



Fredric Jameson

A >Message in the Bottle< for a Different Future

Is >always-already< also a law of the encyclopedic genre? In the most famous of instances indeed, the great Encyclopédie of Diderot and d'Alembert (work on which began in 1745) began life as a translation and enlargement of Ephraim Chambers' Cyclopaedia or an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences of 1728. The use of both terms in Chambers' title ratifies an alternation more traditional in German than in English: this particular >historical and critical dictionary< of Marxism thus alludes to and fortifies itself with the example of Joachim Ritter's extraordinary enterprize, the Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie, eight volumes since 1971, and beyond that, no doubt, the monumental labor of the Grimm brothers (their Deutsches Wörterbuch began to appear in 1852). The distinction, however, between a table of words and a table of facts and things may again have become an interesting philosophical problem; but while any number of facts inform and suffuse the entries of the work at hand (most notably, the history of the labor movements and the soviet-experience), they are here essentially brought to bear on the history of the terms themselves – conceived as concepts – and the names of the great innovators are subsumed under their doctrines and influences (Brecht-Linie, Della-Volpe-Schule), when not recorded in specific interventions within the articles themselves.

Meanwhile, this massive enterprize itself began as a translation of the more modest one-volume Dictionnaire critique du Marxisme of Georges Labica (1982), itself the work of a distinguished team (among which names like those of Balibar, Buci-Glucksmann, Godelier, Lecerle, Lipietz, Macherey, Rodinson and Roudinesco), and preceded by innumerable glossaries of Marxist terminology (not least the indexes of the great MEGA itself), and also by a range of Soviet encyclopedic projects, of which the various editions of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia (also translated into most of the languages of the former Eastern bloc) characteristic. Labica's fine work is far superior to English-language efforts like Bottomore's – no doubt drew some inspiration from the path-breaking Dictionary of Psychoanalysis of Laplanche and Pontalis (1967), which rewrote its terrain by combining substantial articles on Freud's basic concepts with the enlargement offered by a wider lacanian framework and problematic. The substantial reference apparatus of this pioneering work thus, besides the appropriate indications of Freud's own texts in a variety of languages, included an exciting array of contemporary works and articles, very unlike what one finds in the dusty bibliographies of the classical encyclopedias. In this respect, however, the most striking





feature of the Laplanche-Pontalis volume was the terminological articulation of some four hundred entries into their German, English, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese equivalents (and their cross-referencing in German as well as French): a feature retained in approximately the same number of entries in Labica, where the foreign-language equivalents are, however, reduced to a basic German, English and Russian. The Historisch-kritisches Wörterbuch, however, now reaches out beyond Europe and gives us Arabic and Chinese versions of these terms, besides the now customary English, French, Russian and Spanish; while the content of this project authorizes us to evoke Engels' well-known >law< of the dialectical transformation of quantity into quality (later codified by Stalin) as a first approach to the appreciation of the changes that had to result from the expansion of Labica's already generous basic four hundred concepts to some 1200, to fill some twelve volumes which will not be completed before the year 2000. (The publication date of volume I « 1994 » is seriously misleading, in the case of a project already underway during the eleven years preceding it.)

Nor is it a criticism or a drawback exactly to observe the relatively German frame of reference of these first two volumes. Marx and Engels are, after all, German classics as well as international trouble-makers. Lenin meanwhile still considered the pre-World-War-I German Social Democratic Party to be the flagship of the socialist movement. The German traditions of Marxism are extraordinarily rich and multiple; while Germany is the only Western country to have experienced (in part) what can be called the daily life of >administrative socialism<. This great Berlin enterprize, therefore, directed by Wolfgang Fritz Haug, is uniquely in a Position to draw on the heritage of both worlds, and to replenish itself at the very source, as it were. Labica's dictionary was, as is appropriate for the universality of French and of the French tradition, far less apparently centered on its own national context; far more obviously international in its conceptual frame of reference, by which I mean -« not that Gramsci, or Gunder Frank, Lefebvre, Uno or Sweezy, are absent from the German volumes: on the contrary -« but rather that German political history is more frequently adduced in the latter, than modern French socialist and communist political history in Labica's version, whose fundamental references remain those to Lenin and the soviet tradition.

