

Praxis School and the Lifelong Critical Philosophical Attitude of Milan Kangrga

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Abstract: Milan Kangrga was one of the foremost members of the Yugoslavian Praxis School, a school of philosophy active in the 1960s and 1970s. Members of the school founded the journal “Praxis” (1964–1974) and declared their goal in the first editorial: “The primary task of Yugoslavian Marxists is to critically discuss Yugoslavian socialism.” It fuelled their theoretical work, their monumental translating achievements, and their commitment to strengthening the philosophical culture of the region in decades to come. Kangrga’s book *Ethical Problem in the Works of Karl Marx*, published in 1963, became an outline of the school’s programme for an alternative reading of Marx. He related Marx to the philosophical tradition of German idealism, mainly Hegel’s philosophy. Twenty years later, Kangrga published *Ethics or Revolution*, further arguing in favour of the fundamental significance of German idealist thinkers for understanding Marx (being the first one who brought Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s practical philosophy to the Yugoslavian public). Kangrga maintained a lifelong critical philosophical attitude and his example is a part of the Praxis School’s living legacy at the University of Novi Sad to this day.

Key words: Yugoslavian Marxism, Praxis School, philosophy, revolution, socialism, Milan Kangrga

1. Philosophical Orientation of the Praxis School

In the whole of western philosophical tradition, main tendencies and great philosophers rarely came from “small” countries. Yugoslavian culture, during the first half of the 20th century, was one of those small philosophical cultures, having mostly an epigonic status. Yet, thanks to one outstanding generation, during the 1960s and 1970s, Yugoslavia was placed on the philosophical map of Europe and the world. After the horrendous experiences of World War II and following the clash with the Soviet Union, the young republic of Yugoslavia was setting forth to find its own way of building a society on Marxist principles.

In the situation where Marxism was a state project, philosophers were all but forced to follow the Marxian legacy. That resulted in a somewhat poor and sterile philosophical production at first. However, the need of the Yugoslavian communist party to break ideological and political ties with the USSR created an opportunity for a new and critical approach to official Marxist doctrine. One member of the emerging generation of Yugoslav philosophers of the time, Mihailo Marković, described this situation in the following way:

At that time, an utterly simplistic, vulgarized interpretation of Marxism produced by Stalin and his followers dominated the radical scene. Trotsky and Gramsci were dead, Lukacs compelled to conform, Korsch lost in America, Bloch little known, the Frankfurt School disintegrated. For the first post-war generation of Yugoslav philosophers who came from the partisan army to the universities in Belgrade and Zagreb, there were hardly any authorities around.¹

According to this author, this new and critical rereading of Karl Marx's opus resulted in a "rediscovery" of its humanistic contents that included ideas of free creativity, universal human emancipation, various forms of alienation, etc., which became central to the emerging conceptual platform of humanist Marxism as an alternative to Soviet Stalinism.² Furthermore, according to Marković, "Yugoslav humanism, which developed as abstract philosophy in the fifties, gave ground to a concrete critical social theory and became the foundation for social critique."³ This generation's social critique was meant to show and problematize similar models of alienation that socialist societies shared with most of the capitalist world. Sustained efforts of these scholars brought an overflow of Marxist literature and an abundance of philosophical classics from history into Yugoslav philosophical culture. Judging from the contemporary reception and later re-evaluation, this produced a relevant and internationally acclaimed philosophical school of enduring importance.⁴ The subject of this school's critique were Yu-

¹ M. Marković, *Introduction*, in: *Praxis: Yugoslav Essays in the Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences*, transl. J. Coddington, D. Rouge et al., eds. M. Marković, G. Petrović, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht 1979, p. xi.

² *Ibid.*, p. xi.

³ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

⁴ As an example of how the legacy and philosophical reach of the Praxis School is still very much a subject of lively discussion, it is worthwhile to mention the recent collection of articles, more or less critically aligned against that legacy, published by a group of authors in Zagreb: *Aspekti*

goslav political structures that, from the perspective of emerging intelligentsia, just started their ossification into a power system usurped by a bureaucracy that allowed social inequalities to rise and resisted “the new socialist culture.”⁵

It is quite telling that Rudi Supek, who would go on to become one of the founding figures of the Praxis group more than a decade later, began his seminal essay *Material, Social and Personal Grounds of Socialist Culture*, published in 1953 in the journal “Pogledi,” by repurposing Marx’s famous definition of communism from the *German Ideology*:

