

## Preface

to the first volume of the  
Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism<sup>1</sup>  
(Extract)

### I

This is not the first time that a new dictionary has emerged from the intention to translate, revise, or supplement a previous one. The most renowned reference book of the Enlightenment, Diderot's *Encyclopedie*, grew out of a translation project. Joachim Ritter's *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* began as a revision. The *Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism* resulted from the planning of supplementary volumes to a translation. These volumes were announced in the foreword to the German edition of George Labica's *Dictionnaire critique du marxisme* in 1983.<sup>2</sup> They were intended to complement the French emphasis of this work with other emphases, notably German. Every critical school of thought linked to Marx was welcome among the contributions. When the project found itself blocked in then two-state Germany between dogmatic anathema on the ~~one side and social-liberal fear of contact on the other~~, it became more international and, not least, sought collaboration as far as possible with intellectuals from the »tricontinent« of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The limits of the supplement form were soon exceeded, even by the

---

<sup>1</sup> HISTORISCH-KRITISCHES WÖRTERBUCH DES MARXISMUS, edited by Wolfgang Fritz Haug in collaboration with near 1000 scholars. The first volume out of 15 came out in 1994 (Argument-Verlag, Hamburg); until 2008 6 more volumes appeared. Entries are in German. Foreign-language equivalents are given in Arab, English, French, Russian, Spanish and Chinese. For details see [www.hkwm.de](http://www.hkwm.de).

<sup>2</sup> Georges Labica, *Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, German version, edited by Wolfgang Fritz Haug in 8

merely external fact that the supplement had grown to a length which was many times that of the original.

At the same time, there were also internal reasons for this new start. A new type of problematic surfaced, in the comprehensive sense of a configuration of fields of crisis and criticism. The »Limits of Growth« and other existential problems with which the »New Social Movements« were concerned, as well as the implementation of the high-tech mode of production, all led to a progressive shifting of the questions at hand. Soviet Perestroika and ultimately, the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the specific world order which had emerged from the October Revolution of 1917 and the victory of the antifascist East-West-Alliance in the Second World War, promoted an »epistemological break« and a drive toward historicization, pushing the dictionary project into completely new territory.

Although Joachim Ritter's *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* serves as a virtually unattainable example in respect to its erudition, it is a striking experience to compare scholarly contents of the two works. There are almost no points of overlap. Rather, it is as if the *Historisch-kritische Wörterbuch des Marxismus* (HKWM) spoke into a gaping silence, a silence which marks the discourse of the other work as bourgeois, just as the breaking of this bourgeois silence constitutes the necessity of the Marxist dictionary.

After the discontinuance of the Communist experiment, historical and critical attention to the decline and fall appears of merely archeological interest to the *Zeitgeist*, as if »Western Marxism« and the manifold academic and cultural Marxisms of the intellectuals did not exist. Even

if this were so, and Marxism had declined and fallen, it would nevertheless remain a part of our history. The science, culture, and politics of the 20th century are impossible to understand if one does not take the Marxist challenge and the varied and antagonistic reactions to it into account.

Still, any declaration of death is premature. An unfinished project cannot die, as long as the existential problems which it had begun to address have neither been solved nor rendered meaningless. Marxist thought is not an isolated nor a sectarian phenomenon. It emerged and continues to emerge from practical and theoretical attention to the problems of human socialization and social relations to nature with their antagonisms and crises. These questions concern everyone. They remain to be solved, and the fact that they have not yet been solved is increasingly perceived as a question of the survival of humankind on »Spaceship Earth,« even as the scope of these questions is barely understood.

Just as the history of Christianity was not ended by the fall of early Christian rule, so too has the theoretical and practical search for a model of socialization based on the principles of solidarity and environmental soundness not been ended by the fall of Communist rule. The crimes committed in the name of socialism can no more erase the ethical and political-economic substance of the socialist idea than the immense crimes committed in the name of Christianity could erase the Christian ethical impulse.

---

Joachim Ritter wrote in the foreword of his *Wörterbuch* that, »it cannot be predicted, what a new synthesis will one day look like nor whether or not it is already at work«. This sentence could also be applied to Marxist knowledge on the threshold of the 21st century. From the current body of

knowledge, it is just as impossible to predict which separate elements will one day be taken up again and in what combination they will appear.

This fissured knowledge shot through with manifold antagonisms, this knowledge with its insights and blind spots, presumptions and experiences, refuted hypotheses and points of unrealized potential, is the chaotic and immeasurable material of the historical-critical dictionary. It is obvious that this material can never be exhaustively represented, and that any representation is only excursively possible from a restricted standpoint. Additionally, a clear demarcation of the material would have been senseless, the more so since it is in communication with European traditions and since the checkpoints between Marxist and »bourgeois« knowledge were always open, even if often traversed incognito by both sides. The exhibition of models of thought, conceptual tools, and delineation of thought processes opens up connections in every direction and demonstrates possible sites of interaction.

## II

The current historical constellation is both favorable and adverse for the project of a historical-critical dictionary of Marxism. The collapse of state Marxist censure of re-flection on the past is favorable. The archives are open and the theories ownerless. The antihistorical clutch of the »victor« after the history is adverse: it equals in many ways an erasure of social memory. The post-Communist situation thus imprints the topic headings of »historical« and »critical« with an emphatic relevance to the present-day. These headings address the critical (and self-critical) evaluation of

historical experience on the one hand, and the scientific survey, development, and critical examination of an enormous theoretical corpus on the other. A historical-critical look into the labyrinthine »library« of Marxist knowledge can help effect a curative return to one's senses. The process of remembering with critical examination may even contribute to the dissolution of what Sigmund Freud has called the »blind compulsion to repeat«.

