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The Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism –
a Noah's Ark of critical thinking¹

Looking for an adequate title that could be able to condense how I'd like to understand our project, and to be understood in what we're doing, I browsed through the first foreword of the dictionary and stumbled over the metaphor of a *Noah's Ark* carrying the hidden treasures of Marxism through the collapse of administrative socialism into a different time. Since each picture risks to be loaded with misleading connotations, I'd like to add, that the title is not meant to suggest the apocalyptic and elitist vision of being the only Ark in the Flood. But it expresses the knowledge, that there is something precious to be found under the rubble, and the urgent need for human survival, to rescue and to renew it, and also the frightening insight, that we have no guarantees that these treasures can be handed to future generations – given the enormous weight of commodification that governs not only politics and the media, but also academic life.

Huge project -- slim resources

Let me start with a few remarks about who we are, and what the *Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism* (HKWM) looks like. Its publisher, the *Berlin Institute for Critical Theory* (INKRIT), is a pretty young institution, founded in 1996. The fact, that it is not affiliated to any political party or organization, is considered to be a necessary prerequisite for the independence and the pluralistic profile of the dictionary. If you look at the patrons of the "Inkrit", you can see at first glance that the institute is supported by a broad international range of outstanding scholars, from Étienne

Balibar to Immanuel Wallerstein, from Pierre Bourdieu to Eric Hobsbawm, from Jaques Derrida to Dorothy Smith. Its main assignment is the promoting of critical theories in interaction with social movements. To this purpose, it organizes each spring a conference on topics crucial for the dictionary's further development, e.g. on Gramsci (1997), on the centenaries of Brecht, Eisler and Marcuse (1998), on the problematics how to rethink "progress" (1999), on Justice, Violence, and Hegemony (2000). The conferences are organized in a way, that they combine the panel-system with other forms of presentation, which are focused on the discussion of particular articles of the dictionary, thus creating a specific intensity of editorial work on the text and scholarly cooperation.

Such an ambitious editing project could not do without being embedded in a broader theoretical culture. It developed around the dictionary's editor in chief, *Wolfgang Fritz Haug*, who is one of the most wellknown independent Marxist philosophers in Germany. Some of you may know him because of his translated *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*², others may know him as a Gramsci-scholar: we are doing the same job as Joseph Buttigieg is doing for the English-speaking world, namely editing the *Prison Notebooks* of Gramsci in German. Wolf Haug is, together with *Frigga Haug*, the editor of the theoretical review, *Das Argument*, founded in the 1950s, and still persisting as an important element of critical thinking. During the students' movement, he used his teaching position to build up a large network of study-groups working on Marx's *Capital*. In the 70s, this became almost a mass-movement of hundreds of students studying Marx with a serious ethos of learning and discovering the hidden secrets of capitalist society. This was the time, when I was

¹ Presentation at the Amherst-Conference "Marxism 2000", September 23, 2000. Roundtable together with Joseph A. Buttigieg, John Bellamy Foster, Inez Hedges, Richard Lichtman, Victor Wallis.

² W.F. Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics. Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

drawn into Marxist theory, beginning with the *Critique of Political Economy*, then continuing with Marxist approaches to ideology, religion, and philosophy.

Let us turn to the product itself, consisting of *four* volumes so far, ranging from *A* to halfway *G*. We are just laboring on the 5th volume from halfway *G* to halfway *H*, which is to be published next year. As can be seen immediately, it is a conceptually organized dictionary, thus excluding direct entries for individuals. Certainly, there are many concepts that are linked to individual names, like e.g. Leninism, Brecht-school, Fidelism, Della-Volpe-school, and each volume contains also a name-index where you can look up all the personalities that are mentioned in the articles. But, primarily, we start from the intellectual material, in which the manifold process of critical thinking takes place. We use the theoretical concepts as tools, as entry points, to cut from many sides through the contradictory historical formation called Marxism.

If you look at the authors of the dictionary, you can observe an interesting shift. The first two volumes are clearly marked by the dominance of German traditions of Marxism, and I will explain in a while, why this is *not only* a restriction. When it comes to the third volume, you can see a considerable increase of non-German authors, and especially of the English-speaking world, so that, in the 4th volume, you will see already *one fifth* of all the authors living in the U.S. This originally German project has indeed been developing to a more and more international enterprise.

