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On W.F.Haug's *VorSchule zur Philosophie der Praxis*, in:
https://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviews/19857_vorschule-zur-philosophie-der-praxis-by-w-f-haug-reviewed-by-vesa-oittinen/

Wolfgang Fritz Haug, Professor Emeritus at Freie Universität in Berlin, is internationally known above all as the publisher of the journal *Das Argument*, which emerged in 1959 from the anti-nuclear peace movement but soon developed into a forum for high-level theoretical Marxist discussion. In 1994, Haug started with his collaborators a further important publication project, the *Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*. The dictionary is currently up to letter M, with nine hitherto published volumes, and has had 900 collaborators worldwide and a translation in Chinese has been started. Such extensive publication activity would not have been possible without treating its subject matter with a certain degree of pluralism, and Haug has, unsurprisingly, defended the idea that the theoretical heritage of Marxism has an irreducibly polyphonic character.

However, pluralism notwithstanding, Haug resides in a distinct current in German Marxism, representing a position which has, as he himself notes in the introduction to *Vorschule zur Philosophie der Praxis*, emerged in a double confrontation: against the 'neo-Kantian interpretations in the orbit of the Frankfurt School', on the one side, and against Marxism-Leninism as it was practised in the socialist countries and by Communist parties, on the other' (11-12). These confrontations 'became my school', Haug writes; they led to a position which might be called 'Argument Marxism'. To this day, there has not existed any comprehensive exposition of the stance of Argument Marxism, although the main ideas of the current were formulated already in those polemics of the 1970s. Haug's *Vorschule* tries to fill this gap. The book consists of an array of the most important articles from past years, furnished with comments written from the perspective of the 2020s. The title of the book, 'Pre-School', refers to the non-finished character of the whole project, and the last, eighteenth chapter, 'For A Practical Dialectics', lists twenty-one points which should serve as a starting-point for a renewed Marxist philosophy.

What is the main idea of Argument Marxism? It, too, is mentioned already in the title of the book: the central role of *praxis* in Marxist theory. In the first polemical article published in *Das Argument* in 1973 and reprinted here, Haug stresses the importance of the idea of praxis which Marx formulated in the 'Theses on Feuerbach'. The concept of praxis in Marx is directed against the older, 'contemplative materialism'. According to Haug, this means that the theory of cognition (i.e. gnoseology) must conceive the process of cognition 'as a moment – although a particular, specific moment – of social life in its necessity' (60-61). This indeed is the invariant core of Argument Marxism, which remains in all further discussions as its starting-point.

But what is so specific here? Even in standard Soviet textbooks of Diamat, one can find whole chapters dealing with the importance of the concept of praxis. The problem in Haug's version seems to be that it is not clear to which extent Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach' can be applied to questions of gnoseology. For example, the second thesis states that 'the dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question'. This sentence has been read as obligatory for all Marxist philosophy. But Marx jotted it down in a concrete discussion, situated in Germany of the 1840s, and it very probably refers to the then actual disputes in the wake of Hegel's philosophy and its insistence on the reality of thinking. Indeed, it might not be read it as a gnoseological postulate at all. It goes without

saying that our knowledge is conditioned by social forms of practice, but if we apply this principle without distinctions, we are in danger of replacing gnoseology with social philosophy. We cannot, for example, defend the objectivity of our conceptions and ideas by referring *only* to praxis. This is because ‘objectivity’ is a gnoseological concept which cannot be reduced to a question of social philosophy.

This trend towards dropping gnoseology from Marxist philosophy is visible from another early text, ‘Against the Merely Verbal Materialism’, originally published in *Das Argument* in 1975. Here Haug writes that ‘a materialist theory of cognition can in no case be a foundational doctrine, which develops general principles of its own accord [*aus sich heraus*]. It is conditioned by the critique of political economy and thus the anatomy and theory of development of the social context of knowledge, as well as of the premises of “false consciousness”’ (116). Again, it is of course true that knowledge is socially determined, but are we by this fact entitled to suppose that gnoseology, as an autonomous domain of philosophical inquiry, has become obsolete? This is a vexing question without any definitive answers provided here. But we encounter the same problem of the status of gnoseology even in other forms of ‘praxis philosophy’, for example in Gramsci’s theory, or, to take an example outside Marxism, in pragmatism.

