andersen (1990). The common version of this typology postulates three distinct types of welfare state regimes: those repre-

sented by the social democracies of Scandinavia, the Christian democracies of mainland Europe, and the liberal democracies of the Anglo-American world (Esping-Andersen 1990, Korpi & Palme 1998). The classification of welfare states into regime types has been widely influential, and for good reason: It has provided a parsimonious means of capturing features of welfare state variation that have proven robust in subsequent scholarship. Yet paradoxically, this model almost neatly reverses the classical Marxist model of causation. Once established, welfare state regime types create their own form of path dependency in which causality flows from the political to the economic.

### Class Analysis and Inequality

Like several other key concepts in the Marxist tradition, class was regularly invoked but never rigorously defined by Marx. The section on class in Volume 3 of *Capital* famously breaks off after a few very general introductory paragraphs, and in various other places Marx (1978 [1894]) discusses class without fully defining it or consistently using it throughout his work. Nevertheless, concepts such as class structure, class struggle, and class consciousness were key analytical concepts that lay at the heart of classical Marxist theory. Class has been invoked to account for the patterns and possibilities of social change at the macro level, as well as individual behaviors and attitudes at the micro level.

In the early 1970s, neo-Marxist sociologists entered the field of stratification research to challenge the individualistic assumptions of the subfield. The widely influential model of status attainment, made famous by Blau & Duncan (1967) in *The American Occupational Structure*, offered a clear mainstream target. Blau & Duncan sought to explain who gets what by looking at attributes of individuals, such as their parents’ education, individuals’ own schooling, and their first job. For neo-Marxist class analysts, the status attainment tradition was fundamentally asking the wrong question in two senses: (a) It focused on individual outcomes, rather than aggregate class structures, and (b) it was,

as Wright (1979, ch. 1) famously put it, a gradational account based on individual criteria, when a relational analysis based on rigorously defined class categories would provide more analytical leverage. The task of a neo-Marxist class analysis would be to theorize the structure of positions within contemporary capitalist societies, rather than the individuals who occupied those places.

However, the central problem of neo-Marxist class theory so defined soon emerged: the need to theorize to the enormous changes in class structure that had occurred in capitalist democracies since Marx's death. Marx & Engels's (1978 [1848]) model of classes in capitalist societies postulated a core division between owners of the means of production (the bourgeoisie) and those who sell their labor power (the proletariat). Although acknowledging the existence of intermediate strata (principally the self-employed, or petty bourgeoisie, and farmers), they saw these intermediate classes as slowly disappearing with the advance of industrial capitalism.

The dramatic growth of the middle class in the twentieth century thus represented something of an embarrassment for neo-Marxism (as Wright 1985 noted). The boundary problem—that is, how to conceptualize these middle-class strata while remaining within a Marxist framework—would occupy a generation of scholarship but prove intractably difficult to solve within a Marxist framework. The simplest solution was to assert that white-collar professionals and managers were part of the working class (thus making the working class close to 90% of the population in many rich capitalist democracies). But this hardly seemed plausible to anyone given the huge differences in work situations and life chances among such an enlarged working class. Another solution in the 1970s was to emphasize the inherent ambiguity of middle-class positions in the social structure. For example, Poulantzas (1975) and Szymanski (1984) suggested that white-collar workers were a new petty bourgeoisie, in contrast to the old petty bourgeoisie consisting of small employers. Wright (1978)

advanced a compromise view, asserting that salaried white-collar workers, as well as blue-collar foremen and supervisors, stood in contradictory class locations (albeit with the contradiction referring as much to Marxist class theory as to the actual class structures).

These early neo-Marxist attempts at solving the boundary problem primarily served to displace rather than solve it, as they generally failed to specify clear and theoretically derived mechanisms that would place incumbents into appropriate class locations. This was the subject of a serious effort by Wright in the mid-1980s (Wright 1985, 1989b). Wright identified three unevenly distributed assets—property, organizational power, and credentials—that potentially provide the basis for exploitation. But to solve the conceptual problem of the middle class, Wright embedded within his model various elements (organizational and credential assets) that had no clear status within the Marxist tradition. The result was a class map that bore considerable similarity to competing neo-Weberian schemes such as those of Erikson & Goldthorpe (1992) and Heath et al. (1985). Neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian schemes were based on workplace criteria involving supervisory powers and some combination of educational or professional credentials, with the latter using a coding of occupational titles, whereas Wright's map was derived from individual survey responses. As Goldthorpe (2008) has recently noted, the differences between the schemes are far smaller than textbook comparisons suggest; they share far more than they fundamentally disagree on. Sophisticated contemporary work on inequality readily incorporates insights of both models to understand both class exploitation and group-based closure processes (cf. Tilly 1998, Massey 2007).

As we noted above, trends in income and wealth inequality since the 1970s have shown unambiguous and, in the case of the United States in particular, large increases. If the purpose of class analysis is to provide some purchase on the patterning of inequality, it must provide some analytical leverage to account for those trends. One critical challenge of rising



inequality for a Marxist class analysis is to demonstrate that inequality has grown between classes, or that a class-based explanation of underlying social and political trends provides the best explanation. To put it another way, the challenge is to show that the patterning of exploitation and domination accounts for why workers are receiving a declining share of the economic pie.

Marxist class analysis—along with many non-Marxist accounts—has struggled to provide a viable answer. There is little evidence that increasing categorical inequalities (such as class) can provide the needed leverage for a systematic understanding of rising inequality (Morris & Western 1999, Leicht 2008). Why do otherwise elegant neo-Marxist class schemes fail to pick up rising income inequality? Data limitations provide one answer, but operational choices suggest others. Wright (1985), for example, operationalizes his bourgeoisie category as business owners with ten or more employees, and in a small survey this will inevitably lump together such disparate bourgeoisie as those who own gas stations with those who own hedge funds or very large companies (cf. Marshall et al. 1988). But that is not the end of the problem. Evidence about rising income and wealth inequality has simply not shown that ownership assets (in the classical Marxian sense) are the key factor. Piketty & Saez (2010) show that the top 1% of households increased their share of total income from under 10% in the early 1970s to 23.5% in 2007 (with the vast bulk of that increase going to the top half of the top 1%). Can this top group be meaningfully characterized in class terms? Is this a case of a big bourgeoisie pulling away from everyone else? Such a claim is inevitably flawed, as only a modest proportion of the group are property owners in the classical sense (cf. Bakija et al. 2010). Further, there is no clear pattern in terms of industry or sector. The largest group (approximately 40% of the top 0.1%) are high-earning CEOs (who exploit organizational assets to claim enormous incomes), followed by financial and hedge fund managers and employees (most of whom are highly compensated employees of investment banks and

use knowledge assets to secure high incomes), some high-earning professionals (same as previous), and a scattering of other breakthrough entrepreneurs (many of whom exploit market niches with expert knowledge) and winner-take-all performers in various fields (including sports and entertainment). There is, in short, no clear and coherent class logic to identify this unique but critical group.

