

AN INTRODUCTION TO »RETHINKING MARX«
100 YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH¹

Otros se habían
enredado en la frente
de Marx y pataleaban en su barba
... impregnados de dulce menosprecio
para mi ordinaria falta de tinieblas

Pablo Neruda, *Oda a la crítica*

The invitation was addressed to scholars from various countries who conceive of their work as being within the tradition (or one of the traditions) of the Mandan project. Memorial speeches were not asked for, but contributions to a renewal of Marxist theory. The main scope was not to »honor« a classical thinker. Marxism-socialism is a living, unfinished project unavoidably living through crises. There is no better way for Marxist scholars to honour Marx than by approaching him and his heritage in his own way. We therefore invited for a critical re-reading of Marx, in the light of the manifold crises, dangers, problems, innovations of our present world. How does the work of Marx respond to experiences and methods of thought developed during the past century? Steps of learning are often preceded by a period of gradually growing uneasiness with customary concepts, methods, attitudes and practice forms. Interests and perceptiveness slowly shift with the changing problem-configurations, until suddenly a further development becomes possible. We hope to contribute to the preparation of such a new step by bringing together reflections from different countries and various political and theoretical backgrounds.

For this occasion three West German Marxist journals cooperated on a volume,

¹Introduction to: S. Hänninen & L. Paldán (eds.), *Rethinking Marx*, Internationale Sozialismus-Diskussion, vol 5, Argument-Sonderband AS 109, Berlin-New York-Bagnolet (Fr) 1983.

Aktualisierung Marx' (Argument-Sonderband AS 100, 1983, ed. By Detlev Albers, Elmar Altvater and myself). It was made available for the participants of the conference in advance; reflections and analyses, which are in the following pages only alluded to, can be found there *in extensor*. The importance of the conference — as of the volume *Aktualisierung Marx'* — will be found less on the level of the answers than on the level of the questions. What is on the agenda is the opening up of new research and its accompanying debates. However, this is an open-ended process without any guaranties. Without new efforts of synthesis to reach a frame for common theory and practice this opening could be condemned to an act of self-dissolution.

There were many gatherings in many countries to commemorate the Marx-Centennial. One specificity of our conference² consists in the fact that it was organized by Marxist scholars themselves, not by a party or other political institutions. Such an autonomous meeting, though it is not welcomed by all political organizations, has its own right and necessity apart from those meetings which are articulated by parties or state apparatuses. If *Scientific Socialism* is to be more than an ideological formula, then the scientific elements must demand that its own forms and laws of movement be respected. To be sure, socialism cannot be reduced to science, nor can its scientific elements be reduced to politics. Thus it is necessary to develop different spaces and forms of practice within Marxism. As long as this necessity with its dialectics of differences and interrelations has not been learned, there will always prevail the false dialectic of a power-subjected ideology on the one hand, and of a more or less unrelated and atomized intellectuality, a helpless prey to market-relationships and academic career relations, on the other.

The Centennial of Marx' death may, however, be considered *as* a symbolic occasion on which to create a frame for controversial communication between

² Freie Universitaet Berlin, february 1983.

Marxist scholars. Like it or not, in the Federal Republic of Germany and West Berlin we must attempt this — *as* would have to be done in various other developed capitalist countries — under conditions defined by the absence of a hegemonial field around a Marxist workers' movement. It would, though, be fatal to accommodate ourselves to this absence. To accept the unrelatedness of theory to political practice would be no better than to submit theory to authoritarian control. Thus this kind of »freedom« from organizational links should be realized in an even more responsible way.

There are other barriers against a self-organized conference of Marxist intellectuals from different currents and countries. The communication tends to be quite underdeveloped. This conference is intended to contribute within its very modest possibilities to the development of an international Marxist scientific community. Normally the balance of forces as determined by cultural imperialism also blindly determines the theoretical exchange relations between Marxists from different countries. English (or, to some extent, French) texts are translated into other languages, but almost never the other way round. Are we surrendering to these relations of forces in deciding to discuss and publish in what is for most of us a foreign language? We believe, on the contrary, that in so doing we can make the best of it. At least we circumvent the gate keepers. Certainly, the English we are going to speak (and to print) is not necessarily that of the Anglo Saxon countries. It is, nonetheless, a language in which scholars from all the continents — and the five continents are all represented at this gathering — can communicate. In this language all of us who are not native speakers of it, will speak more slowly, articulate more carefully perhaps, use fewer and more current words. We may even speak more understandably to our compatriots, because the artifices of intellectual discourse are less available.

Some of our participants — not only Germans — have expressed their annoyance with these linguistic conditions. Wasn't Marx German, they ask. Indeed, he was.

Nevertheless he also spoke and wrote in other languages, when it was necessary.

The linguistic aspect is one question. Another is intellectual style, as it is normally linked to national cultures. Johan Galtung has outlined a typology of such styles. Let me begin with his portrait of the Teutonic style. In this style hierarchical relations are supposed to prevail; the general pattern would be the pyramid; the systematic way in which everything is to be done would be contained by those patterns; a deductive logic would dominate. Confronted with other positions, a Teutonic thinker would behave within the alternatives of submission and condemnation. — It goes without saying that this style would ruin our conference.

Then there is the Gallic style. It is supposed to express itself in elegant wordplays of individualistic master thinkers, who never pay attention to one another, though they are able to recognize each other within the frame of an individualistic hierarchy. — The Gallic as well as the Teutonic style defines forms of darwinistic struggles among intellectuals.

Let us turn to Galtung's portrait of the Nippon style. Here the subsumption of a position under a thought school seems to define a major preoccupation.

Then there is the Anglo-Saxon style. Here general hostility to theory prevails, though one is prepared to find in every contribution something to appreciate. With the English a documenting attitude would govern the relations toward other positions, with the US-Americans, an orientation towards operationalizing and collecting data. — The general orientations of this style are, as Galtung asserts, quite appropriate for UN-bodies; nevertheless they are inappropriate for Marxists. None of these styles would be of great help.

But in which *intermundium* of intellectual styles are we then supposed to move? — Following Galtung once more, the Scandinavian countries have a special chance to learn from the different styles, to compare them, to borrow the best from each, to

avoid the bad. Let us hope that the strong presence of Scandinavians at this conference is a good omen. Though the Scandinavian Galtung is himself not always a perfect example. For him Marx — together with Freud and Hitler (sic!) — is purely and simply *the* representative of the Teutonic. Against Galtung a major task will be to appropriate Marx universally, to »de-teutonize« his interpretation and also to overcome its eurocentricity. Of course, an indispensable first step for what Henri Lefebvre has called *la mondialisation* of Marxism is to acknowledge and criticize the Teutonic and Eurocentric remnants in Marx and, more importantly, in our readings of Marx.

In the present world, Marxism is the most important candidate for a universalistic articulation of agency (Handlungsfähigkeit). It will become more capable of universalization as we become better able to think (and accept) regional specificities within Marxism. This is a prerequisite for a Marxism of tomorrow.

To be sure, *Rethinking Marx* can only be a contribution to an ongoing and necessarily multivocal process. The title of this book, therefore, reaches beyond its contributions.

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