This reflects, among other things, the gap between 1982 and 1994; but it also raises the question --- unavoidable in the Marxian framework --- of the scholarly >objectivity< of these volumes, or better still, of their relationship to the range of tendencies and alternate





movements and terminologies within >Marxism< itself, a word whose history and usage Labica documents (referencing his own dictionary as such for its content), while the HKWM (as we shall now call it modo germanico) has to be sure not yet reached that alphabetical item. Yet Haug's ample introduction provides information as to the newer principles in particular, besides the classical vocabulary, >are also included concepts which were unknown to the Marxist classics and even to the Marxist traditions, or at least which have as yet found no naturalization in them: a procedure that seemed appropriate when such concepts articulated historically novel problematics or epistemological claims or urged a foregrounding of hitherto neglected sides of Marxism< (iv). Yet the receptivity of such an opening is best evaluated on the basis of the entries themselves: where we find agribusiness alongside Samir Amin's delinking, Auschwitz alongside architecture, third way and Third World alongside Benjamin's dialectical image and Brecht's dialectical theater, and a Kojève-like article on Befriedigung (satisfaction) alongside a commemoration of Eisler's memorable Dummheit in der Musik (musical stupidities): all topics we would not expect to find within Labica's focus and material limits. I will return to some of these items in a moment, with a view towards using the HKWM for aesthetic purposes.

Still, the question has also traditionally been posed in different way, namely the treatment such works actually do end up affording oppositional currents: Trotskyism, the Cuban way (>castrisme<), Maoism, and anarchism are indeed all entries in Labica's dictionary, alongside Revisionism, Religion and even Zionism and Kautskyism, not to speak of Stalinism itself. Judicious and relatively nonpartisan judgements are made on all of these, and Trotskyism is evaluated as a rich storehouse of classical Marxian theory (but as a political), while the philosophical position attributed to Maoism by the Althusserians is respectfully explored. One's sense is that the well-known >unity of theory and practice< is drawn a little more tightly in Labica's dictionary, such that only the faintest trace of a discursive differentiation between political history and doctrinal development is there maintained. The HKWM, coming after post-structuralism, which leaves its traces in such entries as Meaning (Bedeutung), Dispositiv (in English I think we have to translate this as >apparatus< somehow), and Discourse Analysis, not to speak of numerous internal polemics against wilder forms of textualism and postmodernism (see below) must negotiate this fine and often evanescent line between >real history< and >the text< more prudently: something visible in the juxtaposition of the treatment of Anarchism in the two projects – the Labica volume limiting itself to the early struggles against the anarchist movement by Marx himself and his immediate followers, while HKWM (although it can only allude in passing to the development





of contemporary anarchism) nonetheless provides an >archeology< of the alternate Marxist positions of Bucharin and Gramsci on the matter (as opposed to the more standard line).

Indeed, the more contemporary tensions have probably replaced the older doctrinal and ideological differences within Marxism as a potential source of bias and exclusion. Althusserianism is, to be sure, given a full-dress, positive although not necessarily uncritical treatment in both dictionaries: so that this particular bone of contention deployed in England and the U.S. as a means of separating abhorrent >structuralist< deviations from the traditional truth's of the old-time religion (as in E.P.Thompson), are not present in either -α on the one hand, because the nature of Althusser's role within the French Party is much clearer from a French perspective, while on the other Frieder Otto Wolf's splendid article is able to document the richness and productivity of this heritage by way of references to some forty-five different thinkers and scholars in areas ranging from philosophy to aesthetics, from economics to political science and history.