Further, nonclass considerations play an increasingly critical role in understanding rising inequality at the household level (McCall & Percheski 2010). For example, at the household level marriage patterns are increasingly important. In a significant analysis, Schwartz (2010) recently showed that approximately 40% of the increase in inequality at the top of the distribution of household income is due to high earners marrying other high earners. Piketty & Saez (2010) report that in 2008, \$368,000 was required to be considered part of the top 1% of yearly wage earners at the household level; the gender revolution allowed some women access to high-paid employment opportunities, which, combined with rising marital homogamy, created an entirely new group of high-earning households at the top of the distribution (see also Conley 2009 for further discussion).

If the key to understanding rising inequality lies in examining the remarkable increases at the very top, however, then the role of class analysis may nonetheless provide other sorts of critical insight. At the heart of these shifts in the United States are political and policy shifts that distinguish the United States from other rich democracies (e.g., Hacker & Pierson 2010a, Manza 2011). For example, in the United States, public policy has reduced tax burdens on high earners, allowed private sector unions to decline to near irrelevance, permitted corporations to compensate CEOs lavishly, promoted deregulation, and unleashed the financial sector. It is almost impossible to account for these changes without paying careful attention to macro class factors, both in the political mobilization at the top and weakness of countervailing forces from below. A massive corporate mobilization led by peak business

associations beginning in the late 1970s powerfully challenged the New Deal legacy (e.g., Akard 2001, Krugman 2007, Hacker & Pierson 2010a). Financial policy organizations, powerful lobbying operations, dramatically increasing political donations by corporations and wealthy individuals, and strengthening ties of these groups to Republican and Democratic party leaders all contributed to a policy environment that fostered rapid growth of inequality (Rich 2004, Kuttner 2007, Pierson & Skocpol 2007). Of particular note is the remarkable and powerful political mobilization of finance capital, whose repeated large and small victories changed the nature of finance and allowed for rapid if ultimately unstable growth (Johnson & Kwak 2010, Stiglitz 2010, Krippner 2011). The flip side of upper-class mobilization was the decline of organized labor. Workers had declining capacity to demand a greater share of profits, and the political and legal underpinnings of union organization have played a critical role in its steady decline (Fantasia 1988; Freeman 2007, ch. 5).

None of these points would be surprising to political sociologists who have long advocated a class-centered understanding of American politics (e.g., Piven & Cloward 1997, Domhoff 2010), but what is striking is that a very similar kind of analysis is now being adopted by many non-Marxist analysts (e.g., Graetz & Shapiro 2005, Skocpol & Jacobs 2005, Hacker & Pierson 2010a, Jacobs & Soss 2010). This leads to some surprising bedfellows and a confused intellectual history. For example, in their important recent work on the politics of rising inequality, Hacker & Pierson (2010b) criticize their fellow political scientists for neglecting the role of business interests; this prompted a sharp retort from Block & Piven (2010, pp. 205–6), who suggest that “this is hardly the first time that political scientists have recognized the centrality of business power to American politics . . . Nevertheless, Hacker & Pierson are certainly correct that their recent rediscovery is urgent, important, and a needed corrective to mainstream work in political science.” This surprising convergence underscores that a

Marxist analysis of the politics of inequality—if not necessarily all political conflicts—remains highly relevant to understanding key features of the regime of rising inequality.

## Work and the Labor Process

Marx wrote widely on the nature of work, both in his early philosophical writings on alienation and human labor and in his mature work on the accumulation process and the extraction of surplus value at the point of production. Prior to the neo-Marxist resurgence, however, relatively few Marxists had taken up these themes. The predominant drift in postwar industrial sociology was toward a much more positive (albeit not uncritical) view of work and the labor process under capitalism than that of Marx. The classics of industrial sociology took on the economic assumptions about human behavior in Taylorism by arguing that workers were not primarily motivated by economic self-interests. In *The Social Problems of Industrial Civilization*, Mayo (2007 [1945]) argued that work could be shaped to satisfy workers’ emotional needs. Mayo presented the factory as a social system where technical and human organization affects the social conditions of the workers and, in turn, their output. Mayo was writing at the high tide of America’s postwar global dominance, in an era of rising productivity and wages and declining income inequality, and optimism about the future of conflict-free workplaces abounded. For example, the influential work of Kerr & Dunlop (1960) argued that new technologies requiring ever higher levels of skill and responsibility would provide opportunities for individual satisfaction and advancement for workers.

The widespread optimism about shop floor satisfaction and class compromise found in much postwar industrial sociology, however, hardly captured the underlying dynamics of persistent workplace conflict. Even the seemingly placid 1950s were a hot decade of labor conflict, with 5.3% of the entire labor force in 1955 on strike at some point during the year, and as late as 1970 fully 4.7% of the U.S.

workforce went on strike at some point (and many more on unrecorded wildcat strikes) (Moody 2007, p. 99). International labor unrest in the late 1960s in places such as France, Italy, and Britain further signaled that industrial sociology was missing an important aspect of the nature of work and labor conflict.

In this context, the appearance of neo-Marxist scholarship on the labor process in the 1970s and 1980s found an important opening. The most widely read contribution was a book authored by Harry Braverman (1974), a former steelworker, editor, and longtime socialist activist. In *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Braverman argued that capitalism incrementally reduces a worker's control over the work process by deepening the division of labor and separating the conception of work tasks from their execution. This process of deskilling, as Braverman described it, is rooted in the steady application of ever more precise ways of monitoring and controlling the work of subordinates. Braverman argued that the issue of shop floor control is literally inseparable from the imperatives of technology and managerial control. Braverman's argument—and its wide resonance with a new generation of radical sociologists—reenergized the study of the workplace and shifted it in fundamentally new and critical directions. One important source of tension in Braverman's account, however, was its derivation of the objective components of the labor process from managerial ambitions to control workers, rather than from the perspective of workers themselves. Many of the leading labor historians of the same era, notably Gutman (1977), Montgomery (1979), and Brody (1980), examined changes in the labor process from the vantage point of the lived experiences of workers and working-class communities to provide a quite different account riddled with tensions and conflict. Braverman's historical account of managerial power was also challenged in the writings of heterodox radical economists Edwards (1979) and Gordon et al. (1982), who developed an influential historical accounts of the complex and shifting strategies of control at work.

