

Visegrád Fellowship Final Report

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Research project title:

“Marxism’s Anthropological (Re)turn: Tracing the Theme of Praxis in the Writings of Humanist Marxist Philosophers from East Central Europe, 1945-1975.”

Overview of research project:

The aim of my research project at the Donald and Vera Blinken Open Society Archives was to investigate the development of humanist Marxist philosophy in East Central Europe during the post-Stalinist period in the 1950s and 1960s. Humanist Marxism emerged as a coherent neo-Marxist tendency in opposition to what its exponents identified as the persistence of Stalinism in their respective home contexts throughout the communist period. These exponents included members of the Praxis School in Yugoslavia (Gajo Petrović, Rudi Supek, Predrag Vranicki), the Budapest School in Hungary (Heller Ágnes, Márkus György), the Warsaw School of the History

of Ideas in Poland (Leszek Kołakowski, Bronisław Baczko), and Czechoslovak philosophers who were not part of an organized collective, such as Karel Kosík and Ivan Sviták.

As it had been tied to a broader de-Stalinizing project, humanist Marxism developed until the mid 1970s when the *Praxis* journal, which was the leading journal of humanist Marxist thought that was published by the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Zagreb beginning in 1964, was banned by the Croatian League of Communists in 1975. The same year, the Serbian League of Communists dismissed the so-called “Belgrade Eight” or Praxis members at the University of Belgrade from their teaching posts. The Praxis School hit an impasse, and by extension, the humanist Marxist movement more generally, when authorities deemed that the group had gone too far in undermining the official position of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia as leading progressive force in the country. The reaction of authorities only affirmed what the Praxis members and other humanist Marxist philosophers across East Central Europe had identified as the Stalinist DNA of their respective home contexts—namely, self-perpetuating unitary communist party rule.

Findings:

My research at the Blinken OSA has given me an aerial view of the humanist Marxist intellectual landscape across East Central Europe. The materials of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty have allowed me to see the ridges of that landscape that formed through the collisions between humanist Marxist philosophers and communist authorities. Many of the situation reports contained in the biographical files of various humanist Marxist philosophers reveal the

circumstances behind the repression of those philosophers for what communist parties characterized as their dissident views and activities, and how, despite their heterodox intellectual positions that drew from diverse continental philosophical trends, including idealism, existentialism, and phenomenology, humanist Marxist philosophers were united within a Marxist framework in their opposition to self-perpetuating unitary communist party rule as the DNA of Stalinism. That DNA was left intact in state socialist societies following Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, they observed, along with the principle of legitimation of the historical necessity of unitary communist party rule. As such, it precluded the development of what humanist Marxist philosophers understood as authentic communism, which they believed could only manifest through the redistribution of the means of production and the institutions of political life to workers.

The Italian Communist Party Central Committee member Lucio Lombardo-Radice, to this end, wrote the following in a 1973 article published in the left-wing magazine *Rinascita* about the Praxis School: "...in stressing that form of socialism called 'self-management' [Praxis members] are being sharply critical of 'étatistic' socialism."¹ Lombardo-Radice's assessment, by and large,

¹ Lucio Lombardo-Radice, "A Seminar Open to Marxists from All over the World," *Rinascita*, no. 21 (1973), n.p.; cited in "Former 'Praxis' Editor Denounces Stalinism in Yugoslavia," 10 May 1977. Supek, Rudi, 1973 - 1985; HU OSA 300-10-5:12/10; Yugoslav Biographical Files II; Balkan Section: Albanian and Yugoslav Files; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute; Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

applies to humanist Marxist philosophers across East Central Europe who opposed the Soviet model of étatic or state socialism, which concentrated economic and political power in the state and its ruling communist party apparatus. What is more, they opposed and actively sought to undermine philosophical Stalinism as the ideological justification for the concentration of that power by arguing its incompatibility with Marx's writings. Humanist Marxist philosophers viewed self-management socialism, in contrast to étatic socialism, as the most adequate model for a de-alienated society whose products are controlled, not by the market or state, but by workers.