---

The demise of Marxism-Leninism left behind an accumulated historical guilt in the common memory of the peoples. Its counterpart is an enormous mountain of rubble from the fallen system which threatens to bury indiscriminately the rational elements and the seeds of the future which the system contained along with its irrational and lethal elements. This situation forces Marxist thought, in order to survive, to deal with the stress and pain of the negative in the form of what Marx called »ruthless criticism« (*rücksichtslose Kritik*). It is the only way to save a human patrimony of enlightening knowledge and social imagination from being lost in the wreckage. *Retrieving criticism* alone, of which Walter Benjamin wrote, is able to carry as a new Noah's Ark these treasures into a different time.

This kind of criticism is also negative, it can hurt, but it never tacitly pretends to be beyond that which it criticizes. Instead it opens up to historical experience, and by concerning itself with the particulars of this experience, is able to accept them. This criticism does not lay claim to the last word but rather upsets the combination of dismal silence and short-sighted triumph.

The necessary attempt to do justice historically to the object of criticism will not always succeed. Nevertheless, it must be made. To »know

everything better« as it regularly emerges after a defeat is not necessarily indicative of superior knowledge. Often enough, it is just another form of the inability to accept correction. A simple change of sides after the state socialist catastrophe flees from responsible examination into amnesia.

One need not recall only the examples of opportune changes of convictions after the failure of the Soviet attempt at reform and democratization. De-Stalinization had already produced similar cases. In 1956, when Nikita S. Khrushchev pilloried the crimes of Stalin, which was equivalent for the Communist experiment to being »released on probation«, a probation which was forfeited no later than 1968 with the suppression of Czechoslovakian Reform Communism, Henri Lefebvre remarked that it was »the fashion among Marxists to mock quotation as ›the shortest path respectively from one thought to another.« He continues, »This fashion was created exactly by those who had never previously written a line or spoken a sentence without quoting Stalin themselves. Today their ignorance and the emptiness of their thought is concealed in a different manner.«

Without social memory, experience cannot exist. A historical-critical dictionary in times of a »historical break« (Peter Glotz) is significant insofar as it is a part of the process of remembering that mediates intellectual experiences. These intellectual experiences are made up of historical-critical »quotation«, not only of the sort which displays brilliant achievements but also of the sort which exposes the theoretical emptiness of thought enamored of power.

## III

This HKWM has a strong philological emphasis, in addition to its emphases on practical criticism and relation to experience. All quotes from and references to sources have been carefully recorded in the articles, in order to assist further independent work and offer Ariadne's threads as a guide through the labyrinths of the library. There are also pointers to be found as to which works merit new readings in order to make history less fetishistic. The histories the terms can tell in their multiple usages and connotations operate subversively against false certainties and seemingly immovable edifices of thought.

The organizational structure of a dictionary of concepts seemed the most suitable for this project, which is intended to lead to an open workshop atmosphere rather than a closed-minded *Weltanschauung*. While the idea of an encyclopedia assumes control over discrete spheres of knowledge which interconnect like the links of a chain, this dictionary philosophizes with a hammer, in that it shatters the spheres of thought into individual terms. The over-arching meaning is not given. The imaginary control over this over-arching meaning should yield to the deconstruction of hermeneutic totalities. This theoretical reworking of »philosophical grammar« may aid in the introduction of Marxist knowledge into a new »reflexive modernity« enlightened by historical materialism, a modernity in which the unified myths of the subject and meaning have dissolved and which is consequently able to take up the project of critical social theory anew.

## IV

The dictionary addresses over 1500 conceptual terms which have become relevant to Marxism and to social liberation movements within their distinct theoretical and practical lines. The theoretical and politically strategic terms which had become particularly meaningful to Marx and Engels and to the lines of thought connected to them were the first to be included. However, terms unknown to the Marxist classics or even the Marxist traditions, or, at the very least, not native to these traditions were also included. This seemed to be the right choice with terms in which historically new problematics and epistemological claims are articulated or terms which illuminate previously neglected facets of Marxism.

Many of these entries derive from present political-theoretical vocabulary and have never before been addressed in comparable dictionaries. In these entries, many of which are newly coined, the problems of this epoch are articulated. They are the unsolved questions of an epoch of global crises: the transition to the high-technological mode of production of trans-national capitalism, the failure of the Soviet social formation which was determined by the structural inability to keep up with this transition, and the explosion of the North-South conflict in world capitalism once it was no longer held in check by the East-West opposition. Last but not least, the new social movements, most importantly feminism and the environmental movement, helped shape this new vocabulary.

Even in places where the words are not new, the readings certainly are, in that their interpretative questions are the questions of the time.

Historical events, geographical designations, and the names of organizations

---



have not been included, except in cases where they have become expressions in which strategic problems and reflections thereof are condensed. Names of persons appear only in the designations of critical directions or schools which originated with them.

Metaphors, images, topoi, catchwords etc. are accepted whenever they have become important for theoretical-political articulations. Ritter doesn't accept them, even though he knows together with Hans Blumenberg that they »lead to the substructure of thought«.

Terms which have a »split« history appear in a few cases as double entries under the possible variant designations. The resulting polyphony and plurality of perspectives is welcome. It leads into the center of the field of Marxism in its unfinished history.

[...]

Berlin, autumn 1994

Wolfgang Fritz Haug

*Translated by Elizabeth C. Penland*