Theory, Epistemology and Critical Rural Sociology

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This paper would like to provide an alternative to the Marx-Weber dichotomy which has recently emerged in rural sociological studies. It consists of the re-proposition of critical sociology as a mode of scientific investigation which, while remaining within the Marxian tradition, addresses many of the central concerns of Weberian scholarship. Though a merger between Marx and Weber is not proposed, it is assumed that a lack of knowledge of critical sociology has hampered further development of the theoretical debate in rural sociology. More importantly, this lack of knowledge has prevented the diffusion of the basic tenets of critical sociology among sociologists concerned with the study of agriculture and food, limiting their ability to inform empirical investigations and to instruct students.

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Introduction

In recent years disciplines within the social sciences and the humanities have approached issues in the field of agriculture and food with theoretical tools which are increasingly sophisticated. Among the social sciences, rural sociology has perhaps experienced one of the most visible theoretical growths through the generation of studies which differ from, and provide alternatives to, the functionalist and positivist inspired middle-range analyses which have dominated the discipline (Bonanno, 1987; Mann and Dickinson, 1987:302; Falk and Gilbert, 1985; Mooney, 1988, 1987). These new studies have been largely generated by younger scholars who have adopted either Marxian or Weberian inspired approaches and who have concentrated their attention on the emerging sub-discipline of sociology of agriculture and food.

Through the use of Marx and Weber the domain assumptions of the long established empiricist tradition in rural sociology have been challenged and its conclusions and world view rejected. Additionally, the claims that rural sociology is a separate academic discipline from sociology have been questioned on a number of grounds which include various critiques of the uniqueness of "the rural world," rejection of the perceived separation of the rural world from the rest of society and critiques of the institutional settings within which the discipline of Rural Sociology emerged and developed.

Paradoxically, this increase in the use of Marxian analyses in rural sociology has coincided with pronouncements of its bankruptcy stemming from the

identification of theoretical inadequacies and from the collapse of Marxist regimes in Eastern Europe. The work of Weber has often been employed to compensate for these perceived inadequacies, generating a situation in which alternatives to the empiricist - functionalist approach have been identified in a Marx-Weber based epistemological model1.

Despite this common ground, however, in rural sociology Marxian and Weberian inspired analyses remain divided into two intrinsically separate schools. Marxian scholarship is characterized by the predominance of scientific and/or structuralist analyses which emphasize both the priority of material elements in epistemology and reference to the underlying economic structure in the analytical realm. Weberian accounts, on the contrary, stress the fundamental importance of cultural and ideological aspects in the interpretation of reality and dwell on the significance of human agency in the construction of action.

The Marx-Weber epistemological dichotomy is further characterized by the inadequacy of both paradigms to address specific aspects intrinsic to sociological investigation of the substantive area of agriculture and food. Structural and scientific Marxism have offered little aid in the analysis of values, culture, ideology and interpretation of action. At the same time, however, Weberian studies have been criticized for their inadequacy in dealing with economically generated problems (Mann and Dickinson, 1987;1987a; Mooney, 1987; 1983); proposals for a Marx-Weber merger have been likewise deemed inadequate (Antonio, 1985; Mann and Dickinson, 1987).

The present study would like to provide an alternative to the Marx-Weber dichotomy. It consists of the reproposition of critical sociology as a mode of scientific investigation which, while remaining within the Marxian tradition, addresses many of the central concerns of Weberian scholarship. Though a merger between Marx and Weber is once again refuted, it is assumed that a lack of knowledge of critical sociology has hampered further development of the theoretical debate in rural sociology. More importantly, it has prevented the diffusion of the basic tenets of critical sociology among sociologists concerned with the study of agriculture and food, limiting their ability to inform empirical investigations and to instruct students. This situation has contributed to the maintenance of the theoretical gap between rural sociology and other social science and in particular sociology, in which rural sociology still lags behind its parent discipline. This is a gap which, indeed, should be eliminated promptly.

The article is divided into four sections. In the first the growth and crisis of theory in rural sociology are illustrated with specific attention paid to the characteristics of Marxian and Weberian scholarship. The second section dwells on the relationship between Marxism and Neo-Weberianism. A brief exposition of the Weberian critique of scientific and structural Marxism is presented as well as examples of the contribution of the Weberian tradition to rural sociological analyses. The following section introduces critical sociology as an alternative to structural and scientific Marxism and Neo-Weberianism through a presentation of its critical and dialectical components. The fourth and longest section illustrates the position of critical sociology within the Marxian tradition and its differences from Neo-Weberian analyses. In this section the work of Antonio Gramsci is employed as an instance of critical thinking in sociology.

Growth and Crisis of Theory in Rural Sociology

Throughout its existence as a formal discipline, rural sociology has been largely dominated by functionalism in the realm of explanatory theory and positivism in the realm of epistemology (Falk and Gilbert, 1985:564; Mann and Dickinson, 1987: 301-302). Accordingly, while rural sociology has contributed greatly to the empirical tradition of American sociological research, it has accomplished this result with little concern for metatheoretical and philosophical issues. Indeed, the mission of Land Grant Institutions, within which rural sociology departments were created, framed and fostered this type of theoretical development (Bonanno and Swanson, 1989).

