

Interview with social scientist Horst Müller on cancer economics, computer socialism, Hugo Chávez, public private partnerships, and Heidegger

"We have to cook a new soup"

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[Horst Müller](#) is editor of the portal [praxisphilosophie.de](#). He has published numerous articles on philosophical and politico-economic subjects and in 2005 has launched the publication of the series "Studies on the Philosophy and Science of Social Praxis" (2) ("[Studien zur Philosophie und Wissenschaft gesellschaftlicher Praxis](#)").

Mister Müller, could you briefly outline what Praxisphilosophie, Philosophy of Praxis is all about, in which tradition this kind of philosophy is rooted, and who are its exponents or sources?

Horst Müller: Philosophy of Praxis is a major European school of thought that owes its name to the Italian social philosopher [Antonio Labriola](#). It is based on the discovery that in Karl Marx' thought a conception of human reality and scientific nature is expressed that is **completely new** in intellectual history. The protagonists of this approach struggled over articulating the theoretical fundament of that which Marx had merely insinuated in his [Theses on Feuerbach](#). In their respective historic situation each of them had in their own way tried to achieve a corresponding "conception of praxis". The philosophers who are part of this school include, to name but the most important ones, Labriola, the party intellectual [Antonio Gramsci](#), [Herbert Marcuse](#) in his creative period before the Second World War and in the second half of the 20th century and [Ernst Bloch](#), whose profound interpretation of Marx' Theses on Feuerbach constitutes a lynchpin in his magnum opus "The Principle of Hope" (*Das Prinzip Hoffnung*) and also for the required thinking of the "Concrete Utopia".

Apart from the characters that I just highlighted we have individual thinkers in different European countries; in particular I would like to point out the Czech [Karel Kosik](#) and [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) in the West. The most important representative in recent times was probably the French sociologist and Bloch Laureate [Pierre Bourdieu](#), whose work "The Theory of Praxis" stood out not least of all through the resolute critique voiced, that is, by "resistance to neo-liberal invasion". At the same time Bourdieu demanded the "collective design of a social Utopia" be tackled anew.

What is the novum that you just mentioned? In what way does the worldview of the Praxis school differ from other practical and theoretical models that allow us to achieve an understanding of the world?

Horst Müller: The "Praxis" concept unites materialism, dialectics and utopianism. Conceiving of human and social reality in terms of "Praxis", understanding Praxis as the deciphered determination of existence (*Seinsbestimmtheit*), as it were, in the sense of a kind of social Praxis that is contradictory, allows a crucially deepened and prospectively expanded analytics and a corresponding orientation within the concrete social situation.

This kind of an "intervening conception" represents, for instance, a direct attack against any objectivism or positivism, it opposes the ideological concepts of common sense, it opposes the distortion of reality purported by pragmatism and the opportunism of the prevailing scientific character, it opposes the pseudo concrete interpretations of reality that are being reproduced via the mass media. It reveals both the lack of Utopia of a social theory that has gone simply "critical" and pseudo-dialectical Marxisms as being vulgar or dogmatic.

Thus, all thinking carries an index of "Praxis"; the positioning of the scientist "outside" does not exist. One of the most noble tasks of the theory consists in a humane-social, praxis-historical self-conception rooted in the whence, and simultaneously and essentially in the self-determination of a whereto, that is, in the "utopian" evaluation of a socially concrete perspective of transformation.

Such a kind of "Concrete Philosophy of Praxis" is the most forceful antagonist of the one-dimensional squaring of the intellect and of the destruction of reason that is now being aggressively promoted at all levels and in all areas of society.

In your view, why is the Philosophy of Praxis suited to explain the current social development?

Horst Müller: Because it corresponds in the profoundest sense to the characteristic of modern societies as societies in transition and to the character of the new historic age as an [epoch of transformation](#): A thought about which above all the world-systems theoretician Immanuel Wallerstein has expressed something inspiring in his work "[Utopistik](#)": in such a transitional period both the Old and the New is active at the same time, and in the struggle between the decaying and the simultaneously emerging new, better forms of social praxis the theory must prove its capacity for development and creating new perspectives. Just employing positivist, one-dimensional, in short: non-dialectical modes of thinking that claim absoluteness without the incorporation of praxis-theoretical categories like Latency, *Novum* etc. is impossible.

Furthermore, I don't see any other approach of social science that would enable us to comprehend the entire "Dialectics of Praxis" of the beginning 21st century, that is, to grasp the real nexus of trends of neo-liberal globalization and its true alienating character, and at the same time a real possibility of the formation of the emerging other and its latent potentialities. Herein lie the major problems and thus the exact tasks that become apparent in the upheaval of the emerging realisation that "Another world is possible".