Socialist culture is neither a state of affairs that we will reach in the distant future, nor some abstract ideal that we oppose to the concrete social development in the present, but a real movement through which we transcend class society and its culture, and build a classless society and its culture. Thus, when we define that which is specific to the ideological and cultural content of our socialist revolution, it is necessary not to forget that which is universal, humanistic in it, which represents an element and an example of the socialist cultural will.⁶

Supek envisioned building a socialist culture, not as, according to the orthodox Marxist theory, a reflection of the base in the ideological superstructure, but as a *real movement* in which a very important role was to be played by the theoretical endeavour of Yugoslav post-revolution Marxist intelligentsia. This real process of building such a culture was supposed to represent “a deliberate, critical effort of raising human consciousness and sentiments to a higher level in the sense of emancipation from various forms of alienation of man in class society.”⁷ According to Supek, one of the key elements of the scientific foundation for this

praxisa. Refleksije uz 50. obljetnicu, eds. B. Mikulić, M. Žitko, Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, Zagreb 2015. However, in discussions such as this, it is important to keep the original sources, ideas and problems of Praxis philosophy in mind, so that we do not allow, as one opponent of this collection of papers puts it, “sterile criticism” to degrade the legacy of this school to a mere “footnote in the history of philosophy” (L. Perušić, *Being Praxis: The Structure of Praxis Philosophy – Outlined by the Refutation of Contemporary Criticism*, in: *Karl Marx – Philosophie, Pädagogik, Gesellschaftstheorie und Politik*, eds. D. Novkovic, A. Akel, Kassel University Press, Kassel 2019, pp. 173–195).

⁵ M. Marković, *Introduction*, op. cit., p. xiii.

⁶ R. Supek, *Materijalni, socijalni i personalni osnovi socijalističke kulture*, “Pogledi. Časopis za teoriju društvenih i prirodnih nauka” 1953, No. 4, p. 236. Unless stated otherwise, all quotations have been translated by Mina Đikanović and Nevena Jevtić.

⁷ *Ibid.*

process included critical, that is, philosophical, mediation of “everything and anything of significance during the two-millennium long development of human consciousness and culture.”⁸ More specifically, this critical and philosophical mediation of pre-socialist social development was understood as “dialectics of negation and synthesis of pre-existing cultural values, ideas and tendencies,”⁹ with the goal of “making man freer.”¹⁰ Supek opened his article with a definition of socialist culture that underlined its universal, humanistic character, and closed his argument by restating its fundamental universal significance for the whole of humanity. At the same time, in his closing remarks, he distinguished this concept of socialist culture from Soviet orthodox Marxism. For him, the difference was a “radical one”: the Soviet variant “tramples on every individual initiative, disables any kind of ‘deviation’ and necessarily leads to cultural restraints and sterility of creative personhood.”¹¹ In opposition to it and in line with his humanistic orientation, Supek believed that socialist culture should nurture individual creative freedoms and be a strong guide towards new forms of culture.

An important aspect of this “radically” different approach to socialist culture was a freer interpretive approach to Marx and philosophical tradition in general. In order to grasp individual creative “deviations” in socialist society and deal with them critically, rather than oppressively, a new philosophical synthesis of Marxism and philosophical tradition was needed. This would define the whole intellectual circle of the Praxis philosophical school: a belief that radical political and social struggles need radical philosophical principles. Deeper insight in Marx’s work allowed some of the bright minds to start questioning dominant thoughts on Marxist philosophy and its relations to philosophical tradition in general, especially to German idealism. Therefore, some of the main tasks of Praxis philosophy, which produced common grounds and solidified what was a collective endeavour of a heterogeneous group into a proper school of thought, were the following: (1) interpretation of Marx’s philosophy in its connection to the philosophy of German idealism and particularly Hegel:

Without understanding Marx’s thought there is no humanist socialism. However, our programme is not to get to the “correct” understanding of Marx

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 243.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 244.