One of its outcomes was the creation of a theoretically homogenous group of sociologists who remained largely

indifferent to the changes and developments occurring in sociological theory. Put in a different manner, until recently rural sociologists remained almost exclusively faithful to functionalist empiricism despite alternative paradigms proposed and debated in other branches of sociology. In this respect, for example, the wealth of contributions in interpretative and hermeneutical sociology, sociology of knowledge, and critical and dialectical sociology have remained largely absent from the debate within rural sociology.

Years of unchallenged empiricism, however, have left many rural sociologists open to new theoretical alternatives and, since the sixties and with more fervor in the seventies and eighties, a number of us have embraced the enterprise of introducing non-functionalist, non-positivist approaches to the study of rural issues. The motivations for this change are many. Among those of relevance are the practical inability of functionalist and positivist inspired analyses to provide satisfactory solutions to problems in rural areas (Friedland, 1980; Gilbert, 1982; Newby and Buttel, 1980); the metatheoretical inadequacy of some of the postulates of logic positivism, particularly in regard to the practice of manipulation of variables independent of historical and economic dimensions of reality (Bonanno, 1987; Friedland, 1980; Mann and Dickinson, 1987); and the attempt to bring into rural sociology paradigms already in use in "general" sociology.

The introduction of Marx and Weber to rural sociology in recent years has reflected this dissatisfaction with the functionalist-positivist paradigm. However, it has also reflected the status of both the Marxian and Weberian schools within American sociology.

Marxism in American rural sociology

Marxian scholarship in the United States has been largely dominated by structural and, in general, "scientific" readings of Marx. This situation has changed somewhat with the development of new interpretations within the Marxian literature, but not to the point of altering the predominance of scientific and/or structural Marxism in rural sociology. In other words, the type of Marxism that is commonly found in the works of rural sociologists (either in the selected appearances of Marxian papers in the journal Rural Sociology or in papers and publications of members of the rural sociological community) is, broadly speaking, that of the scientific, structural type. Scientific Marxism refers to the interpretation of the work of Marx as a scientific doctrine establishing the general laws of capitalist development which, as in the case of the laws of nature, describe the exact functioning of the capitalist system and its future development. Structural Marxism shares the same general position with an additional emphasis on ideological and cultural aspects of capitalism to be interpreted through a scrutiny of the underlying economic structure of capitalism itself. In both cases human agency (human action) is reduced to an outcome of the functioning of the social formation (society) and the mode of production (the relationship between capital and labor in the process of production of commodities) (Althusser, 1969, Althusser and Balibar, 1970; Gouldner, 1980). More importantly, human action is framed within the evolutionary dimension of the expansion of the forces of production based on class struggle which culminates with the establishment of increasingly progressive social formations. In this type of philosophical anthropology, scientific analysis sides with a presupposed metalogic of history in which experienced trends countering the supposed revolutionary path are altogether inadmissible.

To be sure, the predominance of scientific and/or structural Marxism in the literature does not imply that crude economistic Marxian analyses have intruded into rural sociological research. Rather, a growing and sophisticated group of Marxian scholars have been engaged in rural sociological research which maintains assumptions closer to the Marx of Das Kapital than to that of the philosophical writings.

Weberian scholarship in American rural sociology

Weberian scholarship has a long established tradition in American sociology (Antonio and Glassman, 1985, Wiley, 1987). However, since Weber's work was first introduced in the US in the late 1920's, it has been

greatly influenced by the particular interpretation provided by Talcott Parsons. Indeed, it was Parsons who first translated Weber into English and who influenced, through his interpretation of Weber's work, its use in the various branches of the discipline (Ritzer, 1988). More specifically, Weber's sociology was popularized as the "alternative to Marx's materialism" and as "the dialogue with the ghost of Marx," i.e. Weber was interpreted as an alternative to scientific Marxism (Antonio and Glassman, 1985).

The Parsonian version of Weber has also been frequently employed in the rural sociological literature. For instance, the notion that cultural traits, such as religion and ethnic background, are at the origin of social change has been popular among rural sociologists. However, both in sociology and rural sociology, novel readings of the work of Weber have emerged. These accounts, labeled Neo-Weberian, reject the Parsonian interpretation and provide an alternative which is metatheoretically more sophisticated and which is characterized by important traits common to critical interpretations of Marx (Wiley, 1987). In essence, in these accounts Weber's work is viewed as recognizing the fundamental importance of economic as well as ideological factors in the historical development of society. Furthermore, this posture is maintained in such a way that neither ideological nor economic factors are prominent "a priori" in the analysis of a particular socio-historical context.

The Relationship Between Marxism and Neo-Weberianism in Rural Sociology

Neo-Weberianism has appealed to a number of scholars who, while convinced of the importance of economic factors in the shaping of events in society, were not willing to assume that these events were simply a reflection of the economic structure as assumed by scientific and structural Marxism. Furthermore, at the epistemological level, Weberianism offered alternatives as it emphasized the centrality of human agency in the construction of action (Antonio and Glassman, 1985) and interpretation in the definition of reality (Wiley, 1987). Indeed, scientific Marxian analyses have maintained the tenet of the causal superiority of "objective structural forces" in the economic realm, for they are viewed as the determinants of ideological, cultural and political (superstructural) factors. Though superstructural factors have been considered interesting and significant, emphasis has been placed on the material dimension of reality and on the subordinate position of cultural and ideological elements in the ontological process.

