

# ON THE CONTRADICTIONS OF MARXISM\*

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*Abstract: Since the beginnings of Marxism there has been a persistent demand to understand this theory, as well its practical and organizational development, according to the principles of Marxism itself. By "Marxism" I mean here historical materialism: not mechanical determinism but the interaction of transformational praxis with continually changing reality. This interaction may be confrontational and, as the poet-philosopher Bertolt Brecht said, "like everything that pertains to conflict, collision, and struggle, it cannot be treated without the materialist dialectic." (Gesamtausgabe, vol. 23 [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1993], p. 376.) In the following article I want to show that Brecht's thesis is also valid for the history of Marxism and its forms of motion.*

*Keywords: Marxism, left history, contradiction, Marxism, left history, contradiction, practical dialectics*

\* Paper presented at the First World Congress of Marxism, Peking University, October 10, and at Nanjing University, October 13, 2015. Translated from the German by Joseph Fracchia and reworked by the author, who would like to thank Joseph Grim Feinberg for his invaluable assistance. In what follows, the reader should keep in mind that, although theoretical, this is not an academic text but rather an attempt to speak about China's reality to representatives of the Chinese state. This is an encounter in which even thousands of years old civilizational founding myths can play their role.

### 1. The Marxian Method and Marxism

Since the early history of Marxism, there has been a persistent demand to conceptualize Marxism according to Marxism's own fundamental principles. In what follows, I shall respond to this demand, trying to develop an understanding of Marxism through the lens of what Marx called "my dialectical method."<sup>1</sup> Seeking to illuminate the relation between theory and practice, already in 1959 Henri Lefebvre attempted "to think the living and lived contradictions, that is: the dialectic" of being a Marxist.<sup>2</sup> And in 1978 Adam Schaff admonished that this dialectic "is unfortunately mostly ignored."<sup>3</sup> But how is the dialectic in this case to be understood? Obviously it has to present an alternative to a one-dimensionally determinist approach, since the determination of human reality results from the interplay of world-changing praxis with the world that is to be changed. This relationship is a polemical one – that is, one of contradictions and, as the great Marxist poet-philosopher Bertolt Brecht wrote in 1956, shortly before his death, "like everything that pertains to conflict, collision, and struggle, it cannot be treated without the materialist dialectic."<sup>4</sup> Brecht did not stand alone in this thought. In 1955 he stated: "the text that made the strongest impression on me in the past year is Mao Tse-tung's essay *On Contradiction*." In the first sentence of his essay, Mao states: "The law of contradiction in things, that is, the law of the unity of opposites, is the basic law of materialist dialectics."<sup>5</sup> I want to show that this is also valid for the forms of motion of Marxism itself, though this would have been unthinkable for traditional "DiaMat." Two prefatory clarifications are necessary: one on the concept of contradiction; and a second on the concept of dialectics.

Regarding contradictions, many treat them as something to avoid. And they are right if they mean striving for consistency in explanations and actions. But when Marx speaks of contradictions, he means real contradictions, comparable to Kant's notion of "real oppositions" (*Realgegensätze*).<sup>6</sup> Marx's analysis of the commodity provides an example

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1977), p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *La somme et le reste* (Paris: Meridiens Klincksieck, 1959), p. 683.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Schaff, *Che cosa significa essere marxista. Saggi filosofici 2*, ed. and trans. Augusto Ponzio (Bari: Dedalo, 1978), p. 231.

<sup>4</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 23: Schriften 3. Schriften 1942–1956* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), p. 376.

<sup>5</sup> [[bibl., or [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1\\_17.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_17.htm)] Mao substantiates this with a note from Lenin's Philosophical Notebooks: "Dialectics in the proper sense is the study of contradiction in the very essence of objects." (V. I. Lenin, "Conspectus of Hegel's Book *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*," in *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 38 [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1958], p. 252).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Immanuel Kant, "An Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy," in Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*, ed. and trans. David Walford (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 203–241, here 211. According to Kant's

