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A Guide to Theory and Practice
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Marxism

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Introduction

In considering the work of the classical sociologists it would be a serious mistake to omit an analysis of the works of Karl Marx and others who have been influenced by his ideas. For good or ill, his ideas have had a profound effect on modern thought, political systems, and social practices. Regardless of how far we are prepared to accept the validity of his ideas, we need to recognize that he was a visionary thinker. He was able to combine insights from different intellectual and political traditions and develop from them a detailed analysis of key social processes and their consequences, the injustices involved, and the complex mechanisms giving rise to them.

Unfortunately, there is considerable prejudice against Marx and his ideas. This is partly because his theories are quite complex and difficult for the non-specialist to comprehend, leading to common misunderstandings and oversimplifications. It is also partly because his ideas challenge vested interests within the capitalist system, and so people in positions of power have operated in various ways to distract attention from his ideas, to misrepresent them or to silence them completely when possible. It also has to be acknowledged that his ideas, albeit in a distorted form, have been used as the basis of oppressive totalitarian regimes that have suppressed personal and political freedoms, persecuted dissenters, incarcerated in psychiatric custody those who challenged regime dogma, and murdered thousands of people (Brown, 2009). For very many people, therefore, the name “Marx” is placed in the same category as Hitler, Pol Pot, and Idi Amin. In view of these various factors, it is not surprising, then, that awareness of what Marx actually thought and wrote and the potential value of (at least some of) his ideas is remarkably low.

In fact, I would not be surprised if some readers of this book will actually skip this chapter, already convinced that Marx and his work have nothing to contribute to our understanding of death, grief, and bereavement. They may perhaps even disapprove of Marx’s work being covered in a volume such as this. However, the reality is that, while Marx clearly got some things wrong, he also
had a great deal of useful intellectual inquiry to contribute and much we can learn from. There is also, of course, much to be learned from closely examining how his ideas were distorted and misused for highly detrimental ends, but that is beyond the scope of the present work.

This chapter therefore provides an introduction to some of the key elements of Marx’s approach to sociology. It begins by highlighting Marx as a sociologist. We then move on to explore his theoretical framework (dialectical materialism), before considering, in turn, what he got right and what he got wrong. This will lead into a discussion about what his work can tell us about death, grief, and bereavement. While he may have not focused directly on such matters, we can none the less use his ideas to draw out important insights to develop our understanding further.

Marx the Sociologist

Karl Marx (1818–1883) wore several hats. He is perhaps best known as a political thinker and one of the founders of the communist movement. But a key part of his political theory was a radical critique of capitalist economics. Marx has therefore come to be a noted contributor to economic theory as well as political analysis. However, underpinning his politics and economics was a specific philosophy, one of liberation from exploitation, oppression, and tyranny. His philosophy of social justice, particularly around issues of socioeconomic class, is a body of thought that has proved influential in both philosophical theory and practical application – indeed, the importance of practical application (“praxis,” as he called it) was a key feature of his philosophy, as we shall see below.

But that is not all. He was indeed an influential philosopher, political theorist, and economist, but he was also a sociologist. His theoretical work has much to contribute to sociological understanding and has shaped much sociological theory and research ever since (though there are few sociologists today who accept his work wholesale without wishing to distance themselves from some aspects of it).

There is a certain irony that this man who was, in many ways, an intellectual giant should be so readily dismissed by so many people for the reasons I have already outlined. We should be careful, therefore, not to dismiss his ideas without giving them unbiased consideration.

In terms of the (mis)use of Marx’s ideas, it is important to stress that he was not responsible for the atrocities that were carried out in his name. There is a parallel here with Friedrich Nietzsche’s ideas, which were not sympathetic to Nazi fascism but were twisted (initially by his sister, who managed his affairs after his death – Kaufmann, 2013) and made to look supportive of anti-Semitism and authoritarianism as a basis for totalitarian political regimes (Golomb and
Wistrich, 2002). In reality, Nietzsche was explicitly against anti-Semitism, and the association of his philosophy with fascism was based on an apparently deliberate distortion of his idea of “superman” (or “overman” – *Übermensch*). He used this term to refer to how people could reach new heights and achieve far more than people generally did. Despite subsequent distortions, it is clear that he did not intend “superman” to relate to racial supremacist beliefs – though that is how Nazi sympathizers portrayed his view. They twisted his ideas to suit their own immoral and politically oppressive purposes.