We think, it's worth to widen the international span of the project. We would like the idea of finding a sponsor for an English translation of the dictionary, and we would be very grateful, if you could give us some realistic advice about how to advance in this direction. In the meanwhile we are building up a website (www.inkrit.org; www.hkwm.de), where the English written articles will be published.

The dictionary will have a total number of 15 volumes with about 1500 entries and more than 800 authors. When it will be finished, it will be the biggest, the most comprehensive, the most international dictionary of Marxism worldwide. At the same time, we do this work with a very slim amount of money. We have some financial support from the *Bundesstiftung Rosa Luxemburg* (Berlin), the *Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici* (Naples), and the *Centrum för Marxistiska Samhällsstudier* (Stockholm), but the money is quickly absorbed by the mere production costs of a volume. There is only one low-paid job of coordination, and apart of this, the entire work is done on a voluntary base. Therefore, we urgently need sponsors, donations, subscriptions. I have to get back to this problem by the end of my presentation.

But, let me first turn to the origins of the dictionary and its political background.

The *Historical-Critical Dictionary* and the collapse of Marxism-Leninism

The immediate origin of the dictionary was another Marxist dictionary, namely the French *Dictionnaire Critique du Marxisme* edited by Georges Labica and Gérard Bensussan. As soon as it was published in 1982, we began to translate it, and published it in 8 small volumes. At the same time we were planning some supplementary “German” volumes. They were intended to open up the connections to the new social movements that became fairly strong in Western Germany, with the rising of the feminist and ecological movement, and the emerging of the Green party. But we hurt ourselves at the blockades within the leftist culture in Western Germany: the small Communist party, the DKP, refused to cooperate, because it was afraid that the intended renewal of Marxism could actually mean its dissolution, and the Social Democrats did not participate in any project where Communists were invited to participate as well. We decided, therefore, to internationalize the project. The response

was so positive, that we had to found our own dictionary. The form of supplement was soon exceeded, by the mere fact that it had outgrown the original.

While preparing for the first volume, we were confronted with the failure of the Perestrojka, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the end of a whole world-order, which had emerged out of the October Revolution of 1917 and the Second World War. The falling apart of the Eastern bloc cannot be separated from the victory of neoliberalism, based on the fast development of new electronic, computerized productive forces, undermining or destroying the class-compromises of the social-democratic welfare state as well. Both tendencies together created a new situation for the dictionary, a kind of »epistemological break«, that changed our work enormously. We couldn't just continue as before. Many articles, written during the time of global bipolarity and Western reformism, suddenly looked awfully outdated, and we had to throw them away or to rework them from scratch.

It's worth to remind the contradictory character of this historical moment. On the one hand, Marxist theory got the chance of getting free from the control of communist States and parties, and from a certain inner fixation to them. The archives of Marxism-Leninism went open. It became clear, that the German origin of the *Historical-Critical Dictionary* was not only a restriction, but offered an important historical chance: From the outset, we were forced to combine Western and Eastern strands of Marxist thought flowing together in the same "reunified" country, i.e. different types of knowledge and experience, and also different types of intellectuals. We had to find a productive way to work with these differences and contradictions, both on the level of authors, and in the redaction group itself. We do not have a fifty-fifty representation, but we are constructing one of the rare overarching projects that helps to rescue precious intellectual resources of Eastern Marxism from falling into oblivion.

On the other hand we were confronted with an overwhelming triumphalism of the Western victors, who now excluded especially the critical intellectuals of Eastern Germany from any influential position in Germany. The entire history of state-socialism, with all its hidden struggles, and contradictions, and dialectics has now being reduced in an essentialist way to a single and evil dictatorship, Gulag, almost Auschwitz. The dominating paradigm is to declare Marxism's death, to bury all kinds of hope for a better society as utopian and *therefore* totalitarian in the end. This overwhelming strategy had its impact on the intellectuals in Eastern Germany as well, who were torn between the tendencies of, on the one hand, leaving Marxism behind, substituting it quickly with the dominating tendencies of Western social theories, while skipping *again* the critical, heretical lines of Marxist thought, and, on the other hand, the temptation of clinging to the traditional forms of Marxism-Leninism, preserving it as a sort of passive resistance against the West.