It was the work of sociologist Michael Burawoy (1979, 1985) that fully reengaged the field of industrial sociology, reinvigorating it with a Gramscian account that used ethnographies of the shop floor to explore how workers' consciousness is shaped at work. Burawoy's puzzle was a deceptively simple one: Why do workers work as hard as they do, or more generally, under what types of labor systems is worker consent most, or least, readily achieved? In the south Chicago factory he studied while in graduate school, he reported a collective striving among workers to achieve levels of production above 100% in a piece-rate system as the basis for status hierarchies in the shop. The games workers played to come in above 100%, but not so far above as to be a rate buster, increased antagonisms between workers while decreasing conflict with management. Burawoy's later writings, building on his ethnographic research in places such as Zambia, Hungary, and Russia, distinguished different types of factory regimes that result from the mix of actual labor processes and the larger political environment (including union power, labor law, and macroeconomic conditions) regulating class struggle (Burawoy 1985, 2009).

The influence of Burawoy's work on a generation of scholarship on the labor process, and indeed in regenerating interest in Marx's classical puzzles about the labor process, was considerable (see, for example, the review symposium in *Contemporary Sociology* 2001). Yet over time, even those who welcomed Burawoy's distinctions and ethnographic methods found it necessary to stretch the distinctions to fit the realities of the global workplaces they investigated. Some suggest that Burawoy's assumptions lead him to miss the critical role of gender, race, or nationality (Salzinger 2001). Others, however, sought to elaborate his framework to incorporate nonclass factors. Lee (1998) demonstrates how labor markets interact with gender to create a distinct set of labor process outcomes in two manufacturing firms in China. She argues that the organization of local labor markets produces different conditions of workers' dependence on employers. Similarly, McKay (2006)

uses Burawoy's framework to identify distinct types of work regimes in high-tech factories in the Philippines, but suggests critical variation in the logics of control depending on the nature of the product that the firm manufactures (i.e., capital-intensive or labor-intensive), the nature of production (i.e., complex or deskilled), and the gendered dimensions of the labor pool that the factory draws on. Muñoz (2008) examines the role of citizenship and race in workplace organization in Mexico and U.S. factories.

It would be impossible to conclude that the literature on work and the labor process in American sociology has not been heavily stamped with a strong neo-Marxist influence. In particular, its focus on questions of workplace conflict and in problematizing how employers secure workers' consent remains vital to the field. In particular, as despotic labor practices around the world persist, neo-Marxist models of work will have a continuing vitality. However, historical and theoretical developments have arisen that may not be well-suited to neo-Marxist models. For example, in the rich democracies—where a rapidly growing share of employment is in professional and managerial occupations, as well as in other types of white-collar work where employers' control is far weaker—neo-Marxist theories of the labor process may have significantly less relevance. Further, theoretical work on markets and organizations over the past 40 years raises serious questions about whether shop floor studies that have been the hallmark of the neo-Marxist revival (with their characteristic focus on production) capture the full range of dynamics at play. We take up these issues in the concluding section of the review.

### **Global Political Economy, Development, and Capitalism**

Karl Marx, like Adam Smith before him, anticipated that capitalism would develop on a global scale. In the *Communist Manifesto*, for example, Marx & Engels (1978 [1848], p. 212) famously wrote that “[t]he need for a constantly expanding market for its products

chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.” Early Marxists explicitly theorized processes of economic and political globalization, paying particular attention to the role of imperialism in shaping capitalist regimes. Lenin (1975 [1917]) wrote an influential essay on imperialism, viewing it as “the last stage of capitalism” as capitalists scrambled for places to maintain profitability because of “falling rates of profit” in domestic economies. Luxemburg (2003 [1913]) argued that global expansion was far from new, instead positing that from its inception, capitalism thrived by expanding into noncapitalist regions. Hilferding (2006 [1910]) provided an early and insightful analysis into the role of international finance in capitalist development. For the early Bolsheviks, the prospect of a revolutionary seizure of power virtually required a global revolution, a notion most clearly articulated in Trotsky's (2007 [1929]) theory of permanent revolution. These early ideas about the global dimension of capitalism, developed at a time when international trade and the spread of foreign empires were peaking, began to recede as processes of globalization faded sharply after the 1920s. Stalin's edict that “socialism in one country” was possible did not end the internationalism of the Communist movement, but under Stalinism, it would be increasingly oriented around protecting the interests of the Soviet Union.

In postwar American sociology, questions of the international character of capitalism and the role of imperialism had no place in the dominant modernization paradigm (e.g., Parsons 1960, Rostow 1960). The model asserted that individual nation-states were all on the same continuum toward modernization, with more backward places failing to develop the kinds of institutions—among them free markets, a quality system of education for all citizens, a legal system able to enforce contracts and protect private property, and competent and corruption-free governments—necessary to become a prosperous democratic nation (see Almond & Coleman 1960, Hoselitz 1960).

The explosion of anticolonial struggles in Africa, Asia, and Latin America in the 1960s would undergird a Third World Marxism, most well known from the writings of Mao, Franz Fanon, Che Guevara, and Régis Debray. Third World Marxism held considerable appeal for Marxist political activists and for a time in the early 1970s for the emerging generation of Marxist social scientists as well (cf. Burawoy 2006). Marxists sought to draw lessons and theorize from these struggles. The primary challenge to modernization theory would indeed come from scholars influenced by their investigation of developments in Africa, especially in the widely debated world-systems theory (WST) of Immanuel Wallerstein first launched in the early 1970s (see Wallerstein 1974, 1979).

WST has provided a critical standpoint in debates about globalization within and around sociological Marxism since its introduction in the early 1970s, and it has continued to maintain an institutional presence in the larger discipline (with journals and research institutes around the country). When Wallerstein systematized WST, the core linking mechanism within the modern world economy was said to be a transnational division of labor, with some countries systematically privileged at the core, extracting resources from a dependent periphery (Wallerstein 1979, p. 5). In turn, WST argues that it is impossible to look at national societies as isolated and independent. Rather, the unit of analysis is the world system, which consists of a network of exchange ties that give the system certain causal properties (Wallerstein 1979, pp. 14–15). The system is dynamic; upward as well as downward mobility is possible for individual societies (although relatively rare). Those societies in intermediate positions in the world system were labeled as the semiperiphery, providing the key location for core investments when wages rise too high in older industrial centers (e.g., Ragin & Chirot 1984).

