

Wolfgang Fritz Haug

The Language Question in Marxism

Brecht, Gramsci and Wittgenstein¹

The title pretends too much. The scope of my remarks is in a way quite modest. I want to show that in the creative laboratory of the twenties and early thirties there are innovative elements in Marxist thought of great theoretical productivity. These promising beginnings were prevented from developing by Stalinism, World War II and the subsequent Cold War period. My argument is, that some of these elements meet vital needs of Marxist thought today. This leads to the immodest side of my argument: Here I pretend that Marxist thought or the philosophical discourse of Marxism is in need of being reinvented. The various sedimented philosophies which occupy its field are disparate and at least partly dead. It is time to reinvent, because the time of the old mainstream-Marxisms has run out. This is one element of truth in post-marxisms. There is only one way to »win back« the initiative -- which is to move on. We have had our doomsday. If we simply wait for resurrection it will fail to come. Philosophical action is wanted. However - and *as ever* - from academic philosophy is not much to be expected, though its potential of rationality defines standards which cannot be neglected. To recur to Brecht und Gramsci seems odd to the institutional philosophy. To recur to Gramsci at least does not seem odd at this marvelous conference. There are dozens of presentations and many panels where this is explicitly done. With Bertolt Brecht the case is different. As far as I have seen, the title of my presentation is the only one in which he figures.

There is an enormous discrepancy between the theoretical wealth in Brecht, its importance for Marxist philosophical thought and the restricted use made of it. Brecht's glory as a playwright and poet still outshines his contribution to the modernization and radicalization of Marxist theoretical reflection. In Anglo-Saxon countries Brecht's theoretical productivity may in addition be obscured by the influence of Brecht's theoretical opponent Lukács. The

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Brecht-Lukács-debate was one of the major theoretical events in 20 century's Marxism. One might ask: How can a debate that never took place in its own time and space be a major event in theory? What is more, the event, that never took place, is but the reverse side of what has to be discovered: the respective philosophical hinterlands of these two opponents. On Lukács' side the recurrence of the Hegelian spirit, this time in red - a going back to Marx which meant falling back behind Marx. On Brecht's side there is an insatiable critical appropriation of the advanced tendencies of physics (quantum mechanics, special relativity theory), psychology (Kurt Lewin's field theory to analyse the relation of masses and individuals) or social epistemology (Otto Neurath), of American Pragmatism and Behaviorism -- and last not least of the linguistic turn in philosophy.

Lukács' hinterland is still widely accepted, though the Anti-Lukács, Louis Althusser, has done damage to it. Althusser was one of the few (with Henri Lefebvre) to recognize the philosophical importance of Brecht. All the more important is it to draw attention to a misunderstanding in Althusser's relation to Brecht as well as in the prevailing image of Althusser, who is almost as present on this conference as Brecht is absent. Let me give an example. In his *Avertissement* to the readers of *Capital I* from 1969 (Paris: Flammarion) Althusser characterizes Marx' theoretical achievement as »the discovery of the system of concepts« (»la découverte du système de concepts«) which opens the »continent of history« to the scientific research. Those who accept Althusser's selfpresentation as an anti-Hegelian should be astonished to discover, how close Althusser can be to Hegel. For Hegel the history of philosophy is »the history of the discovery of the *thoughts* [*Gedanken*] on the absolute which is their object« (*Encyclopedia*, Preface to 2nd ed.). To speak of »discovery of concepts« makes sense only in a universe, in which, in Hegels words: »Everything which is not this reality being posited by the concept itself is nothing but transitory existence, exterior contigency, opinion, inessential appearance, untruth, deception.«² This is obviously not the universe of historical Materialism. Compare to this Brecht's word: Take the philosophers as *Erfinder*, *nicht Finder*, as inventors, not discoverers. They are most interesting, he observes, where they disarticulate one another. All of a sudden

² »Alles, was nicht diese durch den Begriff selbst gesetzte Wirklichkeit ist, ist vorübergehendes Dasein, äusserliche Zufälligkeit, Meinung, wesenlose Erscheinung, Unwahrheit, Täuschung usf.« (*Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, Werke, Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, vol. 7, 1)

the technicality of their terms appears.