Similarly, there is nothing inherent in Marx’s ideas to justify state terror, coercion, oppression, and so on. In fact, a key element of Marx’s work and, indeed, his value system was the importance of tackling oppression, of freeing ordinary working people from the injustices of a heartless capitalist system that prioritized profit over people (Chomsky, 1999). What Marx described as “communism” was very, very different from what came to be known as that in eastern bloc countries and elsewhere.

**Dialectical Materialism**

To understand Marx’s approach we must first consider the approach of his predecessor, Georg Hegel, whose work he both challenged and built upon. Hegel (1807/1977) developed his theory of the “dialectic of spirit” (or “mind” – *Geist* in German refers to both “spirit” and “mind”). “Dialectic” is a term used to describe the interaction of conflicting forces. At its simplest, it is a matter of one force (the thesis) being counterbalanced by another force (the antithesis – often referred to as a “countervailing force”), and the result is a combination of the two, a changed reality brought about by the interaction of the two (synthesis). (The reality of the theory is actually far more complex than this, but this basic definition will suffice for present purposes.)

There are (at least) two main implications flowing from this. First, social reality is based on conflict – conflicting forces are the driving force of the social world and thus of people’s life experiences. It is a *dynamic* model – that is, it is premised on the idea of constant change. There are constant interactions going on, constant influences, and counterinfluences producing new syntheses. Each new synthesis then becomes a new thesis in the next round of the dialectic. Social reality is based on constant movement (see Chapter 8 in this volume, where the use of the dialectic within existentialism is discussed).

Hegel’s dialectic was idealistic, not in the everyday sense of “unrealistic” but in the technical sense of relating to the world of ideas. For Hegel, then, the basis of the dialectic was *ideas*. It is in the realm of ideas that conflict and change drive us forward.

Marx took on board Hegel’s use of the dialectic, but with one crucial difference. For Marx, it was not the conflict of ideas that was central but, rather,
the conflict of *material* forces (White, 1997). What forms the basis of society, he argued, is how material resources are managed. He wrote of the historical development from a feudal society to a capitalist one, the latter being based on the significance of the owners of the means of production (factories, land, tools, and machinery and so on).

In a merchant-based system such as capitalism (that is, one in which the economy depends on the production and sale of material goods), ownership of the means of production gives access to considerable power and potential wealth. This key fact led to a distinction, in Marx’s terms, between two social classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Marx and Engels, 1848/2004). The former are the merchant class, the people who own the means of production. The latter are the workforce. To survive, they need to sell their labor; that is, lacking private means of income, they need to be employed within the capitalist system.

Bourgeoisie and proletariat then enter into a symbiotic relationship, in the sense that they rely on each other to a certain extent. Bourgeois owners of land, factories, and machinery cannot produce their goods for the market without a labor force, and members of the proletariat (workers and their dependants) cannot survive without the wage they earn from their employment.

This system produces what Marx called “surplus value.” That is, what it costs the bourgeoisie to produce and sell the goods is less than the income generated from the sale, hence a profit is generated. Although there is an element of symbiotic interdependence in the capitalist system, when it comes to the profit or surplus generated, this was, in Marx’s time, claimed more or less entirely by the bourgeoisie (later profit-sharing schemes and other such developments have subsequently altered this situation in some settings, but it remains the case that the lion’s share of profit goes to the bourgeoisie, to the capitalists). Thus, the symbiotic, collaborative element of the relationship between the classes is overshadowed by the exploitative nature of the system.

The dialectic can be seen to operate in the sense that the capitalists accumulate more and more financial capital from the system (hence the term “capitalism”), and thus have more power due to the financial resources at their disposal. They can afford to invest in further money-making ventures (for example, through buying housing properties that are subsequently rented to members of the proletariat at above-cost rates – that is, at a further level of profit at the expense of the tenants). Such growing profits also allow for the internationalization of capitalist enterprise, and the potential for more power and wealth.

While all this is going on to the benefit of the bourgeoisie, the proletariat are having to survive on the wages they receive in exchange for their labor. Apart from limited opportunities for promotion, their position in terms of financial and other power is largely static and limited, as opposed to the potentially
exponential growth of power and wealth for the capitalist class members. This creates considerable inequality, in the sense of a huge gap between rich and poor, powerful and powerless (Piketty, 2013/2014). The rich operate within a potentially limitless field of opportunity, while the proletariat remain confined within fairly narrow boundaries, those boundaries now determined by the power elite, which by this time is what the capitalists have become.