that is fundamental for the critique of political economy. On the one hand, the commodity exists as use-value, as concrete wealth; yet, on the other hand, and primarily, it has value as abstract wealth, in which concrete wealth is negated. The reason for the coexistence of these contradictory forms of wealth is to be found in the relations of production. Although commodity production presupposes the social division of labor, it is simultaneously unsocial. In other words, the producer of the commodity produces for society, but he does so in order to fill his own pocket. Marx summarizes this and other characteristics of commodities when he writes that “the exchange of commodities implies contradictory and mutually exclusive conditions. The further development of the commodity does not abolish these contradictions, but rather provides the form within which they have room to move. This is, in general, the way in which real contradictions are resolved.”<sup>7</sup> Of course, these contradictions have to be analyzed in a logical, that is, non-contradictory way. Marx comments on the double meaning of the word contradiction, that it can refer both to the logic of assertions and to the structure of the asserted objects: “It goes without saying that the paradox of reality is also reflected in paradoxes of speech,” he says, “which are at variance with common sense and with what vulgarians mean and believe they are talking of. The contradictions which arise from the fact that on the basis of commodity production [...] the relations of people [present themselves] as relations between things and as things – these contradictions are innate in the subject-matter, not in its verbal expressions.”<sup>8</sup> The real contradiction can only be understood as the unity of unity and contradictory partition.

Now one might think that for Marx it is particularly capitalism that is afflicted by contradictions and that its overcoming will dissolve all contradictions. But in that case it would not be possible to understand why Marx sees in the “Hegelian ‘contradiction’” the “source of all dialectics,”<sup>9</sup> including his own, provided that Hegel’s concept was “detached” from its idealist foundation and reconstructed on historical-materialist ground. If we accept this “translation” of Hegel’s conception, we may say with Mao that contradictions are to be found in all things and all appearances.

Contradictions, however, are not only unavoidable, like an ontological<sup>10</sup> given; they also act as motors of development. At her trial, Rosa Luxemburg stated that an individual

conception, in a real opposition “one thing cancels that which is posited by the other; but the consequence is *something (cogitable)*.” (*Ibid.*)

<sup>7</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 198 (translation modified).

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus-Value: Volume IV of Capital*, vol. III, trans. Jack Cohen and S. W. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress, 1963), ch. XX.d., “Baily.”

<sup>9</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 744, n. 29.

<sup>10</sup> Marx’s rupture with metaphysics does not mean separation from the real, as we see it in Neo-Kantian epistemology, often disguised as discourse theory. On the contrary, Marx’s “ontology” is about *inter-action (Wechselwirkung)*; it is *dynamic* (Balibar); it is about *becoming* (Bloch). “Talking to normal Marxists, you cannot pronounce the word ontology,” observed Ernst Bloch, author of

counts as being convicted when he gets trapped in contradictions. But for “human society as a whole,” she continues, this is different: it “develops continuously in contradictions, and rather than succumbing to these, it only starts to move when it meets contradictions.”<sup>11</sup> With Hegel she says: “Contradiction is the very moving principle of the world.”<sup>12</sup> This driving force plays a key role. The question about it leads to the second prefatory clarification concerning dialectics.

Notions that the Hegelian dialectic needs only “to be inverted,” because it was “standing on its head,”<sup>13</sup> lead toward errors. It may be true that Marx “detached” the Hegelian dialectic from idealism, but this detachment should not be seen as a simple inversion. My decades-long investigations of Marx’s praxis of the dialectic in *Capital* have led me to characterize it as a “dialectic of praxis.” “Praxis” means here behavior in certain relations that are the conditions of that behavior and at the same time are modified by it.<sup>14</sup> This understanding of praxis makes it possible to differentiate between theoretical and practical dialectics. The latter term refers to human action, particularly to organized action seen from the viewpoint of how it handles contradictions. Here a radical ambiguity of contradictions appears: they are both danger and opportunity in one. They threaten the capacity for action that can be attained through organization, while at the same time they point toward the moment of a possible leap onto a higher level. A note by Brecht from 1932 culminates in the sentence: in order to prevent contradictions from disrupting the unity of an organization, it is necessary to be able “to operate with antinomies.”<sup>15</sup>

the *Ontology of Not-Yet Being* (Ernst Bloch, *Zur Ontologie des Noch-Nicht-Seins, Philosophische Grundfragen*, vol. 1 [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1961]), which inspired Lukács to undertake his *Ontology of Social Being* (Georg Lukács, *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins*, vol. I–II, *Werke*, vol. 13–14 [Darmstadt and Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1984–1986]); “it reminds them of Heidegger,” Bloch continued, “of fundamental ontology.” Marxists are used to an ontology that is static, unchangeable, “the antithesis of becoming” (quoted by Frank Benseler, “Nachwort,” in Lukács, *Zur Ontologie*, vol. II, p. 744). But for Bloch and the late Lukács, the Marxian approach to being is to conceptualize it as a “permanent irreversible process” (Lukács, *Zur Ontologie*, vol. I, p. 308), far from an idea of the “fixedness of the thing” and its complementary opposite, the idea of the “immateriality of energy” (Lukács, *Zur Ontologie*, vol. I, p. 91). If dialectical thought is to grasp the real or claim “ontological” (that is, realistic) relevance, it cannot operate in a timeless, mechanical sameness. Yet, without some kind of ontology, Marxism does not reach the level of *reality*.