Differences between neo -Weberian and scientific and structural Marxian analyses in rural sociology

Instances of the differences between Marxism and neo-Weberian interpretations can be found in the rural sociological literature. Marxian analyses, for example, interpret the current situation in farming as a reflection of ongoing macro-economic processes occurring at the societal level (see, Mann and Dickinson, 1987 and 1987a). These Marxian analyses take a strong stand against abstract empiricism and middle-range theories typical of functionalist-positivist analyses. However, they also maintain that changes in rural settings are due to a combination of economic trends affecting various social realms such as production, the market, prices of commodities, debt, and land markets as well as governmental policies. Furthermore, these factors are viewed as "objective" forces operating outside the individual sphere (Mann and Dickinson, 1987a:281-282). Consequently and in contrast to Neo-Weberian accounts, in these analyses little room is given to the processes of understanding and interpreting of these "objective" forces. More specifically, no attention is paid to the ways in which these forces are acknowledged in the process of action by actors themselves. The Neo-Weberian tradition has clearly pointed out that the response to "objective" situations can vary among actors, and the various interpretations of the situation in turn inform the response and then shape the creation of a "new situation" (Bruum, 1972). It follows that serious objections to the accuracy of the interpretation of a situation can be raised if the actor's interpretation and understanding of the situation itself is not acknowledged. To be sure, this is not to say that the Marxian tradition

rejects the "social construction of reality." Rather, it is indicated that structural and scientific Marxian accounts present interpretations of reality which exclude aspects which are central to neo-Weberian scholarship and which have greatly contributed to the epistemological relevance of this school.

Toward an alternative

The importance of interpretation and understanding in social action has been emphasized in several studies in rural sociology. Busch (1980; 1978) has illustrated the significance of interpretative negotiation in the creation of structures such as the research system. Later, the relevance of perception as a fundamental element in the development of research policies and its centrality in the constitution of the research enterprise itself have been demonstrated (Busch and Lacy, 1983). More recently, the traditionally accepted concept of nature has been placed under scrutiny to argue its social construction and the interdependence and dialectic relations of nature and humans in the creation of social settings.

The study of phenomena such as the persistence of family farms and the development of part-time farming have indicated the prominence of cultural and ideological elements in the decision and behavior of human actors (farmers and farm families). Elements such as the love for farming and/or the land and lifestyle choices have been indicated as fundamental for both the persistence of family farms and the development of part-time farming (Barlett, 1986:307; Coughenour and Gabbard, 1977; Mooney, 1983).2

These and other studies (Bonanno, 1987) have demonstrated that cultural and ideological factors are difficult to connect directly in the traditional manner of scientific and structural Marxism to the economic structure of society. More importantly, it is difficult to relate them to the economic structure as subordinate elements.

The scenario indicating that negotiation, interpretation and superstructural elements are fundamental for accurate scholarship in rural sociology is correct, it is obvious that Weber's work, pruned from its Parsonian tones, has a lot to offer the discipline. However, negotiation, interpretation, superstructure and, in general, the relevance of human action in the epistemological realm are underplayed by scientific and structural Marxism. Accordingly, a theoretical terrain is created in which Marx and Weber stand at opposite extremes. In other words, the acceptance of a Marxist posture has historically implied incompatibility with Weberian inspired analyses (Mann and Dickinson, 1987:282).

To be sure, the opposition of Marxian and Weberian epistemologies is not limited to rural sociology, as sociology has been concerned with it as well. Indeed, both within rural sociology and to a greater extent within sociology, solutions have been proposed. They have emphasized either the rejection of one school for the other or a merger between the two (Antonio and Glassman, 1985; Bakker, 1981; Mann and Dickinson, 1987; 1987a; Wiley, 1987). While the first of these two alternatives is, of course, presently available, the second has not been clearly defined yet. Despite repeated attempts, it has often been concluded that a merger between Weber and Marx is not possible (Antonio 1985:20)3.

This study would like to contribute to the search for a solution by indicating a new route. More specifically, it is our intention to illustrate the availability of an epistemological posture which, while maintaining fundamental Marxian characteristics, addresses, simultaneously, the major concerns of Weberian epistemology. This new route is represented by critical sociology. Though critical sociology has enjoyed a long standing tradition within sociology, its use in rural sociology has been very limited. Accordingly, very few rural sociological studies employing a critical posture are available and, more importantly, little instruction in critical sociology is carried out in rural sociology departments in the United States. It is fundamental, then, to provide a general yet concise and clear overview of the characteristics of critical sociology, its differences from Neo-Weberian scholarship and its departure from structural and scientific Marxian axioms. It is to these

tasks that we now turn by first illustrating the theoretical roots of critical sociology.

The Epistemological Dimension of Critical Sociology

We identify the alternative to scientific and structural Marxism as well as Neo-Weberianism in critical sociology. Critical sociology is a mode of analysis which finds its basis in the realm of critical theory and philosophical dialectic. However, it should not be equated with either one of these theoretical formulations, as they are characterized by diverse and, occasionally, divergent interpretations. Rather, it should be understood as a theoretical posture which draws from each of them generating a framework within which empirical investigation can be carried out.