¹¹ Ibid.

through interpretation and simply defend it in its “pure” form. We do not care for conserving Marx, but for developing a live revolutionary thought inspired by Marx. Development of such a thought demands a wide and open discussion in which non-Marxists also take part;¹²

(2) application of Marx’s conception of “critique of everything that exists” to the very organization of state; (3) discussion on philosophical, sociological, economic, and cultural problems of socialism; and (4) critical analysis of contemporary problems, such as alienation, inequality, wars, repression, (ab)use of technology in capitalist societies, etc. In the editorial of the first issue of the “Praxis” journal, which was written by Gajo Petrović, the group proclaimed their ambitions as follows:

One of the basic origins of the failure and deformation of socialist theory and practice in the course of recent decades is to be found in overlooking the “philosophical dimension” of Marx’s thought, in open or insidious negation of its humanistic essence [...] If philosophy wants to think of the revolution, it has to turn itself towards important problems of the contemporary world and man, and if it wants to grasp the essence of everyday life, philosophy must not hesitate to give the illusion of distancing itself, to plunge itself into the alleged “metaphysical” depths [...] Therefore we want a journal of philosophy in the sense of philosophy thinking about the revolution: a *ruthless critique of everything in existence*.¹³

They wanted to, and effectively did, cover the main problems of societies such as they were, both socialist and capitalist, and perhaps, by envisioning their philosophical praxis as interventionist and radically critical, they believed that they were in a proverbially unique position to actually exert political pressure on socialist institutions and party organizations and further the revolution – of Yugoslavian society, of course – but also of the rest of the capitalist Europe. According to Gerson S. Sher, who in the 1980s published a comprehensive study on this generation of young Yugoslav dissidents, philosophy was the field in which “the conflict between the Party [Communist Party – N.J., M.Đ.] and the intel-

¹² G. Petrović, *Čemu Praxis*, Praxis, Zagreb 1972, p. 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12, 13. In 1969 this group started the “pocket edition” of “Praxis.” This was a way to print books of its members, published formally as a separate edition of the journal. It was most likely a way to bypass increasing difficulties in publishing via official channels.

lectuals within Yugoslavia was to have its most lasting impact.”¹⁴ Young Yugoslav dissidents were invested *explicité* in the transformation of consciousness itself and the cultural revolution, while expecting an adequate transformation of political structures. In one of his later interviews, Predrag Vranicki, another important figure from the same intellectual circle, described this conflict with the political establishment as a “paradox”: the same political establishment that famously broke ties with Cominform in 1948, was now paradoxically unwilling to acknowledge the necessity for further theoretical breakthroughs and innovations.¹⁵ Polish Marxist Leszek Kolakowski, a contributor and supporter of the Praxis School’s work, remarked in his *Main Currents of Marxism* that:

Their writings often struck a utopian note, expressing the conviction that it is possible to do away with “alienation,” to assure everyone of full control over the results of their actions, and to remove the conflict between the need for planning and the autonomy of small groups, between individual interests and long-term social tasks, between security and technical progress.¹⁶

While “politics” became something in which most Praxis Marxists had disavowed any active interest, their vision of criticism as a social institution gave them a sense that their adherence to this critical attitude was a political act of the first order.¹⁷ First public attacks against the Praxis orientation can be traced as far back as February and March 1965, when Mika Tripalo, then Secretary of the Zagreb City Committee of the League of Communists of Croatia, and Savka Dabčević-Kučar, famous Chairwoman of the Ideological Commission, ap-

¹⁴ G.S. Sher, *Praxis: Marxist Criticism and Dissent in Socialist Yugoslavia*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington–London 1977, p. 16.

¹⁵ P. Vranicki, *Revolucija i kritika. Sto godina marksizma posle Marksa*, Marksistička misao, Beograd 1983, p. 124. One of the distinguished members of the Praxis School wrote about the relationship between politics and philosophy in a manner which is indicative of a certain divide: “Consequently, if questioned about the relationship of philosophy and politics in communism (socialism, humanism), my answer would be that philosophy as man’s critical self-reflection should direct the entirety of his activity, including his political activity. However, I do not think that political acts could or should be prescribed by any philosophy or by a philosophical forum. These should come about by a democratic, free decision of all those interested” (G. Petrović, *Marx in the Mid-Twentieth Century: A Yugoslav Philosopher Reconsiders Karl Marx’s Writings*, Anchor Books, New York 1967, p. 166).

¹⁶ L. Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origin, Growth, and Dissolution*, Vol. 3: *The Breakdown*, transl. P.S. Falla, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1978, p. 478.

