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Basic positions and research questions of a philosophy of practice

A basic philosophical-scientific position

What I'm proposing here is the reactivation, exploration and up-to-date formulation of that *philosophy of practice*, which Antonio Labriola identified as the *immanent* philosophy of Marx' works. It was simplified repeatedly, deformed through dogmatic interpretations, misunderstood from various sides and rejected without proper consideration. Nevertheless it expressed itself in a rich stream of thought. It concerns an approach to a philosophy and science of social practice, open for further development. The social process itself is creating the demand for such an approach. So its profile and relevance should be clarified, and the proposal put forward here is to conduct it within in a scientific network.

Emergence and references within the history of ideas

This specific way of thinking practice came into being with Karl Marx. His 11 Theses on Feuerbach explain the core concept of 'practice *and* conceiving practice'. It's not only a 'practical philosophy', but also a 'novum' in the history of ideas, as noted by Ernst Bloch. Thinking practice permeates the works of Marx in a dialectically inspired manner. But Marx didn't elaborate it, therefore the later efforts of Engels. Firstly Antonio Labriola identified a 'philosophy of practice' as the intellectual center of Marx' theorizing.

There have been manifold attempts, to reach the bottom of practice as a simultaneously nature-embedded, meaningful, materially conditioned and creative mode of human existence, as well as to render the concept of practice a viable social-ontological concept, profiled scientific position and productive in social analyses. At this only some few remarks:

Fundamental resources are Antonio Gramsci's 'philosophy of practice'; Herbert Marcuse's 'Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism' and his later work 'One-Dimensional Man'; the Praxis Group in Yugoslavia, especially Gajo

Petrovic's reflections on 'practice and being'; controversies on 'practice and Marxist philosophy' in the former DDR and later discussions on the problem of praxis in Leipzig; Karel Kosik's 'Dialektik des Konkreten'; Ernst Bloch's interpretation 'changing the world and the eleven Theses on Feuerbach', not to forget his talk about 'Unsolved Tasks of Socialist Theory'; Sartre's 'Existentialism and Marxism'; the 'Metaphilosophy' of Henri Lefebvre and his 'La vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne'. Remember international conferences focussed on the philosophy of practice in Korcula, later on, until 1994, in Dubrovnik and in Kassel. In recent times such conferences have been held in Nuremberg.

The theory of the social philosopher G.H. Mead is situated in its proximity. It was rediscovered in the context of Habermas's 'Theory of Communicative Action'. But its reception by Habermas is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of Mead's 'social act'. I also mention the 'Outline of a Theory of Practice' of Pierre Bourdieu and his 'contre-feux', an initiative against the neo-liberal destruction of the welfare state. Last not least, Immanuel Wallerstein's reflections about 'The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms' and his 'utopistic' studies about 'Historical Choices of the Twenty-First Century' are inspired in an analogous way.

These examples are pointing out: Thinking practice here is understood as 'intervening comprehension'. Therefore the work of all authors mentioned is related to the respective historical situation, its problems and future prospects. In this regard the historical scope of Marx' analysis of alienation, his Critique of Political Economy and some historical perspectives is obviously not invalid until today.

Historical constraints hindering the concept of 'Praxis'

Until today the concept of 'Praxis' was inhibited in many respects. In Marx' works it remained mainly implicit. Most important early studies remained unpublished until 1932. Engels more popular writings were not immune against dogmatization, as it occurred in Soviet Marxism. Hence, during the era of crises and world wars, the awareness of a pervasive 'crisis of Marxism' raised in the Western world. A remarkable example is Karl Korsch's 'Marxism and Philosophy'.

In the period of systems confrontation Western Marxism or 'Neomarxism' was considered inconvenient on both sides. It realized itself rather through individual thinkers and on high levels of abstraction. In this way thinking practice culminated in the idea of 'concrete utopia'. On the other side a variant of economism with the focus on capital and crises theory pushed itself to the fore.

Indeed theoreticians like Bloch and Marcuse gained resonance in the '68 movements, but remained institutionally marginalized. The exponents of the Frankfurt School came to the fore, but increasingly departed from Marxism. In the end Habermas put a concept of 'Intersubjectivity' in the place of the genuine idea of 'Praxis'.

The soviet empire, also the main-bastion of dogmatic Marxism, collapsed 1989. During the following enforcement of liberal ideas and ideologies, the critical mind, Marxism and all utopist ideas have been eliminated almost everywhere.

Preliminary results and research orientation

The varied fates and manifestations of 'thinking Praxis' ,rooted in Marx' work suggests the assumption of an inherent basic position with a promising future, which is not yet elaborated enough. This poses basic questions and individual problems of social philosophy and sciences. For the necessary research and development work I'm suggesting some precautions:

The overall project should display itself as a *coherent conception of reality, theory of cognition and science*. Thereby the 'totalizing' category 'Praxis' with its mode of 'intervening comprehension' requires to pay special attention to questions like the 'emergence of mind' and a 'theory of cognition' related to Praxis. 'Contradictoriness' and 'perspectivity' are constituent aspects regarding the synthesis of social practice. This concerns what scientists customarily call 'Construction of Social Reality'. In line with this we are faced with profound questions of methodology. Here the integral conception of 'Praxis' appears as key category of a methodic and especially ideology- critical, highly sophisticated analysis.

