

Updating Marx's Concept of Alternatives

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Abstract: The analysis of Marx's works will be prepared by outlining a more encompassing research project of intergenerational dialogues, in section 1. Section 2 will review Marx's concept of an alternative, classless society, which was based, e.g., in the projection of rational planning within companies to a national economy - to be revised and updated. Section 3 will discuss how more realistic long-term intergenerational means of orientation and communication of alternatives can emerge. This diagnosis will imply two exemplary and complementary forces calling for alternatives, namely "the perceived risks facing humanity" (Beck) and the enhancement of human rights as global challenges requiring global institutions.

Keywords: Alternatives, Classless Society, (De-) Civilizing Processes, Means of Orientation and Communication, Unplanned Processes, Intergenerational Dialogues, Long-term Goals, Multiple Modernizations, Risk Society, Global Challenges

Acknowledgement: My research into the sociology of alternatives, since the seventies of the past century, gained from discussions with Daniel Bell, Harvard, and Norbert Elias, Bielefeld and Amsterdam. Since 2009, I discussed the more encompassing project sketched in section 1 in the context of the research centre Humanities, Modernity, Globalization in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences of Jacobs University Bremen. Kind thanks also to two reviewers of tripleC.

1. Introduction

Since the first phases of industrialization and democratization in the 19th century, many scholars have contributed eminently to interpreting these economic and political upheavals. Prominently among them were, e.g., Karl Marx and Norbert Elias – among the contemporary ones Jürgen Habermas and Ulrich Beck. Which insights can be gained via explicitly constructed synopses of and dialogues between a few of their highlighted perspectives? Which new insights will be gained via and in terms of such an intergenerational dialogue, concerning driving forces and/or impeding forces? Such an endeavour leads well beyond one theory tradition alone, even if it is as important as the various strands of Marxian analyses and theories, of Marxist organizations and activities.

Yet, from the outset a strong Western bias must be acknowledged, both in terms of the historical phases of industrialization, urbanization, bureaucratization, education, or democratization taken into account as well as the social scientific theories used to interpret and change social conditions. "How different would the history of sociology or anthropology have been if Max Weber (say) had come from India, Emile Durkheim from Cuba or Norbert Elias from Martinique?" (Burke and Palares-Burke 2008, 17)

No theory by one author alone can claim to have developed a globally pertinent theory of alternatives. Yet (Marx 1973: Grundrisse, 77, put into parentheses), "if we did not find concealed in society as it is the material conditions of production and the corresponding relations of exchange prerequisite for a classless society, then all attempts to explode it would be quixotic." (Marx 1973, Grundrisse English ed., 159) Therefore, this essay will (1) situate Marx's concept of an alternative classless society in a network of later attempts at understanding long-term developments and detecting alternatives; (2) specify Marx's concept of an alternative classless society with a selection of highly pertinent quotations, referenced both in the original German and in English, which calls for a complementary update in terms of more recent studies, e.g., by Norbert Elias, Jürgen Habermas, and Eric Hobsbawm; and (3) discuss some chances and limits of alternatives at the beginning of the 21st century in terms of global risk challenges and human rights.

2. Intergenerational Dialogues

From Elias's classic theory of long-term social processes, to be sketched below, including those of more realistic sociological means of orientation and communication, two major components are basic to my inquiry: (1) Individual authors and their works are not the most important or decisive units of analysis, but intergenerational figurations, which combine to new types of insights. (2) Not only the concepts of individual authors and of short-term orientations are at stake, but the very notions of a scholarly "work", to be transformed in terms of a "collective authorship or mind". This will lead from a traditional history of ideas to an equal footing of authors from quite different epochs

and thereby a collective enlightenment scope, taking into account long-term ambiguities as well as dis-/continuities, shifts or break ups, i.e. tilting phenomena.