Linguistics were so to speak the alpha and the omega in Gramsci's intellectual biography: He started as a most promising student of linguistics, and his professor, Matteo Bartoli, saw in him even his possible successor and had him write down the curriculum for the undergraduates. The very last notes which Gramsci wrote down in his cell, in April 1935, seem to be the paragraphs of notebook 29. Gramsci gave it the title: *Note per una introduzione allo studio della grammatica*. The last line in this notebook (9) says: »Il titolo dello studio potrebbe essere: 'Linga nazionale e grammatica'.« In contrast to all the other notebooks of the last period in Formia (the thematic notebooks 19-28) which consist almost exclusively of second versions (C-texts), this one consists exclusively of first versions (B-texts). Questions of »grammar« formed therefore the last field, on which Gramsci once more tried to start from the beginning. Gramsci's final break-down soon put an end to this work (as to his whole work on the note-books, which he never touched again). The East-German linguist Klaus Bochmann commented 1984 in his linguistic selection from the notebooks: »In spite of their small size these reflections represent the first deep-going essay of a Marxist foundation of linguistics.« (37)

Brecht and Gramsci didn't know of each other (as far as I know). Both of them didn't know Wittgenstein personally. And yet: there are mediate relations between these three. Known is the fact that Otto Neurath and Karl Korsch were, through their theoretical work, indirectly connecting Brecht with Wittgenstein (one direction only). Scarcely known is the fact that Piero Sraffa was indirectly connecting Gramsci and Wittgenstein. Let me dwell on this a little bit.

Wittgenstein himself acknowledges in his introduction to the *Philosophical Investigations* that he owes to Sraffa's criticism »the most consequential ideas of this work«. »It was above all Sraffa's acute and forceful criticism«, echoes v. Wright (1967, 24), »that compelled Wittgenstein to abandon his earlier views and set out upon new roads.« And Gerratana adds: Sraffa »poteva [...] esercitare la sua martellante conversazione critica sulle meditazioni filosofiche di Wittgenstein« (1991, XLVII). While all these formulas leave open what those »most consequential ideas« were, Graham Lock names it: »Piero Sraffa s'applique à saper son assurance quant à sa *picture theory* du langage.« (1992, 67) But how? Paul Feyerabend explains: »The only difference being the language games instead of the language of the natural sciences which formed the

theoretical background of the *Tractatus*« (1967, 249). But doesn't the language game start as a most abstract set of things and a master naming these things while pointing to them for a subdued pupil who then has to repeat the names when the master again points to the things, or who has to bring them like a trained dog? What transforms the language game into a rich concept is its founding in »ways of living«³ or *modes of life*. Its relevance consists in that »knowledge, for Wittgenstein, was intimately connected with doing« (v. Wright 1967, 27). And that »a name functions as a name only in the context of a system of linguistic and non-linguistic activities« (Kenny 1974, 187).

Rubinstein (1981, 88) therefore tried to show that in Marx as in Wittgenstein »mind is not a property of consciousness but of action, and that meaning is an intersubjective phenomenon, i.e. a feature of systems of collective praxis«. »Not words alone, but social practices, determine what counts as an object« (Rubinstein 1981, 174).

Let me turn back to Sraffa's role in all this. As early as 1927 Piero Sraffa, who at this moment was still professor of economics at the university of Cagliari, had opened an »unlimited credit account« at the bookshop Sperling & Kupfer in Milan for whatever books the prisoner Gramsci might wish (Fiori 1979, 204). Gramsci accepts Sraffa's help, as he writes to Tania Schucht (Jan. 3, 1926), »primo perché egli è ricco e non sarà imbarazzato nell'aiutarmi, secondo perché la sua offerta non è puramente di cortesia e accademica« (LC, 33f). This could mean that he understood Sraffa's help as that of the intermediary in relation to the Italian Communist Party.

Perry Anderson has had his share in obscuring Sraffa's role as well as the character of Gramsci's *Notebooks*. In his influential study on Gramsci in No. 100 of the *NLR* he claims, against all the evidence of the *Prison Notebooks*: »Gramsci's silence on economic problems was complete.« (1976, 75) He ignores that there are not only an important number of paragraphs dedicated to the Marxian idea of the tendential falling of the profit rate, but also a whole section of notes under the heading *Punti di meditazione / per lo studio dell' / sull'economia*. And aren't Gramsci's analyses of the transition to Fordism part of a concrete critique of political economy of his epoch? It even made sense to publish a rich selection on Gramsci's economical writings from the *Prison*

³ Cf. Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology & Religious Belief*, Ed. by Cyril Barrett, Oxford: Blackwell 1966, 11: »In order to get clear about aesthetic words you have to describe ways of living.«

Notebooks. - Anderson continues: »Yet, ironically and mysteriously, one of his closest and most life-long friends was Piero Sraffa - who mediated his correspondence with the PCI outside Italy during the final years of his imprisonment, and was probably the last man to talk over international politics with Gramsci, a few months before his death in 1937.« As if trying to repudiate Spinoza's sentence *ignorantia non est argumentum* Anderson develops an argument from his ignoring Gramsci's economical reflections when he goes on: »There is a certain symbolism in this strange relationship between the greatest Marxist political thinker in the west and the most original economic theorist of the post-war epoch, with its combination of personal intimacy and intellectual separation. There appears to have been no remote connection between the universes of their respective works.« (Ibid.)

