


# In Defense of ‘True Humanness’

## On the Insularity of the ‘Praxis’ Philosophers

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**Abstract.** In the European tradition, islands usually connote two meanings. On the one hand, they serve as a place where thinking individuals can isolate themselves from the nonsense of everyday life in order to practice true ‘care of themselves and others’ (Foucault) in peace and quiet. On the other hand, they serve as a place to which concerned societies deport their ‘human scum’ in order to prevent the contamination of their organism. The so-called Praxis philosophers organized summer schools on the island of Korčula from 1963 to 1974 to gain the support of Western philosophers for their humanist opposition to their state’s bureaucratized Marxism. This would enable their philosophy to get rid of the academic insularity that was allocated to it at home. Western philosophers, in turn, saw the Korčula summer schools as a welcome liberal island in Eastern doctrinaire Marxism, which supported their interpretation of Marx’s philosophy. Connecting with Eastern philosophers, they expected to rescue the humanist orientation of this philosophy from the capitalist mercantilism at home. But despite these attempts to affirm the ‘true humanness’ of Marxism, its insularity persevered and this article attempts to show why.

**Keywords:** Humanness; insularity; Marxism; socialism; revolution

In his *Considerations on Western Marxism*, Perry Anderson put forth the thesis that, in the wake of the First World War, Western Marxism arose from the failure of proletarian revolutions in Western capitalist societies as well as the disappointment with their aftermath in Eastern socialist societies.<sup>1</sup> For example, both György Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* and Karl Korsch in *Marxism and Philosophy* advocate the divorce between socialist theory and working-class practice.<sup>2</sup> Published in 1923, these “fruits of isolation and despair”<sup>3</sup>—or what I, in

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1 Anderson, *Reflections*, 15–17.

2 Anderson, *Reflections*, 92–93.

3 Anderson, *Reflections*, 94.

the following, prefer to call “trauma narratives”<sup>4</sup>—redirect the alienated Marxist political economy back to its ‘truly philosophical’, i.e. Hegelian origins. After the discovery of Marx’s “Economic and philosophical manuscripts” in 1932, such a re-philosophized Marxism, having found its shelter in universities, resumed the bourgeois tradition of the *Ideologiekritik*, concentrating on the de-alienation of misled consciousness. Snatched from the hands of the working-class representatives, Marxism thus became an instrument of system’s intellectual beneficiaries.

Although the Praxis philosophers can hardly count as Western Marxists, it is worthwhile noticing that, in the 1960s when the journal *Praxis* (1963–1974) was established, Yugoslavia was more liberal than Eastern real-socialist countries in both material and intellectual sphere.<sup>5</sup> It combined market with plan economy and was more open to the pluralism of ideas.<sup>6</sup> In the opinion of the leading Yugoslav intellectuals of the 1960s, the working class model of socialism confronted serious challenges. First disappointments with its delusions and aberrations were voiced in the camouflaged forms of novels such as Ivo Andrić’s *The Damned Yard* (1954) or Meša Selimović’s *The Death and the Dervish* (1966). Significantly, they address the immuring of the (intellectual) self or others (prisoners) against or from the turmoil of the world.

Since the political malformations of society induce *individual* traumas that work slowly, insidiously and unevenly into the awareness of those afflicted by them, literary authors do not encounter traumas in the form of “a one-shot, arm’s length transactions”<sup>7</sup> as do the collectives that are faced with disastrous events. Their problem is instead how to unnoticeably enter into action by navigating and crisscrossing invisible perimeters in order to transform the unjust communal order.<sup>8</sup> Since they experience their discontent as poisonous, they frequently deny it even to themselves, which turns their action into a kind of “gesturing toward” rather than a strategic public performance. That is to say, they respond to a frustrating “inchoate experience”<sup>9</sup> or “free-floating anxiety” that has to be processed in “the situation of being without genre”.<sup>10</sup> The philosophers that were grouped around the Zagreb journal *Praxis* had to cope with the same configuration of disquieting signals whose aggregation clandestinely and gradually acquired the shape of ethical and political demands. In order to articulate an efficient response to their rising feeling of disagreement, they had to find out an adequate philosophical ‘genre’.

4 Fassin and Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma*, 7–8.

5 Klasić, “Jugoslavija i svijet.”

6 see Jurak, “Praxis,” 61.

7 Das, *Life and Words*, 90.

8 see Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 97.

9 Alexander, *Trauma*, 14.

10 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 80.