This diagnosis requires a concrete research project to enlarge the scope of theory-formation beyond traditional texts and efforts for global knowledge beyond Western biases (Featherstone and Venn 2006; Jin 2007). In order to re-allocate the status of widely acknowledged eminent theoreticians – whose special importance for international social theory formation cannot be deepened here - this essay focuses only on Marx's concept of alternatives, yet in a more encompassing project on the works by the following eleven theoreticians 1) Karl Marx; 2) Friedrich Nietzsche; 3) Max Weber; 4) Georg Simmel; 5) Sigmund Freud; 6) Karl Mannheim; 7) Norbert Elias; 8) Alfred Schütz (and Thomas Luckmann); 9) Jürgen Habermas; 10) Niklas Luhmann; and 11) Ulrich Beck.

As recently examined by Danowski and Park (2009, 351), “[i]t would be of interest to map the network structure among public intellectuals, based on their co-appearance in the same discussion threads. However, when the study was pilot tested, sufficient co-occurrence of public intellectuals in the same discussion threads was not found to warrant such an analysis”. Their findings show “on the internet, dead public intellectuals have a social afterlife, a sociomorphic quality that continues in cyberspace. This is a cultural domain in which discursive formations involving public intellectuals continue to evolve. The findings relate to the existing body of research concerning evaluations of online discussion” (Danowski and Park 2009, 352). They conclude: “It would be fruitful to [...] use more traditional methods of content analysis. While threadedness is a message content-based construct, it is only an indirect measure of content. It is more clearly a measure of the persistence of discussion associated with a public intellectual and related ideas, not the composition of the threads. Their semantic composition would be a valuable component of a broader attention to public intellectuals and the internet” (Danowski and Park 2009, 353).

Intergenerational Dialogues will advance in this direction, exemplifying the transformation of the humanities and social sciences in terms of online sources, discourses, and publications. The concept of “dialogues” implies that no hierarchy is presumed or aimed at, but a focus on those theory elements, which combine to innovative synopses, less dependent on their historical or ideological roots. This procedure suspends traditional concepts of biologically and culturally shaped generations, as advanced, e.g., by Karl Mannheim. It deviates from more traditional histories of ideas arguing for the priority of certain thinkers, e.g., Fuchs’ (2009) excellent article on Marx and the media.

Therefore, the selected works will not be interpreted as distinct outcomes of generation-specific conditions and insights, but as combining to a joint process of intergenerational knowledge creation and reflection, beyond biological time spans – which, nevertheless are taken into account for preliminary interpretations and the selection of variations of concepts of, e.g., societal alternatives.

A very simple and therefore transparent synopsis of the time horizon of the more encompassing research is sketched in Figure 1 below.

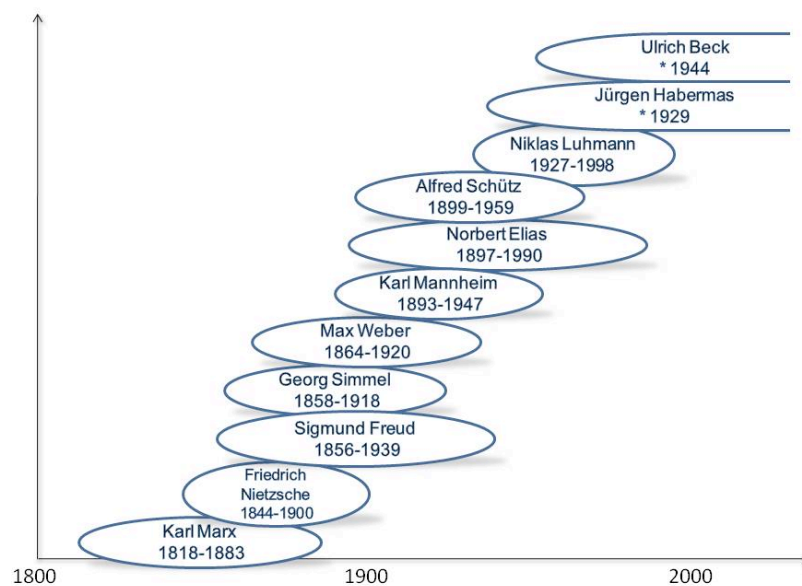


Figure 1: A synopsis of eleven selected public intellectuals from Marx to Beck

If we select only two major concepts for each individual work, e.g., for Karl Marx “classless society” and “alternatives” (as core elements of semantic fields), the number of all possible links between such 22 concepts amounts to 231. This network of concepts is visualized in Figures 2 and 3, below:

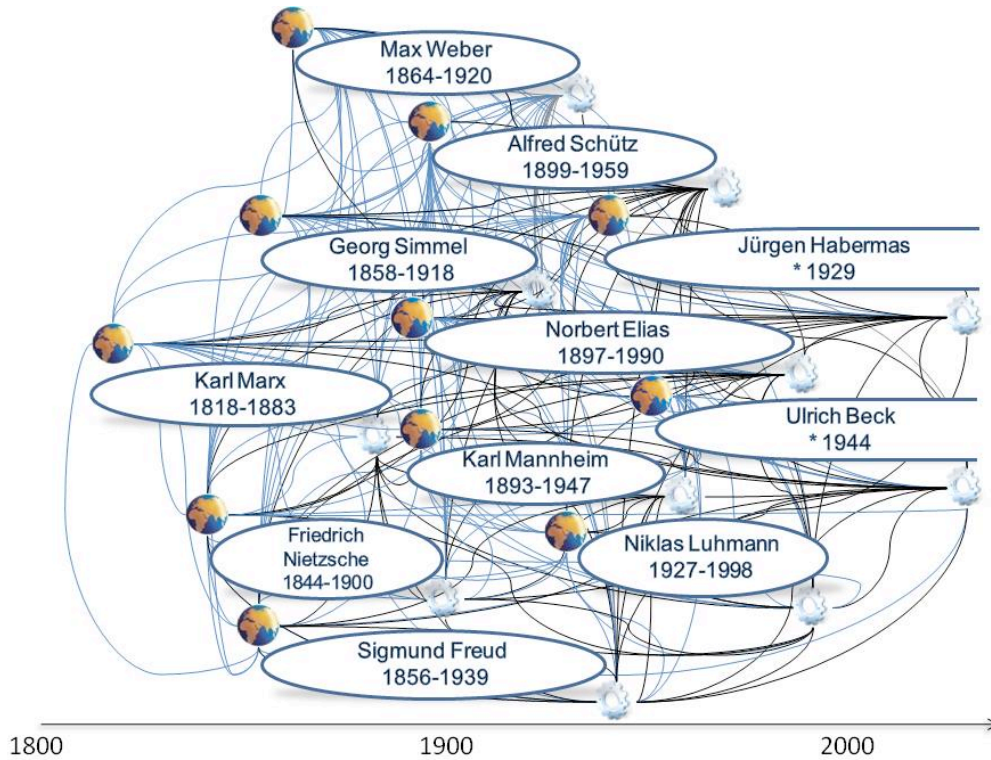


Figure 2: A synopsis of collected writings by eleven selected public intellectuals from Marx to Beck with 231 links for 22 variations of concepts of two selected concepts, emphasis on the authors