<sup>11</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg, Vol. I: Economic Writings 1*, ed. Peter Hudis (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p. 251.

<sup>12</sup> Cited from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel’s Logic: Being Part One of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), para. 119, Zusatz, p. 174.

<sup>13</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 103.

<sup>14</sup> To be sure, praxis doesn’t effectuate this modification as an individual strategy or action, but by virtue of a great number of diverging, but in their results converging, strategies of action in a given field.

<sup>15</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 21: Schriften 1. Schriften 1914–1933* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 578f. “Antinomy” means here that the Communist Party, in order not to be

In this sense, we can further differentiate between active and passive dialectics, an opposition which is basic for practical dialectics. Active dialectic can be compared to the art of riding the waves, the passive dialectic with being overwhelmed by the wave. For a political leadership that must constantly produce a new unity of differences, and often a contradictory unity of oppositions, the art of the active dialectic can be a matter of survival.<sup>16</sup>

Practically, then, it is a matter of strengthening our ability to perceive actual or potential manifestations of crisis from the perspective of their possible prevention and even of using these manifestations as an impetus for renewal. This may be the case when a concrete situation brings goals and paths, ends and means, into an unavoidable contradiction.

Practical dialectics formulates its concepts with an eye toward the contradictions with which world-changing practice must reckon. Its value for our problematic becomes evident when one sees that the portrayal of the “twists and turns,” the “zigzag ways,” of international socialism could be lost in millions of details. In order to prevent this, we must highlight the structural contradictions of the Marxist project – its internal as well as external contradictions. The internal contradictions of the Marxist project can be understood as long-range determinants that in changing conjunctures become virulent in various ways. In the following, I attempt to sketch aspects of a dialectic of Marxism, searching for its constitutive contradictions.

## 2. Contradictions of Marxism

The path from Marx’s formation of his theory to the actual historical birth of Marxism took nearly a half-century. The outlines of what would eventually become Marxism first appeared in the months before the bourgeois-democratic revolution of 1848 in the form of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* that Marx composed in 1847 for a small secret group, the Communist League, founded in London. But this work, today one of the most

torn apart by contradictions, has to take into account mutually exclusive interests of different sectors of its class basis (e.g., employed vs. unemployed).

<sup>16</sup> European politics offer dramatic examples these days, to which all our concepts apply. After contributing to the creation of failed states in the Arab world, and after selling weapons to all contending parties to the ongoing wars in that region, the Europeans witnessed the arrival of large numbers of refugees. German chancellor Angela Merkel tried to “ride the Wave” with a spectacular act of welcoming them. After earning herself in Greece a reputation for cruelty for forcing extreme austerity policies on this country, her image abruptly changed. In some regions, she appeared suddenly as an unbelievable proponent of human solidarity, while in other regions like Poland – until recently Germany’s greatest ally – even the government now depicts her as a “Nazi.” No less abruptly, the astounding “culture of welcoming” the refugees, which was promoted by an impressive social movement, lost the initiative and gave way to the rapid ascent of the xenophobic party Alternative für Deutschland. Thus, facing a dramatic dynamic of opposites, and working through a passive dialectic of reversals (e.g., from inclusion to exclusion), Angela Merkel repeatedly tried to “operate with antinomies” but is threatened with being overrun by a wave that could bring the disintegration both of Europe and of her political basis in Germany.

widely read in the entire world, disappeared into oblivion for a quarter-century after its first publication. The second crucial moment in the formation of Marxism occurred seventeen years later, in 1864, when groups of radicals met in London in the aftermath of the Polish uprising of 1863, in order to coordinate their class experiences and practices on an international level. Toward the end of the planning process, Marx leapt in and formulated the meeting's "Inaugural Address,"<sup>17</sup> with which the "International Workingmen's Association" (IWA), later known as the "First International," announced its presence on the historical stage. This is the hour of the birth of the modern workers' movement, but not yet of Marxism. Though the IWA only remained in existence formally for 12 years (and practically only for eight), it can justifiably be said that this launching of the modern workers' movement was the "practical organizational work"<sup>18</sup> of Karl Marx, for which he made press-ready his major work, the first volume of *Das Kapital*. The First International had to make way for the henceforth rising *national* workers' parties.

