

Jan Rehmann: The Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism¹

Huge project, slim resources

Let me start with a few remarks about who we are, and what the *Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism* (*Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus* = HKWM) looks like. Its publisher, the *Berlin Institute for Critical Theory* (InkriT), is a relatively young institution, founded in 1996. It is not affiliated to any political party or organization; this is considered to be a necessary prerequisite for the independence and the pluralistic profile of the dictionary. If you look at the patrons of the “InkriT”, you can see at a glance that the institute was and is supported by a broad international range of outstanding scholars, from Étienne Balibar to Immanuel Wallerstein, from Pierre Bourdieu to Eric Hobsbawm, from Jaques Derrida to Dorothy Smith. Its main task is to promote critical theories in interaction with social movements. To this end, it organizes each spring a conference on topics crucial for the dictionary’s further development, e.g., on Gramsci (1997), on the problem of rethinking “progress” (1999), on “Justice, Violence, and Hegemony” (2000), on “Capitalism between Consumerism & War” (2005), on “Marxism and the Great Crisis” (2013). The conferences combine panels with other forms of presentation, focusing on the discussion of particular articles for the dictionary.

Such an ambitious editing project depends on being embedded in a broader theoretical culture. It developed around Wolfgang Fritz Haug, founder and editor² of the dictionary and one of the best-known independent Marxist philosophers in Germany. He is, together with Frigga Haug, also the editor of *Das Argument*, a theoretical review founded in 1959 and still an important outlet for critical thinking. During the period of the student movement, he used his teaching position to build up a large network of study groups working on Marx’s *Capital*. In the 1970s, this became almost a mass movement of hundreds of students studying Marx with a serious commitment to uncovering the hidden secrets of capitalist society.

The dictionary itself consists of eight volumes so far, ranging from *A* to *L*. The first volume appeared in 1994. Volume 8/I appeared in 2012 and we are currently preparing volume 8/II (scheduled to be published in 2014) covering the letters *L* and *M* which contain in German

¹ This article was written by Jan Rehmann, member of the editorial staff of the HKWM, in 2005 and slightly shortened and updated by Oliver Walkenhorst in 2013.

² Meanwhile, the dictionary has four editors: Wolfgang Fritz Haug, Frigga Haug, Peter Jehle, and Wolfgang Küttler. The editorial staff comprises about 15 persons.

important entries around, e.g., Marxism and Maoism. The dictionary is conceptually organized thus excluding direct entries for individuals. However, there are concepts that are linked to individual names like, e.g., **Lenin's Marxism, Brecht school, Fidelism, Liuism and Della Volpe school** which are separate entries, and each volume also contains a name index where you can look up the individuals mentioned in the articles. But our primary focus is on the intellectual material. We use the theoretical concepts as tools, as entry points, to cut from many sides through the contradictory historical formation called Marxism. If you look at the authors of the dictionary, you can observe an interesting shift. The first two volumes are clearly marked by the dominance of German traditions of Marxism. From the third volume onwards, however, there is a considerable increase in the number of non-German authors, especially of the English-speaking world, but also from Latin America, India, and China – the originally German project has been developing into a more and more international enterprise. We think it is very important to keep widening the international scope of the project, including scholars from the former Soviet Union, from Eastern Europe, and from countries from what has been called the “Third World”. For further information about the project, translations of articles into English and Spanish, and guidelines for authors, you can visit our website at www.inkrit.de or contact our coordinator Oliver Walkenhorst via oliverwalkenhorst@inkrit.org.

The dictionary will have a total of 15 volumes with about 1500 entries and more than 800 authors. When it is finished, it will be the biggest, the most comprehensive, and the most international dictionary of Marxism. At the same time, we do all this with a very limited amount of money. We have about 250 so-called “InkriT Fellows” worldwide which support our work by donating a modest annual amount of money each and we also get some financial support from institutions like the *Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung* (Berlin), *Espaces Marx* (Paris), *Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici* (Naples), the *Centrum för Marxistiska Samhällsstudier* (Stockholm), and the *Fundacion de Investigaciones Marxistas* (Madrid), but the money is quickly absorbed by the production costs of a volume. There are only two low-paid positions, and apart from this, the entire work is done on a voluntary basis.

The Historical-Critical Dictionary and the collapse of Marxism-Leninism

The immediate origin of the dictionary was another Marxist dictionary, namely the French *Dictionnaire Critique du Marxisme* edited by Georges Labica and Gérard Bensussan. As soon as it was published in 1982, we began to translate it, and published it in 8 small volumes. At

