

NEO-MARXISM

THE MEANINGS OF MODERN RADICALISM

Robert A. Gorman

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To Jesse Paris,
Colin Matthew,
and—especially—dearest Elaine.

Preface

The familiar question “Does Marxism emancipate or enslave?” summons intense and disparate responses but unfairly presumes that “Marxism” is a cohesive theory and a unified political movement that is either good or bad. I argue, contrary to the shibboleths of the Left and the Right, that—within stated limits—Marxism means different things to different people and hence is a discontinuous movement supporting a heterogeneous clientele. Contemporary neo-Marxism is a living dialogue of antagonistic perspectives, less united than Leftists presume and potentially more attractive than Rightists imagine. In practice, it can emancipate or enslave, depending on the ideas, ideals, and tactics of believers.

Each chapter of this book presents one meaning of Marxism as perceived by those directly involved in its constitution, accenting its rhetorical appeal to sensitive, intelligent radicals. Critical comments are directed at what I perceive to be mistaken or illogical applications of a relevant meaning, or its unresolved problems—not at the meaning itself. Since neo-Marxism today embodies all its historical meanings, I write, where possible, in the present tense, affirming their potential utility for readers interested in radical theory and action.

Marxism is decentered in part because of history's reticence. New meanings gestate as old ones futilely encounter unanticipated events or plaintively await unseen predictions. Moreover, Marx's writings are vague enough on important theoretical issues to entertain a variety of interpretations. Neo-Marxism is therefore practically as well as theoretically motivated. Revolutionaries continually reaffirm Marxism as history and a problematic legacy condition their affirmations. Ironically, each is apotheosized, turning a potentially fruitful dialogue into sectarian hostility. Putative historical and exegetical inconsistencies, to some degree tainting all proffered meanings, are felicitously solved with dialectics, which often turns blatantly contradictory evidence into positive proof. Consequently, dissimilar versions of Marxism are rationalized by the same work (for example, the *1844 Manuscripts*) or phenomenon (for example, working-class conservatism), and everyone discovers a different unifying tendency in Marx's writings and history itself. While dialectics *is* an invaluable method of inquiry, it

does not excuse this kind of intellectual fatuousness. Dialectical method can be theoretically justified in different ways and can generate antithetical political strategies. In brief, the intended meaning of dialectics reflects foundational, "meta-dialectical" perspectives. I want not only to describe dialectics as a method, but also to examine its potential meanings and political implications.

This book thus encompasses the entire spectrum of Marxist social theories, examining theoretical links to both non-Marxian philosophy and Marx's own writings, describing significant thinkers, and projecting feasible political strategies. I have selected the important self-conscious representatives of each neo-Marxist meaning, that is, seminal thinkers who purposively formulate original revolutionary social theories. Exceptions are allowed only when unoriginal thinkers have significantly influenced a meaning's evolution. This strategy, unfortunately, excludes legions of important Marxist historians, political economists, sociologists, and anthropologists who productively labor from within a (reflectively or nonreflectively) accepted, established theoretical framework. Moreover, this book examines each neo-Marxist thinker, like each meaning of neo-Marxism, in terms of philosophical preconceptions (where possible, ontology, epistemology, ethics, and methodology), political ideals (particularly freedom and justice), and concrete tactics. Since neo-Marxists have lived in a variety of times, nations, and political conditions—and have formulated strategies dealing with an infinite number of national and local issues, many of which are beyond this book's scope—tactics will encompass general views regarding the proper social role and organization of revolutionary parties. For reasons clarified in chapter 1, epistemology facilely unlocks each total perspective and will guide us through the theoretical and practical thickets.

If this book's ideas are valid and their presentation, here and elsewhere, forthright, then society's move Leftward will be a thoughtful, rational response to economic and political exigencies. But even if they are not, serious readers will have been altered by a liberating spark of reflective insight.

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NEO-MARXISM

1.