When I spoke of the internal as opposed to the external contradictions and situated the external contradictions in relation to the social context, this was, strictly speaking, misleading. There is no "outside" of the world. What is external from the standpoint of Marxian theory is internal from the standpoint of Marxism, which is the becoming-real of Marx' theory. And what is external from the standpoint of Marxist organization is internal from the standpoint of its organized praxis, and so on. All things interact with one-another. This is already obvious in the formation-process of Marxian theory. Marxian theory was forged through the critique of other, contemporary theoretical conceptions.<sup>19</sup> In the reception of Marx's thought a contradiction emerges from this which, as long as it operates unnoticed, ignites a passive dialectic and throws Marx's followers back behind Marx himself. Critique is anti-thesis, and the thesis to which it opposes itself is that of the opponent. The first to point to this problem was Antonio Labriola. Engels' *Anti-Dühring*, he writes, "was not written for a thesis, but rather for an anti-thesis."<sup>20</sup> By introducing elements of the adversary's discourse into the Marxian theory, this threatens the autonomous development of what Labriola calls the "philosophy of praxis," which he sees as the very core of historical materialism. Later, Antonio Gramsci shared this understanding. Among Gramsci's contemporaries, it is once again Brecht who sees that "when we take a stand against the claims of our powerful opponents, the objections which we raise

<sup>17</sup> "Address" meant a kind of manifest, formulating basic principles and demands.

<sup>18</sup> Mats Lindberg, *Inledning till Kapitalet: Särtryck ur sjätte upplagan av första boken* (Stockholm: Arkiv förlag, 2013), p. XIV (Introduction to the new Swedish edition of *Capital*).

<sup>19</sup> Most widely debated is Marx's relation to Hegel, which tends to obfuscate Marx's own dialectical method; cf. Wolfgang Fritz Haug, "Marx's Learning Process: Against Correcting Marx with Hegel," trans. Eric Canepa, in *Rethinking Marxism* 18 (2006), no. 4, pp. 572–584 (online at <http://www.wolfgangfritzhaug.inkrit.de/documents/marxlearning-RM-06-haug.pdf> [accessed May 5, 2017]).

<sup>20</sup> Antonio Labriola, *Socialism and Philosophy*, trans. Ernest Untermann (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1912), p. 53.

must be formed from the material of our opponents' words and concepts."<sup>21</sup> Let me give an example: when Marx says "it is not the consciousness of people that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness,"<sup>22</sup> his counter-statement is posited as the antithesis of the thesis that it negates. Now, most of the time it became transformed into the thesis "being determines consciousness." By this, Marxism falls back in pre-Marxian metaphysics and involuntarily negates exactly what is essential to it, namely: world-changing praxis. The unrecognized contradiction catches Marxists on the wrong foot.

The history of the word "Marxist" leads to an antagonism in the emerging workers' movement. "Marxist" was a curse word that Marx's opponents in the First International aimed at his followers, until those followers, some years later, turned it into a badge of honor. At the foundation of the Second International, six years after Marx's death, all of the political organizations of the workers' movement that were represented committed themselves to Marxism. Our opponents "will go crazy over the fact that they have given us this name," Engels wrote.<sup>23</sup>

The fusion of a scientific theory with a proletarian movement gave birth to a Marxism that was a living contradiction, for which, theoretically, it was not prepared: for its indispensable *intellectual* – because scientific – element, there was no adequate conceptual place within its working class understanding. This unreflected contradiction between reality and self-understanding has done just as much damage as the lack of a Marxist theory of leadership. Both matters were first addressed by Antonio Gramsci while in a fascist prison at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, but his texts did not become known until after the Second World War, and in many countries they still cannot be read in a reliable critical edition (the first such edition did not appear in Italian until 1975; in German, one did not appear until the end of the 1990's).

A third contradiction resulted from the interaction of Marxism with its environment. The Marxian theory of capitalism brilliantly exposed the general contradictions of capitalism and its forms of movement, but it had no appropriate concept of how its own becoming-practical would alter capitalism. The historical materiality of a rapidly changing world distanced the classical texts ever further from contemporary actuality. In particular, the revolution of 1917 greatly enhanced this distance. This is expressed in Lenin's reproach against Bela Kun for criticizing the politics of the Comintern "on the basis of citations from Marx that refer to a situation completely dissimilar to the present one." Lenin insisted, by contrast, that "the concrete analysis of a concrete situation" is

<sup>21</sup> Brecht, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 21, p. 585 (trans. author).