Critical theory

Critical theory is a broader theoretical umbrella associated with the work of the original members of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research and subsequently extended to scholars who continued that tradition. In brief, critical theory finds its origins in the Kantian tradition of "critical philosophy" and, above all, in the Marxian proposition of "ideology critique" (Piccone, 1982: IX-XI). The Kantian notion of critique pertains to the investigation of the possibility and limits of reason, while in the Marxian tradition critique signifies the unmasking of the concealed interests behind theory in the process of establishing emancipatory practices (freedom). Accordingly, critical theory's central concern becomes the exposition of the contradictions between ideology and reality as the former depicts the false unity of the two (Antonio, 1983:331). Ideological claims, such as the existence of freedom, equality, democracy etc., are contrasted with social reality, indicating the contradictory elements emerging from the emancipatory dimensions of ideology and the constraints of historical situations. Employing this process of comparison, which is called Immanent Critique, critical theory elucidates the differences between the ideological assumptions of society and its actual organization. Traditional theoretical formulations about reality are maintained to obscure the nature of the epistemological relation between object and subject, theory and practice and in so doing they depart from and hinder the goal of realizing freedom (Horkheimer, 1982: 188-243). For critical theory the role of sociological analysis is, then, that of exposing the ideological dimension of social relations and their related practices in order to unmask the concealed and distorted portrayal of reality. Simultaneously, sociological analysis is aimed at the development of consciousness of the potential for and limits of freedom.

Dialectic

Philosophical dialectic is rooted in the German idealistic tradition of Hegel reinterpreted by Marx. It assumes that society is humanly produced and that production is based on the endeavor of humans to reconstruct consciously their world according to the satisfaction of their needs. These needs are socially derived and are not homogenous among social actors (Wardell and Benson, 1979:233). This circumstance sets in motion a process of conflict over the satisfaction of these needs, which separates human beings into opposing groups. The outcome of the interaction between conflicting social groups generates historical conditions (modes of production and social formations) which in turn shape the basic characteristics of this conflict. It follows that historical outcomes are not characterized by determination, but rather by potentiality (Wardell and Benson, 1979:233). Potentiality refers to the range of historically possible changes which are created by past and present human action and which constitute the framework for the future. The understanding of history assumes a total posture, so that the conceptualization of social events as separable entities within the historical context is refuted. Similarly, the understanding of the epistemological process as limited to selected pieces of an infinite reality is discarded and replaced by the totality of the historical motion (Antonio, 1985: 26-27). Taking an intrinsically Marxian posture, social events are not investigated as isolated and external elements. Rather, they cannot be understood unless they are contextualized in the whole that gives them meaning.

The epistemology of critical sociology

Drawing on this body of knowledge critical sociology rejects the separation of object and subject, the concept of "value freedom" in the epistemological sphere, and the mechanistic relation of cause and effect in positivist ontology. The object (investigated) and the subject (investigator) in the epistemological process are considered as parts of a unitary process in which the distinction between the two is illusory (Adorno, 1982:500). It is through the process of human action (history) that the elements for understanding and interpreting the world are generated, for human beings are the producers of their conceptions and ideas (Marx and Engels, 1959:247). In this respect, the investigator is considered part of the process investigated, as his/her action of defining the process and studying it is embodied in the existence of the investigator him/herself. The process of investigation and the object investigated could not exist outside the present world as historically created by human action. In other words, a neutral posture in the observation of reality (such as that suggested by positivism) is not considered possible on the assumption that the knowledge of the observer, the observer him/herself, and the phenomenon in question form and are parts of the reality to be observed and, consequently, are not separable (Gebhardt, 1982:380-381).

The existence of a value-free epistemology is also rejected. The unity in the reality of observer and observed does not allow for the existence of observers transcending their own values. Values are intrinsic to the process of human creation of history, as they are fundamental to perception itself. As has been pointed out by Gebhardt (1982:375): "the idea of value-freedom of the sciences [is] an extension of the `objective illusion' that there can be perception without a perspective from which perception can take place." Accordingly, in critical sociology the process of scientific investigation is considered part of the process of human emancipation and, consequently, of political action. Based on the Marxian concept of praxis, the action of investigation becomes a facet of the struggle to end exploitative relations within society and to construct liberated forms of social organization.

