

You Are Not a Marxist On Your Own

By Robert Cohen

Every now and then over the years I have asked myself – not without discomfort – how I would respond on TV (why on TV?) to an interviewer's question: Are you a Marxist? I don't like the question, I don't like to be pinned down, even where in my own mind I have pinned myself down. Besides, the very act of answering – whatever the answer may be – cedes the questioner a triumph: Aha, now I've got you! By answering the question affirmatively in front of an anonymous public I would expose myself to all the clichés, the superficial knowledge, and the defamations which have accrued to the term. My answer would have to consist of the attempt to sanitize the term, to clarify it and to historicize it by tracing its different uses. How to begin? How to proceed? And assuming I am able to do this with the requisite clarity and pithiness, I would still remain under the pressure of the further question: *Am I a Marxist? Do I know enough to be a Marxist?* I have long been intimidated by one of the most witty and wily passages in Bertolt Brecht's *Flüchtlingsgespräche* (Conversations Among Refugees), where Ziffel the intellectual speaks of the high costs of becoming a Marxist – "20,000 to 25,000 gold marks," and that even "without the bells and whistles." These costs are justified, he explains to the worker Kalle, because true Marxism simply cannot be had without "Hegel [...], Ricardo [...], and so on" (Brecht 1987-2000. Vol. 18, 245). Ricardo? Such bells and whistles are in short supply with me.

Furthermore: Am I, by answering the question affirmatively, at least safe from my own side? For in this domain, as Wolfgang Fritz Haug

puts it in his entry, "Being a Marxist," in the *Historisch-kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus* (Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism, abbreviated as *Dictionary*), "There [within Marxism] one is always a 'Nonmarxist' for someone" (col. 1998).

Having affirmed my espousal of Marxism and – not without hesitation – the adequacy of my knowledge, and having overcome my anxiety with regard to those who would exclude me from the label "Marxist", a further issue would still weigh upon me: whether, with this classification, I would limit my thinking. Against this I posit not only the breadth of Marx's (and Engels') thought; the avowal of being a Marxist includes (or can include, or retains traces of) being a Leninist, a Luxemburgist, a Trotskyist, a Lukácsian, a Blochian, a Gramscian, a Brechtian, an Althusserian, a Haugian – and thereby bears on an immense scope and splendor of human thinking. (But what about being a Stalinist?) Moreover: Does being a Marxist reduce me to an academic disconnected from the real suffering of the vast majority of mankind? And what could it mean in our "post communist situation" (col. 1966), to be a Marxist in one's everyday activities? These are but some of the questions that haunt me, as a Marxist.

But the full scope of a Marxist identification or self-identification only becomes apparent once we recognize that this category does not simply pertain to the public or professional persona. As Haug points out, "the political shows itself [...] in the personal" (col. 1965). This touches on a nerve for me. I cannot think of 'being a Marxist' without implicating my private persona. Accordingly, there is an urgency to finding my own place in the choir – or in the cacophony – of Marxist voices and arguments. On the day that volume 8/II of the *Dictionary* arrived in the

mail, I immediately began to read the entry "Being a Marxist," and finished it – all 62 large-sized columns – on the following day. It is, as far as I can tell, the most extensive article in the *Dictionary* to date. That may have to do with the fact that new territory is covered in Haug's historical-critical presentation, but it also speaks to the significance accorded to the topic itself. The eighth volume marks the beginning of the second half of the *Dictionary* (it will eventually be comprised of 15 volumes). Here, in the middle of this immense undertaking, we have arrived at the core of its driving energy. The entry, "Being a Marxist" serves as a linchpin that holds the whole project together. *Tua res agitur* – however historically distant or theoretically abstract some of the entries in the *Dictionary* may seem, they are about us.

Us: the pronoun is born out in around 100 names in the entry "Being a Marxist." What Heinrich Heine once said about literary history also applies to the genealogy established by this article: it is "the great morgue where all seek the dead ones whom they love, or to whom they are related" (Heine 1979, 135). With these 100 names Haug introduces individual "motives and routes of becoming a Marxist" and of "remaining a Marxist," as two of the seven chapter titles put it. Some came from the opposing camp ("conversion of a Saul into a Paul," col. 1970), others via theory or via membership in a communist or socialist party, or through a movement, like the generation of '68, or via the journal *Das Argument* (cf. col. 1980) which Haug has been publishing since 1959. In describing his own path, Lucien Sève, one of the multiplicity of voices, also answers my question as to how one could live up to the claim of being a Marxist: "One *is* not a Marxist, one *becomes* one. And in reality one is never done with this becoming" (col. 1970). *Female*

Marxists occupy a substantial space in this genealogy, from Vera Zasulich and Angelica Balabanoff, to Clara Zetkin, Rosa Luxemburg and Alexandra Kollontai, through Rossana Rossanda, Dorothee Sölle, and Frigga Haug.

