

# PRAXIS SCHOOL

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**Abstract:** *This text provides the basic information about the Yugoslav Marxist philosophical school of humanistic orientation Praxis which existed during the 1960's and 1970's. The author claims that the Praxis school was one of the major currents within the Marxist humanism.*

**Keywords:** *Praxis School, humanism, practice, marxism, truth.*

The Praxis School (Praxis Philosophy or Praxis Group) is a philosophical school of humanistic orientation active in Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s. It cherished humanistic and non-dogmatic orientation in Marxism and was named so because of the central position which the notion of practice (Greek *praxis*) held in it. The Praxis School was engaged in the search for the philosophical solution of the basic ambivalence of the Marxist theory in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe. Marx viewed his own theory as a tool of radical criticism of social practice of the capitalist societies, as well as an anticipation of a possible socialist, that is communist society. However, his philosophy acquired the unusual role of representing a confirmation of social practice in the Soviet Union and the countries in which after World War II the socialist social system was established. This implied that the critical intention was to be excluded from the Marxist theory. Thus the theory was reduced to adogmatized doctrine functioning as an apology of the existing social system. It became the official “Marxist-Leninist” interpretation of Marxism in the versions of Stalinism, “real socialism” as well as “the self-management socialism”.

Relative political liberalization in Yugoslavia in the 1960s encouraged one young philosophical generation from the University of Zagreb (Croatia) to oppose strongly such an official interpretation of Marxism. Its outstanding protagonists postulated a philosophical program of the renewal of the critical potential of Marxism by returning to the heuristic strength of Marx's theory and by discarding dogmatized Marxism. Certain philosophers from Belgrade (Serbia) joined them soon. Together they formed the Praxis School. Its most outstanding representatives were the philosophers Gajo Petrović and Milan Kangrga from Zagreb and Mihailo Marković from Belgrade. The School did not have a unique philosophical and sociological theory. Its representatives were connected by their joint intention to

discuss critically the significant problems of the contemporary world, problems of theory and practice of socialism, as well as the search for the path to humanize life and to structure a more humane modern society, in the spirit of Marx's philosophy, German idealistic philosophy, as well as contemporary philosophical tendencies in the West. They were united in their belief that it was possible to develop a new humanist version of Marxism by the reconstruction of Marx's original thought. Under the auspices of the Croatian Philosophical Society, the representatives of the School published the journal *Praxis* in Zagreb (from 1964 to 1974). It was one of the more significant international philosophical journals of Marxist orientation. In the same period, they organized The Summer Philosophical School in the island of Korčula. The journal *Praxis International*, published in Oxford from 1981 to 1994, was the successor of the *Praxis* journal. Even though the protagonists of the Praxis School did not have an anti-socialist inclination, their radical critical attitude provoked the reaction of the authorities. Due to the denial of financial support, the publication of the journal *Praxis* was discontinued, and the "Korčula Summer School" stopped functioning. Eight lecturers from the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade lost their jobs. Although the influence of the Praxis School was marginalized, particularly after the so-called "fall of communism", its philosophical-critical spirit still lives in some cultural centers in the region of the Former Yugoslavia (Zagreb, Novi Sad).

The Praxis School represents one of the most significant trends within Marxist humanism which developed after World War II. The representatives of the Marxist humanism (Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch, Erich Fromm and others) discovered the grounds in Marx's early works to interpret his theory primarily as humanistic and to confront it with the dominant understanding of Marxism and communism. They discarded the reduction of Marxism to the theory of economic and historical determinism. They also rejected the standpoint that authentic Marxism could present a theoretical basis for Stalinism and the bureaucratized "socialist" systems in Eastern Europe. A significant impetus to the creation of the Praxis School was thus given by the Marxist humanists. The publication of the selection from Marx's and Engels's works of the early period of their activity (1843-1845) in Zagreb in 1953 exercised also a great direct effect. Marx's *Economic-philosophical Manuscripts* from 1844 (*Ökonomisch-philosophischen Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*) held a special position in that selection because they had not been published during Marx's life. Preserved in fragments, they were discovered in the late 1920s and first appeared in the edition of Marx' early works in 1932. The manuscripts represent a testimony of Marx's complex critical attitude to Hegel's philosophy. However, they also present his entire philosophical theory, as well as the outline of the criticism of "national economy" (i.e. capitalist system). The essential notions of his philosophical theory were labour and capital, practice, alienation, reification, man's "generic being", goods and ownership, profit, wage, as well as the hired, manifested and alienated

labour.

In the conditions of its concrete application in the social processes in Yugoslavia, familiarization with the philosophy of young Marx encouraged the protagonists of the Praxis School to try to develop and creatively apply the humanistic cognitive and active potential of Marx's theory – contrary to the orthodox, dogmatic and sterile understanding of Marxism. Their theoretical program had several basic points: first, they interpreted Marx's theory by relating it to the philosophical tradition (primarily with the philosophy of German idealism and Hegel's philosophy); second, in line with Marx's standpoint about "the critique of everything existing", they exposed to radical criticism the existing bureaucratic-statist concept of socialism; third, they discussed the philosophical, sociological, economic and cultural problems of socialism; fourth, they theoretically postulated socialism as a social model of self-liberation of man and society from all forms of alienation; fifth, they critically discussed significant problems of contemporary world (inequality among people, wars, repression, threat of self-destruction, consequences of technology etc.).

From the standpoint of the theory of de-alienation, they had a critical attitude to the capitalist system and bourgeois way of life. As a whole, the Praxis School was a school of non-dogmatic, creative Marxism. Its central notion is practice (Greek *praxis*). In philosophy since Aristotle *praxis* has denoted one of three basic forms of human activity, in addition to *theoria* (insight, thinking) and *poiesis* (creating). Praxis in traditional sense meant the action which starts from man's relation to his own humanness and to other people. Praxis includes the moral, political, economic and legal acting<sup>1</sup>. The protagonists of the Praxis School attached a new meaning to the notion praxis. They made a synthesis of the meanings of traditional notions praxis and poiesis (Latin *actus et operatio*) so that praxis acquires the value of the highest anthropological determination of man's essence as "free creative activity". According to G. Petrović's stipulation, *praxis* is an ontological notion which denotes "a free, universal, creative and self-creative activity by which man creates (does, produces) and changes (shapes) his historical world and himself". *Praxis* is an activity "inherent to man, by which he essentially differs from all other beings"<sup>2</sup>. It is his self-creating activity that creates everything. Man produces his own history as "his *praxis* in the broadest sense of the word". *Praxis* is also a gnoseological notion. It represents a criterion of truth in the sense in which Marx understood it, too: "The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth — i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice"<sup>3</sup>. Theory

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1178 b 20-22; 1139 a 15-30; 1139 b-1141 b; 1095 b 15-20.

<sup>2</sup> Gajo Petrović, "Why Praxis?", *Praxis* (1964), <https://www.marxists.org/subject/praxis/issue-01/why-praxis.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, "Theses On Feuerbach", in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works in III Volumes*, vol. I, 13-15 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969).

is an elaborated form of practice. As a practical being, man is in the original sense a free being. He produces himself and his historical and social world of life. What man is and what he can be is his own deed. Primary temporal dimension of human individual and social life is not past or present, but future.

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