The paths they have taken were diverse, aggravating the detection of their common denominator. But most of them defended philosophy's autonomy from the working class's dictates.<sup>11</sup> Whereas the self-proclaimed representatives of the working class insisted on the primacy of economic basis over the intellectual superstructure, the Praxis philosophers defended the priority of thinking praxis over such unsubstantiated postulates. However, despite their intention, by prioritizing the praxis of philosophical thinking they have not really relinquished the power asymmetry of the basis and superstructure. Instead, by following the model of Kant's *Streit der Fakultäten*, which promoted philosophy to the status of a fundamental discipline and torchbearer of humanity, they merely reformulated it. On the wings of Marx's early imperative of a 'relentless critique of everything that exists', the Praxis philosophers thus rendered sociology, anthropology and political economy as derivative and alienated forms of philosophical thinking. Since the working-class model of socialism relied on exactly these disciplines, they denounced it as a manifestation of bureaucratic, i.e. Stalinist consciousness. As Mislav Žitko recently rightly remarked,

“Stalinism represents the moment of the negative constitution of the philosophy of praxis, given that it is only against its background that the positive, i.e. creative potential of philosophical thinking and revolutionary practice can be discerned.”<sup>12</sup>

As regards the 'revolutionary practice' that this quotation almost organically pairs with 'philosophical thinking', one of the most prominent Praxis philosophers, Gajo Petrović, associated it with socialism as the legitimate heir of a consistent self-decomposition of bourgeois society.<sup>13</sup> One is hardly astonished to see Jürgen Habermas in a complete agreement with him. In the opinion of the German *Meisterdenker*, true socialism does not represent a break with the bourgeois society but its natural continuation, which is why it cannot abandon philosophy.<sup>14</sup> For Petrović, this means that philosophy and socialism can only realize their pursuit of ultimate human freedom by enabling each other's steady 'regeneration'.<sup>15</sup> 'Regeneration' is the key word here, reminding us that revolution, which is in Petrović's interpretation genuine of being itself, always implies a *re-evolution* or return to origins. As Hannah Arendt stated in her book *On Revolution* published in the heyday of the Praxis philosophy, both American and French revolutionaries “wanted to revolve back to an 'early period' when they were in possession of rights and liberties of which tyranny and conquest

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11 Veljak, “Tipologija,” 49–50.

12 Žitko, “Mišljenje i revolucija,” 150, trans. mine.

13 Petrović, “Filozofija i socijalizam,” 367–368.

14 Habermas, “Marksizam,” 601.

15 see Petrović, “Filozofija i socijalizam,” 368.

had dispossessed them”.<sup>16</sup> Behind Petrović’s nominally future-oriented ‘thinking of revolution’, this regeneration of a bygone age uncovers a ‘regressive’ mythical thought that is at pains to heal the ideologically misguided present by returning it to an allegedly primordial truth. Bringing Petrović’s discourse of authenticity close to Heidegger’s “*Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*” (Adorno, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*), this defense of mythical origins from their historical aberrations accounts for the strange ‘elective affinity’ between the two thinkers.<sup>17</sup> True, Petrović advocated a return to ‘proper’ Marx whereas Heidegger to pre-Socratic thinking, but their polarization of the proper and improper—characteristic of all ‘trauma narratives’<sup>18</sup>—makes their arguments overlap. What guides both philosophers is “the idea that before the destruction, there was another world, a happier one, one uncontaminated by the violence that followed”,<sup>19</sup> which is why both leave the impression of therapeutic fantasies that were mobilized to mask the unbearable landscapes of their respective bourgeois and socialist societies. Severe cracks became discernible in the edifices of both and philosophers were desperately trying to smooth them out by engaging such comforting chimeras. A passionate attachment to mythic origins generates their resolute either-or pattern typical of the trauma narrative of the *Ideologiekritik* and its apocalyptic discourse. It is epitomized in the Praxis key alternative: Either we will return to the proper human values or we will fall into the abyss of barbarism!<sup>20</sup>

In both Western and Eastern European countries, the 1960s were the years of a bitter sobering up regarding the prospects of unified humankind. A deepening political and economic imparity of Europe and the world, social asymmetries and colonial atrocities, racial and gender discrimination as well as the devastating consequences of the Holocaust and Gulag started to take the centre stage of the public debate. In such circumstances, Kant’s enlightenment idea of universal humanity was seriously compromised. In the heyday of the Praxis philosophy, Claude Lévi-Strauss for instance remarked:

“The concept of an all-inclusive humanity, which makes no distinction between races or cultures, appeared very late in the history of mankind and did not spread very widely across the globe. What is more, as proved by recent events, even in one region where it seems most developed, it has not escaped periods of regression and ambiguity. For the majority of the human species, and for ten thousands of years, the idea that humanity includes every human being on the face of the earth does not exist at all.”<sup>21</sup>

16 Arendt, *On Revolution*, 45.

17 Petrović, *Prolegomena*.

18 Alexander, *Trauma*, 16–19.

19 Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 51.