¹⁷ G.S. Sher, *Praxis: Marxist Criticism and Dissent in Socialist Yugoslavia*, op. cit., p. xviii.

proached them concerning that which was deemed their “destructive” attitude towards the task of social criticism. Tripalo famously reported that the Praxis orientation could:

Create the objective conditions, regardless of the intentions of the individuals concerned, for “Praxis” to become the core of an oppositional group about which all the oppositional and dissatisfied elements of our society are gathering.¹⁸

As time went by, many of the members left the communist party and lost their footing in established political organizations, relegating their critical attacks from the internal position based on party membership to the position of an intellectual outsider.¹⁹ What followed is by now a very well documented history of persecution and marginalization of most of the school’s members by socialist and subsequent regimes.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 48–49. Original source translated by G.S. Sher.

¹⁹ This landed them in similar circumstances of loosened political ties of their theory to real social struggles, the circumstances that Perry Anderson described with respect to representatives of the so-called Western Marxism. In his study *Considerations on Western Marxism*, he claimed: “Formal incorporation in working-class parties (Lukacs, Della Volpe, Althusser), exit from them (Lefebvre, Colletti), fraternal dialogue with them (Sartre), or explicit renunciation of any connection to them (Adorno, Marcuse) were all equally incapable of uniting Marxist theory and mass struggle” (P. Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, Verso, London 1979, p. 43).

²⁰ There are many internationally published studies on the history and philosophy of the Praxis School that could be of interest to international audiences: S. Sirovec, *Ethik und Metaethik im jugoslawischen Marxismus*, Ferdinand Schöningh, Paderborn 1982; D. Crocker, *Praxis and Democratic Socialism: The Critical Social Theory of Marković and Stojanović*, Humanities Press, Harvester Press, Atlantic Highlands, NJ–Brighton 1983; O. Gruenwald, *The Yugoslav Search for Man: Marxist Humanism in Contemporary Yugoslavia*, J.F. Bergin Publishers, South Hadley, MA, 1983; R.J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action: Contemporary Philosophies of Human Activity*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1971; W.L. McBride, *From Yugoslav Praxis to Global Pathos: Anti-Hegemonic Post-Post-Marxist Essays*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, MD, 2001. There are, also, many personal reports on the events and autobiographical material documenting the persecution. For example: R. Leposavić, S. Ristić, *Šverceri vlastitog života*, interview with M. Kangrga, “Vreme,” 20.9.2001, No. 559; almost every article of the first part of the recently published book of proceedings from a conference dedicated to the philosophy and activities of the Praxis School, including contributions from Predrag Matvejević, Ivan Kuvačić, Nebojša Popov, Zagorka Golubović. See: *Praxis. Društvena kritika i humanistički socijalizam. Zbornik radova sa Međunarodne konferencije o jugoslavenskoj ljevici: Praxis-filozofija i Korčulanska ljetnja škola (1963–1974)*, eds. D. Olujić Oluja, K. Stojaković, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Beograd 2012, pp. 15–128.

2. Width of the Praxis School's Activities and International Acclaim

The most famous philosophers of the Praxis group were Milan Kangrga, Gajo Petrović, Vanja Sutlić, Vladimir Filipović, Danilo Pejović, Danko Grlić, Branko Bošnjak, Svetozar Stojanović, Mihailo Marković, Ivan Kuvačić, and of course the aforementioned sociologist – Rudi Supek. Literary critics and artists were also among the members. A watershed moment in the history of the school was when they announced and started publishing a journal entitled “Praxis: filozofski dvomjesečnik” (“Praxis: A Philosophical Bimonthly”; the international edition was called “Praxis: Revue philosophique”), which was active from 1964 to 1974, when the authorities cancelled financial support for the journal. The first Chief Editors were Gajo Petrović and Danilo Pejović (in 1966 he was replaced by Rudi Supek). The original editorial board consisted of Branko Bošnjak, Danko Grlić, Milan Kangrga, Danilo Pejović, Gajo Petrović, Rudi Supek, and Predrag Vranicki.

The concept of *praxis* was chosen as the title and mobilizing idea of the philosophical journal in accordance with the school's vision of philosophy. This notion underlined the historical movement of societal change and placed human agency at its centre.²¹ As Mihailo Marković put it: “The term ‘praxis’ refers to both the subject, the man who acts, and also the object, the environment in which he acts and which is transformed by his action.”²² In their general understanding, philosophy was not an abstract theory or *Weltanschauung*, but a “revolutionary consciousness of praxis” and a way to steer human agency in the proper historical direction.²³ The struggle for revaluation and reinterpretation of Marxist philosophy classics was conceived as part of a broader struggle to further emancipate people's creative and revolutionary agency. The width of their philosophical interest was enormous, encompassing Marxist and non-Marxist literature alike. For example, the first issue of “Praxis” contained reviews of books by Alfred Schmidt, Ernst Bloch, Henri Lefebvre, Kostas Axelos, and Eugen Fink, covering therefore Marx-

²¹ B. Bošnjak, *Ime i pojam Praxis*, “Praxis” 1964, Vol. 1, pp. 7–20.

