

## REVIEW

## The end of the sociology of Marxism: on the meaning of capitalism in modernity

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**Received:** 31 March 2023; **Accepted:** 08 April 2023; **Published:** 21 June 2023

This study is about the failure of sociology as a discipline and the evolution of its failure from a Neo Marxist perspective since the time of Nietzsche until the postmodern turn. The Berlin Wall was the metaphor for western Neo Marxism and Neo Marxist theory. This study makes use of how the Frankfurt School tried to salvage the namesake of Sociology only to fail as the Berlin Wall collapsed in 1989. The study concludes with the incipient nature of sociology as a discipline and how its seeds of destruction were already embedded at the time of its origin.

**Keywords:** sociology, Neo Marxist theory, social theory, capitalism, critical theory, critical theorists, Frankfurt School, Neo Marxism

### Introduction

Sociology a discipline covers all things about men (and now women) in society. This means that inroads into such sub-disciplines as the Sociology of Religion, the Sociology of Deviance, and the Sociology of Culture would come into existence in the late 1960s to late 1970s. Indeed, some departments of sociology even have the audacity to house departments and programs in anthropology as if the latter were rooted in the former's theory.

Yet, no one knows precisely when sociology began as a discipline; many cite the French philosopher Auguste François Xavier Comte as being the father of sociology. If this were true, then sociology had its beginnings in the modern era. Others prefer to relate it to Talcott Parsons or even Karl Marx.

In spite of its early beginnings, ahead of many other social science disciplines (such as political science, social work, psychology, and economics), many writers have long proclaimed the death of sociology. The End of Sociology was a common theme in the 20th century. It is less common these days because the discipline is already dead. The demise of sociology as a discipline is not the same as criticizing

the discipline. The former is about the end of an academic discipline, while the latter is about questioning its intellectual value and use in modernity.

### Review of the literature

There are many critics of sociology as a discipline. This is illustrated, for example, in the works of Seidman (1), Jha (2), Bhambra (3), Go (4), and Morris (5). Why is Nietzsche absent from sociological theory, especially in North America? In fact, Nietzsche showed no concern about society, social problems, and sociology. He was uninterested in any form of sociological theory that could make sense of an irrational world.<sup>1</sup> One could also remind one's readers that Nietzsche was a virtually unknown scholar who had plagiarized some of his readings of Buddhism and incorporated it into his theory of "eternal recurrence" which he extrapolates in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883–1892) and a little in *La Gaya Scientia* (1887). Nietzsche

<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Antonio, "Nietzsche's Antisociology: Subjectified Culture and the End of History." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 101, no. 1, 1995, pp. 1–43.

was highly acclaimed by western European scholars and critical theorists, but he was unwelcome along the American coastlines, both east and west. Indeed, for these reasons that bear and lay bare the lack of enthusiasm for Nietzsche an philosophy, suggesting the end of modern sociology. At present, modern sociology only makes sense when viewed no less than through its postmodern stem. It is only through the postmodern perspective that the actual sociological problem can be clearly seen.

## Friedrich Nietzsche

Nietzsche was marginalized by many, if not most, of the social theorists of his day for his genuine appreciation of the sociological problem. His honesty and integrity, however, were at odds with those in the discipline who were less interested in Nietzsche's fragmentary approach to understanding the sociological problems of theories, cultures, and societies.

Another reason was that Nietzsche had distanced himself from society and cultural appropriateness from the very start. His theoretical and nominal absence from social theory journals is therefore not surprising as it never suited the sociological careerists interested in making use of their positions in the discipline to further their own careers. Nietzsche's refusal to curry favor with social theory and social theorists even less popular with sociology's nearest relations in social psychology, social work theory, and society and economics, as well as sociological theory. The distance between sociology and its sister disciplines, or sub-disciplines, was mired in their own investment in the former's ideological position.

Sociologists also disliked Nietzsche because he had his sights on analyzing the decadence of western capitalism. Nietzsche disabused the positions of labor-intensive capitalism, capitalist societies, capitalist value systems, and capitalist cultural circuitry. Nietzsche saw any form of aggrandizing capitalism as a form of restraint of man's will to power in *Will to Power*.

When the original theorist Daniel Bell wrote about the *End of Ideology* (1960), he was really writing about the end of sociology and the death of sociology as a discipline.<sup>2</sup> Recall that when one writes about the fall of sociology, one is not writing about the end of Marxism as that would be a grave misnomer. They are not one

and the same thing. Neo Marxism lives off the critique of social classes and the exploitation of the masses by bourgeois capitalism.