What began as, in principle at least, a system of mutual interdependence therefore became a highly unequal relationship rooted in exploitation and unfairness: in-built advantages for the bourgeoisie, in-built disadvantages for the proletariat.

These in-built (that is, structurally defined) disadvantages are then passed from generation to generation. Children of capitalist parents inherit wealth and associated privileges, while children of the proletariat inherit a disadvantaged social location, already assigned to a lower status and opportunities (“life chances,” to use the technical term) before they have breathed their first breath. Opportunities for social mobility have, of course, increased significantly since Marx’s day, but the boundaries and structural inequalities are still not too hard to find in present-day society.

A further important element of Marx’s work was the recognition that the proletariat suffer not only materially from the inequalities inherent in the capitalist system but also psychologically or spiritually. The “alienation of labor” is a key concept. It refers to how the fruits of the workers’ labor are taken from them. Given that the capitalist system is based on the idea of maximizing profit, workers are generally given the minimum rewards (in terms of salary and other benefits) that their employers can get away with. The “surplus value” from their labor goes not to them but to the owners of the means of production. One of the consequences of this is that there can be disaffection and feelings of not being valued – alienation, in Marx’s terms. Later theorists have extended this notion to show how the capitalist system creates alienation in other ways and at other levels (Fromm, 2011; Jaeggi, 2014). Would it be a step too far to see this alienation, this denial of a fair share of the fruits of workers’ labors, as a form of grief? Given that the word “bereaved” has its etymological roots in the term “bereft,” which means “robbed,” perhaps it is not such a great step.

In terms of grief and loss, one consequence of the exploitation of labor to maximize profit was, in Marx’s day, minimal attention to health and safety concerns or the wider impact of oppressive working conditions on employees. The result was a high level of worker mortality and major work-related health problems (Engels, 1845/2009). Although the situation has changed significantly since then (we no longer send children up chimneys), the workplace death rate remains a cause of concern (Schnall et al., 2009). Similarly, in terms of class differences, there remain significant health disparities and inequalities
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(and associated levels of life expectancy) linked to income and wealth (see, for example, Smith et al., 2016).

A further feature of dialectical materialism is the idea that the rich are rich because the poor are poor – that is, poverty is endemic within the structural relations that are part and parcel of the capitalist system (Jones and Novak, 2014). While, of course, not all workers will experience poverty, the emphasis on profit maximization as the primary (if not sole) concern means that there is no guarantee that workers and their families will have sufficient to meet their needs.

What Marx was not able to anticipate was governmental welfare provision to guard against poverty, but, even with such systems in place across developed western democracies, we remain far from a position in which poverty has been assigned to history (Ridge and Wright, 2008). Part of the reason for the persistence of poverty, according to Marx’s analysis, is the exploitative nature of the system. As Gandhi is attributed to have put it: there is enough for everyone’s needs, but not for some people’s greed.

There is much more that could be said about dialectical materialism, but in light of the limitations of space I will restrict myself to addressing one further element, namely the significance of ideology and hegemony.

Marx’s view of the role of ideology can be summed up in one sentence: “The ruling ideas are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force” (Marx and Engels, 1932/2004, p. 64). What he meant by this was that powerful groups in society have the potential to influence the media (especially when they own those media!) and therefore propagate ideas that are in their interests, while suppressing those that challenge their dominance (Herman and Chomsky, 1995). Capitalist ideology therefore comes to be seen as “common sense,” as “normal” and “natural,” while contrary ideas will tend to be sidelined or even dismissed altogether as seditious.

The significance of ideology was further developed by Louis Althusser (1973/2008), although, in doing so, he unfortunately distorted certain elements of Marx’s work, reducing the dialectic to a mechanistic, deterministic one, which is not what Marx had put forward (Sartre, 1960/2004).