A major proposition of WST is that these three zones—core, periphery, and semiperiphery—are differentially rewarded on the world market. This conclusion is derived

from a theory of unequal exchange (Emmanuel 1972) in which core societies reproduce their superior status through the exploitation of peripheral societies via market exchange. The suppression of wages in peripheral societies allows for significant disparities in global prices and, in turn, reproduces core/periphery distinctions. On balance, then, global trade is said to result in the net transfer of value from the periphery to the core (Chase-Dunn & Grimes 1995, p. 396). Foreign direct investment was viewed as particularly harmful to developing economies, at least in sociological dependency models (Boswell & Dixon 1990).

The WST analysis of the modern (capitalist) world economy draws explicit links to Marxian theory and provides an essentially economic view of global social and political dynamics. However, by the late 1970s, Marxist critics had mounted powerful challenges to WST for its focus on markets rather than production (see, for example, Brenner 1977). The distance between WST and classical Marxism is by now well established [Wallerstein has frequently suggested that WST should be viewed as a critique of orthodox Marxism (see, e.g., Wallerstein 2004, p. 21)]. Yet there has been much dialogue about global economic development and class conflict that continues to maintain a close connection between the two. For instance, Silver (2003) demonstrates a long-term global pattern in which, as production expands, workers' power expands and labor unions eventually begin to develop and challenge for a greater share of profits. Arrighi's (1994) monumental study of global capitalism argues that recurring configurations of business and state organizations lead to systemic cycles of accumulation. According to Arrighi, these cycles take the form of large-scale expansions of capitalism into new areas of the globe, capital reaching the limit of this approach, and the subsequent transfer of capital into high finance. Parallel to this process, Arrighi & Silver (1999) argue that financial expansions lead to a decline in strength of the world's hegemonic powers, resulting in global chaos, followed by a transformation in the national bloc of business



and state organizations that will emerge as the new hegemonic powers. In his last work before his death, Arrighi (2007) postulates that a transition is under way in which China will soon emerge as the next dominant core power.

What all neo-Marxist accounts of global capitalism—in WST or others such as Brenner (2006)—include is the continual focus on the inherent instabilities and crisis tendencies of the capitalist system [for example, compare Wallerstein (2005) and his critic Brenner (2002, 2006)]. Crisis has virtually been a leitmotif of both classical Marxism and the neo-Marxist revival in any serious discussion of the global economy. Every downturn has generated its own literary cycle of doom and gloom. Crisis theory is a recognizable subfield within Marxism, with competing analytical traditions and sources of evidence (e.g., Wright 1978, ch. 3; O'Connor 1984; Davis 1986; Harvey 2010). The focus on crisis tendencies within global capitalism has produced a distinctive kind of understanding and emphasis that marks sociological Marxism's approach to global political economy as inherently distinct from non-Marxist competitors.

### III: ASSESSING THE LEGACY OF NEO-MARXIST SOCIOLOGY

In this section, we turn to an assessment of neo-Marxism in American sociology. We begin with a brief discussion of the declining interest in sociological Marxism since the late 1980s and then turn to an analysis of the state of neo-Marxism in the critical fields we have reviewed in this article.

#### What Happened to Marxist Sociology in the United States?

If interest in neo-Marxism within American sociology peaked between the mid-1970s and the early 1980s, the heyday was a short one. A decade later, research explicitly employing a neo-Marxist framework or testing Marxist ideas

had declined significantly. Membership in the Marxist section of the ASA peaked in 1979 at just under 600 members, declined for a time to under 300 in the early 2000s, and has stabilized in recent years at around 400 members, at a time when other sections with inequality themes have seen their membership numbers soar (McAdam 2007). For example, although in the late 1970s the Marxist section was larger than the Sex and Gender section, today the latter has three times as many members; other inequality sections such as Race, Class and Gender, and Racial and Ethnic Minorities were also at least twice as large or more).

What happened? Although a complete answer goes beyond the parameters of this review, we suggest four critical points: (a) the decline of left politics and movements, (b) challenges of neoliberalism and the reframing of social and political debate after 1980, (c) the theoretical power of the critique of the primacy of class thesis from feminist and critical race theorists, and (d) growing recognition of the egalitarian possibilities within market economies and the nearly universal loss of confidence in central planning as a key organizing principle of socialism.

The failure to recruit a second generation of sociological Marxists has to be placed, first and foremost, in the broader context of the changed political circumstances since the 1970s. The mass movements on campuses against the Vietnam War, and more broadly for racial justice, gender equality, and other issues, provided one set of lived experiences for young intellectuals. In addition to New Left activism, there was also plenty of rank-and-file union activism that provided hope for the possibilities of a broader working-class mobilization. And throughout the 1970s, a number of socialist organizations sought to build ties to radical labor currents, and they provided radical intellectuals inside the University a context for thinking about the possibilities of a working-class mobilization with radical potential (Elbaum 2002). If that combination served to strengthen Marxism in the academy in the 1970s, by contrast,



the drastic weakening of left forces after the late 1970s provided no encouragement for younger intellectuals to pursue Marxism (Petras 1990, Chibber 2006). A second critical context for the decline of Marxism was the changing political environment in the age of neoliberalism. Radical scholars link their work in some fashion to the broader project of creating more egalitarian societies. Since 1980, defending the welfare state (even the very modest American version) has been a constant challenge. From criticizing welfare capitalism for its role in propping up capitalism and/or its redistributive shortcomings in the early 1970s, many neo-Marxists (or former neo-Marxists) had rediscovered its virtues (or at least prioritized its continuing existence) (see Brooks & Manza 2007, ch. 1 for examples).

The collapse of those forms of socialism that had existed in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union prior to 1989, as well as China's drift toward free market capitalism, also helped undermine a source of real-world interest in the socialist alternative. Few sociological Marxists embraced Soviet-style socialism in any meaningful way. Nevertheless, periodic challenges to Communist rule—in Hungary in 1956, the Dubcek reform era in Czechoslovakia in 1967–1968, the Solidarity movement in Poland in 1980–1981, the democratic movement in China in 1989, and the attempted reforms in the Gorbachev era in the Soviet Union—were all dramatic moments that appeared to offer at least the hope of reforming actually existing socialism from within. Each generated new interest in the possibilities of socialist renewal from within state socialism. And there were always dissident voices within Soviet-type societies who found hope in the reform of socialism as the pathway toward a better world, and many of these voices came from sociologists and theorists who were read in the West (e.g., Bahro 1978, Konrad & Szelenyi 1979, Kagarlitsky 1990). But the continual crushing of reformist impulses, and then the stunningly rapid collapse of socialist governments in Eastern Europe in 1989, took away one critical foundation within

which Marxism had relevance—albeit an uneasy one—in the academy. Among sociological Marxists today, an unwillingness to seriously investigate these societies, warts and all, has now been viewed as a serious shortcoming for the larger neo-Marxist project (Burawoy & Wright 2002).