The notion that another world is possible is currently experiencing great currency. As an implicit motif of earlier social and political movements, however, this idea is not new and previous attempts to create a socialist economy and society have failed spectacularly. Today protesters still cannot point to a concrete Utopia, to a genuine alternative either...

Horst Müller: It is precisely for this reason that the exploration of the historical circumstances, reasons and background facts for the collapse of traditional left movements and social experiments *in the light of yet to be explored tendencies, latencies and concrete-utopian perspectives* is one of the tasks of a concrete Philosophy of Praxis. It is definitely also a matter of unsparing self-critique and of a *re-formation of left identity* to fit our current time.

Incidentally, the latter analytical categories stem from German philosopher Ernst Bloch's Philosophy of Praxis. They are now required from the very process of civilization itself and conversely

have to prove in it their exploratory potential. In my view, if we take these analytical categories seriously, it leads us at first to realize that a systemically and historically genuine new mode of production and form of society has not come out of the struggles and illusions of the 20th century. This leads us to the extremely uncomfortable realisation that a major share of the responsibility lies with the same school of thought of traditional Marxist thinking and political economy which has shut itself off from the praxis-theoretical methodology of transcendence and generally the concrete-utopian idea.

In my opinion, in particular the long overdue transcendence of "critique" by means of a sound "utopian conception" of political economy implies that the consequences of the "concept of praxis" in relation to scientific methods and economic theory are completely reformulated. Instead, in endless exegetical spiritual exercises a theory of value, capital and crisis has been formulated, in substance fostering a thinking that negates.

As a result, some 150 years after Marx the new social and political movements, the social forums, the critics of globalization and left organisations have an entire array of objections and charges at their disposal, but they lack a concrete economic-political alternative and a project of a better civilization which would be sufficiently concrete in relation to a theory of praxis and transformation. Hence, although today "Socialism" marks a finishing line of historicity, it does in fact not denote a concrete proposal that could persuade a social majority. To illustrate: The soup in the pot is burned and we have to cook a new soup.

In the article on "Alternative Concepts of Political Economy", your latest contribution in the anthology ["The Transitional Society of the 21st Century"](#), you thoroughly criticize the book "The Socialism of the 21st Century" written by the social scientist and Hugo Chavez' advisor [Heinz Dieterich](#) who teaches in Mexico. In doing so, you develop your own philosophical-economic concept. Could you please sketch both the positions held by Dieterich and your critique as well as the positive conclusions derived from it?

Horst Müller: Very briefly: To begin with, Heinz Dieterich has a very conventional understanding of "dialectics" and "scientific socialism", an understanding that does not correspond to the scientific-methodological requirements of a more advanced analytics of Praxis. This fact is concentrated in the terrible and far-reaching claim that scientific socialism was "the quintessential cybernetic philosophy of science".

His fierce criticism of constituent basic elements of the existing type of society, a bourgeois, merely "formally-representative" democracy, of capitalist or "chrematistic" economics, of the idiotic consumerism and the modern media powers shakes their very foundations and is not afraid of polemic exaggerations. However, Social Praxis is thus definitely being reflected upon and negated in a one-dimensional way – [Adorno](#) springs to mind here.

Against that abstract, constructed counter-images are being put forward as a would-be concrete alternative. Dieterich tends toward a radical-democratic, "participatory" democracy and a "socialist" economics, moving the "equivalence economical" idea of the so called Scottish School to the centre. It is being claimed that thanks to modern information technology this can only now be realized, through a planned economy based on the value of working hours and grassroots democratic control.

However, as far as theory is concerned, this construct is incompatible with Marx' theory of value, and in my opinion [Cockshott und Cottrell's](#) "computer socialism" is on the whole more an echo of the computer euphoria of the past than a sustainable model for the future. **(3)**

The logical consequence of Heinz Dieterich's proposal means the affirmation of the traditional structure of the historical process in terms of crisis, revolution and reconstruction, which plainly does not offer a perspective of transformation in line with the transitional situation. What was formerly named revolutionary class is being replaced by him by a "community of victims" (*Gemeinschaft der Opfer*). By that I do not mean at all that revolutions wouldn't be possible anymore. But a revolution that lacks a concrete perspective of transformation would be exactly that what Marx has called a mere revolt.

The possible solution to the problem of the not yet identified alternative economy, correctly interpreted by Dieterich as being a fundamental, existential problem, consists in my opinion in a kind of analytics of transformation of socioeconomic Praxis, rooted in a theory of reproduction and transformation, and which transcends Marx' narrow industrial-capitalist modelling. By employing such a kind of exposition of the problem which at the same time opposes the prevailing classical-neoliberal economic theory, I try to show that the potentialities and forms of a society that would be superior both in terms of economy and civilization are already present as "latency" "in the bosom" of the existent and can be set free in the course of a historic process of transformation.

