

ON THE CONFERENCE “TWO CENTURIES OF KARL MARX”

On May 5, 2018 we commemorated the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx’s birthday as a part of a conference titled “Two Centuries of Karl Marx” that was held in the *Prague Creative Center* on May 4th and 5th. The conference was organized by Aleš Novák and was solely dedicated to the thinker’s *philosophical* influence and heritage.

Petr Kužel was the keynote speaker with his lecture on “Marx’s Philosophy and Its Critical Function” on May 4. The main aim of his presentation was to elucidate the most important features of Marx’s critical approach. The author first examined methodological and epistemological aspects of Marx’s theory, explaining Marx’s distinction between the so-called “object of knowledge” and “real object” on the one hand and the “exoteric” and “esoteric” levels of investigation on the other. He then discussed Marx’s critique of empiricism and outlined a link between this approach and the approach of French historical epistemology, and used Marx’s critique of political economics to show how Marx’s method of the historization of categories and their “denaturalisation” may serve as a powerful tool for de-ideologization. It both (i) exposes the social and historical constitution of certain phenomena and rids them of their semblance of naturalness and (ii) explains, in accordance with the principles of critical theory, why systematically flawed beliefs arise concerning certain social phenomena that are nevertheless then established by society as “knowledge.” In the end, Kužel also introduced the method of symptomatic reading with regard to the concept of ideology and ideology deconstruction. According to the French philosopher Louis Althusser, Marx discovered this method while reading political economics and later applied it to his critique of the same.

Jan Bierhanzl opened the second day of the conference with his talk on “Marx’s Ontology of the Sensuous.” The *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1864* are usually interpreted as a transitional work between elements of Feuerbach’s and Hegel’s philosophy, both of which remain strongly present in Marx’s early thought, and the historical materialism of Marx’s mature thinking. Bierhanzl, referring to the recently renewed French discussion on “the young Marx,” aimed to show that the *Manuscripts* contain an ontology which is non-reducible either to the remnants of German classical philosophy or to the materialistic conception of social life. He described this original

ontology as an ontology of the sensuous, alternatively as an ontology of the finitude of human sensuousness.

This opening presentation was followed by Michal Hauser's lecture on "Marx's Non-Identical Conception of Nature. How to neither Be a Natural Determinist or a Cultural Constructivist." According to Hauser, there are two entrenched positions in today's social sciences: for one of them, "nature" (evolutionary or genetic determinism) is the term of the last instance from which social and cultural phenomena can be derived. For the other one, "nature" in man is merely a cultural construct whose manifestations must be understood as a result of certain ideological practices (the imperative to command nature). In his lecture, the author tried to demonstrate that Marx's conception of nature creates a bridge between the two camps.

Martin Kolář took to the podium next, speaking on the topic of "The 'Inversion' of Marxist Theory of Superstructure in the Aesthetics of Karel Kosík." Marx's analysis of the relations of production, as described in his now classic *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), stresses society's economic structure. This emphasis serves as a starting point for Karel Kosík's thought, especially in regard to the problem of the theory of reflection and so-called "realism." Using Marxist conceptions of the "base" and "superstructure," Kosík applies a specific "inversion" that causes a shift in the concept of art which, in turn, liberates a work of art from the function of reflection. A work of art thus becomes an expression of reality and is a social driving force capable of creating the "world."

Jakub Chavalka launched the afternoon's set of lectures with his lecture on "Marx's Conception of the Proletariat as a Species Being." Chavalka's contribution traced the practical strategies Marx used to constitute the proletariat as a realization of his conception of the figure of man: *the species being*. How or in what ways does the worker have to create himself so as to make the birth of the proletariat possible? And to make it possible not in its immediate – that is unconscious – form, but as a permanent revolutionary practice? Such a reading is based on a hypothesis that Marx saw in revolution not only necessary social change, but also and most importantly an anthropological transfiguration of a being which has throughout history more or less wrongfully appropriated the name "human."

David Rybák then spoke on the subject of "What Kind of Consciousness Knows of the Production of Consciousness?" Rather than being some comprehensive presentation of Marx, this lecture focused on the formulation of the issues related to the general outline of Marx's theory: according to Marx, production is a way by which a man appropriates nature through historic social change, that is, *Produktionskräfte* and *-verhältnisse*. However, man himself is a natural being, which implies that in production nature appropriates itself. But where does the source of the legitimacy of such a statement lie? How does Marx *know* that it is the relations of production and productive forces that produce consciousness? How does he *know* about the relations of production? What kind of consciousness is it that *knows* that consciousness is produced? In other words,

is it not “production” (*Produktion*) and “life process” (*Lebensprozess*) that Marx uses to explain everything, which is not itself, however, explained? Is it not all an exegetic operation of inversion, anchored as such in the metaphysics of consciousness (as a source of Marx’s knowledge)?

The conference closed with Aleš Novák’s contribution on “Marx’s Place in Heidegger’s ‘History of Being’: A Thought Experiment.” The author’s thought experiment, inspired by this year’s 200th anniversary of Marx’s birth, tried to find Marx’s place in Heidegger’s “History of Being” and thus demonstrate, in concrete terms, the application of this thought. Novák then used Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* to consider the benefits of this thought experiment for understanding Heidegger and his thinking.

An audiovisual record of the conference’s entirety is available on the YouTube channel of the “Společnost pro filosofickou antropologii.”

Aleš Novák

Translated by Tatiana Badurová