20 see Golubović, *Zagrebačka*, 139.

21 Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 329.

As the French anthropologist clarified in the famous polemics against Sartre's Hegelian understanding of human history as presented in his *Savage Mind* (1962), the idea of humanity relies on an inadmissible back-projection of human consciousness onto the periods which did not know it, and which are therefore misapprehended in this way. Although human consciousness "appeared very late in the history of mankind" and was in addition very unevenly distributed among the latter's representatives, Hegel turned it into this history's common denominator, excluding from it all those who, enmeshed in the skirmishes and petty battles of everyday 'historicity', were bereft of it.

Indeed, in Hegel's view, whoever is immersed in such vulgar 'prose of the world' cannot become the protagonist of world history and thus qualify for the membership in humankind. He regards such blinded collectivities as 'peoples without history', captured in the stage of spiritual infancy and too immature for statehood.<sup>22</sup> In his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820) he unhesitatingly stated that "civilized nations" are entitled "to regard and treat as barbarians other nations which are less advanced than they are [...] in the consciousness that the rights of these other nations are not equal to theirs and that their independence is merely formal".<sup>23</sup> Unreservedly legitimizing British imperialism as a model worthy of being taken up by the Germans, Hegel regarded it as a "higher undertaking [...] grounded in a higher necessity", "the world-historically justified victory of the higher principle over the lower".<sup>24</sup> Indicatively, echoing Engels's harsh 1849 critique of the South Slav retrograde attachment to the past in the aftermath of their peoples' national revolutions,<sup>25</sup> in 1853 Marx supported Hegel's imperial thesis even though he realized that the British destroyed the whole Indian old world, sadly, "with no gain of a new one".<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, he points out, the Indian "idyllic village-communities [...] restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass [...] depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies".<sup>27</sup> Like Native Americans in Hegel's rendering, they are used to submission and incapable of independence,<sup>28</sup> finding their equivalents in Slavs whom Herder rendered as auxiliary people, characterized by "terrible slavish inertia" (*Knechtsträgheit*).<sup>29</sup>

In sum, with Herder, Hegel, Marx and Engels one is reminded of Hannah Arendt's cynical 'proposal' that for "humanity as a whole it would be better to

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22 Hegel, *Elements*, 378.

23 Hegel, *Elements*, 376.

24 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1061–62.

25 see Engels, "Der demokratische Panslawismus."

26 Marx, "The British Rule," 169.

27 Marx, "The British Rule," 173.

28 Hegel, "Race," 113.

29 Herder, *Ideen*, 698, trans. mine.

liquidate certain parts thereof”.<sup>30</sup> Recall for example Herder’s sentence: “We regard here the Jews as a parasitic plant hanging onto almost all European nations and drawing more or less profit from their juice”.<sup>31</sup> In the same spirit, half a century later,<sup>32</sup> Marx advised his Jewish co-nationals to sacrifice their national emancipation to that of humankind. It is the latter that has to emancipate itself from Judaism, not vice versa. And the same, to be sure, applies to the emancipation of women. “They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented”, states Marx for all these underprivileged in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, implying that their “political influence finds its final expression in the executive power” of their representatives.<sup>33</sup> All in all, Marx’s attitude to these not-quite-humans is epitomized in his memorable sentence “Human anatomy contains the key to the anatomy of the ape”.<sup>34</sup>

Such a triumphant retroactive determination of human history—up to the mid of the twentieth century almost a matter of course—got a bad reputation in the course of the 1960s. Following the aforementioned Lévi-Strauss’s limitation of the idea of humankind, in his *Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966) Michel Foucault associated it with the rise of bourgeois society in the nineteenth and twentieth century and announced its soon disappearance. In his contemporaneous *Reading Capital* (1966), Louis Althusser straightforwardly antiquated humanist Marxism, replacing its unilinear determination of history and society with an inaccessible network of relations that only manifests itself through its effects:

“The structure of the relations of production determines the places and functions occupied and adopted by the agents of production, who are never anything more than the occupants of such places, insofar as they are the supports (*Träger*) of these functions. The true ‘subjects’ (in the sense of the constitutive subjects of the process) are therefore not these occupants or functionaries, are not, despite all appearances, the ‘real men’ but the definition and distribution of these places and functions.”<sup>35</sup>

His revision of Marxism followed the ‘disciplinary’ rearrangement of modern societies that switched to the dispersed network of power with a vast multitude of its anonymous ‘functionaries’ whose particular horizons keep ‘overdetermining’ each other. In such circumstances, nobody is in position to criticize other’s prejudices without thereby exposing one’s own. If political space is by definition plural, nobody

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30 Arendt, *The Origins*, 299.