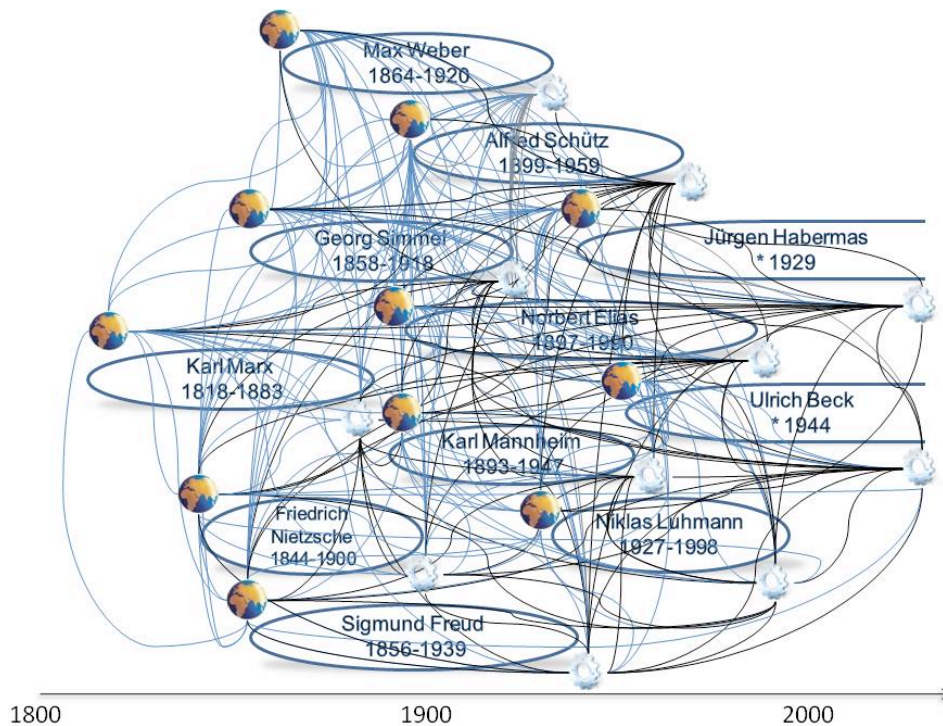


Figure 3: A synopsis of collected writings by eleven selected public intellectuals from Marx to Beck with 231 links for 22 variations of concepts of two selected concepts, emphasis on the intergenerational network of knowledge creation

These figures visualize the increasing interconnectedness of this intergenerational dialogue, leading individual works into the background and the network of concepts into the foreground. Thereafter, similar synopses of online publications will lead to even larger data sets and more complicated visualizations.

Already in 1929, Karl Mannheim developed a dynamic synthesis of diverse perspectives beyond class and political group barriers, challenged by his contemporary Antonio Gramsci. This intellectual challenge becomes more demanding, namely to investigate well beyond traditional national perspectives and to see and show synopses beyond current orientations and now living generations. Mannheim's assistant Elias inquired in his "Habilitationsschrift" from 1933 on the Court Society into a major phase prior to industrial capitalism as an important example for the historic development of state institutions, behaviour standards and personality traits. Elias's later (1939, in English 2000) interpretations of books on manners as observers and standards of human behaviour and personality structures in the context of increasing interdependencies between various social strata and functional realms as well as the monopolization of physical force and taxation by state institutions laid the basis for his outline of a theory of the civilizing process in the West. State formation, behaviour standards and personality structures were seen together. His insights, however, also allow for a better understanding of multiple civilizing processes in historically differentiated cultural zones. (Cp. with explicit references to Elias Ben-Rafael and Sternberg 2001.)

According to Elias's theory of long-term unplanned civilizing processes, networks of interdependencies are multi-dimensional and multi-functional, and only very partially known or intelligible to the actors or authors – which points beyond any attempt at discovering universal principles of socio-economic developments and revolutionary progress. They are so numerous (cp. Elias's chapter 3 on Game models and his calculation of the complexity of social relationships in Elias 1978, 101, Table 1) that it is impossible for any individual actor or author to oversee millions of connections already in small-scale networks. It is even less probable that individuals can calculate advantages and disadvantages, costs and benefits of individual actions within such networks or even parts of figurations beyond their own lifetimes. Elias (1939, cp. Ludes 1989) mainly argued that unplanned long-term social processes predominate any kind of short-term individual constraints and options as well as affective ties and deep-seated levels of anxieties. Such unintended consequences of social actions, strategies, interdependencies of knowledge, and risky unaware-

ness have become a major concern of Ulrich Beck's (1992, 2008a and 2008b) theory-formation on reflexive modernization.