the same time, we were planning some supplementary “German” volumes. They were intended to open up links to the new social movements, which became fairly strong in Western Germany with the rise of the feminist and ecological movements and the emergence of the Green party. But we encountered obstacles within the leftist culture in Western Germany: the small Communist party, the DKP, refused to cooperate, because it was afraid that the intended renewal of Marxism could actually mean its dissolution, and the Social Democrats did not participate in any project where Communists were invited to participate as well. We decided, therefore, to internationalize the project. The response was so positive that we had to start our own dictionary – we could no longer see our work as a mere supplement to an earlier project. While preparing the first volume, we were confronted with the failure of the Perestroika, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the end of a whole world-order, which had emerged out of the October Revolution of 1917 and the Second World War. The falling apart of the Eastern bloc cannot be separated from the victory of neoliberalism, based on the rapid development of new electronic, computerized productive forces, which undermined or destroyed the class-compromises of the social-democratic welfare state. The two tendencies together created a new situation for the dictionary, a kind of “epistemological break”, that changed our work enormously. We couldn’t just continue as before. Many articles written during the time of global bipolarity and Western reformism, suddenly looked awfully outdated, and we had to throw them away or to rework them from scratch. One must keep in mind the contradictory character of this historical moment. On the one hand, Marxist theory got the chance of getting free from the control of Communist states and parties, and from a certain inner fixation to them. The archives of Marxism-Leninism were opened. It became clear that the German origin of the *Historical-Critical Dictionary* was not only a restriction, but offered an important historical opportunity. From the outset, we were forced to combine Western and Eastern strands of Marxist thought flowing together in the same “reunified” country, i.e. different types of knowledge and experience, and also different types of intellectuals. We had to find a productive way to work with these differences and contradictions, both on the level of authors and in the editorial group itself. We do not have fifty-fifty representation, but we are building one of the rare overarching projects that helps to save precious intellectual resources of Eastern Marxism from falling into oblivion. On the other hand, we were confronted with the overwhelming triumphalism of the Western victors, who now excluded especially the critical intellectuals of Eastern Germany from any influential position in Germany. The entire history of Soviet-style state-socialism, with all its hidden struggles, contradictions, and dialectics has been reduced in an essentialist way

to a single and evil dictatorship, Gulag, almost Auschwitz. The dominant paradigm is to declare Marxism's death, to bury all hope for a better society as utopian and *therefore* ultimately totalitarian. This suffocating strategy had an especially strong impact on the intellectuals of Eastern Germany, who were torn between two equally barren options: on the one hand, leaving Marxism behind and replacing it quickly with Western social theories, once again overlooking the critical, heretical lines of Marxist thought; on the other hand, clinging to the traditional forms of Marxism-Leninism, preserving it as a sort of passive resistance against the West. Between these opposite tendencies of abnegation of Marxism and its dogmatic preservation, it was not easy to open up space for a critical and self-critical renewal of Marxism. But this was the challenge we had to take up.

Plural Marxism and "rescuing critique"

One of the tragedies of Marxist theory in the Soviet Bloc was its direct submission to political rule. A theoretical critique was transformed into an official ideology unable to analyze the internal contradictions of socialist society, its paralyzing structures, and Marxism's own lack of hegemony. Therefore, we had to rediscover and re-articulate Marxism as a critical theory, as a theoretical critique of any domination: class-domination, state-domination, patriarchal domination, and exploitative domination over nature. And we had to reconstruct it as an analytical tool for criticizing its own history, in all its achievements, tragedies, and crimes. Walter Benjamin once coined the term "rettende Kritik" whose literal translation would be "rescuing critique". It is a transformative criticism, which does not shrink from recklessly unveiling the gaps, blockages, and deformations in Marxist traditions, while rescuing their elements of rationality, hope, and commitment. Such a critique is the opposite of denunciation. Instead of totalizing Marxism, treating it as an essentialist entity, it reconstructs its historical conditions and internal splits. Closely linked to this concept of critique is the commitment to accept and to reconstruct Marxism as a plurality of different and often opposite tendencies. The real challenge is how to make sure that the articles themselves show the plural development of Marxist thinking. Whenever a Marxian concept is adopted by different strands of Marxism and interpreted differently, the author has to demonstrate these differences, whatever his or her own opinion might be. In this respect, our guidelines are very clear: "No one has to deny his or her standpoint, but competing positions must also be represented and in 'Dialogue' form. The entries should not be treated like fortresses in a war of position". This

requires a certain critical-historical distance, which prevents us from just reproducing the pitfalls and failures of our history. It could enable us to dissolve the blind compulsion to repeat. One important task of a plural understanding of Marxism is to deal in a critical and self-critical way with the relationship between First- and Second-World Marxism and Marxism in the so-called “periphery.” Eurocentrism has been a problem in different Marxist traditions as well. We have also the extreme opposite, an uncritical third-world revolutionarism, which tends to cover up the failures and deformations of liberationist movements instead of analyzing them. The dictionary contains many entries that contribute to a correction of an Eurocentric bias, from **Anti-Colonialism** (Samir Amin) to the **Zapatistas**, from **Arab Socialism** (Wolfgang Schwanitz) to the **Green Revolution** in India (Bastiaan Wielenga), from **Dependency Theory** (Jan Otto Andersson) to the **Vietnam War**. But we would violate our *historical-critical* approach if we did not work on the manifold “tiersmondist” illusions and deformations as well, including, e.g., an article on **Pol-Potism** and its horrible genocidal politics.