Nonetheless, a certain tension necessarily persists between a >postmodern< outlook and the other kind (however one wants to characterize it). It will inevitably be felt more strongly in the cultural and aesthetic field (to which we now turn), and does not at all exclude a wide-ranging und sympathetic treatment of contemporary trends: as witness Thomas Weber's outline of the Problems of Meaning (Bedeutung), which, although clearly enough staged under the sign and in the force field of contemporary semiotics and language theory, is productively concerned to reestablish the richness of the Marxian Tradition in matters of language (besides Schaff, Klaus, Vygotsky, Gramsci and Volosinov, the reminder of Marx's own complex dealings with language is very helpful indeed). This article is then usefully complemented by Jürgen Link's treatment of Discourse Theory, which begins by posing the Marxian philosophical objections to an idealistic >pan-discursivism<, before proceeding to the ways in which an ideological analysis can find new precision in discourse analyses at the same time at which it provides a more concrete social and historical grounding for them. Dispositiv (by Thomas Laugstien) then returns to a philosophical examination of the new model -- this is at least in part an engagement with Foucault and Deleuze (Lyotard is not mentioned) -α and the cross-references of the two articles promise forthcoming entries on Semiotics, Philosophy of Language, Structuralism, Speech, and Subject-effects, while sending us back to Weber's first-rate and exhaustive discussion of Articulation (Gliederung), which traces this concept down to the present from Marx himself in the 1857 Introduction to the Grundrisse: here Laclau and Mouffe's pathbreaking work is engaged, and it is pleasant to





find Stuart Hall's rich discussions of these matters resumed and cited, as further documentation of the international left-culture of the contributors -- the framework may be that of the German tradition, but the references themselves are world-wide, as befits a tendential globalization that affects more than business.

Still, the critique of >pan-discursivism< sounds a note which is something of a constant in current debates on >postmodernism<: the accusation of monism levelled paradoxically enough by the adversaries of the last of its adherents, the self-proclaimed defenders of difference as such in all its forms. That Difference itself should have become an >ultimately determining instance< of the kind formerly reproached in Marxism is perhaps a paradox that can only be unravelled dialectically: for the politics of difference in our societies today surely became possible only on the basis of a gradual equality (or Identity) of social subjectivities. Such >debates<, in which the enemy is qualified as >metaphysical< on the grounds of impossibly vast und vague positions \approx everything is economic, everything is language, everything is aesthetic, everything is performative -- are as bootless as they are unavoidable: HKWM wishes, not merely to put Marxism's best foot forward, in an enterprise also characterized as that >message in the bottle< for a different future (the image was Adorno's, about Schoenberg's music, I believe), but also boldly to engage the cross-fire of contemporary Post-, anti-, and non-Marxist theory. In this situation - \approx one not merely of a proliferation of positions and polemics but also of a temporality of fashion change, whose infrastructure lies in the commodification of the Publishing industry as well as in the twin dynamics of the public sphere and the academic hierarchy -- the most crippling reproach that can be made to Marxism is probably not that it is >totalitarian< or that it is >deterministic<, but rather that it is >foundational<, which is less likely to mean, in some principled philosophical fashion, that it is >metaphysical<, and more likely simply to accuse it of being irredeemably old-fashioned. It is the fate of old enthusiasms: and Marxism here recapitulates the fate of its most eminent cultural (and theoretical) representative, Brecht, whose informing presence everywhere in these pages is a splendid testimony to the specificity of the German cultural perspective and the advantages to the rest of us of viewing the general Marxian scene from it. Here, postmodernism seems to come as something like the absolute break which poststructuralism threatened but did not fulfill (for, keeping to our own context, did not both Deleuze and Derrida retain their links to Marxism; were not Lacan and Lévi-Strauss co-travellers with Marxism at certain moments; is not Althusserianism itself testimony to the possibility of spanning both worlds and both moments?).





Now however Brecht and Marxism alike, along with so many other monuments of a pre-postmodern age, seem to recede into the antediluvian mists of high modernism as such: a panic about their loss rejoins the general middle-class panic about the dissolution of the past in general and the loss of traditional values of all kinds. It is a formulation which suggests, as one possible strategy, >postmodernization< as such: can one not then simply rewrite this or that in postmodern form, is a postmodern Brecht conceivable or stageable, if there can be this or that postmodern religion, even postmodern fundamentalism, why not a postmodern Marxism? It is not a solution which will appeal to everyone, even if it is realizable.