²² M. Marković, *Dialectic Today*, in: *Praxis: Yugoslav Essays in the Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences*, transl. J. Coddington, D. Rouge et al., eds. M. Marković, G. Petrović, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht 1979, p. 6.

²³ M. Kangrga, *Program SKJ – oslobađanje stvaralačkih snaga socijalizma*, in: *Humanizam i socijalizam. Zbornik radova*, Vol. 2, eds. B. Bošnjak, R. Supek, Naprijed, Zagreb 1963, p. 19.

ist thought, Yugoslav literature, Nietzsche's philosophy, and trending sociologic themes. Issues that followed generally maintained this wide interest in works of authors such as Serge Mallet, André Gorz, Herbert Marcuse, Lucien Goldmann, Edgar Morin, Marek Fritzhand, Erich Fromm, Georg Lukács, José Ortega y Gasset, John Kenneth, etc.

They also organized a famous philosophical summer school on the island of Korčula in 1963, which lasted until 1974 and received substantial international acclaim. Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch, Jürgen Habermas, Lucien Goldmann, Ernest Mandel, Tom Bottomore, Maximilien Rubel, Kostas Axelos, Serge Mallet, Franz Marek, Leszek Kołakowski, Karel Kosik, Umberto Cerrone, R. Lombarde-Radice, Ágnes Heller, Helmut Fleischer, Marx Wartofsky, Robert Tucker, Norman Birnbaum, and others took part in the conference over the years.²⁴ At the same time, international acclaim that the school received provided moral and intellectual support for its members. There is an interesting anecdote recalled by Kangrga – when he and Rudi Supek initially debated about the Korčula summer school, Kangrga protested the “school” part of the name, while Rudi Supek allegedly said that this was the way to mask their intended dissident theoretical activity and ensure much-needed funds from the state.²⁵

Their intentions to widen the scope of philosophical culture of their days were very clear and ambitious. The term “school” was an adequate signifier of their self-understanding in that sense. It is quite possible, furthermore, that this motivation was also behind the quite strict division of labour among the group's members. Almost every student of philosophy today, in Serbia as well as in Croa-

²⁴ Interestingly enough, one member of the Praxis School (Žarko Puhovski) stated in a recent interview that Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer had never shown any substantial interest in the work of the group. When he asked Adorno in 1967 to join the summer school on Korčula, the latter replied something along the lines of: “In the Mediterranean, philosophy died over 2000 years ago, there is only tourism now” (Z. Arbutina, “Puhovski: Habermas je zakasnio u Jugoslaviju,” interview with Ž. Puhovski, “Deutsche Welle,” 18.06.2019, <https://www.dw.com/bs/puhovski-habermas-je-zakasnio-u-jugoslaviju/a-49248083> (accessed 24.11.22)). For a detailed overview of the relationship and exchange between the Praxis School and the Frankfurt school, see N. Stefanov, *Yugoslav Praxis Philosophy: Critical Theory of Society and the Transfer of Ideas between East and West*, in: *Entangled Protest: Transnational Approaches to the History of Dissent in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, eds. R. Brier, Fibre Verlag, Osnabrück 2013, pp. 109–126.

²⁵ Kangrga's report on the concept, organization and successes of the Korčula summer school can be found in M. Kangrga, *Izvan povijesnog događanja. Dokumenti jednog vremena*, Feral Tribune, Split 1997, pp. 278–294.

tia, knows of this “labour division”: if interested in something regarding logic – go to Gajo Petrović, ethics – refer to works of Milan Kangrga, aesthetics – Danko Grlić, philosophy of right – Ljubomir Tadić. When one looks at the range of their interests and ambitions, it gives the impression that they wanted to develop – alongside a humanist socialist alternative – almost a complete curriculum, a programme for studying philosophy as a whole based on those new alternative principles. They themselves translated some of the most important works of western philosophy; they organized and were pretty much, one way or another, behind the truly monumental translating and publishing activity throughout the country during this period. Through their translation efforts, they practically created a philosophical vocabulary for themselves to further their own position and of course for posterity (for example, Milan Kangrga translated G.W.F. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a feat that required him to create much of the philosophical terminology in Serbo-Croatian language that is still very much in use today). This was one of the most important traits of this philosophical school and part of the answer to the question of what distinguished this movement as a school – a school almost in a literal sense of the word.