A third factor arises from the puzzle of those scholars who confidently embraced Marxism as the foundation for their analytical work early in their careers but chose not to sustain that commitment over time. Although there were a variety of pathways out of Marxism, these did not—unlike previous generations of ex-Marxists—typically entail abandoning a commitment to egalitarian politics altogether (relatively few of the 1960s/1970s generation of sociological Marxists became outright neoconservatives). But the very openness of the New Left generation to other radical currents made sociological Marxism vulnerable. In particular, the rise of new types of contentious politics around issues of gender, race, and sexuality fundamentally challenged Marxism's critical primacy of class thesis. For example, Stacey & Thorne's (1985) feminist sociological manifesto in the mid-1980s took special aim at Marxism's ghettoization of the "Woman Question," suggesting that "Marxist sociology has been even less affected by feminist thought than have more mainstream bodies of sociology theory.... Analysis of sex and gender is not easily absorbed within a Marxist conceptual framework" (p. 308). This issue was a deeply vexing one for Marxist scholars. Few sociological Marxists would continue to defend the primacy thesis in the face of feminist and critical race theory challenges. As Fred Block (1987, p. 34) elegantly put it:

Our collective project was to see if a coherent theoretical framework could be shaped out of the "unknown dimension"—the more or less underground tradition of critical Marxism. But the task of producing coherence proved more intractable than we had expected. We

found that many of the key concepts that promised to provide coherence to a Marxist analysis did so at the cost of an unjustifiable narrowing of the array of causal factors. The Marxist concept of class, for example, tends to exclude the possibility that nonclass social actors could play a significant role in determining historical outcomes. However, attempts to incorporate these nonclass social actors into the theoretical framework result in reduced coherence and a position that is no longer recognizably Marxist.

There were certainly serious attempts to develop Marxist analyses that could incorporate gender or race, most notably in the classical socialist-feminist literature of the 1970s (see especially the classical essays collected in Hansen & Philipson 1990); we noted also the case of creative work on the labor process that employed some analytical tools of Marxism while analyzing female-dominated workplaces (Lee 1998, Salzinger 2001). But in a fairly short period of time, the marriage of Marxism and feminism became an increasingly unhappy one, as Hartmann (1981) once put it. A similar story could be told about Marxist accounts of racial formation (see, for example, Omi & Winant 1994).

Finally, a critical challenge to Marxism arose from a broader reassessment of the virtues of markets, and the possibilities of achieving egalitarian outcomes within the context of market economies. Growing evidence of the inherent varieties of capitalism would displace the classical Marxist view of capitalism as a single social system. Classical Marxism fundamentally rejected the possibility that markets could be meaningfully reshaped and restrained by a capitalist state, which had the long-run interests of capitalists (and capitalism) at the center of its *raison d'être*. Yet over time, unmistakable evidence emerged that diverse pathways were possible for capitalist economies. The differences between the social market economies of western and northern Europe versus the liberal market economy in the United States are vast indeed (e.g., Esping-Andersen 1990,

Pontusson 2005). The notion that sustainable forms of capitalism could be strongly redistributive had to be acknowledged.<sup>4</sup>

## Analytical Legacies

Turning now to the critical question of the analytical legacies of the neo-Marxist generation, we suggested in the introduction two models for evaluating neo-Marxist social science from within neo-Marxism: those of Burawoy (1990) and of Wright (1989a). The Burawoy model emphasizes Marxism's ability to continue to generate interesting puzzles and to evolve in response to the challenges it faces from theory and history if it is to continue to be a progressive scientific tradition. Wright, by contrast, proposes a model of adjudication between Marxist and non-Marxist approaches, with Marxist sociology continually having to prove itself in relation to its competitors [we should note that Wright has largely abandoned this realist position in his more recent writings (see e.g. Wright 2009)].

By these two standards, the legacies of the neo-Marxist movement in American sociology are, at best, mixed. It is important at the outset to note one undeniable accomplishment: bringing Marxist ideas into the sociological mainstream. Few serious American sociologists today can afford to be ignorant of some of the basic insights of the Marxist tradition. Given the general expansion and fragmentation of the discipline since the 1960s, this accomplishment has to be set alongside the growing numbers of theoretical schools and ideas that contemporary sociologists have to know a little something about (see, e.g., Joas & Knobl 2009 [2004]); as Martin (2004) cleverly put it, theoretical pluralism has led to an "I'm okay, you're okay" sensibility in the discipline today. In other words, to the extent that the Marxist tradition has now

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<sup>4</sup>Changing views about the market and growing acknowledgement of the weaknesses of centrally planned economies led to a brief flurry of interest in market socialism in the 1980s and 1990s, before it too would largely disappear from the discussion (e.g. Miller 1991, Roemer 1996, Ollman 1997).

become simply one of many potential sources of inspiration, it loses its capacity to provide an orienting worldview. Marxism becomes the Marxist tradition, one among many (Wright 2009).

Beyond making Marxism relevant again, what are the substantive accomplishments of sociological Marxism, in terms of the two models of science? We can explore this question somewhat systematically by returning, briefly, to the four subfields we have investigated in some detail earlier in the review.

**Political sociology of the state.** Sociological Marxism played an important role in stimulating renewed interest in the state. But some four decades later, Marxist models of the state are troubled, either in comparison with their capacity to protect the classical core or in competition with non-Marxist competitors. Marx was only the first—and certainly not the last—Marxist political analyst to underestimate the capacity of the capitalist state to forge compromise between classes. The rise of the welfare state, and the kinds of equality it has produced in places of its greatest success, has for 100 years frustrated Marxist and neo-Marxist efforts to theorize the capitalist state. The Gramscian/Poulantzas effort did not go nearly far enough. Poulantzas (1973, 1978) is no longer required reading for the political sociologist, not just because his opaque formulations prove nearly impossible to operationalize and test against alternative models, but also because the relative autonomy of the state has proven, on closer inspection, to be a rather empty formulation that cannot inspire systematic research or generate new insights. Interestingly, the dismissal of plain Marxist or instrumentalist theories of the state in the 1970s by structuralist Marxists such as Poulantzas now appears remarkably facile. Critical theories of power and political institutions today are reexamining the core insights of the power elite tradition begun by Mills (1956) and represented today by Domhoff (2010), where intersecting networks of political, corporate, media, and ideational interests are most central (cf. Chibber 2004 from a neo-Marxist perspective).