At first glance the capitalist world system is in the saddle more firmly than ever before; where do you see it crumble?

Horst Müller: If the devil comes along astride his steed, you must still try to pull him down; otherwise, you'll get mashed for certain.

We know that the dominance of cancer economics claims millions of victims and that it ruins the world and our future on a daily basis, be it in infinitesimally small, or recurrently also in larger portions. Marx observed correctly that capital incessantly revolutionizes the social productive forces, but it only revolutionizes them by simultaneously undermining the sources of true wealth. Capital scourges civilization and undermines at the same time the "planet Earth and the worker", i.e., the natural foundations of existence and ultimately the true human competence for an ultimately pacified, future social self-creation that would be equipped with a superior consciousness.

The inevitable, and from a social sciences view self-evident question of major importance today is about the pending change of a system which has been around for hundreds of years and increasingly reveals its precarious and highly problematic aspects; it could not be answered by Marx in his time. But it is the historical task we have to solve. In this context I like to quote from Immanuel Wallerstein's aforementioned "Utopistik": "The system is finished, the question is: What comes afterwards?"

In the light of sometimes very unfavorable developments of democracy, economy, media and social awareness for wage slaves, where do you see positive starting points for your theory of "setting the wheels of transformation in motion"?

Horst Müller: For this we now have new hypotheses or concepts available using a proto-theoretical research approach and that I put up for discussion: No single human being can solve the problems that have arisen on their own. Likewise, it would be a gross self-deception if we would simply place our hope on the processing of experiences of a continuous Praxis: theoretical work as such is also Praxis.

Here is the first result of it: Marx was not able to solve the problem of a required alternative, of which he was of course always aware, because his theoretical model of the famous two spheres of reproduction was based on a "totalling" of industrial-economic Praxis. But the real historic starting point moving towards transformation going beyond that, for "setting the wheels of transformation in motion", can only be found in a kind of modelling of the more mature form of the capitalist political

economy as it has developed after the Second World War.

We are talking about the triumvirate of industrial production of commodities, an economically functional social state, and the so called "social welfare services" that I subsume under a *new sphere of reproduction*. The implications of that novel fundamental thesis are of major significance: According to it, the current interpretation of the welfare state in terms of a merely temporary historical concession made by the power of capital is in principle inadequate. If this is true, then for instance also the intentions towards an institutionalization of a socialist economy, intentions that have primarily been aimed at the controllability of the industrial production of commodities, were in essence wrongly orientated and failed not least of all because of that, at any rate they did not fail because of, say, the absence of information and communication technology.

Alternatively, several conclusions drawn by the theoreticians of capital need to be revised, as far as they analyze the context of events in our age of "neoliberal globalization" by recourse to conceptualizations and tentative propositions originating from Marx' analysis of the "Capital in General".

How much would the state and the economy have to be changed to realize your concept, and how would the path towards it look like (seeing that it is not only a matter of rising the standard of living, but rather a matter of reigning in an economy that behaves in an ever more totalitarian way)?

Horst Müller: Traditional theory of capital and crisis conceptualizes the contradiction between capital and labor or increasingly also the contradiction between the exploitative economy and the natural resources; it finally also points out that the crisis is the manifestation of a self-contradiction of the capitalistic-economic practice. But by doing so it does not describe the crucial contradiction between the old mode of reproduction and a new ensemble of productive forces that is already coming into being and out of which a different form of reproduction, superior in terms of civilization, could arise.

Another hypothesis could be used to explore this lead: What Marx, from the perspective of capitalist economy, called "unproductive labor", has, in a more mature form of this economics, developed into the other half of the economy, as it were; this has blossomed into an enormous fund of state sponsored social-infrastructureal projects or "social-welfare services".

From the Praxis perspective of industrial production of commodities this newly created sphere is seen as a cost factor, a burden or a luxury within this real constellation. Hence, the big fuss about imposing too heavy a burden on the "factor" labor through social security contributions or the supposed profligacy of the state.

The crack in the system of social labor indicated here marks a front within the capitalist system: The managers of capital are seeking an escape from the chronic over-accumulation and growth fiasco within by imposing the capitalist economic form on the social-welfare services.

The struggle against this disfigurement or [amputation of the community](#), casually labelled [Private Public Partnership](#), and the objective of this struggle is aimed at organising the production of the fundamental requirements of society according to its needs essentially through social transfers, but organised differently than it is now, and instituting it as a public and non-profit making operation; this could in contrast contribute considerably to a real reorganization and change of the entire mode of reproduction including its inherent economic calculation.