3. Militant Subjectivity of Milan Kangrga

Milan Kangrga was one of the most famous representatives of the Praxis School, although he himself was against the representation of thinkers gathered around the “Praxis” journal as a homogenous group. Yet, with all their differences and discrepancies taken into account, those intellectuals really did have one unifying principle, and that was *critique*. Following Marx’s remark from one letter to Arnold Ruge, they committed themselves to the “ruthless criticism of the existing order,”²⁶ even, or especially, when it meant criticizing themselves.²⁷ Kangrga was

²⁶ Marx writes as follows: “If we have no business with the construction of the future or with organizing it for all time, there can still be no doubt about the task confronting us at present: the ruthless criticism of the existing order, ruthless in that it will shrink neither from its own discoveries, nor from conflict with the powers that be” (*Letter from Marx to Arnold Ruge*, Marx Engels Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09-alt.htm (accessed 24.11.22)).

²⁷ In his unusual autobiography – which is at the same time the portrait of not only the Praxis group but also of one turbulent historical period – *Šverceri vlastitog zivota* [Smugglers of Our Own Lives], Kangrga testified that he once gave a negative review to his most admired associate

born in 1923 and died in 2008. In all of the regimes under which he lived, he was notorious because of his uncompromising leftist political orientation. In both philosophy and life, he was dedicated to the idea and practice of freedom. That often caused him serious problems, but he remained firm in his beliefs until his death. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, he remained the same honest Marxist, oriented towards the idea of freedom and antagonistic to every form of nationalism. In one interview from 2001, he claimed: “The proletarian is the last historical situation that enables you to be either nothing or human. You are cut from everything; you are neither a little Serb nor a little Croat, nor a rich man. You are left to your own devices, so you are what you are. Fight and be something – become a human.”²⁸

He never betrayed noble ideas of the Praxis group, which cannot be said of all of his colleagues. Some of them were faithful, some – or most – remained silent, and some, like Mihailo Marković,²⁹ openly supported the nationalistic madness that led to a civil war. As Kangrga testifies, Mihailo Marković, alongside many other famous philosophers of the time, was actually a member of a (wider) editorial board, and not a “full member” of the Praxis group or a true representative of Praxis philosophy. Nevertheless, in public opinion, Marković’s name was always connected with Praxis, and he even began publishing “Praxis International” in America after the “Praxis” journal was banned in Yugoslavia, even though members of the original “Praxis” editorial board did not approve that idea.³⁰

Kangrga lived as he worked: “With my whole life, and with my philosophy, I considered that my principle task was to fight for the truth. To fight for the truth still means – because it is already implied in the term – to fight as a free man,

and friend, Gajo Petrović, and that he himself also received negative reviews for one article. As a curiosity, he writes that the editorial board of the “Praxis” journal refused to print Louis Althusser’s discussion (at that time unknown), because they found it to be Stalinistic-positivistic! With that same article, published in the journal “La Pensee,” Althusser became a star of Marxist literature in Europe (M. Kangrga, *Šverceri vlastitog života. Refleksije o hrvatskoj političkoj kulturi i duhovnosti*, Republika, Beograd 2001, p. 19).

²⁸ R. Leposavić, S. Ristić, *Šverceri vlastitog života*, interview with M. Kangrga, op. cit.

²⁹ Mihailo Marković was maybe the most famous member of the Belgrade part of Praxis group, although his true connection to the “Praxis” journal and its critical position is largely open to discussion. His investigations were focused mainly on logic and theoretical philosophy. In the 1990s, he became one of the ideologists of a strongly nationalistic political path. Kangrga claims that he thought of himself as *the greatest* Yugoslavian philosopher (M. Kangrga, *Šverceri vlastitog života*, op. cit., p. 68).