In the 1970s, Haug was criticized by adherents of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, who insisted that a plea towards ‘praxis’ does not solve the problem of objectivity, if we have not in advance specified whether we are speaking of a material or an ideal praxis. Thus, in order to defend a materialist position, we must ‘recognize’ the existence and objectivity of matter already before we begin to talk about human practice. This is an old argument in Marxist philosophical discussions. Already Plekhanov insisted that it is possible to avoid solipsism only by a *salto vitale*, an act of ‘faith’ concerning the existence of an outer world. Haug is quite right when he notes that this position leads to a form of subjectivistic decisionism. However, the philosophical problem remains, since Haug’s idea of praxis does not solve it either. Haug recognizes the problem at least partially, when he rejects Benedetto Croce’s claim that Marx would have entirely ‘replaced philosophy with practical activity’ and defends Gramsci’s idea that ‘philosophy cannot be negated otherwise than in a philosophical manner’ (349). But if Gramsci is right, we find ourselves again at the starting-point: philosophy and especially gnoseological questions cannot be replaced by ideas or claims which come from outside the domain of philosophy. Obviously, we have here an antinomy, the core of which consists in the fact that the question of the objectivity of thought cannot be solved by thought alone. This is an antinomy to which Marxist philosophy – be it ‘praxis-oriented’ or not – has not yet been able to give a satisfying solution.

Be that as it may, the real strength of Argument Marxism lies elsewhere than in gnoseology. It can be read as a continuation of the Gramscian impulse in Marxist theory. Its main constituents are, besides the heritage of Gramsci, ideology theory and the ‘critical psychology’ of Klaus Holzkamp. There are yet further dimensions of Argument Marxism, which Haug does not, however, discuss in the book, namely his theory of ‘commodity aesthetics’ [*Warenästhetik*], maybe his most famous book, and his critique of different interpretations of Marx’s *Capital* which have been more or less inspired by the Frankfurt School and are known under the names of ‘Capital Logics’ or ‘Neue Marx-Lektüre’.

An encounter with the so-called critical psychology of Klaus Holzkamp and Ute Osterkamp had a big impact on Haug’s idea of Marxism. Holzkamp attempted to give to the psychological science an emancipatory and Marxist note by adhering to the activity theory of Soviet cultural-historical school (Leontyev et al., in part Vygotsky). There are indeed many

similarities between Holzkamp's and Aleksey Leontyev's ideas, but while the Soviet cultural-historical psychology attained worldwide recognition, Holzkamp's theory has remained a German peculiarity. One reason for this may have been the difficult manner of Holzkamp's presentation, which cannot be called reader-friendly. But for Haug, Holzkamp's psychological theory has been important, especially his 1973 book *Sinnliche Erkenntnis* [*Sensual Knowledge*]. Here Holzkamp tries to develop a thoroughly materialistic but at the same time non-reductionist theory of the human psyche, starting from the natural-historical presuppositions of anthropogenesis and showing the central role of activity in human development. Haug tells us that he was astonished to note 'how parallel our intentions were' (236). Holzkamp's psychological theory seemed to depict 'the natural-historical presuppositions for the philosophy of praxis' (238).

However, in Holzkamp's theory of subjectivity there was one problem for Haug. Holzkamp backed up the definition of the subject given by Soviet philosopher Vladislav Lektorsky, according to which the individual subject is 'a mode of existence of the social subject' and thus 'the gnoseological subject is, to speak in the exact sense of the word, not the individual but the society' (292-293). Lektorsky's definition is rather typical for Soviet philosophers, who were suspicious of individualism and have always stressed the importance of the social milieu for the development of subject and personality more than their Western counterparts. Haug finds – justifiably, to my mind – Lektorsky's definition of the subject too reductionistic and thinks that Holzkamp's theory here needs further specification. Haug finds this specification in the concept of 'activity competence' (or 'ability': *Handlungsfähigkeit*), mentioned by Holzkamp's wife Ute in a conference paper. According to Haug, this concept has proven very fruitful in the more concrete social research carried out by him and his collaborators (310).