The Ambiguous Legacy

PHILOSOPHY, ACTION, AND SOCIAL THEORY

Social theory is society's conscience. It contemplates the social aspects of individuality and outlines proper limitations by which individuals achieve their potentials in a just and equitable community. It systematically interrelates the needs of each individual and the requirements of society.

The fulcrum of a social theorist's work is his understanding of the origin, nature, and limits of valid knowledge. To mediate individuality and community effectively, we must know what is real and what isn't. Only then can we build a body of reliable knowledge that is useful in formulating salient principles and concepts. What we call "theory of knowledge," or "epistemology," is therefore implicit to meaningful social theory. Lacking it, we have no rational basis for assertions concerning either individuality or community. There is neither meaningful discourse nor reliable theorizing. Habermas is surely correct when he tells us, "If we imagine the philosophical discussion of the modern period reconstructed as a judicial hearing, it would be deciding a single question: how is reliable knowledge possible."¹

Epistemology is not an abstract intellectual category, isolated from the world we normally experience. Reflective cognition embodies principles of ontology, epistemology, methodology, ethics, and politics. Each separate perspective is collectively defined by the others. For example, journalists often consider a citizen's reflective decision to protest official policy to be newsworthy. Yet this act's reality comprises far more than the media-image grasps. It expresses a subjectively meaningful procedure for distinguishing right from wrong, a technique for analyzing everyday reality to discern essentials, opinions as to what is real and what isn't, preconceptions concerning humanity's nature and potential, and an apposite strategy. These concepts are as real as the act itself, which merely captures and expresses them at a specific time and place. Meaningful, rational behavior is never isolated in only one category. The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory is obsessed with reflection and theory at the expense of practical political activity, while the New Left sees revolutionary action as an end in itself. Both, however, express very distinct ontological, epistemological, methodological, and ethical beliefs—all vital to a correct understanding of critical theory and New

Leftism. Rejecting political action for reflection is itself a form of action, with obvious consequences. Rejecting theory in favor of spontaneous revolutionary activity is rooted in explicit (perhaps unacknowledged) theoretical principles drastically limiting theory's scope and significance. Meaningfully experienced and reflectively considered reality is, by definition, a unity of theory and praxis. Social reality is far more complex than thirty-second news spots reveal. It is churning, dynamic, and multidimensional, comprising qualities impervious to the naked eye or naive perspective.

Social theory, then, is a totality, including theories of being, knowledge, valid inquiry, and morality, and connected to the institutional world by active, reflective participation. Each dimension nourishes the others. Economic, social, and governmental institutions form an environment that reflects, expresses; and modifies theories, while these are similarly related to concrete institutions. Social theory is therefore initiated and studied from any perspective, theoretical or practical. When effectively consummated, the process propels us directly into the multidimensional totality. Consequently, a theory of knowledge is practical in several ways. It generates a method for valid social inquiry, evolves ethical criteria to discriminate right from wrong, and is realized in meaningful, rational action representing subjectively experienced goals. Epistemology, then, expresses and influences perceptions of being, methodology, and ethics, and permits planned social acts. In turn, it is redefined by these acts as practical consequences confirm or deny the original assertions. Epistemology is thus a central category for understanding social theory and action. It is particularly useful in examining the evolution of Marxist social theory, which is distinguished by its ongoing search for criteria of valid knowledge. Although competing schools of Marxist exegesis reflect different and potentially antagonistic totalities (dissimilar conceptions of ontology, methodology, ethics, and politics), they are originally motivated by epistemological questions, and these determine their exoteric structures.

This interest in epistemology is not surprising. Recalcitrant history has forced Marxism to compete ideologically for the hearts and minds of the discontented, a battle it was ill-suited to wage. Marx never formulated a systematic epistemology. As Marxism was compelled to communicate its own social theory actively, its blatant weaknesses surfaced, and the search began to find in Marx's writings clues for an adequate epistemology.