It would be digressing too far if one were to look further into the consequences of an "emancipation" and economically equivalent "evaluation" of the socioeconomic services in relation to company or national accounting, the structure of private property, a new democratic economic constitution, or even to address questions on inter- and transnational business transactions and the entire nexus of problems with globalization.

An in-depth research study titled "Social Economy as Alternative to the Capitalist System" ("[Sozialwirtschaft als Systemalternative](#)") addresses the core issues. In the given context I keep to the reaffirmation of the main hypothesis by saying that an economic and social constitution of a more advanced civilization is existent as a real latency but not sufficiently perceived in politico-economic terms, and which does not constitute a remote Utopia, which could only be transformed into a concrete project after a so called power problem has been solved.

A Praxis of economic and social transformation that has nothing to do with Sir Popper's piecemeal social engineering, and that goes far beyond the often proposed left-Keynesian change of economic policy is indeed possible.

After about 20 years of a discouraging and disorientating experience of collapse and overwhelmingness, signalled by the year 1989, a more concrete tangibility of that perspective in itself would unleash undreamed of potentialities.

If and how a new formation of social forces can assert these future perspectives against the current practical and ideological dominance of an increasingly regressive and destructive formation of society, and which direction this global, multi-polar and historically open-ended process will ultimately take, that is another question. In this regard, [Rosa Luxemburg's](#) word "Socialism or Barbarism" should make us think.

In a TV-interview given in 1969, Heidegger had critically [commented](#) on the famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach from Karl Marx; would you for your part like to subject Heidegger's explanation to a logical examination at the end of your interview?

Horst Müller: Heidegger criticizes the thesis: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways. What matters is to change it." The argument goes that the demand for a practical change of our reality already implies an interpretation of the world, that is, it implies the practice of philosophy in the highest sense of the word or that the active realization of the demands requires such a practice. Heidegger is completely right about this!

However, he fails to recognize that Marx—in the sense that you mentioned at the beginning— does not oppose philosophical reflection per se. Crucially, Philosophy of Praxis is implicit in Marx' entire body of thought and of his creative activity. Its further development as an emancipated worldview, the formation and the renewed concretion of its inherent paradigm of a modern science of social praxis is what I understand to be a situationally and historically pending project.

Translator's notes:

(1) This interview with German social scientist Horst Müller conducted by Reinhard Jellen was originally published one year ago, on October 7, 2007. Despite the fact that it is not a recently published text we decided to bring it to your attention for the general and particular issues touched are thought provoking and have not at all lost their topicality. To the contrary, and as recent economic, political, social, and natural developments underscore, they are rather red-hot issues that concern us not only in Venezuela but on a planetary scale.

(2) Given the particular content and implications of the philosophical concept "Praxis" outlined by H. Müller, we decided to keep the German term "Praxis" stemming from the Greek term **πρᾶξις** instead of using the Greek term itself or the word "practice" that, no doubt, would be the "linguistically correct" translation but is rather inadequate as far as its specific meaning and connotations are concerned. The topic requires us to emphasize and keep in mind that the concept "Praxis", "Philosophy of Praxis", employed by H. Müller denotes something new, original, and is absolutely distinct from the content of the

word "practice" used to indiscriminately express e.g. everyday repetitive action, habit or custom, the way of doing things, etc. Consequently, the philosophical concept Praxis cannot be fathomed on this level and must not be understood in the prevailing sense as defined in dictionaries and according to which the word "practice" denotes, for instance, "action *rather than* ideas". This, it is precisely not; to put it in Müller's terms, Praxis, Philosophy of Praxis "opposes the ideological concepts of common sense"; it rather denotes a contradictory, dialectical interrelation of action as "action *and* ideas", of Praxis as "Praxis *and* Theory", in the sense that "also theoretical work as such is Praxis" as Müller emphasizes. Thus, to differentiate, wherever Müller refers to Philosophy of Praxis and the further development and concretion of a novel, emancipated world outlook, we use the concept "Praxis", "praxical"; otherwise, we use the conventional translation "practice", "practical".

(3) It should be noted that Venezuelan President Chavez clearly distanced himself from Cockshott und Cottrell's computer socialism advocated by Dieterich, and has put much emphasis in the fact that the Venezuelan people and its government are perfectly well able to think, act and give birth of, by, and for themselves to a genuine, authentic, Venezuelan, Bolivarian Socialism of the 21st century.

Source: "[Die Suppe neu kochen](#)"

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