In contrast, Habermas focused on (communicative) *actions* rather than on the means of production, class relationships, civilizing processes, or a risk society, relying on the Weberian tradition of action theory and rationalization processes. Habermas (1981, vol. 1, 439 and 446) focuses on interactions, which can be verbalized. In his theory of communicative action, "total experiences" as a prerequisite for "existential truths" (cp., e.g., Wolff 1976) come closest to dramaturgical actions, fundamentally expressive, calling for existential truth or authenticity in a subjective world. But for any type of discourse, its participants must mutually accept and listen to each other, be trustworthy and act trustfully. In historic terms, sacred traditions offer limitations, which have been only partially transformed and replaced in secularizing phases of social development. Most prominently, in his "Theory of Communicative Action", Habermas (1981, vol. 2, 585) postulated three distinct social realms, namely science, ethics, and arts, whose communication across realms had to be taken into account. Both the distinction and the complementarity condition and frame any discourse on diagnoses and even more so on strategies for actions. In more recent writings, Habermas (1999, 2011) emphasized the "inclusion of the other". Similar to Kurt H. Wolff's emphasis on the historic rupture of the possibility of human self-destruction as a challenge for historically new understandings of all kinds of social relations, Habermas (2001, 125) focused also on the dangers of gene-technology and especially cloning as transforming human autonomy.

Therefore, a globalizing discourse theory does not only require existential truths as prerequisites, but also intergenerational ties, i.e. an alternative social institution, which requires questioning current self-understandings of autonomous individuals, parties, or classes and time horizons limited to individual life-spans. Some attempts at using original Marxian insights from the 19th century for the beginning of the 21st century, from analyses of the early phases of industrialization without any bourgeois and/or proletarian democratization, especially the right to vote or some state and public control of decision-making in companies fall behind Marx's achievements of analyzing socio-economic developments with a multiplicity of perspectives. Only thereby his critiques of the German ideology or of the political economy of the early and mid-19th century could be developed for new types of "alternatives". Therefore, this essay aims at updating Marx's concept of an alternative, classless society in terms of a few social scientific studies from the past decades. Since this update - which implies fundamental upheavals for historically new conditions - begins with Marx's original sketches, a few especially pertinent quotations will be offered; in this context, it appears as obvious that this should be done in English, although concepts always carry on some original language connotations, which often get lost even in excellent translations. As Bielsa (2011, 205) states, "the global dominance of English is expressed [...] in [...] domesticating translation [...] which disrupts the cultural codes of the translating language".

I draw attention only to two "words" in Marx's writings: "bedingen", which may be translated as "to condition" or "to determine", originally is similar to "provide with things" or "provide with material", which does not necessarily refer to a "material basis". "Notwendigkeit", as another example, implies the necessity to turn over misery, "Not-Wendigkeit", not necessarily socio-economic determinism (Fleischer 1972, 74 and 142). "British and American sociology have neglected the important role translation plays in the discipline, both in mediating the international circulation of theory and in key methodological aspects of social research, a lack of interest that can in part be explained as a product of current global inequalities and the dominant position of the Anglo-American academy in the world." (Bielsa 2011, 212)

3. How Did Marx Specify an Alternative, Classless Society?

Reviewing all writings of the Collected Works of Marx in German (MEW) led to a reconstruction of major prerequisites, impediments and characteristics of an alternative, classless society already more than three decades ago (Ludes 1979 and 1980). Mainly in writings not intended for publication including the "Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts", the "Grundrisse" and letters, Marx repeatedly asserted that the conscious control of economic and social processes is desirable and realizable. He also stressed the possibility and desirability of fundamental transformations of human character-formations like a general need for surplus labour, work discipline, solidarity with one's own as well as future generations; moreover, a decline or even abolition of traditional institutions like property, the family, money and finally the state at least in its repressive functions.

Marx (see table 1 in Ludes 1979, 130) named about 210-215 times specific prerequisites, 50-55 times impediments for a classless society, and warned that material wealth might lead to golden chains fettering workers within capitalism.

He sketched characteristics of a classless society in about 150 passages.