The first wave of Marxist interpreters includes Engels, Kautsky, Bukharin, and Plekhanov. Theirs is an optimistic scholarship, for they perceived the imminent collapse of Western capitalism and growth of proletariat hegemony. Their literary style, while not exactly inspiring, is relatively clear and forceful, directed both at enlightened intellectuals and the maturing revolutionary masses. They dealt with important epistemological questions but simultaneously anchored these in practical revolutionary strategies, hopefully courting the exploited who would fulfill history's promise.

But Russia's successful workers' revolution was not duplicated in those Western European countries where they were eagerly anticipated. As the likelihood of world revolution lessened, Marxists found themselves questioning their own social theory, seeking causes and remedies for its inability to translate historical necessity into a radical working-class movement. Beginning especially with Bernstein, Labriola, and Lukács, Marxist social theory sought to escape the orthodox vulgarity that Westerners find unattractive but also preserve the essentials of Marx's revolutionary message. This effort shapes neo-Marxist social theory in this century. Unable to provoke a mass revolutionary movement, Marxist social theory questions and requestions itself, looking to understand its failure and reverse its fortunes.

Unanticipated consequences have complicated matters. Neo-Marxism has become disconcertingly inbred. Marxist social theory is now a complex toy reserved exclusively for intellectuals who share an impenetrable jargon and style. Many ideologically sympathetic students hopelessly engage the work of Lukács, Adorno, Althusser, Della Volpe, Sartre, or Kosik—some blatant offenders—and reluctantly retire from the debate. Neo-Marxist journals are often incomprehensible to anyone but contributors, people learned in an arcane terminology that is apparently singularly suitable to revolutionary theory.

This situation has provoked an angry reaction primarily among those linking neo-Marxism's turgid style to its epistemological aspirations. Many now contend that Marxism involves no position on philosophical questions and cite Lenin's condemnation of epistemology as irrelevant to the class struggle.² Colletti has recently called methodology "the science of those who have nothing"³ and accused Marxism of atrophying into a "purely cultural and academic phenomenon."⁴ Noting neo-Marxism's incomprehensibility, Perry Anderson blames this "theoretical regression" on epistemology, which accompanied the defeatist mentality associated with a failed revolutionary movement. The goals of Western Marxism, Anderson sadly observes, are "to disengage the rules of social inquiry discovered by Marx, yet buried within the topical particularity of his work, and if necessary to complete them. The result . . . [is] that a remarkable amount of the output of Western Marxism . . . [becomes] a prolonged and intricate Discourse of Method,"⁵ a discourse that vitiates Marx's intentions. "When the masses themselves speak, theoreticians—of the sort the West has produced for 50 years—will necessarily be silent."⁶

Obviously, significant historical phenomena have pushed neo-Marxism on to its present path. The triumph of Soviet Marxism, particularly Stalinism, has produced its in-house critics, as has the revolutionary movement's failure in the industrialized West. The restabilization of European capitalism—marked by an economic expansion of Western Europe, the growth of imperialism, and the retreat from classical laissez-faire approaches to eco-

conomic and social policy—has prompted new, more relevant Marxist theory. The democratization of liberal political institutions, especially the advent of universal suffrage, has complicated the theory and strategy of radical politics in ways Marx did not anticipate. And, of course, factional and personal quarrels within the radical movement itself have promoted a critique of orthodox doctrine. Neo-Marxism has matured in the context of these concrete historical phenomena. Precisely because theory and practice interpenetrate, we must now pay serious attention to Marxism's philosophical motif, which indicates the movement's failure to visualize the origin, nature, and limits of valid knowledge coherently. A superficial, unconvincing epistemology destroys the credibility of Marxist methodology and ethics and minimizes the likelihood of effective revolutionary social action. Epistemology, to repeat, is not purely intellectual; it is expressed in, and defined by, concrete attitudes and actions. The feebleness of revolutionary working-class organizations indicates weakness in revolutionary theory. People simply will not rebel unless convinced it is the "correct" thing to do, based on available "knowledge." Neo-Marxism's concern with epistemology is thus symptomatic of a congenital disease incubated in Marx's own writings. Blindly joining unavoidable philosophical questions with the top-heavy, expendable language Marxists now use is tantamount to discarding the proverbial baby with the bath water.

