

Marquette University  
**e-Publications@Marquette**

---

Social and Cultural Sciences Faculty Research and  
Publications

Social and Cultural Sciences, Department of

---

1-1-2011

## Marxist Sociology

Michael A. McCarthy

*Marquette University*, [michael.mccarthy@marquette.edu](mailto:michael.mccarthy@marquette.edu)

Jeff Manza

*New York University*

---

Published version. "Marxist Sociology," in *Oxford Bibliographies Online: Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. DOI. © 2011 Oxford University Press. Used with permission. Michael McCarthy was affiliated with the New York University at the time of publication.

# Marxist Sociology

By: Michael McCarthy and Jeff Manza

## Introduction

Karl Marx (b. 1818–d. 1883) and his lifelong collaborator Friedrich Engels (b. 1820–d. 1895) developed a body of thought that would inspire major social movements, initiate revolutionary social change across the globe, and provide the foundation for many socialist or communist governments. More recently, Marxism's political influence has waned, with most of the formerly communist regimes undergoing significant change. It is important, however, to separate out Marxism as a system of ideas in the social sciences from Marxism as a political ideology and the foundation for revolutionary social movements and as a governing philosophy. Marxist ideas have influenced many fields of thought and indeed have played a particularly important role in the development of the discipline of sociology. Classical sociological theorists such as Émile Durkheim (b. 1858–d. 1917) and Max Weber (b. 1864–d. 1920), for example, developed their theories of society in conversation with the works of Karl Marx. However, as it evolved in the United States and western Europe in the middle parts of the 20th century, sociology's dialogue with Marxian propositions declined. For example, the widely influential norm-oriented functionalist sociology of Talcott Parsons (b. 1902–d. 1979) had little engagement with Marxist thought. In the aftermath of the large-scale social struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, however, sociologists around the world increasingly embraced a historically oriented approach to knowledge and in many cases found in the classics of Marxism a source of inspiration. Debates and controversies over Marxism continue to shape the development of sociology up to the present time, although "neo-Marxism" is less influential today than it was twenty-five years ago. Nonetheless, serious students of sociology have to have some familiarity with some of the classical ideas and theorists of Marxism, and Marxist theories continue to influence some parts of the discipline today.

## General Overviews

It is hardly surprising, given its historical significance, that hundreds of general overviews of Marxism have been written. As a body of thought and a political movement, Marxism can be synthesized from many points of view. [McLellan 1974](#) offers an ideal introduction through an examination of the life and ideas of Marx himself. [Draper 1977](#) and [Draper 1978](#) focus more squarely on the relationship between Marxism and politics. In the case of Marxist sociology, [Bottomore 1984](#) provides a historical analysis of the relationship between Marxism and sociology. [Lefebvre 1968](#)'s contribution provides a more advanced introduction. [Mandel 1970](#) is a good place to start for students interested in Marxist economic theory (which is shaped by sociological insights far more than its neoclassical competitors). [Foley 1986](#) develops more formalized models for understanding the basic contributions of Marx's political economy. Finally, [Ollman 1976](#) offers an excellent overview of Marx's philosophical concept of alienation.