The fact that in state socialist societies the means of production and the institutions of political life were controlled by the state and its ruling communist party apparatus revealed a different kind of alienation to the capitalist one. Rather than the value of human labor and its products being determined by their exchangeability on a market as private property, it was determined under a centralized system of planning in which workers were excluded from participating in the management of production and the distribution of their products. Humanist Marxist philosophers thus returned to Karl Marx's early writings on alienation from the 1840s, particularly, his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, to advance their critique of alienation in state socialist societies. Against the official view of communist parties that the elimination of private property in the capitalist sense was identical to the transcendence of alienation, they argued, following Marx in his *1844 Manuscripts*, that the expropriation of the means of production and the institutions of political life by the state created a universal form of alienation through the control of those means and institutions by a concentrated power.

The alienation of workers from the products of their labor, as well as from labor itself, according to Marx in his *1844 Manuscripts*, means that labor and its products acquire an independent existence. Whether they confront the worker as something belonging to the capitalist or to the state, that independent existence becomes the measure of value of a worker's labor and its products.² The key difference, however, is that in étatistic socialism, or what Marx referred to as "crude communism" in which individual private property is annulled and transformed into "universal private property" through its expropriation by the state,³ the value of a worker's labor and its products is monopolized.

Humanist Marxist philosophers stressed the continuation of Marx's intellectual development along the theme of alienation, rejecting the notion of an "epistemological break" between the so-called "young" and "mature Marx" most notably propagated by Louis Althusser.⁴ In his three-volume intellectual history of Marxism, entitled *Main Currents of Marxism* (1976), Leszek Kołakowski summed up Marx's intellectual development in the following way: "The theory of

² See Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844: Estranged Labor," in *The Marx-Engels Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York City: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 70-81.

³ Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844: Private Property and Communism," *ibid.*, 82.

⁴ For Althusser's notion of an "epistemological break" between the "young" and "mature Marx," see Louis Althusser, "On the Materialist Dialectic," in *For Marx* (London: Verso, 2005), 161-218.

value [that Marx developed in his later writings]...is ‘nothing but the definitive version of alienated labor [that Marx developed in his early writings].’⁵ This throughline of alienation gave humanist Marxist philosophers a new basis from which to critically reexamine Marxism.

In his intellectual history of the Praxis School, entitled *Praxis: Marxist Criticism and Dissident in Socialist Yugoslavia* (1977), Gershon Sher writes that “the [Marxist] theory of alienation...is intimately linked to a theory of praxis, and it can be argued that for [humanist] Marxism it is indeed the latter which is the more fundamental.”⁶ The human “species character,” according to Marx in his *1844 Manuscripts*, is praxis, which he describes as “free, conscious activity.”⁷ Marx distinguished between animal “life-activity,” in which production is linked to biological self-preservation, and human “conscious life-activity” that intentionally transforms objective reality.⁸

⁵ Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, the Golden Age, the Breakdown*, trans. P. S. Falla (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), n.p.; cited in “Review in the *New Republic* by Michael Harrington of *Main Currents of Marxism. Volume I: The Founders. Volume II: The Golden Age. Volume III: The Breakdown*,” 03 February 1979. Kołakowski, Leszek, 1957 - 1979; HU OSA 300-120-2:187/1; Biographical Files from Abalkin to Zwingli; Western Press Archives; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute; Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

⁶ Gershon Sher, *Praxis: Marxist Criticism and Dissent in Socialist Yugoslavia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 71.

⁷ Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844: Estranged Labor,” op. cit., 76.

⁸ Ibid.

As he writes, “the worker’s activity [under conditions of alienation] is not [their] spontaneous activity [as free, conscious activity, i.e., praxis]. It belongs to another; it is the loss their [selves].”⁹ My research at the Blinken OSA has allowed me to trace the development of humanist Marxism through the efforts of its exponents to demonstrate how universalized conditions of alienation under étatic socialism prevented the realization of the human “species character” through praxis—efforts that brought humanist Marxist philosophers into direct confrontation with communist authorities that were reported by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

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⁹ Ibid., 74.

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