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Chapter

2

Foundations of Radical Sociology

In this chapter we will outline the most important features of the Marxist sociological paradigm. All thinking in the social sciences is based on philosophical assumptions about the nature of the world, and more particularly about how thought is related to the physical world. The perspective that Marxism takes on these issues is known as "dialectical materialism." It incorporates elements from other related philosophies, and therefore many of its elements will not be unfamiliar to the student. Nevertheless, there may well be some elements that are new. In any event, some understanding of Marxist philosophical assumptions will make it easier for the reader to understand what we are attempting to do in the remaining chapters of this book. For these assumptions shape both the questions that are asked and the ways in which they are answered.

This chapter will also define basic empirical concepts used in sociology. First, we will explain what is meant by a "society" and show how this concept is used in radical as well as other sociologies. Second, we will examine the key characteristics of class societies.

DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM

Radical sociology is postulated on a *dialectical* conception of knowledge. This means that knowledge develops as part of an interaction between the thinker and the environment. Thought cannot develop in a vacuum without any link to the real world.



Photo by Neil Benson

Social conflict reflected in sunglasses.

But neither can the social world be known independently of the thinking human beings who make it up. Thinking, including the thinking of sociologists, is viewed as an integral part of the social process.

Dialectical materialism incorporates elements from classical philosophers such as Plato and Hegel. These philosophers developed the concept of the dialectic as a way of thinking in which knowledge advances as a consequence of a dialogue between two thinkers. One thinker advances a thesis, the second responds with an antithesis, and out of the interaction a new idea, the synthesis, emerges. But Marxism does not stop at this point. Rather, it goes on to say that these thinkers are not isolated individuals, but members of social classes. And the struggle between these thinkers is not so much intellectual as social. The dialectic of ideas is a reflection of the dialectic of class. Thus, first the capitalist advances the ideas and interests of capitalism (reflecting the reality of capitalist relationships). The workers growing out of this social system advance contrary ideas and politics through the labor movement. Out of this conflict, both the ideas for and the reality of a new socialist society emerge.

Dialectical materialism also accepts the basic tenets of scientific logic. It incorporates the basic idea of science as a method whereby theoretical generalizations are tested by empirical research. This means that once a notion about the world is formulated, whether on the basis of experience or reason, it is put to a test. The results of the test are then used to modify the original theoretical notion, and the modified theory is again tested. The results of the test of the more sophisticated no-

tion are once again used to modify the theory to bring it into closer agreement with reality, and so on. Through this process, social theory can get closer and closer to reality, though without ever reaching perfect knowledge.

The process of testing theories cannot be the same in social science as in physical science. This is so because the social scientist is part of the social system that he or she is studying. Testing theories about society may involve simply making passive observations, offering predictions about what will happen in the future, and then waiting to see if these predictions come true. If the mythical "ivory tower" ever really existed, where academicians could write and lecture without anyone paying the slightest attention to what they said, then perhaps social science could be limited to this sort of passive scientism. Radicals, however, are committed to helping to change societies. The only ultimately effective way to test theories of how to change society is to put them into practice. Thus, radical sociologists believe that applied practice is an essential method for scientific research in the social sciences. Theories about political change must be tested through politics; theories of how to organize economic production must be tested through experimentation at the workplace; theories of socialist education must be put into practice in schools. In this way, the theory becomes part of the world in a way that astronomical theory never influences the motions of the planets. Thus, dialectical materialism works toward an ultimate unity of theory and practice.

Theory and Reality

Sociological theory must be both advanced by reason and disciplined by practice, whether the practice is scientific experimentation, political activity, or productive labor. Although theory is primary, practice is necessary. Practice is necessary in order to develop an understanding of the social world. Unlike radical sociology, most liberal and conservative sociology is based on the division of theory from research. During the 1950s and much of the 1960s sociology was divided into the two camps of the Grand Theorists and the Abstracted Empiricists—the proponents of a theory separate from research and of research techniques independent of theory. These two camps could maintain their respective positions only by rejecting the dialectical conception of the relation between theory and practice. While the Grand Theorists engaged in concept association and dissociation (illustrated by common-sense examples), the Abstracted Empiricists developed pretentious methodological techniques (Mills refers to it as the "methodological inhibition"). The empiricist camp came to use research methods, especially survey methods, in a ritualistic manner that revealed little concern with the differential applicability of techniques to research problems. Radical sociology, on the other hand, is concerned neither with abstract speculation about the world nor with research methods developed for their own sake. Radical sociology maintains that the separation of theory from research is nonsense. Ideas without verification are as worthless as verification techniques without ideas.

In some cases, sociological theory can be advanced by using data that have already been gathered for some other purpose. This might include analysis of census data or of historical reports gathered in the library. In other cases, the sociologist may physically observe what is going on in a group but attempt to avoid influencing anyone's behavior. Alternatively, the sociologist may use interviews or questionnaires to gather information. This inevitably influences the responses, since the questions are determined by the researcher and people will answer differently depending on what and how they are asked. All of these methods are fairly similar to those used in the physical and biological sciences, and these sciences also have the problem that their observation processes may affect the processes they are studying.