Between these opposite tendencies of abnegation of Marxism and its dogmatic preservation, it was sometimes not easy to open up a space for a critical and self-critical renewal of Marxism. But this seemed us to be the challenge, we had to cope with.

Plural Marxism and "rescuing critique"

One of the tragedies of Marxist Theory in the Soviet Block was its immediate submission to political rule. It meant the transformation of a theoretical critique into an official state-ideology unable to analyse the internal contradictions of socialist society, its paralysing structures, its lack of hegemony. Therefore, we had to re-discover and to re-articulate Marxism as a critical theory, as a theoretical critique of any domination, class-domination, state-domination, patriarchal domination, and exploitative domination over nature. And we had to re-invent it as an analytical tool

for criticizing its own history, to historicize itself, in all its achievements, tragedies and crimes.

Walter Benjamin once coined the term *rettende Kritik*, whose literal translation would be “rescuing critique”. It is a transformatory criticism, that does not shrink from recklessly unveiling the gaps, blockades and deformations in Marxist traditions, while rescuing their elements of rationality, and hope, and commitment. Such a critique is the opposite of denouncement. Instead of totalizing Marxism to an essentialist entity, it reconstructs its historical conditions and internal splits.

Closely linked to this concept of critique, is the conclusion, to accept and to reconstruct Marxism as a plurality of different and often opposite tendencies. For the dictionary, the problem of Marxist plurality is not primarily a problem of *political correctness*, e.g. how can we distribute the entries in a way, that we give say 15 to what is left from the Communists, 10 to the Trozkists, 12 to the Eco-Socialists. But the real challenge is, how to make sure, that the articles themselves show the plural development of Marxist thinking. Whenever a Marxian concept is adopted by different strands of Marxism and interpreted differently, the author has to demonstrate these differences, whatever his or her own opinion might be. In this respect, our guidelines are very clear: ”No one has to deny his or her standpoint, but competing positions must also be represented – and in ‘Dialogue’ form. The entries should not be treated like fortresses in a war of positions.” This requires a certain critical-historical distance, that prevents us from just reproducing the ditches and failures of our history. It could enable us to dissolve the blind compulsion to repeat.

One important task of a plural understanding of Marxism is to deal in a critical and self-critical way with the relation between First- and Second-World Marxism and Marxism in the so-called “periphery”. Eurocentrism is a problem of our tradition as

well. We have also the extreme opposite, an uncritical third-world-revolutionarism, that tends to repress the failures and deformations of liberationist movements instead of analyzing them. The dictionary contains many entries that contribute to a correction of the eurocentric bias, from *Anti-Colonialism* (written by Samir Amin) to the *Zapatistas*, from *Arab Socialism* to the *Green Revolution* in India, from the *Dependency Theory* to the *Vietnam War*. But, we would leave our *historical-critical* approach behind, if we did not work on the manifold ‘tiermondist’ illusions and deformations as well, including e.g. an article on Pol-Potism and its horrible genocidal politics.

Catching up with new developments

Let me get to a third conclusion: the dictionary is not only the space, where Marxist key-concepts are carefully exposed, as a sort of well elaborated *canon* of Marxism, but it claims to pick up the thread, wherever Marxist theories intervene in relevant problems of humanity or are connecting themselves to relevant social movements. It is this understanding of an intervening and connecting Marxism that makes this project so big and in some way difficult to handle.

We have to be aware, that Marx’s analyses are not sufficient for resolving the current problems of our world. In a way, this was already true for the first half of the 20th century. Marx could not anticipate, that 20th century capitalism, and especially US-american capitalism, was able to create a new mode of production and regulation, that prevented the revolutionary crisis he had been expecting in the Capitalist centers. It was primarily Antonio Gramsci, who has tried to conceptualize this new social formation that he called *Americanism* and *Fordism*. This is one of the reasons, why Gramscian concepts have a considerably large place in our dictionary, much larger than in average US-Marxism, as far as I can see by now.