³⁰ Ibid.

meaning to fight for freedom at the same time.”³¹ His very concept of philosophy is based on the idea of inseparability of thoughts, deeds and works. It is, therefore, rather hard to distinguish his “philosophical” endeavours from his social engagement, not because his philosophy was not *academic* enough, but because his life was entirely philosophical, in the context of Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. To write *only* about his excellent analyses of German idealism and Marx or about the great translation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* means to misunderstand his work. He himself would say: “You understand nothing!” All of his writings and philosophical work in a narrower sense have a distinctive goal: freedom. And yet, just for the record, a simple look at Wikipedia shows that he wrote fifteen books, one textbook, over sixty original scholarly papers in national and international publications, and also numerous texts and presentations. He translated the works of Kant, Hegel, Bloch, Marcuse, Lukács, Descartes, and Leibniz. Even if he had done nothing but these translations, his contribution to philosophical education in this region would still be enormous. Nevertheless, he was the co-founder of one of the best philosophical journals, not only in Yugoslavia and not only of that time, he was among the organizers of the philosophical school in Korčula, but – above all – he was a *free* man who was always ready to fight for the freedom of others, freedom of philosophy, and freedom of the state.

His PhD thesis, entitled *Etički problem u djelu Karla Marxa* [Ethical Problem in the Work of Karl Marx], represents a certain manifesto of what would become the core of his investigations and endeavours in the Praxis group, but also his lifetime preoccupation. Therein, he argues in favour of the thesis that interpretations of Marx have not tried to reach “the true source of Marx’s philosophy.”³² Only radically critical and consequential thought can overcome abstract phrases and paroles on humanism and can reach the field of realization of Marx’s revolutionary and humanistic points. In the years that followed, Kangrga continued to analyze the problem of “the true source” of Marx’s philosophy. In that quest, he succeeded in “discovering” Johann Gottlieb Fichte for the Yugoslavian philosophical audience and he truly researched connections between Fichte, Hegel and Marx. In his more mature works, this circle of problems resolved itself in one new concept of *speculation*. He did not define speculation in the Kantian manner,

³¹ Ibid., p. 8.

³² M. Kangrga, *Etički problem u djelu Karla Marxa. Kritika moralne svijesti*, Naprijed, Zagreb 1963, p. 7.

as theory. Nor did he accept the Hegelian identity of philosophy and speculation. Following Marx's philosophy, he argued that philosophy was a pre-stage of speculation. In his words: speculation is a "philosophy that goes under the skin," while the common philosopher "walks on the surface."³³ In other words, philosophy stays on the surface, while speculation goes straight to the essence.

Immanuel Kant's concept of spontaneity is the watershed moment in the relationship between philosophy and speculation. Spontaneity is freedom, and it marks "a revolutionary twist in thinking,"³⁴ from which speculation would emerge as permanent revolution. However, Kant did not begin with freedom, spontaneity, and for that reason he ended up with aporia. On the other hand, Fichte started with freedom, and therefore he was the true inaugurator of this concept of speculation. Hegel, in Kangrga's opinion, only *arrived* to freedom, and therefore he falls under the philosophical standpoint that Fichte had established. Therefore, Hegel unfortunately "retreated from the position of Fichte's speculation back to his philosophical position," failing to develop this theme any further.³⁵

This specific concept of speculation is actually the result of the development of the concept of praxis that was coined within the Praxis group. Speculation is a unity of theory, practice and imagination.³⁶ Its true coryphaei were Fichte and Marx. Kangrga claimed that Marx owes much more to Fichte than to Hegel, "although he always talks about Hegel." For him, the debt is obvious in the identity of speculation and revolution that happened with Marx. Kangrga explained the basis of this identification of speculation and revolution by arguing that philosophy must begin with freedom, continue with freedom, and end with freedom. That was precisely the main goal of his philosophical endeavour. The main themes of his philosophy were all focused on the question of freedom of humanity, along with our understanding of history and time. He argued that history is a pre-condition to time, and not the other way around. The very definition of man is that he is "a historical event."³⁷

All of his philosophical investigations led to the concept of speculation as a unique relation between theory, practice and imagination. Speculation, in that

³³ M. Kangrga, *Klasični njemački idealizam (predavanja)*, FF Press, Zagreb 2008, p. 19.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁶ "And Marx wasn't really related to Fichte, although it was Fichte who gave him fundamental speculative hints, not Hegel! Yet, he permanently talks about Hegel" (*ibid.*, p. 115).