Giorgio Baratta supposes, Gramsci might have overstrained his »dry, rational, cautious and distanced« friend. This remark refers to Gramsci's question (addressed via Tania to Sraffa in his letter from Mai 30, 1932), if one might say, »che Ricardo abbia contribuito a indirizzare i primi teorici della filosofia della praxis al loro superamento della filosofia hegeliana e alla costruzione del loro nuovo storicismo, depurato di ogni traccia di logica speculativa?« (*Lettere del Carcere*, 629) Sraffa replies that this question is difficult to answer, because Ricardo, in contrast to the first »filosofi della praxis« -- he spells »praxis«, not the italian »prassi«, exactly as Gramsci does in his three letters on Croce from 1932 -- »non si ripiegava mai a considerare storicamente il suo proprio pensiero« (1991, 74).

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Politically they couldn't be much more opposed, Wittgenstein on one side, Brecht and Gramsci on the other. Like his teacher Gottlob Frege, Wittgenstein was a political reactionary, not much better than Nietzsche had been. What kept him from falling for the Nazis might have been that he was gay and jewish and torn apart by a never ending reflection. In order to prepare the confrontation of Wittgenstein's ideas with those of Brecht and Gramsci I shall turn to the language question in the founding texts of Marx & Engels.

It was always a shortsighted view to play the young Marx off against the old Marx. How could such an addict to life-long learning *not* make progress. And yet there is a point in it. Marx' texts from 1843 to 46, partly written together with Friedrich Engels, present a firework of ideas shedding their sudden light

in many directions. We may call them the texts of emergence of this new thought. The stages of progress appear rapidly. The early Marxian research conquers its territories in a war of movement, compared to the 30 years-war of position of the Critique of Political Economy.

Many of the insights of the period of emergence have later been marginalized by that main research. And since many of the texts of emergence were not accessible to the first two generations of Marxists - imagine a Lenin having read the *German Ideology!* - the reception and integration of Marxian ideas into what became known as Marxism was quite selective and in many ways an impoverishment.

Let me give three examples of basic ideas that were filtered out by the successors and often turned into the opposite: 1. the elements of a radically critical theory of the ideological in the *German Ideology* (GI) were disarticulated by a regression into ideology; Valentin Vološinov, whose book from 1929 starts with the observation: »Until today not one single Marxist work on philosophy of language exists«, and who, like Gramsci and Brecht, strives against »abstract objectivism« (aiming at Saussure), - this Vološinov identifies without hesitating the realm of meaning or why not of language with the realm of ideology; 2. the idea that patriarchy can be seen as the first class-relation in history -- with slavery as its extension and property as »the power of disposing of the labour-power of others« (CW 5, 46) [»Verfügung über fremde Arbeitskraft«, MEW 3, 33] at its very center; 3. the inscription of language in the basic pattern of historical Materialism.

This inscription is twofold: A. on a methodological level »language« in its metonymical meaning serves as the key concept; B. in its primary sense language is understood as one of a set of »original moments« of human existence.

A. »Language of real life«. -- The metonymical concept of language occupies the key-position of what is supposed to substitute the hermeneutics of spirit: »Language of real life«. The relevant passage is maybe better known than its relevance: »The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity [*Tätigkeit*] and the material intercourse of men [*der Menschen*] -- the language of real life.« (CW 5, 36) *Nota bene*: Language in a non-metaphoric sense is implied in the terms »the mental intercourse of men« [*geistiger Verkehr der Menschen*]. -- Under elementary

conditions the ideas can be understood as »direct efflux« [direkter Ausfluss] of »material« activities. But also under conditions of growing complexity and differentiation of social structures the rule applies: from politics to law, from poetry to metaphysics: always try to »read« the mental formations as »language of real life«. Only that »real life« applies now to the complex realities of State-reproduced class-societies. And the problem is now, to understand the 'languages' of the superstructures of State-reproduced class-societies: law, ethics, metaphysics etc. Only if we understand such forms as »language of real life«, will we understand the real life of language.

B. Primary meaning: Language is understood as one of five »aspects of social activity« (43) which Marx and Engels differentiate as »fundamental facts«. These »aspects« are »not of course to be taken as [...] different stages, but just as [...] aspects or, to make it clear to the Germans, [...] 'moments', which have existed simultaneously since the dawn of history and the first men [*Menschen*], and which still assert themselves in history today«. - These aspects (*Seiten*) are: 1. »the production of material life« (42); and, as a result of this, 2. the »creation of new needs«; 3. the reproduction of the species in the family as »the only social relation« at the beginning; and 4. »a certain mode of production« implying »a certain mode of co-operation«.