In the last two chapters, Haug seeks to formulate 'a new beginning' for Marxist philosophy after the demise of real socialism and emerging global challenges. According to him, there are three aspects in Marx's critical oeuvre that are still important and will remain so. The first is the heritage of the Marxian critique of political economy (394). The second is Marx's critique of ideology. Here Haug presents once more his own interpretation of ideology, which he had developed in the *Projekt Ideologie Theorie* (PIT), carried out by him and his collaborators at the Freie Universität Berlin at the end of the 1970s. According to this interpretation, which arose in a polemic against Althusser, ideology should be defined as a form of 'socialization from above', which in class societies leads to an acceptance of the views of the ruling class. Even in a new global situation, Marxism must remain a critique of the dominant capitalist ideology. The third aspect is 'the critique of objectivism', which, according to Haug, was for the first time formulated by Marx in the 'Theses on Feuerbach'. Already in the first thesis, Marx had stated that the main defect of all materialism hitherto has been that 'that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*'. We should follow this pointer, says Haug, and understand the world in the sense of the philosophy of praxis, as a dynamic ontology (396).

It is easy to concur with Haug on the first two aspects of Marx's philosophical heritage, which have a lasting significance, but the third collides with problems concerning the idea of praxis/practice mentioned above. To call Marxism a 'philosophy of practice' is of course not wrong, on the contrary, but 'practice' or 'praxis' is not a panacea either, by which it would be possible to loosen the knots of philosophy. The question remains how a Marxist concept of praxis differs, for example, from the idea of 'practice' used by the Pragmatists, or, say, from the *attualismo* of a Giovanni Gentile.

The final chapter, 'For a Practical Dialectics', summarizes Haug's views on the future of Marxist philosophy. The chapter is very interesting and an English translation of it should be published somewhere in order to boost a more lively discussion. Haug begins with a distinction between theoretical and practical dialectics, in accordance with the old division of philosophy in general into theoretical and practical parts, made already by Aristotle. According to Haug, Marxist dialectics should in the first instance be seen as a 'practical dialectics'. Formal schemata of theoretical dialectics should not be viewed with great importance. At best, they are only a form of the presentation of knowledge. As Haug remarks, the view of 'the merely interpretative function' of dialectics was accepted even by Engels in his exposition of the dialectics in nature (403). If we accept this view on the role of dialectics in the theoretical work of Marx, it follows that the use of the famous 'dialectical method' in *Capital* was limited to the exposition of the results Marx had already acquired from his analysis of the economy of bourgeois society. This conclusion is a serious blow against the 'Hegelianized' interpretations of the method of *Capital*. In fact (although Haug does not here advance this far in the argument), all the main results of Marx's critique of political economy could, in that case, very well be presented in another, non-dialectical form. This has actually been done in many textbooks and introductions to Marx's economic theory. True, the question remains, why Marx himself so stubbornly insisted upon the importance of dialectics, albeit as a form of presentation only of his research.

But if theoretical dialectics is only a way to present *post festum* the results of inquiry, what about practical dialectics? Here Haug gets somewhat obscure. According to him, a Marxist must always have eyes open for contradictions, collisions and dissonances in reality and especially in political life. Here his main authorities are no longer Marx or Engels, but Bertolt Brecht and, to a lesser extent, Walter Benjamin. He quotes Brecht, who suggested studying the materialistic-dialectic way of thought 'as a way of life'. The practical dialectician will not 'deduce dialectics only from a previous way of thinking'. Instead, we should conceive dialectics starting from its 'political usability'. In the words of Benjamin: 'To be a dialectician means to have the wind of history in the sails. The sails are the concepts. But it is not enough to have the sails. The decisive fact is the ability to heave them' (413).

Practical dialectics would thus be the ability to analyze the contradictions of reality and formulate suggestions for political and other kinds of activity. However, although we can find such an ability in many prominent Marxists and revolutionaries, for example in Lenin, Gramsci or Rosa Luxemburg, maybe even in Mao Zedong, problems remain. Above all, that which Haug calls 'practical dialectics' clearly is an ability that does not have any rules fixed beforehand. It cannot be taught. In this sense, Haug's concept of a practical dialectics is very akin to the idea of genius in the classical German tradition. For Kant, genius was a talent following no rules but, on the contrary, it is the instance that gives the rules. Should we understand a 'practical dialectician' in the same sense, someone not bound by the formal rules of theoretical dialectics, or of any theory whatsoever, but instead defining them anew?

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