31 Herder, *Ideen*, 702, trans. mine.

32 Heder, “On Jewish question”, 1844.

33 Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, ch. VII, unpaginated.

34 qtd. in Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 33.

35 Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 180.

is authorized to act as *the* ‘agency of humanity’. Being an arbitrary and violent act, such advocacy of the human cannot but bereave another part of the irreducible human many, to render it with Hannah Arendt, of the right to bear human rights. In her significant lines from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), she insists that “the right to have rights, or the right of every individual to belong to humanity, should be guaranteed by humanity itself”.<sup>36</sup> As nobody can survive without prejudices and as our present judgment, somewhere and someday, becomes such a prejudice too, the analytical objective is not to dispose with prejudices altogether because of their failure to realize the universal truth. The task is instead “to trace back these prejudices to the judgments inherent to them and to affiliate these judgments for their part to the underlying experiences which once gave rise to them”.<sup>37</sup>

Ignoring in their compulsive, almost traumatic insularity the above delineated contemporary developments, the Praxis philosophers passionately adhered to humanist Marxism with all its indicated blind spots and shortcomings—and were thereby enthusiastically endorsed by their prominent Western ‘comrades’ in the range from Bloch and Habermas over Goldmann, Lefèbvre, Fromm and Marcuse to Bauman and Heller. Both Yugoslav and Western Marxists responded to the sobering disappearance of unified humanity by walling themselves off against that which they understood as its catastrophic disintegration. In defense of this self-consoling chimera, Eastern insularity endorsed its Western counterpart. However, for the sake of truth, it needs to be said that not all Hegelian Marxists averted their eyes from the divided body of humankind. In his Preface to Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, Jean-Paul Sartre for example cautioned his ‘high-minded’ compatriots that swearing to liberty, equality and fraternity “did not prevent us from making antiracial speeches about dirty niggers, dirty Jews, and dirty Arabs”.<sup>38</sup> According to him, “there is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism since the European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters”.<sup>39</sup>

Yet both Yugoslav Marxists and their Western supporters disregarded this racial imparity in the midst of humanity. In their opinion, national and gender emancipation had to be subordinated to that of humankind. Once again, this was in line with Kant’s original idea of ‘mankind’ that, among all other ‘subalterns’, excluded women, ‘Negroes’ and native Americans. The latter, according to Kant, are completely bereft of all talents and cannot be educated, whereas the ‘Negroes’ underlie education, yet only through physical coercion and corporal punishment.<sup>40</sup> They are “so talk-

36 Arendt, *The Origins*, 298.

37 Arendt, *Was ist Politik*, 79, trans. mine.

38 Sartre, “Preface,” 26.

39 Sartre, “Preface,” 26.

40 Eze, “The Color of Reason,” 215.

ative that they must be driven apart from each other with thrashings”.<sup>41</sup> No wonder, remarked Kant, as if a “fellow” is “quite black from head to foot,” this is “a clear proof that what he said was stupid”.<sup>42</sup> It is this legacy that both Yugoslav Marxists and their Western supporters uncritically adhere to.

Accordingly, whatever could imperil the progress of ‘true humanity’ was disregarded in the works of the Praxis philosophers. Not only contemporary French thought but also, for instance, the Frankfurt School version of Marxism were ignored. Strangely enough, despite the rising awareness of the Holocaust at the time, the expulsion of the ‘Jewish parasites’ from humanity did not deserve their serious attention. In fact, the Praxis philosophers devalued all religious and national claims whatsoever. Nevertheless, they did consider them every now and then, whereas the gender question, although it was discussed in Yugoslavia at that time and hanged in the air throughout Western countries, remained in their works almost completely ignored. In view of universal human substance, they seem to have considered it accidental. In ten years of publishing, only two articles appeared in their journal that demonstrated some sensitivity to the topic,<sup>43</sup> but both were far removed from raising the question of gender. Their female companion Blaženka Despot dealt with it in a philosophically relevant way only after the journal was forbidden. Under the spell of her colleagues’ ‘mansplaining’ practice, in the articles published in *Praxis* she also focused on ‘universal’ topics.<sup>44</sup>

The delineated Western and Eastern Marxists’ insular attachment to humanism in the face of its ruination in the 1960s and 1970s reminds us that the differentiation of modern societies did not antiquate the idea of homogeneous community. On the contrary, this differentiation became “the condition for the more exact profiling of the concept of community, inasmuch as it could now advance into a collective name for all that which cannot be subsumed in the concept of society”.<sup>45</sup> That is to say, Foucault has prematurely celebrated governmentality’s historical emergence because it supposedly dethroned the oppressive political regime of sovereignty, unmoored the political field from its traditional anchors, and introduced a diffuse set of tactics deprived of a single source of power. He thereby disregarded that the new regime of governmentality became the site for the dangerous reanimation, reconstellation, and recirculation of the supposedly suspended sovereignty. It did not eliminate but rather reproduce, enlarge, strengthen and expand the state

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41 Kant, *Observations*, 111.