³⁷ M. Kangrga, *Praksa, vrijeme, svijet*, Naprijed, Zagreb 1989, p. 11.

sense, does not belong solely to the philosophical way of thinking. He claimed, somewhat provocatively, that the first speculative man was actually the prehistoric man.³⁸ He revealed himself as a speculative being in the very moment he started to work on stone in order to produce a stone axe. Later, man became hunter, and maybe he was angry when he slipped on clay until he figured out that he could use that clay to make a pot, etc. “And where was the stone axe in nature before that? Where was the pot? Nowhere!” Prehistoric man created *ex nihilo* and proved himself to be a speculative mind in Kangrga’s opinion, since he was “a theoretician, practician, man of imagination, a free man and absolutely his own boss.”³⁹

4. Praxis School Seventy Years Later

Kangrga’s influence on philosophy in Yugoslavia was – and still is – invaluable, especially in Zagreb and Novi Sad. Belgrade’s philosophical thought has turned its back on Marxist legacy and accepted analytical philosophy. The Department of Philosophy in Novi Sad was built on the strong belief that the core of philosophical studies must include a thorough reading of German idealists and Marx. Kangrga’s philosophical endeavours to show “the missing link” – Fichte’s influence on Marx – have motivated generations of students and professors of philosophy in Novi Sad to read Fichte’s works and gain new insights. Kangrga’s PhD student and friend, Milenko Perović, was a founder and long-time Head of the Philosophy Department in Novi Sad. He shares Kangrga’s strong conviction that a true philosopher is one who always seeks freedom; consequently, many students have philosophically grown up on Kangrga’s works, which simultaneously means on his life principles.

However, the Praxis School was not just of philosophical interest. This group also had a strong influence on public life in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Their standpoints were sufficiently coherent to be part of the same philosophical orientation and flexible enough to accept different approaches. As such, they were seen as subversive and dangerous elements. Freedom of thought, speech, action, work: these were common demands of the Praxis School. It was not some sort of “salon

³⁸ M. Kangrga, *Spekulacija i filozofija. Od Fichtea do Marxa*, Službeni glasnik, Beograd 2010, p. 13.

³⁹ M. Kangrga, *Klasični njemački idealizam*, op. cit., p. 82.

philosophy” but a revolutionary movement, with much wider implications than just theoretical ones.

This is one of the main reasons for choosing Kangrga as a characteristic representative of the Praxis School. His concept of speculation implies unity of what we can call two verticals: moral and philosophical. Ever since he was a young man harbouring strong resentment for war, and an even stronger inclination for revolution, he was a remarkable figure in Yugoslavian public life. During the years of “preparation” and actualization of civil war, he never betrayed the simple postulate of Marxist political philosophy: that a society of equals cannot stand any sort of nationalism. While Mihailo Marković somehow became the very ideologist of nationalism, Kangrga held on to his early beliefs until the last day. He was often stigmatized as an enemy of Croatian society, and he was regularly taken to court for insult. The last of those cases was particularly interesting, as he wrote that the turtledove that came to his window every day was much smarter than the Croatians were. The turtledove knew its interest and sought food, while Croatians kept voting for people who destroyed them. Of course, some “patriot” found himself insulted by this thesis and sued Kangrga. Deliberation on Kangrga’s alleged “guilt” was in itself a very brief process, but the fact remains that almost everything he wrote was subjected to serious scrutiny of the so-called patriots.

There is one anecdote in our history, very dear to all philosophers and especially professors of ethics. During the German occupation of Belgrade in 1941, all of the significant intellectuals were forced to sign a document in which they proclaimed loyalty to German authorities and support for the fight against communism. One professor of ethics, Miloš Đurić, refused to sign, since more than half of his students were partisans. One of his colleagues, a music professor, tried to convince him to sign, in order to escape consequences, and Đurić famously answered: “It’s easy for you – you play the clarinet, but I teach ethics!”⁴⁰ This episode testifies to a truly strong character; not many such people can be found in the history of any culture. Kangrga was also such a character, a true intellectual who could not separate what he taught from the way he lived.

Over seventy years later, while geographically and politically speaking socialist Yugoslavia is only a distant and odious memory from the standpoint of almost every contemporary ex-Yugoslav political elite, a tremendous edifice of an im-

⁴⁰ In the original statement, it is not clarinet but “diple,” old national instrument.

mensely enriched philosophical culture and debate remains in that same space. Against nationalism and neo-fascist ideology that started re-emerging its malicious, and rather useful, head during the process of capitalist transition, new generations of philosophers and sociologists have an effective, however bittersweet, ideological medicine in the tremendous philosophical production and individual examples of the Praxis School.

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