This posture represents a strong departure from the Neo-Kantian and Weberian traditions, as both argue for the existence of scientific investigation free of value orientation (Antonio, 1985:21-26; McNall, 1984:479). The Kantian epistemology acknowledges the separation between the "is" and the "ought to be", where the former is confined to the realm of science and the latter to that of ethics (McNall, 1984:479). This separation represents, in turn, a guarantee of objectivity in scientific investigation. For Weber, values do enter the sphere of scientific investigation, but only as preliminary inquiry into the choice of the research problem (Antonio, 1985:21). However, once this choice has been made, values can be separated from the empirical determination of social facts (Weber, 1949). To be sure, and differing from the naive modern conception of value freedom, Weber is forever warning about the influence of values upon epistemological endeavors. Yet, through the creation of nonpartisan, non political social sciences, values can be set aside in order to provide reliable "objective" empirical information (Bruun, 1972:16-77). The nonpolitical, nonpartisan social sciences are those in which various solutions to problems are proposed together with their possible "positive" and "negative" foreseeable consequences. It is, then, the task of society to make an informed choice on the basis of the analyses provided. In Weber's intention the plurality of choices available enable the construction of an epistemology free of value distortion (Bruun, 1972). However, and despite Weber's intention, this posture does not eliminate values from epistemology. As underscored by many studies both within and outside the critical tradition, the process of choosing among alternatives is political in character even if only the scientific arena is considered. The decision on the content, character and direction of science is, in fact, more a matter of power and political interests than "pure" epistemological discovery (See the now classic work of Foucault, 1965, 1975 1979, and the vast production generated within the post-modern school. See also works within American rural sociology such as Busch and Lacy, 1986; Lacy and Busch, 1988).

Critical sociology rejects the episte-mological notion of causal relations and replaces it with dialectic. Causality

is considered inadmissible since necessary and sufficient causal relations are impossible to determine (Howard, 1982:45-53; Park, 1988). However, the major tenets of critical sociology in this realm are the complementary, contradictory and dynamic dimensions of reality. Put in a different manner, the dynamic of reality makes the static existence of a causal origin impossible, i.e. a pure original starting point is not admissible. Furthermore, the relations among events deny their existence "a priori," namely they do not exist as independent from one another and independent of the context within which they exist. As illustrated by Marx (1959) and derived from the Hegelian notion of dialectic, history presents itself in a unitary and contradictory fashion. In this respect, for example, the existence of a "master" is historically possible because of the existence of the "servant". Without the servant there would be no master. Master and servant are sides of the same unitary process. Their relation is dialectical, for the master is a determination of the servant and the servant is a determination of the master. At the same time, they are contradictory as the emancipation of the servant would deny the existence of the master, while the persistence of the master condemns the servant to his subordination.[3] The relationship between master and servant includes the ideas of becoming, i.e. human beings never are, but become, as they change continuously with the changing of social relations. In this respect, the concept of "man in general" (man transcending history) is denied. Humans are masters in so far as humans are servants (Gramsci, 1971:335). Put in a different way, critical sociology denies the existence of immutable entities which transcend history, i.e. which remain constant despite historical change. Even human arrangements, nature and human beings themselves are not considered transcendental entities as their existence is defined by and made possible through social relations that humans themselves set in place.

Critical Sociology in the Marxian Tradition

Critical sociology as illustrated above departs significantly from traditional forms of Marxism frequently adopted in rural sociological and sociological literature. However, this situation does not signify that critical sociology is foreign to the Marxian tradition. On the contrary, it testifies to the diversity existing within Marxism and to the various and, at times, opposing views of Marx developed in the last century. Accordingly, it is relevant to identify the position of critical sociology within the Marxian tradition, the origins of its minor role within this tradition and its essential differences from neo-Weberian scholarship.

Marxian scholarship has been characterized by a variety of interpretations which have fostered many theoretical and political disputes (Antonio, 1983:327). Essentially, and according to a number of syntheses of Marxian literature (Antonio, 1983; Gouldner, 1980; McNall, 1984), Marxism can be divided into two broad camps: that of "scientific" Marxism, characterized by an emphasis on Marx's economic writings (Das Kapital in particular); and that of "critical" Marxism, largely derived from his "philosophical" writings.

Scientific Marxism

Scientific Marxism finds its roots in Engels' reading of Marx, in the Second International and in the Leninist and Stalinist traditions. After the death of Marx in 1883, Engels was left the task of completing some of Marx's works (most notably the last two volumes of Das Kapital) and of reinterpreting other works of Marx to a growing world audience. Influenced by the dominant positivist philosophical milieu of the time (Bottomore, 1975:17; Lichtheim, 1969), Engels gave an interpretation which "made Marx into a positivist"[4] (McNall, 1984:482; Wellmer, 1981). In this account, Marxism is depicted as a scientific doctrine establishing the general laws of capitalist development which, as in the case of the laws of nature, describe the exact functioning of the capitalist system and of its future development. Historical processes are formed of parts (ideological, cultural, political) which are ultimately and causally dependent on the economic structure. Dwelling on Engels' interpretation, the socialist members of the Second International (circa 1889-1914) elaborated a version of Marxism which developed strong teleological and deterministic tones. Accordingly, emphasis was placed

on Marx's remarks depicting history as moving through a set of stages of which capitalism and pre-capitalist periods alike are transitory phases that precede the advent of socialism and, then, communism. The historical movement through stages is seen as inevitable, as is the dissolution of capitalism. The role of human agency is minimized to that of spectators who cannot change the ineluctable trajectory of history, but only accelerate it (Kautsky, 1971:53). In the process of the demise of capitalism, the role of progressive political activists is that of reducing the "waiting time" before the inevitable collapse (Plekhanov, 1973). This mechanistic view of history increasingly became associated with "true Marxism" through the works of "official interpreters of Marx" like Plekhanov (1973). The success of the Russian revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union as the first, and for a long time, the only socialist country, reinforced the prominence of Scientific Marxism. Leninism and Stalinism made it the official doctrine of the Soviet State and established its unchallenged supremacy in all the countries and socialist political movements of the Eastern bloc (Shanin, 1983).