Our discussion of the case of the politics of inequality above is a case in point.

To be sure, Marxism is not alone in wielding a model of the state that, by the late 1980s, proved increasingly less useful (cf. Almond 1988). The state of the art has moved beyond all approaches—including neo-Marxism—that treat states as unitary actors with coherent interests and fails to provide theoretical frameworks for incorporating policy networks (or fields), which inevitably include a diverse array of relevant actors and publics (Mitchell 1991, Heinz et al. 1993, Bourdieu 2005, Pierson & Skocpol 2007). Dominant classes (or class fractions) may exert outsized influence in some contexts, and those are important to study and understand. But this claim hardly exhausts the possibilities of policymaking once scholars turn to examining more detailed mechanisms and processes of political change.

The best work of recent years inspired by Marxist frameworks has succeeded, in our view, in part because they go beyond the parameters of a Marxist class model of politics to incorporate a broader range of institutional and political dynamics while resituating them within an overall Marxist framework. For example, Chibber's (2004) work succeeds by showing, on the one hand, that state intervention can prove a decisive positive force in a nation's economic development, whereas on the other hand, that state capacity depends on the orientation of capitalists. For such arguments to work, and convince a broader array of political sociologists, Chibber had to provide a rich empirical analysis of bureaucratic capacity across multiple policy fields. Similarly, Hung's (2008) recent contribution to the transition to capitalism debate combines previous Marxist and non-Marxist historical institutionalist accounts to provide a new synthesis. Comparing Qing China with eighteenth-century England and nineteenth-century Japan, he shows that China's nontransition to capitalism, despite its agrarian wealth, lies in the absence of an entrepreneurial urban elite capable of shifting agrarian surpluses into industrial and institutional innovations.

**Work and the labor process.** The sociology of the workplace, especially in manufacturing, remains heavily indebted to neo-Marxist views of control and consent. But history has thrown up two critical puzzles that threaten the progressive character of the neo-Marxist approach to the labor process: growing workforce diversity through immigration and social change, and the rising share of employment in less hierarchical forms that are not easily examined within a traditional Marxist framework.

The second issue—the changing character of workplaces in contemporary capitalism, with the decline of manufacturing and the rising proportion of white-collar jobs that are subject to very different and much looser forms of control—is less easily incorporated into a Marxist framework, built as it was on a factory-based model. The predominantly service-sector and white-collar workforces in the rich democratic countries (and increasingly elsewhere as well) have been examined by some Marxist scholarship (e.g., Sherman 2007, MacDonald & Korczynski 2008). But when it comes to white-collar work, especially as one moves closer to sites in the division of labor where levels of trust and autonomy rise, problems abound. Braverman's (1974) early assertion that white-collar work was being routinized and deskilled in the same manner as manufacturing jobs surely captured some dynamics. But the steady expansion of high-skill, high-trust work defies easy translation into the neo-Marxist tradition of labor process studies.

If sociological Marxism faces limits in relation to the challenges of history, how robust is its ability to compete with non-Marxist research traditions that bear on the organization of work? Although much of the scholarship centered on the shop floor remains embedded within a neo-Marxist framework, work organizations are not defined solely at the point of production. And in the broader context of organizational studies, neo-Marxism has remained largely invisible. The growing research literatures on management, organizational fields, intra-organizational dynamics, and the study of the social construction of labor markets are at

the heart of the sociology of work today. The new generation of economic sociology finds few points of contact with sociological Marxism (cf. Dobbin 2004, Granovetter & Swedberg 2011). As rich and thick as the neo-Marxist literatures on the shop floor have been, the theoretical and empirical puzzles about the broader organization of work beyond the point of production have been largely ignored. In this sense, the neo-Marxist legacy has been self-limiting in the face of the challenge of non-Marxist economic sociology.

**Inequality and class analysis.** Two key historical and theoretical puzzles have defined the contours within which neo-Marxist class analysis has unfolded over the past four decades: the continuing embarrassment of the middle classes and rising inequality (at least within the Anglo-American countries). But the bigger challenge has been to demonstrate that class analysis, however formulated, provides sufficient analytical leverage to justify its continued relevance. To put the point another way, the seemingly endless boundary debate that arises from the changes in class structure of the past 100 years represents a critical challenge for sociological Marxism, but its resolution matters only to the extent that the resulting map of the class structure provides strong analytical leverage in accounting for outcomes of contemporary significance. How well has Marxism responded to these challenges?

In his magisterial work *Class Counts*, Wright (1997) examines such topics as income inequality, gender equality, policy and workplace attitudes, and friendship patterns to show that his class map does indeed help to explain other kinds of important inequality outcomes in a cross-sectional context. Other analysts have used related class schemes to examine attitudes (Vannemann & Canon 1987, Svallfors 2006), voting behavior (Hout et al. 1995), income (Hout et al. 1993), subjective class consciousness (Hout 2008), and social mobility (Erikson & Goldthorpe 1992, Breen 2005). Most of these latter studies situate themselves in a neo-Weberian tradition, but all owe an

intellectual debt to Marxist models as well. It is difficult to characterize them in a neat package, but two broad conclusions appear to be in order: (a) Carefully measured, class impacts have not declined as much as some death of class theories have asserted (Clark & Lipset 1991, Waters & Pakulski 1996; for critical assessment of these arguments, see Goldthorpe & Marshall 1992), but (b) class impacts are often modest, sometimes far outweighed by other inequality measures found in gradational/individualist accounts (e.g., Halaby & Weakliem 1993, Kingston 2000; but cf. Chan & Goldthorpe 2007) or nonclass factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and others.

At the center of the conflicts over class analysis is that American sociology's disciplinary bias insists that identifying class structures in the absence of demonstrating their empirical consequence becomes an empty exercise, but Marxist class analysis has neither proved the analytical superiority of Marxist conceptions of class nor demonstrated that class models (however conceived) should have analytical primacy over other types of inequality. This conclusion leads toward a startling conundrum for sociological Marxism. If the idea that class structure should inform individual-level behavior is abandoned, then the purpose of class analysis moves solely to a form of macro analysis that largely abandons the empirical field of inequality studies to non-Marxist approaches. Reframing class analysis as a macro concept in the movement of history is to cede much of the field of contemporary inequality studies.