Some sociological theories can best be advanced through experimentation. It is possible to test some ideas in a classroom, or with a small group of students gathered together as subjects in an experiment. Many of the most important ideas in radical sociology, however, can be tested only through political practice. The best way to formulate a sociology of revolution is to form a revolutionary movement and put one's ideas into practice. This involves a process of experimentation that is logically identical to that used in a research laboratory. For example, the road to power followed by a social movement such as the Communist Party of China consisted of following a series of policies based on Marxist-Leninist theory but constantly modified in the light of the successes and failures of practice. The theory of the Chinese Communists became better and better as the Party's successes and failures were assimilated and as a better theory developed on which to base further practice. In the process the original ideas of Marx and Lenin were modified considerably. Theoretical development can also come through work experience. A group of workers may think up a more efficient way of producing a good, which they then put into practice. Their success and failure in introducing more efficient techniques is assimilated into their theory and a more correct practice of production is developed.

There is nothing mystical or unusual about this process. The logic of social science is more systematic and thorough than the logical processes used by nonscientists in their practical lives, but it is not qualitatively different. This is not to say that social science theories, including those of radical sociology, cannot be complex or difficult to understand. That happens, however, because of the complicated and often contradictory nature of social reality itself.

Contradictions

Probably the most important aspect of dialectical thinking, and also perhaps the most difficult to really grasp, is the idea of contradiction. The notion of contradiction captures the essential tragedy of social relationships in class society. People's intentions and aspirations are systematically frustrated by the very consequences of their actions. Since social relationships have a logic of their own, and social relationships are



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A contradiction. New housing is built in the suburbs while existing housing deteriorates in the cities.



nothing other than the interrelated actions of people, what people hope to have come out of their actions is negated by the social processes of class society. Things turn into their opposites because people try to make them stay the same. This notion of tragedy is essentially the same as that of classical Greek or Elizabethan dramatic tragedy. For example, in Sophocles' play, *Oedipus Rex*, the oracle prophesies that Oedipus will someday sleep with his mother and kill his father. Horrified by this prediction, Oedipus from that day onward structures his life to rationally minimize the possibility of realizing the oracle's prophecy. Nevertheless, the very course of action that was the most rational to follow to avoid sleeping with his mother and killing his father was exactly the course of action that most surely brought about that result. Such is the stuff of all classical tragedy, and such is the stuff of social relationships in class society.

An example of a contemporary contradiction facing the United States is the fact that the cost of maintaining world military superiority makes for a very slow rate of economic growth, which in the long run undermines the economic basis for exerting worldwide political hegemony. To be the world's number one power is thus inherently contradictory. The very course calculated to maximize worldwide power—heavy military spending—diverts productive resources away from uses that would result in increased productivity and growth and leads to the relative economic decline of the leading country relative to others. Eventually, some other country, once its more rapid rate of economic growth has taken it beyond that of the previously hegemonic power, will convert its economic basis into worldwide political hegemony. In turn, this new power will be faced with the same contradiction. Throughout the rest of this book we will have occasions to point to other contradictions in social relationships.

Scientific Laws

The dialectical method is similar to heuristic principles used in other sciences. All the "hard" sciences tend to see the world in a dialectical way. The concept of system, for example, is universal in astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology. Likewise the concept of systematic change or evolution. These fields also categorize their subject matter in terms of opposing forces that are at the root of change—positive and negative charges, north and south magnetic poles, matter and antimatter, centrifugal and centripetal forces, and acids and bases. The unity of theory and practice or experiment is also a goal of most sciences. A dialectical methodology is an attempt to apply the scientific approach developed in other fields to the social sciences.

One goal of socialist sociology is thus to create a body of scientific laws similar to those that exist in other sciences. Scientific laws, of course, are not statements that something will always occur. They are rather statements about forces or tendencies that always operate under specified conditions. Thus, the law of gravity states that all

things tend to fall toward the center of the earth. This statement, of course, does not preclude the possibility that balloons, airplanes, or rockets can counteract this tendency with other forces. Likewise, with social laws, the statement that A tends to do such-and-such is not a claim that A always does such-and-such, but only that there is a force operating to compel A to do such-and-such. Only if there are no effective countertendencies will A in fact actually do such-and-such. The actual outcome is the product of all forces or laws that are operating.

The basic logic of science is determinist. It assumes that behavior is determined by objective factors; if this were not so, behavior would be random and it would be impossible to form laws about it. Many people are prepared to believe this about physical particles but are reluctant to believe that their own behavior is determined by anything other than their own personal preferences or wishes. Of course, it is not possible to completely predict anyone's behavior since this is a result of a myriad of forces that have acted on that person throughout his or her lifetime. If an individual really wishes to control his or her own life, however, the only way to effectively do so is to study the forces that have shaped his or her personality and the forces in the social and physical environment that limit his or her alternatives. Similarly, if the people in a society wish to change their society, they must first understand the constraints imposed by their society. Radical sociologists are committed to acting on the world in order to change it, but in order to do this effectively they must focus on the ways in which social systems are determined by objective factors that are beyond any individual's conscious control.