A brief look at Marx's inconclusive commentary sets the central problematic of neo-Marxism.

MARX AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Aside from Marx's open distaste for extant philosophical idealism and empiricism, his legacy regarding the source, nature, and discovery of knowledge is almost flagrantly ambiguous. He examined philosophical questions primarily in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), *The German Ideology* (1846), the 1857 introduction to *Grundrisse*, and the 1859 preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Even in these works, however, philosophical positions are suggested but not systematically defined, and nowhere can we find a well-developed epistemology.⁷ Marx's attitude toward philosophy in general, and epistemology in particular, is one of indifference, presuming that hotly debated topics, then amusing to bourgeois philosophers who were interested only in scholarship and discussion, were already settled. Residual controversies are purposively shifted onto historical, economical, and political planes, where they are measured with concrete terms and concepts.

The essence of capitalism is its urge for business success, which Marx saw as necessarily based on exploiting and dehumanizing workers. Bourgeois philosophy perpetuates this injustice by flaunting abstract, superfluous concepts, mystifying and confusing people who really need only alter

their ways of living together. Philosophy's goal is not enlightenment, but the selfish desires of a powerful ruling class. But science demands a commitment to justified conclusions even if they "little . . . conform to the interested prejudices of the ruling classes."⁸ By this criterion, extant philosophy was antiscientific. Since Marx considered himself a scientist, his desire to "settle accounts with our former philosophical conscience"⁹ implies *spurning philosophy altogether in the quest for revolution and socialist equality*. "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."¹⁰

Consequently, Marx's science unfolds without a clear discussion of mind's relationship to matter, whether the material world is passively "reflected" in mind or is a product of human creativity. These key issues, with which Marx's followers have endlessly struggled, are considered unimportant and meaningless. Questions concerning reality and the quality of truth are "purely scholastic," a consequence of ideological confusion. "The whole problem of the transition from thought to reality, and thus from language to life, exists only as a philosophical illusion: it is justified only to the philosophic mind, puzzling over the origin and nature of its supposed detachment from real life."¹¹ On the other hand, people have needs to satisfy, and these alone shape relationships to nature and society. The world is an arena where practical needs are fulfilled, not a Pandora's box filled with spiritual profundities. Philosophical dilemmas mean nothing to most people, for the world is only the locus and objectification of their practical activities. "Cognition" means rendering a human sense to things, not grasping at transcendent truths. Knowledge, then, has no "epistemological" value. It is not evaluated independent of practical consequences. "Correct thinking" merely facilitates the satisfaction of needs, allowing us to liberate and fulfill ourselves in nature. "Incorrect thinking," on the contrary, confirms and perpetuates human servility. Thoughts either liberate or oppress by satisfying or denying basic human requirements. This constitutes their truth or falsity. In any case, thoughts occur in and are connected to the surroundings within which we undertake practical activities. Consequently, "truth" and "falsity" become appendages of social systems: Those oppressing and denying humanity generate false images and theories (for example, philosophy), while those that liberate and fulfill yield accurate, true ideas (for example, science).

Marx conflates two distinct problems. The practice of philosophy, including epistemology, is part of bourgeois social theory, a totality comprising all those institutions expressing and supporting it. Marx accurately perceived the close, mutually supportive link between bourgeois philosophy and liberal-democratic-capitalist institutions. Logically, given his unremitting critique of capitalism, he rejected this kind of theorizing. Because liberation is incompatible with capitalist exploitation, bourgeois theory must, indeed, yield to revolutionary action. However, Marx failed to analyze