I think that the turn of my discussion towards cultural and aesthetic issues – the question of postmodernism being essentially a cultural way of formulating problems that can also be expressed in very different social, political, or scientific terminologies – has its deeper logic in the historical originality of our contemporary social world (or in other words in the structure of >postmodernity< itself). For one way of characterizing that Originality is as an immense de-differentiation of all those levels and autonomous spheres which it was the very logic of modernity as such to have originally differentiated in the first place: now they all fold back upon each other for a historic reason which can perhaps best be dramatized in the fate of their ultimate extremes, the economic and the cultural (or what Marxists used to call >base< and >superstructure<: and it is satisfying to observe, in passing, that HKWM does not simply drop this particular old hot chestnut in an unseemly haste to become respectable and contemporary, but lucidly and patiently details the drawbacks of the metaphor und the heuristic advantages of the distinction). Postmodernity can then be characterized as the becoming economic of the cultural (in mass culture), and the becoming cultural of the economic (in consumer commodification, image society, advertising and the like). Marxism's classical theorization took place when these levels were still decisively separated and differentiated, the economic being an unlovely space of sheer physical drudgery and the cultural an effete privilege of wealthy groups: computers and yuppies, among other things, have changed all that all over the world.

It behooves us therefore to look further at HKWM's contributions to a cultural formulation of Marxism, it being understood that it is precisely in this area that its most striking innovations are to be found (in Labica, the entry Culture reads simply: >Voir: École, Idéologie, Proletkult, Superstructure<, and indeed in this respect, the Dictionnaire critique had not yet crossed the threshold of that new mass cultural era – the Reagan years, but also wholesale and





systematic demarxification under Mitterand's Parti socialiste, the cybernetic revolution hand in hand with the new globalization – whose dynamics could not yet be visible.

These early entries (volume 2 of the HKWM only takes us up through the letter D) allow us to approach the matter along two paths, that of aesthetics and that of >everyday life< (in German Alltag or Alltäglichkeit) -- already a promising and preeminently contemporary juxtaposition. But clearly enough Marxist aesthetics has its own narrower history which a reference work of this kind needs to tell (and some of which -- Realism, Socialist Realism, Proletkult, and the like – will obviously find their entries in later volumes). A comprehensive and discriminating article by G. Mayer sorts out the history of Marxist pronouncements on the matter (governments, artists, critics, party congresses and the like); goes on to trace the various Marxist theories of art (not necessarily the same thing as the theory of the Beautiful), and concludes appropriately enough in a crisis, from which Mayer calls for a new division of labor of aesthetics, according to >activity-related specialization, as in aesthetics of work, politics, play, sports, sexuality, advertising, design (and metadesign), digital media, money, and so forth<, alongside the more traditional aesthetics of the various fine arts as such. We will return to this proposal in a moment, which could in the context of this particular article only betray the bankruptcy of some properly Marxist aesthetic tradition.

But such is the ambitiously philosophical framework of the HKWM that the matter is by no means considered exhausted at that point: rather, there follow other entries -- aesthetic abstraction, aesthetic theory, autonomy of art, and the untranslatable Basis-Ästhetik – which then reach back into the bourgeois and pre-bourgeois history of the reflections which crystallize in this relatively recent term (Baumgarten, 1754), as well as projecting the newer inflections imposed on them by modern left thinkers, most notably Adorno. Such perspectives are enhanced by splendid articles on Brecht as theoretician (Haug) and on Benjamin (Th. Weber, under the rubric of Dialectical Image, presumably on the grounds that B. founded no school and had no disciples). I am also tempted here to mention the creative invention of new categories in the HKWM: in these volumes Character Mask, and Stupidity (Dummheit, in general, not only in music!), both by Haug himself, are most welcome contributions which are theorized from out of relatively minor remarks in the >classics< (it is a pity, however, that Sartre's curious philosophical investigation of stupidity in the Journal de la drôle de guerre was not mobilized for the last-named of these entries).