Western Marxism

Scientific Marxism became extremely influential in the West as well (Spriano, 1978). However, it was in the West that a critical and dialectical interpretation of Marxism emerged. The historical origins of the departure from scientific Marxism are to be found in the failure of Leninist strategies in European countries (particularly the failure of the revolutionary movements in the "Red Biennium" of 1919-1920), the survival and growth of capitalism, and the sectarian and dogmatic posture of Marxist political organizations. It was within this climate that alternative roads to emancipation were sought. Theorists like George Lukacs, Karl Korsch and Antonio Gramsci formulated novel interpretations of Marx in which positivist and mechanistic dimensions of what is now called scientific Marxism were omitted. They emphasized the humanistic dimension of Marx, stressing the fundamental importance of human agency, consciousness and ideology in the analysis of capitalism and, above all, in its transformation. Rather than stressing the dogmas of the inevitable collapse of capitalism and the advent of socialism, emphasis was placed on the Marxian method and on its historical and critical dimensions (McNall, 1984:487). Furthermore, an attempt was made to reformulate the relationship between philosophy (science) and Marxism in reaction to Engels' thesis of the end of philosophy through its dissolution in the development of positive sciences (Paggi, 1979:116). For Engels (1959), a fundamental contribution of Marxism lies in its reformulation of the role of philosophy. Arguing against the German philosophical tradition, Engels refutes the concept of philosophy as a system capable of solving social problems through its development to support the conclusion that this objective can be achieved only through the adoption of the method of the positive sciences. An alternative to Engels' formulation can be seen in Gramsci's work (1971:463-464). It is to Gramsci, then, that we now turn in order to provide an example, yet not the example, of critical thinking.

Gramsci's critical sociology

For Gramsci, the Marxian method is an historical method as it investigates the action of human beings in their historical context which, in turn, is humanly created on the basis of conflicting world views. Engels' rejection of the concept of philosophy is reformulated in terms of immanent class conflict and contradiction. It is through the concepts of class conflict and contradiction that it is possible to realize that there are limitations to thought imposed by the existing social context. Accordingly, "problems" are created and defined by the class character of society and can be solved only through class action. The solution of problems through class action, however, is not preordained (as assumed by scientific Marxism through the theory of the inevitable collapse of capitalism). Rather, it is dependent on the historical action of conflicting classes in a changing social context. In essence, Gramsci's interpretation of the method of Marx avoids teleology or mechanistic interpretations, for it is based on contradictions between conflicting worldviews and the potentiality of historical outcomes (Gramsci, 1971a: 710-712).

The rejection of "scientific objectivity" and the emphasis on historical action characterize Gramsci's interpretation of the notion of praxis, or political action. For Gramsci the dialectical aspect of Marxism mandates the unification of history, philosophy and politics. It follows that any human action is political and that the ultimate evaluation of human action cannot be carried out in scientific or universal ethical terms, but in political ones. Scientific and ethical terms are aspects of the dialectical totality of human existence and history; they exist as expressions of human endeavor toward the satisfaction of social needs and are the products of class action. Following the rejection of the existence of "man in general", Gramsci formulates the negation of the "philosopher (intellectual) in general," i.e. the rejection of any form of human expression independent from a political posture. He wrote commenting on a convention of philosophers which took place in Milan in 1926: "Philosophy is bourgeois or proletarian, just as the society in which man thinks and acts is bourgeois or proletarian. An independent philosophy does not exist, just as man does not exist apart from the social relations in which he lives. Of course, thought generates thought, but it does not come out of nothing just as one cannot nourish oneself with nothing." (Gramsci, 1926; also quoted in Paggi, 1979:120). For Gramsci the ontological and epistemological processes are unified in terms of human agency and class struggle, which define the realm of existence. It is the conflicting class action of human beings that qualifies existing and possible worldviews. Accordingly, objectivity in ontological and epistemological terms becomes political. As Paggi (1979:121) suggested, Gramsci's statement of the existence of two philosophies, one bourgeois and the other proletarian, does not signify that there are two ways of producing science according to class perspectives. Rather, "that there are two ways of doing philosophy, one conservative and one [emancipatory], depending on their acceptance or rejection of the symbiosis of philosophy and existing social conflicts." (1979:121). Accordingly, the problem of metatheoretical superiority of one philosophy over another is rejected at the abstract level of "general philosophy" and reaffirmed in praxis, i.e. according to the class interests that ultimately generate it and foster its development5.

The break with scientific Marxism and the Weberian tradition

The break with the scientific Marxist position is clear. In the scientific Marxian formulation, metatheoretical superiority is generated at the abstract epistemological level. It is the scientific dimension of Marxism that legitimizes its position in the philosophical arena.

Differences from the Neo-Kantian and Weberian tradition are also evident. The symbiosis of philosophy and existing social conflicts postulated by Gramsci rejects any formulation in which separation of political posture (values) and epistemology is contemplated. Though in the Weberian formulation values do inform the selection of epistemological tasks (Antonio, 1985), the principle of value freedom maintains the separation of scientific inquiry from value judgement (Bruun, 1972:16-77). It follows that epistemology has the capability of providing scientific results that assume the status of universal "truth" (Bruun, 1972:78) regardless of class and praxis.