<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx, „Preface“, in Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Nahum Isaac Stone (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1904), pp. 11-12 (translation modified).

<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Engels, *Letter to Laura Lafargue, June 11, 1889* (online at [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1889/letters/89\\_06\\_11.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1889/letters/89_06_11.htm) [accessed May 20, 2016]; translation modified).

“the living soul of Marxism.”<sup>24</sup> In each epoch such an analysis has to establish anew the strategy of the workers’ movement. Even the handling of this contradiction can become a danger, as the late Lukács notes in 1966: with Stalin, he says, under the “predominance of tactics over the principles of theory,” these principles “sink down to [...] an adornment,” putting the final nail in the coffin of both theory and praxis.<sup>25</sup>

The amalgamation of scientific theory and the proletariat brought Marxism as it was practiced into opposition to Marxism as theory. Rosa Luxemburg viewed this as the “vengeance” taken by the “social conditions of proletarian existence [...] first elucidated by Marxian theory, [...] by the fate they impose upon Marxian theory itself.”<sup>26</sup>

It was Marxism’s success that tumbled the Marxism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century into its first crisis, as the opposition between (actually attained) reform and (delayed) revolution became virulent. Luxemburg, in her polemic against Bernstein in 1899, developed the opposition between short-term and long-term goals in a rather unreflected manner. Four years later, however, she developed the necessity of holding together increasingly distant poles in a manner that renders to Realpolitik what belongs to Realpolitik but ties pragmatism to the goals that push beyond that which is *only* pragmatic. For the handling of this contradiction she coined the notion of “revolutionary Realpolitik.”<sup>27</sup> It is supposed to maintain the “tension-filled context of mediation between short-term and long-term goals” and to prevent organized Marxist praxis from losing its identity.<sup>28</sup> This “tension between path and goal,”<sup>29</sup> between the present day and an ultimately uncertain future, runs through the history of Marxism.

<sup>24</sup> V. I. Lenin, “KOMMUNISMUS. Zeitschrift der Kommunistischen Internationale für die Länder Südosteuropas“, *Lenin Werke*, vol. 31 (Berlin, DDR: Dietz Verlag 1966), pp. 153–155, here 154. Translation by WFH from the German original. (The article also appears in English, where this line is translated, somewhat imprecisely, as V. I. Lenin, “KOMMUNISMUS: Journal of the Communist International,” in *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 31, trans. Julius Katzer [Moscow: Progress, 1965], pp. 165–167.)

<sup>25</sup> Georg Lukács, “Gespräche mit Hans Heinz Holz, Leo Kofler und Wolfgang Abendroth (1966),” in Georg Lukács, *Werke, Vol. 18: Autobiographische Texte und Gespräche* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag Bielefeld), pp. 349f.

<sup>26</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, “Stagnation and Progress of Marxism,” in David Ryazanov (ed.), *Karl Marx: Man, Thinker and Revolutionist*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: International Publishers, 1927) (online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1903/misc/stagnation.htm> [accessed May 20, 2016]).

<sup>27</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, “Karl Marx”, in Rosa Luxemburg, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1, 2 (Berlin, DDR: Dietz Verlag, 1970), p. 373.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*; cf. Frigga Haug, *Rosa Luxemburg und die Kunst der Politik* (Hamburg: Argument, 2007), pp. 57–94 (Chapter 2: “Revolutionäre Realpolitik”).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

### 3. Towards a Dialectic of Marxism

Contradictions must not be misunderstood as mistakes. Mistakes occur in the *treating* of contradictions. If there are “no things that do not contain contradictions within themselves,”<sup>30</sup> the ability to operate with them is a necessary condition for politics. Contradictions are to be feared only like a *test* that one must pass in order not to perish.<sup>31</sup>