Several entries of our dictionary deal with these specific features of 20th century capitalism, based on mass-production, Taylorism, consumerism, and a specific “Fordist” class-alliance between bourgeoisie and a part of the upper working class. But, the most challenging and difficult task is to explore, what types of capitalism are now being imposed by the rule of neoliberalism. To give an example: How can we conceptualize, on the one hand, the new high-technological mode of production, often described as information society, postindustrialist, immaterial production etc., and on the other hand, the brutal revival of older older forms of capitalist production, that we can observe in the *maquillas* at the border between Mexico and the U.S.. If you look e.g. at the Smithfield plant, the biggest slaughterhouse of the world, as reported in the New York Times (June 16, 2000)³, you can see a sort of Super-Fordism, but without the old Fordist class-compromise, based on an extremely exhausting overexploitation at the assembly line, and operated by a cruel racial division of labor and segregation.

In order to catch up with these developments, we have to include many new terms, which do not originate in Marxism, but where Marxists have something important to say about: like Information Society, Postindustrialism, Postfordism, Neoliberalism, Toyotism. Unfortunately, many of them begin with the prefix “neo” or “post”, which always indicates, that it is not quite clear, what the new quality exactly is. By this way we try to gather the best analyses of contemporary Marxists, e.g. the investigations of the so-called regulation-school around M. Aglietta, A. Lipietz or Bob Jessop. In the next (fifth) volume of the dictionary, we will publish e.g a very substantial article by Christoph Ohm on this new type of computer-intellectual or computer-rebel called *Hacker*.

³ Charlie LeDuff, *At a Slaughterhouse, Some Things Never Die; Who Kills, Who Cuts, Who Bosses Can depend on Race*, New York Times, June 16, 2000

As a general principle, we do include terms unknown to the Marxist traditions, if these terms articulate historically new problematics or if these terms illuminate neglected facets of Marxism. In this vein, we included e.g. the Weberian term of *Charisma/charismatic leadership*, because it points to a crucial dimension of political practice that is a blind spot in Marxist theory.

Marxist Border-Crossings

Let me give some examples of the border-crossings, we try to carry out, in order to establish connections to the most relevant social movements:

Marxism-Feminism: Promoted and pushed forward by Frigga Haug, a large part of articles is related to gender, gender relations, domestic labor, feminization of poverty, feminist discussion of ethics, up to feminist theology. The article *gender* is just being written by Donna Haraway. Obviously, class-domination and patriarchy can neither be deduced from each other (or reduced to each other), nor separated from each other. They largely intersect and overlap and perpetuate each other. We try both, namely to inscribe feminist critique into the Marxist traditions, and vice versa, to re-inscribe Marxist critique into feminism. Several articles have to deal with the problem, that Marx's focus on wage labor lead him to underestimate the role of female domestic labor in the reproduction of capitalism. And on the other hand, our article *Feminism*, written by Rosemary Hennessy brings back the class-issue into the history of feminism itself: she demonstrates how the social base of white upper-, and middle-class women in the capitalist power-centers could lead to an upper-hand of a moderate, liberal, postmodernist *Cultural-Feminism*, which has largely been adjusted to neoliberal ideology.

Eco-Socialism: Fortunately I can rely here on two authors present in the panel, Victor Wallis and John Foster, who have demonstrated in their articles, that in Marx's

Critique of Political Economy class-questions are closely linked to human relations to nature, and that he already anticipated, what much later has been labelled as *sustainable development*. Obviously, our task as a historical-critical dictionary is again a twofold one: we must uncover a horrible neglect of environmental questions in Marxist traditions, that have been marked themselves by a sort of Fordist industrialism. As you certainly know, it was the negative comment in the *Communist Manifesto* about the “idiocy of rural life”, that made career in the Second and the Third International, and served to justify a reckless industrialisation, that lead to similar consequences as Marx had ascribed to the capitalist agriculture: “undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker”. And we have to showcase that there are still precious treasures to be discovered in Marx’s criticisms of exploitation and destruction of nature, e.g. think about the late Marx’s appreciation of the Russian rural commune and its communal ownership of land as a possible springboard into socialism. And above all: each current strategy for a sustainable development, if it is serious, must convert the organization of production itself, and therefore needs a perspective that goes beyond the capitalist mode of production.