The conceptual elaboration is in need of a *debate with proximate positions*. To these belong a traditional fixation on the category of 'labour' or 'interaction', and also the varieties of 'Critical Theory' up to Habermas' theory of intersubjectivity and communication 'Theory of Communicative Action'. The latter rejects the key 'Praxis' as supposedly 'holistic', ignores the 'Critique of Political Economy' and denies a serious socio-historical perspective of transformation. Against this, the conception of 'Praxis' claims to uncover the deficiencies and even the nowadays inadequate character of a merely 'Critical Theory' and kindred standpoints. In this way we can identify the travesties of Marx' ideas included in this perspectives and also in the view of a 'traditional Marxism'. Beyond this, newer theories of action and practice with a wider bearing come into view. All this considered, the discussion with all the conceptual contexts of 'Practice' should be intensified.

A number of strong features and research perspectives indicate the capacity of the concept:

I refer to the incorporation of Hegels' dialectical philosophy. It works against the impending obscuration of this most valuable heritage of classical German philosophy. So the philosophy of practice is inseparably linked with dialectics as fundamental aspect of constitution. This is something like a unique characteristic.

The category 'Praxis' is open for dialogue with other positions, and the field of thinking practice is a place *for constructive theoretical debates*. In times past there were discussions with phenomenology, interactionism and psychoanalysis. In the present for example, the reception of George Herbert Meads practice-oriented conception of 'social act' and 'interaction' has high significance, as well as his conception of an intelligible and intelligent 'social act', of contextual, implicit *objective meaning* and an 'objective reality of perspectives'. Meads Ideas transcend pragmatism and also stand against theories of truth, which focus on intersubjectivity and consensus. Regarding his philosophy of mind or theory of subjectivity I suggest it as a *'missing link in the philosophy of practice'*.

The consequent reading of economic life in the proper and methodologically well-conceived meaning of 'Praxis' offers the chance, not only to criticize neoliberal models of theory and economic practice more stringently than other 'heterodox' economists do, but also to overcome a pure negative orthodoxy of politico-economic

'critique', which came to the dead end of pure negative critics. Since one hundred years traditional political economy fails to reach the positive or the 'concrete alternative'. This fundamental problem is rooted deeply in the loss of the philosophical-scientific dimension of reflexion. Rediscovering and modelling economic practice opens up the vast conceptual space of an *'utopistic' or social transformation research* concerning modern social capitalism, respectively.

A last issue requires more detailed examination: Theoreticians which focussed on praxis always exercised severe criticism concerning the conflicting and catastrophic social developments and power relations, which are characteristic for the capitalistic era around the world. This context too sheds some light on the actual tendency towards an expertocratic-liberalistic economic dictatorship in Europe.

But beyond this, a basic goal or result of 'thinking Praxis' is the determination of the respective historical situation. In the public as well as in the scientific, especially in the Marxist, debate of today a fundamental transposition is insufficiently remarked: Marx lived at the beginning of the evolution of the industrial mode of production and social formation. In contrast to him, today we live 'on the other end'. Right here, social practice not only meets with existential, natural and environmental barriers. At the same time we have entered an *era of systemic transformation* and stand on a branching point.

One of the most profiled analyses of this historical bifurcation was given by *Immanuel Wallersteins 'Utopistics'*. Aside from the fact that he argues in this crucial point with Max Weber, his 'Historical Social Science' confirms the 'concept of praxis' and leads to a more precise understanding in regard to the global simultaneity and the ambiguous character of modern 'societies in transition', involving latent potentials. This situation contains the highest challenges in respect of 'comprehension of praxis' for philosophers, for scientists and also conscious living people, it provokes a decision concerning the direction of social development.

Marxism and Philosophy of Practice

Karl Marx is a primary source, but 'Marxism' is a too narrowly defined, inadequate and not up to date title for a Philosophy and Science of Social Practice in the 21st century. This represents a philosophically reflected worldview, an analytically

efficient type of scholarliness and generally inspires an emancipated intellectual and cultural life.

The core is a *paradigm of social science*, which is grounded in an utmost realistic conception of reality, in the application of ‚Praxis‘ as analytical key, in a corresponding, elaborated methodology and last not least in a rich fund of economic, social and historic research. This conception aims at the orientation of Praxis in the sense of ‚intervening comprehension‘. Therefore the basic character conforms with a ‚Concrete Philosophy of Praxis‘, which combines critique, analysis and prospects.

The social mission of this mode of science implies the irreconcilability with alienating, that means socially uncontrolled circumstances overwhelming individuals, as well as a corresponding criticism of social wrongs and polarizations. At the same moment it is leading the way to a solidary, naturally embedded and democratic society, never existing before, to an achievable superior civilization. Such real humanism could acquire new actuality in our times of crises and transition in the 21st century.

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<http://www.praxisphilosophie.de/start.htm>

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