CHAPTER 9

Once Again on the Problem of Knowledge and Praxis

The theory of knowledge represents a central problem in Marxist philosophical debates. As we have explained, it contains questions as fundamental as that of the relationship between idealism and (pre-Marxian) materialism and that of the – ultimately – materialist character of a praxis-orientated interpretation of Marxism. These theoretical problematics had and continue to have far-reaching consequences, insofar as within them is found the balancing act that any critical Marxist philosophy and theory must constantly dare to realise; a balancing act to which this philosophical tendency owes a great deal of its allure and importance, but which simultaneously represents an internal philosophical reason that this theoretical current does not enjoy much sympathy in the current political context.

Bourgeois thinkers and actors took pleasure in casting against this current the allegation that it was allied with dark forces in the Soviet Union, a reproach which still finds adherents after the end of the experiment of actually-existing socialism. Among Marxist theorists and activists, on the other hand, this theoretical current – known as Western Marxism – always awakened the suspicion that it might contain a ‘bourgeois’ softening of the Marxist critique of the ruling capitalist relations of production and bourgeois society. With the end of the Soviet Union, the majority of dogmatic Marxists have also disappeared from the face of the Earth. Now, old dogmatic Marxists who suddenly recall that they were always good bourgeois democrats, together with untiring anticommunists, unleash insults against any persisting efforts to develop Marxist

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317 See also: ‘The fact that the point of departure for dialectical materialism is of a specifically epistemological character is due to the circumstance that Marx and Engels accept Hegel’s critique of Kant without being able to simultaneously accept his speculative foundation. With Hegel they affirm the possibility of knowing the essence of phenomena, and with Kant (certainly without referring to the *Critique of Pure Reason*) they insist on the non-identity of form and matter, subject and object of knowledge. It comes in such a way – albeit without expressing it openly – to a materialist reformulation of the problem of constitution’: Schmidt 1969c, pp. 10f.
theory, and affirm with relief that at least one thing has remained constant in their thought: their rejection of a non-dogmatic interpretation of Marx.

This first way of avoiding self-reflection on one’s own theoretical weaknesses at a previous moment – that of projecting one’s own defects in interpreting Marx onto others who were always suspicious of them – is complemented by a second way. Some formerly dogmatic Marxists are now convinced that they have always been critical, non-dogmatic Marxists. Through this reconstruction of their own theoretical history, they avoid, in their own way, the pending self-criticism. An example of this second form of conduct is the mentioned Cuban philosopher Jorge Luis Acanda González, who has recently presented himself, without any kind of reflection on his own philosophical past, as someone who has always interpreted Marx critically.

The philosopher from Frankfurt, Alfred Schmidt, is one of those theorists who, already long before the end of the Soviet Union, was developing an autonomous and non-dogmatic interpretation of Marx in contrast to state philosophers, and after the end of the experiment in actually-existing socialism does not want his own philosophical production during that period to disappear into oblivion. In light of the fact that Schmidt has made decisive contributions to the non-dogmatic debates surrounding Marxism, above all on the terrain of the theory of knowledge, it would be beneficial to place some of his reflections alongside Sánchez Vázquez’s philosophy of praxis.

a Materialism and Idealism

As concerns the relationship between praxis and knowledge, Alfred Schmidt, like his Spanish-Mexican contemporary, upholds the third of the positions mentioned in the chapter regarding the discussion of the Theses on Feuerbach. As we have already observed, Sánchez Vázquez describes this position in the following terms: ‘Finally others, like Kosík, maintain that without praxis, or the creation of a socio-human reality, knowledge of reality is itself impossible’.

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318 See also, in this regard, pp. 85ff of this book.
319 Alfred Schmidt, for example, expressed years ago that he continued to defend the positions put forth in his book The Concept of Nature in Marx. Evidently alluding to the treatment that Max Horkheimer gave his own previous writings after having returned to Frankfurt in 1947 from his exile in the United States, Schmidt said that he would not lock his early writings up in the basement (personal communication, c. 1993).
320 See the chapter ‘Interpretation of the Theses on Feuerbach’, pp. 132ff of this book.
321 Sánchez Vázquez 1977a, pp. 116f.