## Neo Marxist appeals?

While Neo Marxist theory appeals mainly to the young and the restless radicals, sociology has no such appeal at all. While Neo Marxism attracts the youth of today, sociological theory sucks on the veins of capitalist laborers; the more these veins give up blood, the more they are sucked on by cultural analysts, storytellers, and social historians such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, Arjun Appadurai, Homi Kharshedji Bhabha (the one from Harvard), A. Raghuramaraju, Bhudev Chandra Mukhopadhyay, Bhiku Parekh, Sudhir Chella Rajan Sushanta K. Mishra, R. K. Narayan, Ashis Nandy, A. Ayyappan, Pramod Ranjan Sengupta, and Ravi Sharma, to mention a few social thinkers and Neo Marxist scholars.

With Marx long dead and buried in England, his followers were left high and dry in Europe, India, China, and across Southeast Asia with greater numbers of misleading interpretations of Marxian politics, economics, and society. Indeed, theoretically complex studies of culture have never made more compromises than in the time of the great Friedrich Nietzsche himself. American Neo Marxist theory within a so-called ethos engulfing certain demographic norms would only include the works of such grave writers (and works) as Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: Marx, Modernism and Modernization* (1988), Friedrich Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), and Philip Smith's *Cultural Theory* (2001).

Since the end of the Cold War, the Neo Marxist branch of the sociology of culture has not even attempted to produce anything new. Examples of the so-called advances in re-thought Marxism are niche publications that recast the past (Turner, 2007) and those that keep flogging a long-dead Neo Marxist horse (Wright, 2000; Biernacki, 2001). Critical Theory has similarly been unable to rediscover new theoretical assistance since the demise of its two great generations of thinkers that include Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and Hannah Arendt.<sup>3</sup> There is a third generation of Frankfurters, which some believe to be led by Jürgen Habermas and his students.

<sup>2</sup> Political scientists have never attempted to unify their methods since the end of the positivist movement (if we discount about 17% of those who continue to harbor the thought of a science of politics) and others who seek to evaluate politics in a neutral and value-free manner. Note that Daniel Bell is a fairly common name, but only the one who published the *End of Ideology* can truly claim to be great.

<sup>3</sup> "Interview a Turkish Muslim in Germany in 2016 and you will understand the meaning of racism" is something that Henry S. Kariel would say were he alive today. Kariel was noted for being the American political theorist who brought postmodernism into American political science. He was also a research assistant to Hannah Arendt. The author was one of the second-last doctoral students of Kariel at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

## Critical theory

Critical Theory in the good old days involved elegant attempts to explain socio-historical circumstances that extracted the surplus value of workers across the world from Berlin to Beirut. The old critical theories, despite their exuberance and captivating qualities, did not plant the seeds of revolution led by Left-wing intellectuals in successive generations of Left-wing scholars.

The Critical Theory of the Old Frankfurt School similarly failed to excite academic and intellectual interest as it floundered in post-Cold War Neo Marxist Reconstructionism. It was unable to recover the kinds of radical and controversial political activism associated with the first- and second-generation critical theorists.

Critical Theory had not achieved the depth of influence over the millennia to capture and elucidate any in-depth understanding of capitalist social phenomena as its forebears had achieved.

In fact, the fall of the Berlin Wall was to become the marker of the demise of the Frankfurt School. While Steve Smith, Friedrich Jameson, Jürgen Habermas, Douglas Kellner, Stephen Turner, and others tried to conjure sophisticated responses to the neoliberal capitalist onslaught, their narratives and those of their students have neither been sufficiently powerful to entice a new generation of theorists to be led down the garden path with rose-tinted spectacles. One of the weaknesses of Critical Theory was exposed by the criticism leveled by Jürgen Habermas. Habermas' attempts at developing a nuanced and sensible, even rational, philosophy through his communicative action model embodied the reconstitution of the broken bits left after deconstructing Critical Theory's greatest vulnerabilities by refocusing on how we all might understand ourselves and our (Kantian-inspired) perception of the universe. Habermas' epistemological intersubjectivity involves the act of thought transformed into utterances in our speech patterns. Our utterances and communications are guided by a sense of social norms that may provide a critical function for some. But it was too little and too late. Their powerful work, known as the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, once perceived as the bible of the fashionable Left is no longer adopted as course texts in departments of sociology across the United States. In its place are new kinds of sociologies, watered-down sociologies that offer different takes on culture, society, and politics, if at all.

## Roxa Luxembourg, the new left and Antonio Gramsci

Roxa Luxembourg was famous for her criticism of the Leninist school as well as the moderate social democratic ones. In the end, Luxembourg was neither well accepted

nor broadly deployed in Neo Marxist teaching. In fact, Roxa Luxembourg had little to do with the New Left that dominated the Neo Marxist English-speaking world of the early 1970s, as seen in London and parts of New York and Northern California.