This dialectical approach does not assume a narrow and predictable set of outcomes for contradictions as did scientific Marxism of the early Twentieth Century or as do current structural Marxists. Nor does critical sociology assume infinite possible outcomes of contradictory social phenomena as do most Neo-Weberians and idealists. Rather, this approach assumes a relative range of possibilities for particular contradictory conditions. Importantly, not all outcomes are assumed as possible. For example, it is unlikely that current contradictions in U.S. agriculture will produce a return to a dominance of pre - capitalist forms of petty commodity production. The products of contradictions are mediated by biography and the subjective understanding of individuals and collectivities, but not determined by them.

The relationship between the economic structure (structure) and culture, values, ideology and the polity(superstructure)

Gramsci's thought can also be employed to illustrate

briefly another element which separates critical sociology from that of other theoretical perspectives: the relationship between the economy and culture, values and ideology. Again, it is important to mention that Gramsci is employed here as an example of a critical interpretation of Marx.

In the interpretation of scientific Marxism the relationship between the economy (structure) and the non-economic dimension of reality (superstructure) is centered around the tenet that the former determines the latter. More specifically, it is maintained that the generation of superstructural forms is a reflection of the economic dimension of society (Plekhanov, 1973; Kautsky, 1971). In the structuralist interpretation developed in the 1960's and early 1970's, the mechanistic relationship between structure and superstructure is modified to allow for "relative independence" of superstructural forms (Althusser, 1969; Althusser and Balibar, 1970; Poulantzas, 1973). In this context it is maintained that ideology, religion and the political apparatus (the State) gain autonomy from the economic relations of production. Such autonomy allows the ontological predominance of these and other superstructural elements in specific historical circumstances. However, they cannot overcome the structural limits imposed by the relations of productions and the class character of society. The State, for instance, is viewed as an element which is autonomous from the direct control of the ruling class, yet is structurally constrained to reproduce the existence of capitalism. In other words, it is possible to witness the divergence in short term interests between the officialdom of the State and the bourgeoisie (or its leading fraction [Poulantzas, 1973]), but the overall capitalist relations bind the State to reproduce the class rule of the bourgeoisie. In essence, structuralist interpretations of Marx, while acknowledging the importance of superstructural elements in the epistemological endeavor, subordinate them "in the last instance" to the economic structure and, as such, they reproduce the mechanistic posture of scientific Marxism6.

The alternative to Neo-Weberianism

It could be objected at this point that there are no reasons for an attempt to avoid the Weberian epistemology. In the last instance neo-Weberian interpretations have given relevancy not only to the superstructural dimension of reality, but also to the economic one, creating an interpretative framework that moves in the same direction as critical sociology. Furthermore, it is this common "direction of theoretical motion" that has inspired the much discussed merger or synthesis between Marx and Weber (Wiley, 1987:8-16). However, fundamental differences between neo-Weberianism and critical sociology remain. As pointed out earlier in the paper, epistemological and political stands make a merger between the two paradigms rather difficult, if not impossible. In other words, the historical approximation of the Marxian inspired critical sociology and Weberian scholarship is not sufficient grounds for a synthesis (Antonio, 1985:26-27). Three relevant differences prevent the realization of such a synthesis.

First, the notion of value freedom, fundamental in Weberian analyses, is rejected by critical sociology. As illustrated above, critical Marxism and Weberian accounts sharply differ in the use of the concept "value" in epistemological endeavors. While for Weber, following the neo-Kantian tradition, it is possible to "approximate" a neutral posture in the investigative process, for critical Marxism this is impossible. Accordingly, any human endeavor is characterized by the existence of class based values, which implies the rejection of the separation between values and facts.

Second, the contemplative dimension of Neo-Weberian analyses is rejected by Marxism in the name of praxis. Epistemology, for critical Marxism, has the double role of denouncing the class (bourgeois) character of traditional theory and providing the grounds for emancipatory constructions of society. In this respect, the study of substantive areas is not done in the name of the enhancement of accumulated knowledge as postulated by the Weberian tradition (contemplative knowledge), but for the purpose of social change.

Third, critical Marxism's worldview is that of "totality" as opposed to the Weberian notion of "infinite reality". For Weber reality presents in itself an infinite entity which is impossible to study in its entirety. Accordingly, the relevant epistemological task is to

