

TEACHING WORKSHOP: TEACHING MARXISM **ASA, AUGUST 15, 2005**

ERIK OLIN WRIGHT

6 Key Points

1. Teach using a “Marxist tradition” rather than “Marxism” (makes it sound like a religion or cult)
2. Stress that a Marxist tradition is a modular framework it is NOT a Theory with a capital “T”, it is NOT all encompassing, it is not “all or nothing”. Students can accept some parts, but do not have to accept all.
3. Marxist tradition is not a theory of everything. You must make a distinction between Marxist theory and Marxist analysis. For example, be skeptical of any Marxist theory of gender but a Marxist analysis of gender might be OK.
4. Emphasize that Marxist tradition is one of a variety called “emancipatory theories” but it is NOT alone. It faces four tasks, as does any theory of emancipation:
 - a. elaborate normative content to idea of emancipation (morality)
 - b. develop a critique of existing institutions in light of normative stance
 - c. provide an account of an alternative; must envision real alternatives (ex. Marx envisioned communism/socialism).
 - d. Provide a theory of how to get from here to there; a theory of social reproduction (obstacles) and a theory of social transformation (contradictions).
5. Normative foundations must be made clear through two propositions: 1) moral conviction: in a just society all people have access to the stuff they need for flourishing lives and 2) political conviction: people should be empowered to control those areas that control their fate. If these two propositions are not met you do not have democratism and that equals capitalism.
6. Marxist ideas are really interesting even if you don’t buy it. For example, the bourgeoisie must get the cooperation of the people they exploit to be successful. It is an exploitative relationship and is very interesting. An easy way to demonstrate this is to link it to sexual exploitation.

Asks: “If class is the answer, what is the question”? That was the title of his new book but the publishers made him change it to *Six Approaches to Class*. It’s an edited volume coming out on Cambridge University Press. He also recommends a book by Burtel called *How to Take an Exam*.

He teaches a course with ½ undergrad students and ½ graduate students (in exact numbers (and they get paired up on the first class meeting and are told to meet outside class once a week in a format where the undergrad interrogates the grad student.

He says you don't need to read original texts—and says it is a failure of the tradition if the best and most profound thing about a concept was written 150 years ago by Marx himself. He suggests even reading W.E.B. DuBois.

JOHN FOSTER

Marxism is not an academic topic like Weber, it is tough to teach. The question is “who educates the revolutionary?” The answer is: “you can't” it comes from revolutionizing the praxis. Students come with intellectual baggage about Marxism. They have been told he was an economic determinist; that religion is the opiate of the masses, that he wants the state to control everything, etc. You could assign the Ernst Fischer book *How to Read Karl Marx*. You need to introduce concepts and get closely to praxis and applied level. None of the concepts alone equal Marxism but are Marxist in their synthesis. His emphasis is class-based. A great example is to examine capitalism and the environmental crisis. So the answer to the original question “who educates the revolutionary? Is “they educate themselves, you create a context for them to ask the critical questions. That is your only role as an educator.

JOE FEAGIN

There are three main lessons to take from Marxist Tradition

1. Always look beneath the obvious social realities to the deeper realities of human life.
2. Always attend to material realities of human life
3. Always do research to develop social change

You can begin by digging deeper into human oppression. For example, Marxist theory is very important when looking at race and racism in the US. Institutional racism is the alienating of racist relations. Look at Marxist ideas like surplus value and etc. and relate to race. Racial Surplus Value is the crux of American capitalist system b/c we enslaved/oppresed thousands through slavery to make our economy run for many years. George Washington had at least 8 close relatives who were black and were enslaved by the white Washington president providing labor that provided wealth to the US president.

Must do at least one session on Hagel to understand the methodological Marx. You could also structure your course around the various critics. For example, there was only one country in the world where white, working men could vote at the time Marx died (that was the U.S.) and note the date of his death compared to the date of the Russian Revolution. Marx struggled with race and gender in 1000s of pages but does not provide a specific theory of either. Marx wrote on the Civil War though and noted that there would be no capitalism in the U.S. without slavery. In a chapter in *Capital* on the working day, he notes that the Irish ethnicity in Britain is very similar to the relations among Blacks in the U.S.

Regarding gender, most of what Marx wrote is yet unpublished but may be coming as Feagin helps with editing and translation from German. It is largely unreadable but it seems to say that gender is the most important mark of progress in any modern society. In his later writings, he says that the path he laid out from Feudalism to capitalism is not likely to be the path everywhere and he mentions Russia. Marx did not romanticize all forms of resistance, nor did he romanticize pre-capitalist societies.

EDNA BONACICH

Always keeps Paula Frari in mind and asks who are the students and what do they need to know?

At the beginning of the course she breaks students into groups and moves them around (physically) the classroom. She does this with groups of 20 or with groups of several hundred. She believes the teacher should pose problems to the class for them to work out, rather than the teacher having all the answers.

Her class is a course on Race, Class and Gender for example. When discussing race, on the first day she asks the students to decide what to call each other. She asks what they want to be called. In doing this they discuss what is race; what is racism; and is colorblindness possible. She shows them through their own discussions about what to call each other that there is no human universal but race is a created/constructed concept.

In the days they discuss class she asks how things are unequal in the U.S., why are the rich rich and the poor poor and how is that possible, and they work through conservative versus liberal models. She asks the students to pose a radical alternative to the relationships between the classes. She uses examples of rent prices, exploitation of credit card debt rather than a standard employment discussion b/c many of her students have never worked.

When discussing gender she re-divides the groups into groupings of males, females, LGBT, etc. to discuss various issues. Then she brings them all together at the middle of the quarter. She has panels of women of color (BW, AW, LW, LBGT W) and also panels of WM, WW, and a multi-racial panel (mixed race individuals). She poses questions like does race trump gender and notes that many students can't move beyond race. That's OK but she points it out to them.

At the end of the course she asks them "what is to be done?" and usually they all say education, or upward mobility, or change the minds of all and she says that she challenges them to move beyond individual solutions to structural level changes.

She notes that there are always problems in the class such as "white hurt", white apologizing for making mistakes, but she tells the students that conflict is part of growth is good in the classroom but it must stay there and it must be academically inclined.

In some classes she gives the class a project to go out and do something that addresses social inequality that will bring about equality. They can volunteer, whatever, but they must be creative and they must write up their results using course concepts in their analysis.