Rather than aiding the New Left retrograde, reorganize, and prepare a compelling counterattack as the Communist International did in the heady 70s, eloquent writers like Tom Bottomore – once regarded as the most influential sociologist in Western Europe – helped write the eulogy for the New Left as it was being birthed. Bottomore was so focused on his Indian casework that he neglected the workers' issues in Britain. His failure to move into the political quagmire of violent revolutionary Left-wing Marxism left the workers without one of the most powerful intellectual advisors a revolutionary spirit could possess.

Part of the reason for the failure of the New Left involved a simultaneous failure to provide a comprehensive and believable vision of the social and political universe. The absence of this alternative made the post-utilitarian democratic theories of the early Latin American liberal theorists such as José Mora Alberdi and José Lastarria, as well as the populist liberal work of John Rawls and his archrival Robert Nozick, pave the way for the tremendous shift away from the possibility of an achievable socialist utopia to that of a democratic form of egalitarianism through the accumulation of neoliberal capital. The "New Right" ideal was even more appealing because it could be criticized without becoming theoretically weak; it could be implemented and tested with panel data; it could be shunted from left to right across the ideological spectrum and reappear smelling like a rose.

Apart from Roxa Luxembourg and the New Left, the really influential thinker among the Neo Marxist group was Antonio Gramsci. While in prison, he developed his theory of cultural hegemony where the two partners comprising the State and the ruling Capitalist Classes make use of Cultural Institutions to maintain power parity in capitalist societies, as seen in Bucciarelli (6).

The old conceptual forays into accumulation crises, capitalist accumulation fallacies, and the old culture industry failed to capture the interest of students in graduate schools not because of the truisms attached to the failures of Stalin, Khrushchev Brezhnev, Mao, Deng, Kim Jong Il, and others, but because they had immediately deviated from their core business which is the worker. Driven by ego and esoteric accomplishments, the stars of the Left had their egos rise so rapidly into the stratosphere of intellectualism that they ran out of oxygen.

Notwithstanding Jameson's eclectic and persuasive discourse, he ironically pointed toward the truisms within High Modern ideological perspectivism: that

capitalism was not only successful but also dancing on the grave of the New Left. Jameson's critics celebrated his diatribe against post-modernity as a conduit for mass exuberance through conspicuous consumption. His denunciation of the Right created more critical space for democratic adventurism and intellectual exceptionalism. By ignoring the importance and untapped potential of workers across the world, he unwittingly made his theory of culture vulnerable to dissent and disabuse.

International studies of mass conspicuous consumer behavior led to heightening emphases on the exceptional power of capitalist marketing as workers were divided by small wage differentials as the bourgeois tactic of divide and enslave rode roughshod over workers' rights in the undemocratic states of South Asia, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and South America.

The old Critical Theory perspectives on mass consumption and capital accumulation posited new topographies that were deeply rooted in positivism and reproduced the old discourses of pleasure and pain, solace and solitude, wants and desires, ambition and failure, and devotion and inattentiveness.

To the untrained eye, Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* seems like an offshoot of the work of Adorno and Horkheimer. However, his methodological approach was different. So was the case with his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which, unlike the speculative political philosophy of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno and Horkheimer), was more grounded in terms of its methodical citations and references to relevant parts of the literature (7). Habermas and his colleagues would eventually break from the Frankfurt School and, in that sense, weaken the New Left. But if they had broken earlier, they would have avoided the unfortunate association with the New Left and might even have followers today. Alas, this was not to be the case.

In 1980, Stephen K. White argued that Habermas' notion of communicative ethics invites the possibility of evaluating politics from rational consensus. This is neither mutable nor applicable in today's post-industrial, post-modernist context. At present, the technology is simply too radical to explain the misgivings of society and culture, of social history, and of social theory itself. Indeed, it seems to be better than sociology died when it did at the *fin-de-siècle*.

## Conclusion

Nietzsche became famous because of his innovation of the old theory of eternal recurrence and his idea of the ideal man, or the iconoclastic *Übermensch*. Yet for all his zealotry over being the Anti-Christ and his profound statements on the existing social problems

and the inadequacy of social theory, he was grossly marginalized by the discipline of sociology as he continued to critique capitalism *per se*. As is commonly known, without the sociology of Marxism, there will eventually be no sociology at all.

The darker relative of sociology was political science, which has long eclipsed sociology by breadth and width. Bereft of theory and new theorists, sociology stood silent as influential thinkers like Rawls and Nozick became increasingly associated with political philosophy and political theory, leaving the scraps of uneventful things for social theorists to navel gaze and argue among themselves. It is not that the sociology of Marxism has offered inferior engagements of the subliminal realm of neoliberal capitalism or that the post-industrial world of Daniel Bell and the portending clashes of old cultures that Huntington mistook for a clash of religions. Rather, it is the lack of sufficiently robust theories within the sociology of Marxism and its failure to provide intellectual leadership and commanding theories that have relegated any "big S" sociology of the Left to the bottom right of the theoretical bookshelf in late modernity.

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