The philosophical question of whether human behavior is totally determined by objective factors, or whether there is in the last analysis some degree of individual free will, is not crucial to radical sociology. What is important is to understand that radical sociology, like all science, seeks to explain behavior as it is determined by objective factors and that it assumes social structure is the source of human oppression. This means that the goal of radical sociology is the understanding of the forces behind human behavior. It is thus not so important what individuals or groups *think* are their motivations, but what they *really* are. Only in this way is it possible to uncover the laws that govern social relations, and to act effectively to change those relationships.

Social laws differ fundamentally from laws in abstract sciences such as physics in that they are specific to certain kinds of social systems. Just as many biological principles are valid only for certain species or types of organisms, social laws frequently apply only to specific types of societies. For instance, some laws apply only to capitalist societies, and even within that category some apply only to competitive capitalism while others apply only to monopoly capitalism. There are very few social laws that apply across the board to all societies. Such general social laws are limited to statements such as (1) people's ideas always tend to fit their social position and experience, (2) people always tend to act in accordance with their interests, and (3) all societies have to satisfy certain basic biological needs of their members. With the exception of

principles such as these, in order to understand the operation of a society or its component institutions it is more or less sufficient to understand the social laws that govern the particular social organization. Each type of social organization operates according to its own set of laws and they are the principle determinates of what goes on within them.

The full range of phenomena can be analyzed into increasingly specific levels, called “levels of specificity”:

1. Laws that apply to all matter.
2. Laws that apply to all life.
3. Laws that apply to all animals.
4. Laws that apply to all mammal interactions.
5. Laws that apply to all primate social relations.
6. Laws that apply to all human societies.
7. Laws that apply to all class societies.
8. Laws that apply to all capitalist societies.
9. Laws that apply to all monopoly capitalist societies.
10. Laws that apply only to certain levels of organization within capitalist societies, such as mode of production, state, ideology.
11. Laws that apply only to a concrete institution or process, such as ecology, the family, crime, imperialism, racism, social movements.

As the level of analysis gets more specific, more and more useful laws appear until the level of capitalist society is reached. Analysis on this level explains the most. As the system becomes still more specific, our analysis tends to explain less and less. Certain characteristics of monopoly capitalist societies can be explained in terms of the laws that apply to all matter. For example, because they are constructed out of matter, cities occur on the surface of the earth. Other characteristics of society are explainable in terms of the laws that apply to all forms of life, to all animals, or to all mammals—societies need to provide food, warmth, and shelter to its members. Some other aspects of society are products of the fact that society’s members are primates or members of the species *homo sapiens*. Such facts as the year-round sexuality of women, the flexible hand, and the ability to speak have a tremendous social impact. Other aspects of monopoly capitalist society are either characteristics of all societies (such as the few we mentioned above), characteristic of all *class* societies (such as the functioning of the state), characteristic of all capitalist societies (such as the functioning of the military), or are specific products of monopoly capitalism itself. In later chapters we will discuss in detail the laws that originate at each of these levels.

Functional Analysis

It is society that must be the principal unit of social analysis. It is the characteristics of a societal type that fundamentally determine its component system of social relations, the modes of individual social behavior, and social change. It is the logic of a particular type of societal organization that is responsible for virtually all significant aspects of social relations within a society.

Another way of saying that all important social elements and processes are determined by the basic social structure of a society is by stating that these social behaviors have a *function* for the social structure or for the people in it. The function of a behavior is the contribution it makes to the survival of a larger system. Some behaviors are *functional* on a biological level. Food production, clothing production, child-care institutions are all necessary to meet people's biological needs. Other behaviors have a function at a higher level of specificity. All societies, for example, need some process for decision-making and for communication within the group. Decision-making institutions thus play a function on the level of all societies. The same social institution can play a function on more than one level at a time, however. Political institutions in class societies play a decision-making function necessary for all societies, but they also play a function that is specific to class societies. This is the function of maintaining the privileges of the upper class against the rest of the society. All class societies impose such universal imperatives as those for a state apparatus enabling a minority to control the majority. Capitalist societies impose additional functional requirements such as the need for a high level of unemployment to keep wages down and for a standing military force to protect economic interests. Monopoly capitalist society imposes further demands, such as the need for state regulation of the economy and universal education. Thus, a single institution, such as the American government, performs functions on a number of different levels of specificity. Some of these functions would not be needed in a socialist society, while others would be.

Functionalism is a method of analysis that explains social phenomena in terms of the functions they play. Conservative sociologists often use functionalist analysis as an argument against change. They say that since existing social practices perform a function for "society" they are necessary and should not be changed. Radicals do not accept this. The fact that an existing social practice may perform some function in maintaining an existing capitalist society is no argument for not changing it. Instead, it can be an argument for changing not only that practice but also the society as a whole!

While radical sociologists do not accept this sort of conservative functionalism that opposes change in the interest of preserving an abstract entity called society, radicals can make use of functionalist analysis. Marxist functionalism differs from conservative functionalism in that it recognizes that social practices are functional for historically specific kinds of social systems, which are eventually going to break down and be transformed into new social forms. Marxist functionalism is dialectical in that it