Yet even when it comes to the political sources of inequality, there are limits as to how much of the critical details Marxist approaches can supply that other theories cannot. The political mobilization of business and upper-class interests in favor of tax cutting, deregulation, and policy drift, combined with the weakness of countervailing forces such as unions, has a now widely acknowledged analytical force, and neo-Marxism has provided a valuable and long-standing (if sometimes unacknowledged) standpoint for this understanding. But the story cannot stop there. Neo-Marxist efforts to show

the patterning of class mobilization by industry or sector finds weak and contradictory impacts and has not proved a viable contender in the literature on political money (for the best of these studies, see Burris 1987, 2001; Clawson & Neustadt 1989; Mizruchi 1989, 1990; see Smith 1995 for a review of these models). Further, Marxism has no plausible theory of public opinion that accounts for the political triumph of neoliberalism among important sectors of the working class in the past 30 years. The right has largely won the ideological frame game, at least in the United States and to a lesser extent in the other Anglo-American democracies. It successfully mobilized public opinion in support of marketization and an antigovernment agenda (cf. Smith 2007, Bartels 2008, Manza et al. 2012). Marxist and other radical approaches insisting on the power of simple political manipulation by corporate elites (e.g., Ginzberg 1986, Domhoff 2010) lack a fine-grained understanding of the dynamics of public opinion and contemporary political contests and, in particular, the complexities of opinion change. A more sophisticated understanding of the political triumph of the new inequality requires supplementing a Marxist account with a broader analysis of how and why conservative ideology found and maintained traction (see Brooks & Manza 2007 for one attempt to understand these multiple and linked dynamics in a comparative perspective).

**Globalization, development, and political economy.** As with rising inequality, the reemergence of an increasingly globalized capitalism and economic turbulence has put some wind behind the sails of a neo-Marxist political economy. Important questions of our era have included those on which neo-Marxist analysts have largely focused: the instability of capitalism, the implications of neoliberalism and global economic competition for the well-being of the world's poor, and modern imperialism and geopolitical conflict.

In the competition with the modernization paradigm, or alternatives such as the world society model of Meyer and his students (e.g.,



Meyer et al. 1997), WST and other sociological Marxist accounts have the obvious strength of calling attention to crisis tendencies within global capitalism and to the hierarchical ordering of states and the inequalities it generates between countries. The longer-range perspective on capitalism provides a distinctly different way of thinking about trajectories and of raising critical questions for policy and political processes. Korzeniewicz & Moran's (2009) intriguing recent work combining a WST model with an account of the diverse institutional pathways of countries in a low-inequality equilibrium versus those in a high-income equilibrium suggests one exciting possible direction.

But at the same time, the political economy frameworks put forth by sociological Marxists have tended to overstate crisis tendencies. As mammoth countries like China and India grow rapidly, the possibilities of declining inequality within the global system appear at least possible (Firebaugh 2003; but cf. Milanovic 2011). That question remains open, but evidence from well-measured outcomes such as life expectancy and infant mortality may provide a firmer view of these processes and their interaction with dependency dynamics (see, for example, Brady et al. 2007).

Even more problematic is the failure to provide equal attention to the institutional means for economic stabilization within contemporary global capitalism. In a remarkable parallel to the shortcomings in the analysis of welfare states, neo-Marxist analysts of the global political economy have tended to underestimate the robustness of the capacity of capitalism to respond to crisis. As Mann (2010, p. 181) has recently asked, in commenting on Wallerstein, "when the 'true crisis of the system,' the 'social chaos' . . . will arrive, as Wallerstein has predicted for over thirty years . . . capitalism and democracy seem today largely unchallenged. And why cannot capitalism keep expanding by finding new 'needs' to commodify?" The jury is still out, but as the lack of any significant political response to recent financial and economic crises suggests, it is likely to remain out for a long time to come.

#### IV: SOCIOLOGICAL MARXISM'S FUTURES?

It is currently unclear whether, as Therborn (2008) has recently asked, Karl Marx will be one of those handful of thinkers still read hundreds of years after his death (as are Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, etc.). In its first 150 years, Marxism has shown a considerable capacity to regenerate itself and find new relevance, even in the face of historical and political challenges. Further, within American sociology, the Marx-Weber-Durkheim triumvirate remains firmly entrenched as the theoretical anchor of the discipline. This particular grouping works, in part, because Weber and Durkheim positioned their work, at least in part, in opposition to Marx (Bottomore 1984). But this is unlikely to hold forever. For example, the rise of analytical sociology (Hedstrom & Bearman 2009) promises a set of theoretical and empirical starting points that largely break with the traditional appeal to the classics of the discipline.

What about other possible futures for sociological Marxism? Several possibilities have emerged since the 1980s, and we discuss them briefly in closing.

##### Analytical Marxism

The so-called analytical Marxist group, of whom Erik Olin Wright was the most prominent American sociologist member, promised one way of reviving Marxism by systematically identifying the microfoundations of Marxist tradition (Roemer 1986, van Parijs 1993, Mayer 1994). The core premises of the analytical Marxists were that the themes of classical Marxism failed to satisfactorily specify the conditions of social action under which capitalism reproduces itself, or which individuals living within capitalist society engage in social action as predicted by Marxist theory. The resulting turn to rational choice models and methodological individualism was a deep challenge to the functionalist premises of Marxist theory. Within these broad parameters, members of the group made some important and widely



read contributions to Marxist social science in the 1980s (Roemer 1982, Elster 1985, Przeworski 1985, Wright 1985, Carling 1991). But by the 1990s, most had ceased working within the Marxist tradition. Przeworski (2007) summarized the shift among the bulk of the group in the following terms: "We ultimately found that not much of Marxism is left and there wasn't really much more to learn." Critics from within Marxism raised doubts about whether it could be meaningfully recast along rational choice lines, suggesting that the demise of the analytical Marxist project was not universally lamented (see, e.g., Burawoy 1986, 1990).

One potentially critical kernel growing out of the analytical Marxist project, however, can be found in the very intriguing work of Samuel Bowles and his colleagues at the Santa Fe Institute (e.g., Bowles 2003, Gintis et al. 2006). In formal dialogue with traditional microeconomic theory and its rational choice foundations, but also engaging questions with deep sociological relevance, Bowles and his colleagues have sought nothing else than to show that altruistic sentiments provide a more robust foundation for understanding individual behavior than standard rational choice assumptions about the centrality of material interests. Bowles's laboratory experiments suggest the beginnings of a rapprochement between microeconomics and sociology, as well as a new and more plausible kind of microfoundation for neo-Marxist social science. As work still in progress, we await further developments and efforts to integrate them into sociology (for one such early effort, see Baldassarri & Grossman 2010).