A deep connection with the "fate of the weak and oppressed" (col. 1982) takes up a decisive share in all of these pathways. This illuminates why so many have not let themselves be deterred from being a Marxist by disappointment with the course of history or by disadvantages at work or in everyday life (and sometimes far worse consequences). What may appear as godly selflessness here Haug sweeps aside in one of the wisest passages of the article. In place of selflessness, the dialectician posits the motive of "self-actualization": "Crucial here is the growth in one's *own* development opportunities and 'cultural' productivity through means of solidarity" (ibid. emphasis added). This is close to Brecht, who has Shen Te say (in *The Good Person of Szechwan*): "To let no one perish, not even oneself / To fill everyone with happiness, even oneself, that / is good" (Brecht 1987-2000. Vol. 6, 232). The altruism of idealist lineage is replaced by a materialist ethics. Happiness can only be realized through community. When the many are denied the possibility of being happy, the self-actualization of the few is also blocked.

Under the chapter title, "Antinomy of Marxism," (col. 1996) another risk-laden aspect of being a Marxist comes into view. It is introduced with a formulation of Rosa Luxemburg: Many pupils of Marx, she writes in 1903, suffered from a "mortifying anxiety [...] to remain 'within the bounds of Marxism'" (ibid.). We nod knowingly. After the lessons of a century that saw socialist states arise and disappear again in the rear-view mirror of history, Haug tries to allay our fear: "To be true to the basic

thrust of Marxism is to go beyond Marx." This is followed by the clear-sighted assertion: "Even the most faithful translation of this impulse in changed circumstances abandons – or betrays? – the original" (col. 1997). There is no escaping the antinomy of fidelity and betrayal, as many collaborators of the journal *Das Argument* could bear witness. For their going-beyond-Marx they were supposed to be driven out of 'Marxism' by a group of West German Communist Party (DKP) theorists in the first half of the 1980s. Haug reacted with the two-volume publication that already signaled the program of *Das Argument* in the title: *Pluralist Marxism* (published 1985 and 1987). With the end of the Soviet forms of socialism, the once powerful pressure exerted against Haug's notion of a Pluralist Marxism has faded. In "Being a Marxist," it is not only the plural modes of Marxism, but also the boundaries of this pluralism that are emphasized. They are to be found wherever the door could be opened to arbitrariness. Haug approvingly cites the words of Polish Philosopher Adam Schaff, that it does not suffice "to *want* to be a Marxist, one must also *be able* to be a Marxist" (col. 1997). It is not enough to have the requisite knowledge, one must also know how to use it. In reference to Schaff, Haug states, "this opens the question of a basic core of theses which, if abandoned, would preclude one from calling oneself a Marxist" (col. 1998). The question being posed here is one of 'correct' continuity with the founders (col. 1997). Which, however, is the 'correct' continuity? Haug's answer amplifies the unease inherent in the antinomy: "It is in the mask of fidelity that one can commit the greatest treason" (col. 1998). A prescription for how to avoid such an ensnarement is not offered. The minimal requirement remains: "fidelity to the foundational impulses [of

Marxism]" (col. 1999). Each epoch has to find its own way of implementing this requirement.

No matter their position vis-a-vis the Soviet system and the Communist parties, their end is linked to an eminently irreplaceable loss for Marxists; a loss compounded by the decline of the industrial working class around the same time. The hinterland for being a Marxist is disappearing. Historical developments have ruptured the unity of theory and practice – one of the "fundamental requirements" for being a Marxist (col. 1990). "Marxist individuals," Haug writes, are tasked with "proving themselves in both spheres" (ibid.). He reminds us that "You are not a Marxist on your own" ("Marxist ist man nicht allein," col. 2005). Confronted with the dwindling of a community to whom they can speak and from whom they can learn, Marxists pay the cost of "loneliness" (ibid.).

How do we overcome this rupture? How do we fashion community with those "bought off by bread and (televised) games, the vast majority of whom do not want to know anything about those who would be their champions?" (col. 2019). In order not to fall prey to a "pseudo revolutionary nihilism," the negation of the existing conditions must be anchored in a positive vision (col. 2011). Its contours are those of "self-determination, solidarity, human dignity" and just social relations (ibid.). That denotes what one could call, with Walter Benjamin, "the minimal program of humaneness" ("Minimalprogramm der Humanität," GS II.2, 572). And with Bloch, who provides the title "Living in concrete utopia" to the sixth chapter of the entry, being a Marxist becomes oriented toward a "Not-Yet Being" (col. 2011). The resuscitation of utopian thinking – which in postmodernity has gone to the dogs – is

rooted in the "unrealized possibilities" (col. 2013) to be uncovered in the present. The realization of these possibilities, even in light of the bleak present, will not be put off till the Second Coming; every moment is a good one to begin. As for the rest? "The dialectic continues to hold surprises." (col. 2022)

A linchpin, we said. One can also call Haug's article a milestone. As such it marks the distance covered so far and points in the direction where the goal must lie. The distance yet to travel is not shown. Here, for the duration of 62 columns, we have made a stopover. Refreshed by new insight into our situation, we again set out on our way.

Trans. from the German by Sean Larson

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