Daily life also boasts a series of interventions, beginning with an authoritative statement by the very founder of this line of research, Henri Lefebvre; meanwhile, Frigga Haug's comprehensive article on Alltagsforschung then places feminism squarely on the agenda of a new discipline whose sources in Marxism and in phenomenology she traces. This is the point at which the HKWM erupts into the contemporary situation (which we do not have to call postmodernity unless we want to), and stakes out a claim to relevance in the new mine-fields of cultural studies, performativity, ethnic and identity politics, gender, and the like. Whether these perspectives will be developed in later volumes, and above all whether the gap that now opens up between the entries on aesthetics and art and those on the culture and study of daily life can be bridged productively at all, must for the moment remain an open question.

In that spirit, however, I must feel that an opportunity is (provisionally) missed in the articles on Bild and Abbild (both of which mean something like the English >Image<), which tell some dreary tales of older philosophical debates on >reflection< without seizing the occasion to leap ahead to image-concepts such as that of the late Guy Debord on the >society of the spectacle<, where economics and everyday life meet culture and aesthetics head-on. These issues are, however, joined elsewhere, in the article on Basis-Ästhetik, with which I will provisionally conclude this inquiry. The term is I think not known in the West, in either French or English: we know only Haug's Commodity Aesthetics, which I take to be rather a flipside, a converse or negative, of this more positive and programmatic conception (the former being covered in the article aesthetic abstraction). What is meant by >aesthetics of the base< (so to speak) is apparently an attempt to reconstruct a theory of Beauty on the >basis< of objective values, whether those of nature or of labor: the theory seems to have emerged from work in the GDR and thus may also stand as an index of what has yet to be explored in the theoretical achievements of that collective experiment. My own feeling is that under capitalism the attempt to evolve a positive aesthetic and restore a theory of beauty as such (including notions of ornament and the like) is premature if not altogether Utopian. Equally clearly, the attempt deliberately sets out to pose a countertendency to the predominance of theoretical references to the Sublime in more properly postmodern writing. G. Mayer's thorough outline of such issues and references makes the polemic explicit when he describes this differentiated and articulated expansion of aesthetic concepts as a substitute and counter-position to >the absurd thesis that reality is ultimately aesthetically constructed, that ^aesthetios^^ has become the fundamental form of knowledge, indeed that knowledge itself is finally to be grasped as an aesthetic construct<. But positions like this last cannot simply be dismissed on the grounds of their putative >postmodernity<: they go to the heart of





some of the newer analyses of contemporary society (and develop Debord's work -as mentioned above as- in a far more throughgoing and sometimes even outrageously absolute fashion). They also make it clear that these aesthetic differences are also ultimately political: for it is clear enough that Basis-Ästhetik seeks to discover local places of practical resistance within a late capitalism that for the image-society people is irredeemably commodified.

But there is more, and it returns us to the formal question of the dictionary or encyclopedia as such. My own feeling is that contemporary developments have demonstrated the impossibility and the internal contradictions of such concepts as >aesthetics< in the first place. Adorno was able to write the last and most prodigious aesthetic of all, because of his own dialectical insistence on the productiveness of failure: thus, Aesthetic Theory emerges from its own impossibility, and for one last long minute the thing proves to be possible, before vanishing with a thunder-clap into the ozone of the postmodern. But impossibility in this sense is a truly formal and profoundly dialectical matter: wrapped up with determinate not-being, and with the self-undermining of the positive and the >affirmative<. How to register it on the list of actually existing concepts? How to overcome the ontological claims of all conceivable rubrics and entries, in such a way that the possibility of their historical dissolution is also respected? Yet given the riches of these first two volumes, it seems conceivable that the HKWM team will find a way to do that too.

