It is a commonplace now to observe the declining influence of Marxism on the social sciences in Europe and America, its armies in dismal retreat before the advancing forces of postmodernism and relativism, its Enlightenment weaponry – the belief in the application of reason to human affairs and in the pursuit of objective knowledge, the commitment to social transformation – scattered and blunted. In the local disciplinary battlefield constituted by the sociological analysis of racism and ethnicity, casualties have been particularly high: a cursory internet search reveals the extent to which Marxist analyses of racism have fallen into desuetude, a striking contrast to the situation of twenty years ago. I shall suggest that there are three principal reasons for the waning interest within Western universities over the past decade or so in Marxist accounts of racism and ethnicity. Firstly, Marxist theories have rarely challenged the notion of race itself and, in so far as they have failed to do so, they have reproduced many of the shortcomings associated with its use in orthodox social science. Marxists have largely failed to identify a distinctively Marxian view of the phenomena of race and ethnicity. This is ironic in view of the second reason, namely the advance of postmodernism. Whilst it can be acknowledged that the term
postmodernism covers a wide range of sympathies, in the social sciences its most far-reaching effect has been seen in the rise of a species of relativism and a corresponding ‘loss of nerve’, to use Goldthorpe’s expression,¹ in the epistemic claims of social research. Marxism, with its concern with social transformation and its commitment to scientific, materialist theory, has thus found itself increasingly peripheral to the academic social sciences, which in turn often regard Marxism as discredited or anachronistic. Finally, political developments, particularly the global pre-eminence of US interests since 9/11, the ‘War on Terror’, and the response to these developments by those who are the targets of US policy, have shifted the interest of sociologists to issues of identity politics, multiculturalism and religion, topics for which many consider Marxism to be ill-suited because of its putative unconcern with matters of politics, subjectivity and ideology. I shall deal with each of these reasons in turn before concluding with an assessment of Marxism’s resources for responding to them.

1. Marxism and concepts of race

Classical figures in Marxism such as Marx and Engels, Kautsky, Luxemburg, and Trotsky unsurprisingly wrote little that addressed specifically the issue of racism (although they had a good deal to say about imperialism, colonialism and nationalism and the ways in which these relations affected the views held by the working classes of the imperial states of the colonised; Marx and Engels’s discussion of British rule in India and Ireland are two cases in point). The interest of Marxists in the analysis of racism only emerges as significant in the 1930s and 1940s and principally in response to the efforts of black Americans to challenge racism and discrimination in the USA. W.E.B. DuBois (1868–1963) and O.C. Cox (1901–74) were key contributors to the development of a distinctively Marxian view of racism. An early anti-racist activist and co-founder of the NAACP, DuBois’s views were decisively shifted towards Marxism by the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 and his subsequent visit to the USSR in 1927 (although he did not join the US Communist Party until 1961, at the age of 93). He became a powerful critic of imperialism, arguing that a necessary condition for proletarian revolution was the uprising of the exploited

¹ Goldthorpe 2000.