42 Kant, “National Characteristics,” 57.

43 Degač, “Praxis,” 118.

44 Degač, “Praxis,” 116.

45 Rosa et al., *Theorien der Gemeinschaft*, 37–38, trans. mine.



power in its legitimacy.<sup>46</sup> It is precisely the suspension of law which it executed that made room for the reemergence of sovereignty in an illegitimate, extra-legal form, characterized by violence. In the regime of governmentality, sovereignty acquired the grotesque form of whimsical, unpredictable, and tyrannical operations of ‘petty sovereigns’. In the new form of political legitimacy with no built-in structures of accountability, they usurped the right to suspend rights.<sup>47</sup>

When the Praxis philosophers criticize the bureaucratic aberrations of socialism, they target precisely this phenomenon of bureaucracy gone wild. Indeed, in his *Gulag Archipelago* Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn pointed out that lawlessness resided at the very heart of Soviet legislation, enabling Stalin’s judges to interpret the law perilously arbitrarily.<sup>48</sup> Cut off from the access to the criminal code,<sup>49</sup> defendants could be sentenced for their *intent* rather than their committed *deeds*.<sup>50</sup> However, as a labour camp’s inmate, Solzhenitsyn did not see this—like the Praxis philosophers—as a dangerous malformation of socialism’s human essence. Departing from a completely different experience of an outcast of the socialist system, he interpreted all modern societies as the complicitous alliances of beneficiaries that jointly operate their ‘sewage disposal systems’. In order for these beneficiaries to enjoy and celebrate life on earth, they systematically imprison, banish to labor camps, or send into underground all kinds of ‘social parasites’.<sup>51</sup> They understandably disavow their responsibility for that but he alerts them:

“And just so we don’t go around flaunting too proudly the white mantle of the just, let everyone ask himself: “If my life had turned out differently, might I myself not have become just such an executioner?”<sup>52</sup>

The questions that he directs at the silent operators of governmentality can be formulated as follows: Are they sheer eyewitnesses who merely execute its demands as opposed for example to the labour camp’s direct operators who are brutal perpetrators? Or are *all* state citizens continually sending their co-citizens into the underground world bereft of humans?

These are the questions that never occur either to Yugoslav or Western Marxist humanists who, taking advantage of their insularity, deny any implication in their societies’ operations. If these societies allocated their philosophers academic islands

46 see Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 82.

47 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 83.

48 Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 67.

49 Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 121–122.

50 Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 61.

51 Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 27.

52 Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 160.

to isolate themselves from the bustle of everyday life and tranquilly practice ‘care of their selves and others’, then the question ought to be raised to what a degree these islands implicated different kinds of islands, which the same societies took advantage of to dispose their ‘dregs’? Think of the French Empire’s penal colony New Caledonia, or the Russian Empire’s Sakhalin, or the more recent Yugoslav Goli otok (Bare Island), which the ‘degenerate’ humans were relegated to. The Praxis philosophers never considered their self-insulation as systemically linked with such a forceful insulation of others.

By an ironical but habitual turn of destiny, ultimately they themselves were silenced and ‘sanitized’, i.e. overnight forced to replace the ‘white mantle of the just’ with that of the martyrs. After the nation-states replaced the federal state of Yugoslavia, the Praxis philosophers were additionally treated as a regrettable ‘Marxist aberration’ of their peoples’ ‘troublesome national histories’ and expelled from respective cultural memories or at least marginalized in them. In today’s ‘transitional societies’, power-keepers and martyrs, perpetrators and victims turn out to be intertwined and exchangeable positions. Their separation from one another depends on those who are temporarily in charge to draw the distinction between them. Certainly, all societies must distinguish between their ‘good’ and ‘evil’ members, which makes such verdicts indispensable for their maintenance. But the judges who make these verdicts are at pains to suppress their involvement and position themselves above the fray. As nobody can exempt himself or herself from the ‘irreducible human many’, the task of the analyst is to figure out the experiences and prejudices that underlie their judgments.

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