I don’t want enumerate all the social areas, and battlefields and movements, that urgently need a reconnecting of Marxist analysis, or rather, to put it the other way round: to which Marxism is to be reconnected in the interest of its own sustainability. Two other authors of this panel, Richard Lichtman, the author of *Freudomarxismus*, and Inez Hedges, the author of *Fotomontage*, do incorporate themselves some of the connections that are vital for the opening of Marxism. My own focus in the redaction-group of the dictionary is the reconnecting of Marxism and liberationist tendencies in religion. What is often missing in Marxist criticism of religion, is the analytical distinction within *religion* between ideology from above and resistance from below, between paralysing effects and dynamics of empowerment and encouragement.

We have in Europe a long tradition of Christian-Marxist dialogue, and even of a Christian Marxism. You shouldn't be surprised, therefore, if you find in the dictionary articles on *Justice in the Bible*, *Materialist Bible Reading*, *Congregation*, *Faith* (distinguished from *Religion*), and even *God*.

Philology as a medium of a non-centralized reconnection

I hope, you did not get the impression of a huge and shapeless agglomeration of dispersed elements. When we are talking about Plural Marxism and Marxist border-crossings, we are not praising the colorful world of differences as such, nor are we celebrating the disconnectedness of contemporary academic Marxisms from each other and from popular movements. Deconstruction may play an important role in our dissolving of false certainties, but it is not an end in itself. Our program is critical re-construction and re-connection in a non-centralized form.

I'd like to comment on a quite modest but indispensable promoter of such a non-centralized reconnection, namely a careful *philology*. It is a connector, because it enables the readers to have a look at the original texts themselves, to make their own research, to create their own connections, independently of the opinion of the author. In the *Historical-Critical Dictionary* all quotes from sources and references to sources have to be carefully recorded in the articles, in order to assist further independent work.

I'd like to give you a personal example. Last year, I was asked to write an article in the review *Socialism and Democracy* about Marx's concept of *civil society*, related to the current debates on civil society in the US.⁴ Looking at different standard works on this subject (from Cohen/Arato to John Ehrenberg), I permanently stumbled over the

⁴ Jan Rehmann, "Abolition' of Civil Society? Remarks on a Widespread Misunderstanding in the Interpretation of 'Civil Society'", *Socialism and Democracy*, Vol. 13, no. 2, 1999.

assumption that Marx was “the peerless nineteenth-century critic of modern civil society”, and fervently desired a dedifferentiated, class-less society etc.⁵ The general version in the debate is, simply spoken, that you are either a Marxist and against civil society, or you are supportive of civil society and against Marx, but in the same row as, say, Hillary Clinton and Major Giulliani, who both use the term in abundance.

But Marx himself, writing mostly in German, used the German term *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, which is ambivalent: it can mean civil society (opposed to the State), but also bourgeois society, defined by capitalist domination. Whenever Marx criticizes the *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* in the name of a class-less society, it is the *bourgeois* society he is targeting. But the English translations, including the translation of Marx’s *Collected Works*, often got it wrong, by translating buergerliche Gesellschaft as civil society, where Marx clearly talked about bourgeois society.⁶

This is one example where a sloppy philology has disconnecting and harmful consequences for a political strategy. It prevents Marxists from intervening into the contradictions of civil society and from claiming civil achievements against bourgeois domination. And it helps bourgeois politicians to denounce Marxists as anti-democratic and premodern. In this blocked constellation, I rediscovered the importance of the *Dictionary* and especially its philological value for my own work, not as a redactor, but as a user. Because Reinhard Markner’s article *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* did focus exactly on the deciphering of the term’s different meanings in Marx’s writings, giving their contexts, and, not least, the precise passages and pages, so that I could get directly to the sources, in a relative short time.

⁵ Cf. Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 97, 228, 231, 256, 346, 410, 643n.101.

⁶ Cf. CW 5:5

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Any declaration of Marxism's death is premature, because the existential problems which it had begun to address have not been solved and have not been rendered meaningless. Just as the history of Christianity was not ended by the fall of the "Christian" Roman Empire, so too has the search for a socialist society not been ended by the fall of Communist rule.

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