Keeping up with new developments

Let me get to a third conclusion: the dictionary is not only a space where Marxist key concepts are carefully expounded, as a sort of well-elaborated “canon” of Marxism, but it also claims to pick up the thread wherever Marxist theories intervene in relevant problems of humanity or connect themselves to relevant social movements. It is this understanding of an intervening and connecting Marxism that makes this project so big and in some ways difficult to handle. We have to be aware that Marx’s analyses are not sufficient for resolving the current problems of our world. In a way, this was already true for the first half of the 20th century. Marx could not anticipate that 20th century capitalism, and especially US capitalism, was able to create a new mode of production and regulation that prevented the revolutionary crisis he had been expecting in the capitalist centers. It was primarily Antonio Gramsci who tried to conceptualize this new social formation that he called “Americanism” and “Fordism”. This is one of the reasons why Gramscian concepts have a large place in our dictionary.

Several entries of our dictionary deal with these specific features of 20th century capitalism, based on mass-production, Taylorism, consumerism, and a specific “Fordist” class-alliance between the bourgeoisie and a part of the upper working class. But the most challenging and difficult task is to explore what forms of capitalist domination are now being imposed by the rule of neoliberalism. We have to conceptualize on the one hand, the new high-technological

mode of production, often described as information society, postindustrialist, non-material production etc., and on the other hand, the brutal revival of older forms of capitalist production, which can be observed in the “maquilas” at the US-Mexican border. In order to keep up with these developments, we have to include many new terms which do not originate in Marxism but about which Marxists have something important to say, e.g., **Information Society, Postindustrialism, Postfordism, Neoliberalism, Toyotism** (unfortunately, many of them begin with the prefix “neo” or “post” which always indicates that it is not quite clear what the new phenomenon exactly is). By this means we try to gather the best analyses of contemporary Marxists.

As a general principle, we do include terms unknown to the Marxist traditions if these terms articulate historically new problematics or if they illuminate neglected facets of Marxism. In this vein, we included, e.g., the Weberian term **Charisma/charismatic leadership** because it points to a crucial dimension of political practice that is a blind spot in Marxist theory.

Marxist border crossings

Let me give some examples of the border crossings we try to carry out in order to establish connections to the most relevant social movements.

Marxism-Feminism: Promoted and encouraged by Frigga Haug, a large number of articles are related to gender, gender relations, domestic labor, feminization of poverty, feminist discussion of ethics, and even feminist theology. Obviously, class-domination and patriarchy can neither be deduced from each other (or reduced to each other) nor separated from each other. They largely intersect and overlap and perpetuate each other. We try both to inscribe feminist critique into the Marxist traditions and, conversely, to re-inscribe Marxist critique into feminism. Several articles have to deal with the problem that Marx’s focus on wage labor led him to underestimate the role of female domestic labor in the reproduction of capitalism. Frigga Haug’s entry **Gender relations** proposes a new understanding of these relations as specific relations of production. And on the other hand, our article **Feminism**, written by Rosemary Hennessy, brings the class-issue back into the history of feminism itself: she demonstrates how the social base of white upper- and middle-class women in the capitalist power-centers could lead to a moderate, liberal, postmodernist “Cultural Feminism” which has largely accommodated itself to neoliberal ideology.

Eco-Socialism: Several articles in that area have convincingly demonstrated that in Marx's critique of political economy class questions are closely linked to human relations to nature, and that he already anticipated what came much later to be labeled "sustainable development" (see, e.g., John Bellamy Foster's article **Earth** and Victor Wallis' article **Species Questions**). Obviously, our task as a historical-critical dictionary is again a twofold one: we must uncover a horrible neglect of environmental questions in Marxist traditions, most of which have been marked by a sort of Fordist industrialism. As you certainly know, it was the negative comment in the *Communist Manifesto* about the "idiocy of rural life" that held sway in the Second and Third International, and served to justify a reckless industrialization that had consequences like those that Marx in *Capital* had ascribed to capitalist agriculture: "undermining the original sources of all wealth: the soil and the worker". And we have to showcase that there are still precious treasures to be discovered in Marx's criticisms of the exploitation and destruction of nature, e.g., Marx's later appreciation of the Russian rural commune and its communal ownership of land as a possible springboard into socialism. And above all: each current strategy for sustainable development, if it is serious, must transform the organization of production itself, and therefore needs a perspective that goes beyond the capitalist mode of production.

I cannot enumerate all the social areas, battlefields, and movements that urgently need a reconnecting with Marxist analysis, or rather, to put it the other way round: to which Marxism is to be reconnected in the interest of its own survival. One assignment is to relate Marxist analysis to different strands of critical psychology and psychoanalysis, as we try to do in articles like **Freudo-Marxism** (Richard Lichtman) or **Critical Psychology** (Morus Markard). Other areas often underestimated in Marxism but crucial for both ideological domination and resistance are the struggles about aesthetics and culture, see, e.g., articles like **Aesthetics** (Günther Mayer), **Photomontage** (Inez Hedges), **Cultural Industry** (Douglas Kellner) or **Aesthetics of Commodities** (Wolfgang Fritz Haug).