If the art of surfing teaches one to move on the tipping point, keeping the always-looming contradiction from swamping the surfer, then *antinomies*, in the ancient meaning that one has to obey two equally imperative and mutually exclusive norms, are contradictory waves that cannot be surfed, contradictions that cannot but swamp us. To be broken by antinomies is the theme that gave the political drama of Greek antiquity its tragic character. *Antigone* by Sophocles offers a much discussed example. Antigone’s brother, Polynices, raised his sword against the ruler. He is defeated and killed, the burial of his corpse forbidden. In this case two equally untouchable moral laws enter into conflict: the law of the state, embodied in its ruler, forbids the burial of the seditionist. But the moral law demands equally unconditionally the burial of the dead man by his sister according to cultic ritual. By having obeyed this commandment, Antigone violates the state’s prohibition and is condemned to be “buried alive.” Then the un-reconciled antinomy produces catastrophe upon catastrophe. Antigone commits suicide, followed in this by her fiancé, Haimon, the son of the ruler; and Haimon is in turn followed by his mother, Eurydice, the wife of the ruler.

The logic of the *ability to operate with antinomies* which otherwise are pregnant with catastrophe is, in contrast, attributed by Aeschylus to Heracles. Prometheus (whom the young Marx called “the grandest saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar”<sup>32</sup>) was to be “chained” to a rock in the Caucasus for the rest of his life. That was his punishment for having violated the prohibition, issued by Zeus, against teaching human beings how to use fire – a violation that, of course, brought about a great leap in the development of the human species. According to Aeschylus, Prometheus knows that the ruler and,

<sup>30</sup> Mao, *On Contradiction (Über den Widerspruch, Ausgewählte Werke*, vol. I, [Beijing: Verlag für fremdsprachige Literatur, 1968], pp. 365–408, here 371).

<sup>31</sup> Even when contradictions indicate pent-up necessities for change, danger represents, at the same time, an opportunity. For that reason, the maxim with which Bertolt Brecht prefaced his *Dreigroschenprozess* (1931/1932) is valid not only in terms of the contradictions of the opponents of Marxism but also for Marxism itself: “Die Widersprüche sind die Hoffnungen!” “The contradictions are the hopes!” (Brecht, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 21, p. 448). But mere hope is of course “nothing but an inconstant joy,” as Spinoza said – because we are to some degree in doubt about the actual outcome (Baruch de Spinoza, *Ethics*, Book III, “On the Origin and Nature of the Affects,” Proposition 18, Scholium II, in Edwin Curley (ed.), *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, trans. Edwin Curley [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994], p. 165).

<sup>32</sup> Karl Marx, „Draft of a New Preface,” in Karl Marx, *Marx-Engels Collected Works, Vol. 1: The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* (Moscow: Progress, 1902), electronic version cited, formerly available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/410.htm>, no longer accessible; no page no. (translation modified).

with him, the entire ruling order will fall. And in response to the question of who will effect this downfall, Aeschylus lets the enchained Prometheus answer: the ruler himself, whose “own light-witted decisions will undo him.”<sup>33</sup> The ban of the antinomy is broken by Heracles. Clever as a fox, he respects the literal verdict and yet simultaneously not only liberates the enchained Prometheus but also preserves the ruling order and Zeus himself from imminent downfall by a symbolic compromise: Prometheus must for all eternity bear a ring in which a piece of that rock in the Caucasus is embedded.

In his great three-volume novel of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *The Aesthetic of Resistance*, the German-Swedish, Marxist writer Peter Weiss set himself the herculean task of creating a narrative mode for the antinomies of his own time. It gives the impression that Weiss followed in a literary manner Brecht’s maxim about being able to operate with antinomies.<sup>34</sup> He lets historical Marxist antagonists of that time have their say in such a way as to respect their irreconcilable antinomies. Therein appears a glimpse of a future Marxism that has learned not only to admit its contradictions, but also to look them in the eye.<sup>35</sup> In this regard, the history of Marxism seems to resemble that of the liberated Prometheus – even if only in literary-imaginative anticipation and in remembrance of so many victims.

<sup>33</sup> Aeschylus, “Prometheus Bound,” line 762, trans. Richmond Lattimore, in David Green and Richmond Lattimore (eds.), *Greek Tragedies I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 99.

<sup>34</sup> Actually, Weiss could not have known it; he died in 1982, shortly after he finished his book, while this maxim was first published ten years later.

<sup>35</sup> In 1983, Klaus Holzkamp, the founder of Marxist critical psychology in West Berlin, stated, playing off a famous formulation from Marx: “The prehistory of Marxism is not yet over.” (Klaus Holzkamp, “‘Aktualisierung’ oder Aktualität des Marxismus?“, *Aktualisierung Marx, Argument Sonderband* 100 [Berlin, West: Argument Verlag, 1983], p. 64).