## Post-Marxism

For some Marxists, the pathway toward new directions grew out of the larger postmodernist and cultural turn that gathered steam in history and the social sciences in the late 1980s and 1990s (Bonnell & Hunt 1999, Steinmetz 1999). An important part of the larger current was a group of scholars coming out of the Marxist tradition who came to

describe themselves as post-Marxists. Among the most prominent were those identified with the Gramscian/Althusserian/Poulantzian tradition. In particular, Laclau & Mouffe's (1985) highly influential work was at the forefront of a broader post-Marxist wave that insisted on the abandonment of concrete material interests and class as a structuring force in favor of an analysis of discursive ideas about class and material interests. Post-Marxists prided themselves on a rejection of Marxist reductionism and grand theory, although they were often perfectly capable of generating their own opaque grand theory of discursive realities to replace it (e.g., Laclau 1990, Butler et al. 2000).

The most sociologically influential variants of post-Marxism were those that asserted one or both of two positions: (a) that the privileging of class must give way to a multitude of inequalities, each with their own logic that is simply not reducible to class structure or class determination; or (b) that the intersection of overlapping inequalities produces a complex patterning of inequality (Collins 2000, McCall 2005). To be sure, one does not have to take a post-Marxist detour to arrive at the position in which class is not everything; for those who started from a Marxist position, post-Marxism provided a coherent vehicle. But it would prove of limited utility beyond its role in providing a move away from the Marxist core, and has little resonance in sociology today.

## Utopian Radical Sociology?

In their survey of sociological Marxism, Burawoy & Wright (2002) urge both theoretical and empirical investigations of real utopias, as Wright (2010) has called them. As paradoxical as it may seem, at the very moment when the prospects for a revival of radical politics appear especially bleak, a remarkable number of Marxist sociologists and social scientists have produced new work on utopian possibilities. Developing blueprints for new kinds of utopian ideas for socialist transition has been a remarkably brisk undertaking in recent years, strangely enough often emanating

in North America where real socialism (or social democracy) is furthest from the political agenda. Wright's real utopia series (e.g., Cohen & Rogers 1995, Roemer 1996, Fong & Wright 2003, Ackerman et al. 2006) is one home for this surprising enterprise. Claus Offe (Offe & Heinze 1992) has explored labor exchange networks as an alternative to conventional labor markets. Wallerstein (1998), Harvey (2000), and Rogers (2009) offer speculative and utopian ideas about postcapitalist futures. As Therborn (2008, p. 135) has noted, "despite its impressive scale, and defiant stand against the headwind of the times . . . [the new utopianism] may look somewhat odd, particularly to northwestern Europeans," all the more so given the heavy involvement of American authors.

One particularly interesting example of recent utopian thinking can be seen in the attraction of some sociological Marxists and other radical social scientists to ideas about basic income (i.e., government-provided universal income grants to all citizens) as a vehicle for moving toward egalitarian structural reform (van Parijs 1992, Block & Manza 1997, Ackerman et al. 2006). This is a striking development. Proposals for a universal income grant to all citizens have long held appeal to a broad, albeit generally tiny, coalition of intellectuals and quirky political actors, ranging from libertarians such as Milton Friedman and Charles Murray to liberal economists such as James Tobin and visionaries of various kinds. For most Marxists, however, basic income held little appeal until fairly recently. In fact, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, American radicals strongly opposed proposals for universal income grants through a negative income tax, viewing it as a poor substitute for real structural reform (for this history, see Steensland 2007).

### Continuing Relevance of Sociological Marxism

Finally, we conclude on a somewhat more positive note by suggesting that there remain areas of scholarship where the possibility of continuing innovation and development by so-

ciological Marxists appear especially likely. One such area is in comparative-historical work, especially in relation to large-scale social change. Here, American sociology provides space for explananda that are sufficiently general and broad for sociological Marxism to be relevant. Several recent examples highlight these possibilities. Stepan-Norris & Zeitlin's (2003) impressive *Left Out* demonstrates, through a historical comparison of Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions, that "intra-class struggle within the class struggle" has a major bearing on outcomes in American union organizing. Similarly, Haydu's (2008) recent work grapples with the divergent processes of capitalist class formation in the late nineteenth century. Seidman's (1994) focused comparison of South African and Brazilian workers asks how two countries that were so different could produce two labor movements committed to the broader working class, as opposed to sectoral interests, continuing the long-standing interest among sociological Marxists in the conditions and circumstances of labor militance or quiescence. The classic work of Marxist labor history by Kimmeldorf (1988), comparing longshoremen unions on the East and West Coasts to explore why radicalism is fostered in some places but not others, turns Sombart's famous challenge on its head to ask "Why was there any socialism in the United States?" Lachmann's (2000) award-winning work on state formation in early modern Europe examines variation in the patterning of elite alignments to explain widely varying outcomes.

Not surprisingly, criticisms of comparative-historical Marxist scholarship abound. Adams et al. (2005) argue that while Marxism was central to the reemergence of historical sociology (part of the larger movement within the discipline that was critical of the ahistorical and atheoretical aspects of the disciplinary mainstream circa 1970), it served more as a standpoint to be built on but ultimately rejected for its determinism. Later generations of comparative-historical research, they suggest, inevitably move away from the grand theoretical narratives to more nuanced

positions. Hamilton (1996) raises a sharply critical question of whether large-scale comparative-historical scholarship can survive in the discipline at all, given the tendency in such work to pose questions at a level of abstraction that make them difficult to systematically test. Nevertheless, precisely because (or as long as) the American sociology tent continues to be broad enough to house large-scale comparative-historical scholarship, we are confident in seeing this as a place for Marxism to productively pose big questions.

## CONCLUSION

The resurgence of sociological Marxism in the 1970s and 1980s affected American sociology in a variety of ways, in some subfields more than others. As an intellectual movement within a disciplinary context, neo-Marxism affected sociology but was ultimately constrained and marginalized within it. Our account has considered two standpoints to assess neo-Marxism's

impact: whether it was able to continue posing exciting questions and offer plausible responses to the challenges from history and theory that it faced; and how well it competed with non-Marxist alternatives. In answer to the first question, we find evidence that in its key subfields Marxism remains a vibrant standpoint, but it comes up short in terms of generating plausible mechanisms and detailed analytics to address the theoretical and historical puzzles that have arisen. In the confrontation between sociological Marxism and the empirical mainstream in American sociology, sociological Marxism's initial insights in the 1970s have pushed the field in a novel direction, but nowhere has Marxism consistently maintained an adjudicatory advantage. Our most optimistic conclusions about sociological Marxism's future pertain to those areas of the discipline that have the greatest scope for large-scale comparisons across time and space. In spite of these doubts, we suspect that as in the past sociological Marxism will find new sources of intellectual energy and persist.

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