What is particularly interesting about ideology, though, is the way it can very effectively safeguard existing power relations of dominance and subordination, privilege and disadvantage, through the power of ideas. This is achieved through a process known as “hegemony” (Forgacs, 2000). Literally, hegemony means dominance, but within sociology and political theory it is used to refer to a specific form of dominance, that of ideas. That is, it refers to how dominance is maintained not through direct force and coercion (although that remains as a fallback position) but through ideology. Because dominant ideas (the right of the rich to exploit working people as fully as they possibly
can within the limits of the law, for example) come to be seen as normal and
natural and therefore tend to go unquestioned, the existing power relations
are largely maintained at the ideological level. This is, of course, one of the
reasons why, as I highlighted earlier, Marx’s work tends to get such a bad press
from mainstream media and other channels of power geared toward maintain-

In sum, then, dialectical materialism is partly an extension of Hegel’s work
on the dialectic and partly a repudiation of it (replacing an idealist dialectic
with a materialist one). It emphasizes the way in which the evolution of the cap-
italist system, was – and still is – based on the maximization of profits through
the exploitation of working people (and, increasingly, the destructive exploita-
tion of natural resources, putting our habitat under threat – Fitzpatrick, 2011).
This creates huge inequalities, which can have major knock-on effects, not least
in terms of health problems and reduced life expectancy. Much has changed
since Marx’s day, but it is fair to say that much of what he had to say still has
purchase today. I shall now therefore focus on what value his ideas continue
to have before exploring what aspects of his thought have been superseded or
shown to be of less value.

**Marx Was Right: The Positives**

Despite the considerable antipathy in many quarters to his intellectual contri-
bution, Marx’s ideas can be seen to continue to be applicable in some circum-
stances to certain aspects of modern social life. I briefly review some of these to
give a flavor of what we can gain from studying his work.

We noted earlier that Marx recognized that the ruling ideas are the ideas
of the ruling class, and that this is the basis of hegemony or ideological domi-
nance. This continues to be widely accepted within sociological theory, though
it is now recognized that it is more subtle than this: that it is the ideas of pow-

erful groups more broadly, rather than just the capitalist class. The analysis
has therefore been broadened to incorporate other sets of power relations (in
terms of race and gender, for example), and not just class inequalities. Indeed,
there is now a significant literature base that draws on this important concept
(see, for example, Laclau and Mouffe, 2014).

One extension of this idea is the concept of “blaming the victim” (Ryan,
1988). This refers to how ideology operates to present people who are expe-

riencing social problems (poverty, for example) as the architects of their
own misery. Commonly poverty is explained in certain influential quarters
as the result of fecklessness; unemployment is down to being work-shy; and
being homeless is a lifestyle choice, it is alleged (Jones, 2013; Thompson,
2017). What all these pseudo-explanations have in common is the tendency
to distract attention from wider sociopolitical processes, structures, and
inequalities, thereby leaving intact the existing power relations, and the vested interests they represent.

Marx was also right to emphasize the key role of class differences and the unequal consequences of the way class relationships are handled within a capitalist system. Although the world is a very different place from the one Marx was immersed in, there is no shortage of evidence to the effect that class remains a key differentiating factor in contemporary society (Roberts, 2011; Jones, 2013). This contrasts strongly with the oft-heard refrain that “we are all middle class now.” In terms of Marx’s analysis, we continue to have a key distinction between the classes, those that own the means of production and those who do not and therefore have to sell their labor, though the picture is now much more complex because of the role of corporations and other such developments. The basic principle, and its inequitable consequences, none the less remain the same and continue to have significance.

The significance of alienation continues to be of sociological interest, though it is generally expanded beyond Marx’s original specific focus on the alienation of labor. In Chapter 17 we shall explore the important concept of disenfranchised grief: grief that, for a variety of reasons, is not socially approved, sanctioned, or supported. Such grief can then be understood to be a form of alienated grief – that is, grief that we are perceived not to have any right to.

A further influence of Marx’s thought that is still with us is the idea that sociologists should not be neutral social technicians (and therefore indirectly apologists for the status quo) but, rather, part of a movement for social amelioration. As Marx famously put it: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (Marx, 1845/1968).

Marx used the term “praxis” to refer to the fusion of theory and practice, and implicit within this was a commitment to making sure that theory should not remain at an abstract level but should have something positive and constructive to say about social change and development. Certainly, not all sociologists would accept this commitment, but it has none the less proved to be an influential outlook.

There are, then, a number of ways in which the influence of Marx’s work remains of value to many sociologists today. However, it is also fair to say that some of his tenets (and the distortions that have flowed from them) have, for the most part, been rejected.

**Marx Was Wrong: The Negatives**

Marx believed that ideological hegemony, as it later came to be known, could be understood as “false consciousness.” That is, he felt that the ideas put forward by the capitalist class in various ways prevented members of the proletariat
understanding the “true” nature of their circumstances. However, later developments in sociological theory influenced by phenomenology (discussed in Chapter 8) have shown this to be an oversimplification. It is not simply a matter of true or false, as if there is an “absolute” reality underpinning the ideas being put forward, but, rather, a complex process (or set of processes) through which ideas, perceptions, and cultural understandings are formed, interpreted, and used.