Finally, language appears as the 5th instance to overthrow the ruling role of consciousness in philosophy as established by Descartes two centuries before. Ironically, maliciously: »Only now, after having considered four moments, four aspects of primary historical relations, do we find that man also possesses 'consciousness'. But even from the outset this is not 'pure' consciousness. The 'mind' is from the outset afflicted with the curse of being 'burdened' with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language.« Marx and Engels continue: »Language is as old as consciousness, language *is* practical, real consciousness that exists for other men as well, and only therefore does it also exist for me; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men.« (44) Etc.

The materiality of language consists in this double relation: To what we might call the relevance structures of my surrounding⁴ and the relation to the group to which I belong: »language« is the articulatedness of »my relation to my

⁴ Crossed out: »My relation to my surroundings is my consciousness.«

surroundings«. A »private language« would be only a metaphorical expression.⁵ Consciousness is, then, in its human sense, always articulated consciousness. Human reality is articulated reality. Therefore it is far from being true to say that Marx, »despite his materialism, continued to accord mind distinct existence as a realm or thing« (Schatzki 1996, 55). This could be said from Marxism-Leninism. Because those insights of the young Marx and Engels have been repressed by the so-called »reflection theory«. How can we understand the relation of these two paradigms, the paradigm of the mirror (reflection) and the paradigm of articulation? Reflection is a binary relation. The framework in which this concept works, is the philosophy of consciousness. Articulation, however, has to be understood in a threefold sense, as we have seen. Consciousness is always linguistically articulated; speech is articulating practices and their elements; the practical reality is again articulated.

It is finally worth noting that the *German Ideology* already knows linguisticism as ideological successor of philosophy of consciousness: »One of the most difficult tasks for the [the *Collected Works* put: confronting] philosophers is to descend from the world of thought to the actual [*wirkliche*] world. *Language* is the immediate actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] of thought. Just as philosophers have given thought an independent existence, so they were bound to make language into an independent realm.« [»Wie die Philosophen das Denken verselbständigt haben, so mussten sie die Sprache zu einem eigenen Reich verselbständigen.«] (CW 5, 446; MEW 3, 432)

About 35 years later, in his *Marginal Notes* on the German national economist Adolph Wagner from 1979 until shortly before his death, Marx returns to the question of language. Wagner's manual belongs to the first generation of bourgeois manuals of economics dealing casually with Marx' work *Capital*. Through this kind of text the late Marx is looking into the mirror of reception. He is appalled. He reacts with a radicalization of his epistemological reflection. Once more the critique of the Hegelian legacy -- though in its vulgar form - appears on the agenda. Marx criticizes the »scholasticism« of

⁵ »Language is practical, real consciousness that exists for other men as well, and only therefore does it also exist for me«. To »exist for me« is conditioned by language: »Where there exists a relationship, it exists for me: the animal does not 'relate' itself to anything, it does not 'relate' itself at all. For the animal its relation to others does not exist as a relation. Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all.« (44)

deriving from the concept of *value* the concepts of use value and exchange value. He does not dispose of a ready-made terminology to formulate his criticism. His analysis boils down to the fact, that Wagner (as Rodbertus) is seduced by the »synsemic« property of the three terms in question - the occurrence of the expression »value« in all of them - to presume a substantial community. (Let us note *en passant* that the point is most interesting: Marx discusses here critically what is in our days ascribed to him as his »logical method«. In a certain way Marx' critique of this

»Begriffsanknüpfungsmethode« to derivate concepts from concepts is also a self-critique. Marx stresses the »unlogical« character of, f.i., the way in which different kinds of commodities on a price list are totally distinguished as use-values from the other kinds, while they present simultaneously their price as »qualitatively the same, but quantitatively different of the *same essence*«. You have to start from the »social thing«, be it a fact or an act, and not from its name. - Almost casually Marx slides from polemics into a serious sketch of how language and concrete social activities are genetically mediated.

Discussing use value he touches what later has been called predicates of disposition and introduces the dimension of standpoint-related practical relevance into the understanding of judgement and predication. »It would hardly appear to a sheep as one of its 'useful' properties«, he says, »that it is edible for men.« (MEW 19, 363) Marx analyses how human naming-activities are embedded in the exploration of relevance-structures in the surroundings. Experimental appropriation acts precede linguistic appropriation in the form of naming acts. The consequence is: if there is a dialectics it has to be found on the practical activity-level in the framework of a »life-winning process [*Lebensgewinnungsprozess*]« with a certain social character or form-determination (as, f.i., »wage labour« or »house work«). If you look for it on the linguistic level you will inevitably land in »concept-dialectics« (*Begriffsdialektik*). In this late context Marx comes to conceive of his own method as of »my analytical method« (opposed to »professoral-deutsche Begriffsanknüpfungsmethode«).

Compare this to what has prevailed as Marxism for a long period and you will be glad to discover what Ernst Bloch used to call *future in the past*. A past that never came to be a present before, because it was aborted when in our »short century« so many developments were overwhelmed by exterminist violence and the following antagonism of superpowers.