select portions of it as the subjects of scientific investigation (Weber, 1949:72). It follows that reality can be separable and some of its elements can be separated and isolated from others in order to complete a scientific inquiry. In the Marxian tradition the concept of "separability" is denied. Reality is viewed as a total entity which cannot be segmented into isolated parts. This posture maintains that class conflict and the historical establishment of a mode of production unify the mode of existence of human beings and their actions. Diversity is, then, acknowledged in terms of negation and opposition within a single reality.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the essence of the paper points to two elements. First, rural sociology as well as other disciplines in the social sciences and humanities should be theoretically informed and, second, critical sociology can provide novel insights to this enterprise. The importance of a theoretically informed discipline is not just contained in its heuristic improvement, but lies in the fundamental goal of the emancipation of human existence. In this respect, efforts to improve human conditions must involve a scrutiny of the theoretical constructions that hamper such efforts. At the same time, such efforts must provide the theoretical ground on which emancipated forms of human organization are possible. The contribution that critical sociology provides points in this direction. Through the adoption of immanent critique, the ideological and material dimensions of domination are documented. Simultaneously, the dialectical dimension of critical sociology postulates continuous motion in which an "absolute final point" is denied and in which any situation contains its negation. The application of this theoretical construction to epistemology involves the constant research for theoretical modes that reflect societal changes but which are, at the same time, parts of their generation. Its application to society involves the understanding that the advancement of humanity can be reversed and that an emancipatory progress can be inverted into subjugation. In essence, it is in the objective of human emancipation and in negation of the distinction between theory and practice that a critically inspired theory finds its principal characteristics and qualitative differences from other theoretical constructions.

The rejection of materialistic philosophical anthropology, which stems from the historical failure of Marxist inspired regimes and from alterations in the socio-economic structure of capitalist societies, has further widened the debate on the identification of a viable emancipatory theory. The no longer acceptable wait for the insurgence of an emancipatory proletariat has inspired alternatives which either search for transcendental forms of emancipatory arrangements (such as the case proposed by the Habermasian project) or problematically enter other theoretical paradigms (such as the case of the Marx-Weber merger)7. A Gramscian inspired critical theory, which assumes an open-ended Marxism but which also searches for historical subjects as carriers of an emancipatory project, represents an alternative which deserves attention.

Notes:

1. Analyses wich explicity refer to a Marx-Weber model of research are not found among the recent literature considered in this essay. However, authors often adopt postures which employ the Marxian "relations of production" as the central explanatory element for their works. Nevertheless, they turn to the more Weberian "relations of exchange" to account for other aspects of their analyses. A particularly brilliant example of the use of Marxian and Weberian scholarship in this fashion is provided by Linda Lobao in her recent book entitled Locality and Inequality.

2. These references attest to an emphasis on superstructural elements in the analysis of the mentioned phenomena, rather than a classification of their authors within the Weberian school. Though some of them would not object to the identification of their work as part of the Weberian tradition, others would. At any rate, their works are employed here to indicate alternatives to the Marxian interpretation.

3. At this point it is plausible to ask why it is important to remain within the Marxian framework instead of abandoning

it in order to propose a Weberian account. While abandoning a Marxian framework is certainly possible, there are a number of reasons which motivate our standing in the Marxian camp. As will be discussed below, the inadequacies of the assumption of value-freedom, of the contemplative dimension of Weberian epistemology and of the Weberian view of reality motivate our standing.

4. It is important to note that Engels admitted on more than one occasion that his emphasis on the scientific dimension of Marxism was motivated by the attempt to respond to attacks coming from idealist and positivist circles rather than a mere concern with the illustration of Marxian philosophy (See Antonio, 1990).

5. For a discussion of epistemology and politics in the realm of rural sociology, see Falk and Gilbert, 1986. The unity of epistemology, ethics and politics is concealed according to Gramsci and critical sociology by the ideological apparatus dominant in society. As indicated in Gramsci's discussion of "hegemony" and in the critical tradition of "immanent critique," the consideration of epistemology, ethics and politics as independent elements in history is part of the process of class domination.

6. Interpretations viewing the superstructure as a direct reflection of the economic structure have also been accepted as the "official Marxian account" by non-Marxian scholars. In the United States, Parsons' (1949:488-494) interpretation of Marx has greatly contributed to the diffusion of such postures, as he stresses the causal priority of the material dimension over ideology in Marxian ontology. Furthermore, it is not a coincidence that Parsons' interpretation of Weber's work is intended as a response to his economistic reading of Marx. In fact, for Parsons the emphasis on religious ideas in Weber's work provides a more desirable theoretical framework than the materialistic Marxian approach, as if the two (structure and superstrucutre) were alternative modes of ontological explanation (Antonio, 1985:20).

7. An additional example of this type of theoretical action is provided by the recently developed attempt to employ pragmatism as a complementary element to critical Marxism (see Antonio, 1989). Though the objective of this endeavor is to provide an historical and non-transcendental theory of emancipation, it tends to reintroduce transcendental elements which deny the distinction between theory and history central to the Marxian account.

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RESUMEN

Teoría crítica, epistemología y sociología rural

Este trabajo trata de proveer una alternativa a la dicotomia Marx-Weber que recientemente a emergido en los estudios sociológicos rurales. Consiste en una re-proposición de la sociología crítica como un modo de investigación científica que, aún permaneciendo dentro de la tradición marxista, puede dirigirse a muchos aspectos concernientes al saber Webweriano. Aunque una integración entre Marx y Weber no es propuesta, se parte del supuesto de que una falta de conocimeinto de sociología crítica tiende a estorbar el fomento y desarrollo del debate teórico en sociología rural.

Mas importantemente, esta falta de conocimiento ha trabado la difusión de los fundamentos básicos de la sociología crítica entre sociólogos que se ocupan de los estudios de la agricultura y alimentos, limitando la información de la investigación empírica y la enseñanza a los estudientes

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