Following on from this, Marx argued that the emancipation of the working class through the throwing off of false consciousness was inevitable (Marx and Engels, 1848/2004). Again, this proved to be an oversimplification. There have been many social, political, and economic developments that have stood in the way of any such revolutionary liberation (concessions made to working-class interests through trade union pressures, for example). He was therefore being over optimistic by not taking into consideration potential countervailing factors (despite such factors being consistent with the materialistic dialectic of which he wrote).

Where there was revolutionary change, in the Soviet Union and other countries that became “communist,” this did not happen along the lines Marx envisioned. He anticipated the urban working poor rising up against the capitalist industrialists, whereas what happened in the Soviet Union was that a largely agrarian society took major steps that Marx had neither anticipated nor advocated. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, what emerged in the name of “communism” in the form of oppressive, totalitarian regimes bore little resemblance to the egalitarian society he was in favor of (Brown, 2009). Bernard Schweizer illustrates how different what emerged was from what had been envisioned:

> communism, which has historically developed a party apparatus with ecclesiastical characteristics, [is] an organization that endows the writing of its founders with scriptural authority and encourages worship of its exalted “prophets,” including Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao. Communism, in other words, becomes a surrogate religion even as it advocates the eradication of Christianity.

(Schweizer, 2011, p. 40)

A pseudo-religion, far removed from the egalitarian society Marx envisioned, was what developed. So, it is not so much Marx’s ideas per se that we need to reject but, rather, the edifice of oppression that was built on the misuse and distortion of those ideas.

In particular, what has been problematic about the misuse of Marx’s work is that, in certain quarters, any attempts to develop his thinking to reflect changes in society and the economy faced dismissal as “revisionism.” This became a term
of abuse, indicating that Marx’s theoretical work had been reduced to the status of unassailable dogma. This dogma then became the basis of a rigid, authoritarian approach to social issues, rather than a critical intellectual inquiry that was open to challenge and development over time.

One further problem with Marx’s work was that he, and, for the most part, his followers, focused narrowly on class-based social differentiation. Later theorists have sought to challenge and rectify the exclusion from his purview of patriarchy and sexism and racism, and other such forms of social inequality and discrimination (Thompson, 2011). Despite these criticisms, many writers continued to focus primarily if not exclusively on class well into the twentieth century.

**Developments beyond Marx**

Although “revisionism” became a dirty word in the communist world, this is not to say that there have been no theoretical developments outside that restricted sphere. There have been many of these, but here I shall limit myself to commenting on three in particular.

The Frankfurt School of theorists (Wiggershaus, 2011) developed their “critical theory” on a marriage of elements of Marx’s work and insights from psychoanalysis. They embraced Marx’s sociological approach for the most part, but felt that it had little to say about psychological matters, therefore providing a one-sided understanding of human experience.

Cultural theory, especially the work of Stuart Hall, is another school of sociological thought that has drawn on Marx’s ideas (Morley and Chen, 1996). Marx focused strongly on the structural aspects of society. Cultural theory acknowledges the value of this but seeks to complement it by understanding how related cultural issues are also of significance.

Existentialism is also a theoretical approach that has drawn on Marx’s insights, particularly in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, who sought to integrate established existentialist concepts with Marx’s structural focus and, in the process, produce a stronger basis of explanatory power. As Nik Farrell Fox puts it:

>The trouble with Marxism, in Sartre’s view, is not that it attaches importance to the realm of political economy as a determining factor in social life, but that it attaches *too much* importance to it, thus effectively reducing those other determining factors (family, groups, culture) to mere reflections of the economic base. (Fox, 2003, p. 100)

Existentialism will be our focus in Chapter 9, and so I will not comment further at this point.
Marxist Thought as Applied to Death, Grief, and Bereavement

The focus of Marx’s work was on broad structural themes, and so it is not surprising that death, grief, and bereavement did not receive direct attention. However, this does not mean that there is no value in seeking to relate Marx’s insights to this field.

Denise Bevan (2002) comments on the significance of poverty in relation to death, grief, and bereavement. For example, she highlights the financial implications of visiting someone in a hospice setting when the travel costs can prove inhibiting for someone on a low income. Resources that can be taken for granted by the majority of people can prove a stumbling block to people living in poverty.

As mentioned earlier, poverty is also significant in terms of health disparities and reduced life expectancy levels. The people who lose out the most from a system of capitalist exploitation therefore face, on average, a shorter lifespan and fewer resources when issues of death and bereavement arise within that lifespan.

There are also workplace issues to consider. The principle of profit maximization results in unsafe, health-affecting working conditions. This can be for direct, physical reasons (minimal compliance with health and safety requirements and no real commitment to developing a health and safety culture – Thompson, 2013). Alternatively, it can be at a more psychosocial level in terms of stress and the harm that this can do to individuals and families in relation to health and life expectancy. There is now a significant literature base highlighting the detrimental effects of workplaces in organizations that put profit before employee well-being (Thompson and Bates, 2009; Schnall et al., 2009).

The history of trade unionism is characterized by efforts to make the workplace a safer, more humane, and more humanly fulfilling place. These efforts have more recently been supplemented by a growing emphasis on the importance of workplace well-being. While many organizations have become enlightened about these issues, recognizing that it is in everybody’s interests to have a more supportive, collaborative approach to working life, many continue to uphold working patterns and relationships that are little different from Marx’s day: maximum reward for the owners of the means of production; the minimum rewards they can get away with for the people who are required to sell their labor.

And, of course, the very nature of trade unionism, with its emphasis on worker rights, owes a significant debt to Marx’s thought and his highlighting of the detrimental effects of an exploitative, alienating system that generates considerable inequality and a number of social injustices at various levels.

Continuing with the workplace theme, we can also note the strong tendency for bereavement issues to be marginalized in a high proportion of workplace
settings, as if there is little or no room for compassion. In an earlier work (Thompson, 2009), I have detailed how issues relating to loss, grief, and trauma are often given minimum attention in employing organizations. It is as if death, grief, and bereavement are seen as unfortunate inconveniences that get in the way of profit maximization. Workplaces that take such matters seriously and recognize the complexities involved are the exception, rather than the rule, even though a more compassionate approach could pay dividends for all concerned (Thompson and Bevan, 2015).

A sociology informed by Marx’s insights can also help cast light on the notion of “complicated grief.” The term “complicated grief” was coined to move away from judgmental and disempowering notions of “abnormal” or “pathological” grief. However, it remains a contested area that tries to account for – and respond to – those incidences of grieving that seem to be problematic or destructive in one or more ways – delayed or extended grief reactions, for example.

To date, the focus in studies of complicated grief has been at the individual, psychological level. To avoid the dangers of a narrow, overly individualized approach, the psychological insights can be complemented by sociological understandings, In particular, we can begin to explore how sociopolitical factors can play a role in creating complications. From the perspective of Marx’s thought, we can identify poverty, alienation, and resentment, lack of (workplace) support, discrimination, and feelings of being marginalized and undervalued. This is an area for potentially very fruitful future exploration.

**Conclusion**

That Marx’s ideas were distorted and misused as the basis of brutal totalitarian regimes is a historic tragedy of considerable proportions. However, there would also be an element of tragedy in rejecting Marx’s ideas out of hand – throwing the baby out with the bathwater, as it were. “Marxist” is not a term that I would apply to myself or my work, as I have concerns I have documented elsewhere (Thompson, 2010) of people subscribing exclusively to a particular thinker’s approach and thereby risking becoming dogmatically wedded to it, a member of the “club.” However, as this chapter should have made clear, I do believe that Marx had much to offer sociological thought in general, with a number of implications, as sketched out here, for our understanding of death, grief, and bereavement in particular.

To what extent his ideas in relation to this field will be further explored and developed remains to be seen. There is also scope for further development of the approaches that have grown out of Marx’s writings (the Frankfurt School of critical theory, cultural theory, and so on) to examine what insights they can bring to bear. There is also the potential for parallel emancipatory movements (feminism; anti-racism and anti-colonialism; and the disability movement, for
example) to bring forward ideas and theoretical frameworks that can also take our understanding forward.

Marx and his work were instrumental in creating and sustaining critical sociological approaches that help us to look more holistically at aspects of social life and not to remain rooted in dominant ideologies and disempowering discourses that serve the interests of the powerful few at the expense of the many. It is for this reason, among others, that Marx has earned his standing as one of the founders of sociology as a critical and enlightening discipline. Our field of death, grief, and bereavement will be the poorer if we turn our backs on what his insights have to offer.

References