“The German Ideology” (MEW 3, 424) for example considered the division of labour together with private property as limits of productivity: “We have already shown above that the abolition of a state of affairs in which relations become independent of individuals, in which individuality is subservient to chance and the personal relations of individuals are subordinated to general class relations, etc. – that the abolition of this state of affairs is determined in the final analysis by the abolition of division of labour. We have also shown that the abolition of division of labour is determined by the development of intercourse and productive forces to such a degree of universality that private property and division of labour become fetters on them. We have further shown that private property can be abolished only on condition of an all-round development of individuals, precisely because the existing form of intercourse and the existing productive forces are all-embracing and only individuals that are developing in an all-round fashion can appropriate them, i.e., can turn them into free manifestations of their lives. We have shown that at the present time individuals must abolish private property, because the productive forces and forms of intercourse have developed so far that, under the domination of private property, they have become destructive forces, and because the contradiction between the classes has reached its extreme limit. Finally, we have shown that the abolition of private property and of the division of labour is itself the association of individuals on the basis created by modern productive forces and world intercourse” <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch03o.htm> (accessed March 30, 2012).

Yet, in Volume 1 of “Capital” (MEW 23, 512), Marx postulated the suspension of the old division of labour. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch15.htm#S1> (accessed March 30, 2012). In an earlier version of the sixth chapter of the first volume of Capital, Marx foresaw the ambivalence of scientific progress, which increases human control over nature, but also over workers (Resultate, 80f): “The application of the forces of nature and science [...] are [...] things which confront the individual workers as *alien, objective, and present in advance*”

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/economic/ch02b.htm> (accessed March 30, 2012).

In his speech at the anniversary of the “People’s Paper”, Marx argued in 1856:

At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. Even the pure light of science seems unable to shine but on the dark background of ignorance. All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force. This antagonism between modern industry and science on the one hand, modern misery and dissolution on the other hand; this antagonism between the productive powers and the social relations of our epoch is a fact, palpable, overwhelming, and not to be controverted. [...] The English workingmen are the firstborn sons of modern industry. They will then, certainly, not be the last in aiding the social revolution produced by that industry, a revolution, which means the emancipation of their own class all over the world, which is as universal as capital-rule and wages-slavery

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1856/04/14.htm> (accessed March 30, 2012).

About two years before his death, Marx wrote to Domela Nieuwenhuis in 1881:

The thing to be done at any definite given moment of the future, the thing immediately to be done, depends of course entirely (sic!) on the given historical conditions in which one has to act. But this question is in the clouds and therefore is really the statement of a phantom problem to which the only answer can be—the *criticism of the question* itself. No equation can be solved unless the elements of its solution are involved in its terms. [...] Perhaps you will point to the Paris Commune; but apart from the fact that this was merely the rising of a town under exceptional conditions, the majority of the Commune was in no sense socialist, nor could it be. [...] It is my conviction that the critical juncture for a new International Workingmen's Association has not yet arrived and for this reason I regard all workers' congresses, particularly socialist congresses, in so far as they are not related to the immediate given conditions in this or that particular nation, as not merely useless but harmful. They will always fade away in innumerable stale generalised banalities

http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1881/letters/81_02_22.htm (accessed March 30, 2012).

Even more fundamental are the following prerequisites, which were not yet met by the beginning of the 21st century and thereby reduce the applicability of Marx's (and Engels's) early "Manifesto":

National differences and antagonism between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto. The supremacy of the proletariat will cause them to vanish still faster. United action, of the leading civilised countries at least, is one of the first conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat. In proportion as the exploitation of one individual by another will also be put an end to, the exploitation of one nation by another will also be put an end to. In proportion as the antagonism between classes within the nation vanishes, the hostility of one nation to another will come to an end

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm> (accessed March 30, 2012)

In the "Grundrisse", Marx elaborated some of his earlier thoughts. Thus:

When the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc., created through universal exchange? The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity's own nature? The absolute working-out of his creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development, i.e. the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a *predetermined* yardstick? Where he does not reproduce himself in one specificity, but produces his totality? Strives not to remain something he has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming? (Marx 1973, Grundrisse English ed., 488 = Marx 1974, Grundrisse German ed., 387. See also *ibid.*, 440).

Marx's discussion of labour as "real freedom" is also worth to be quoted extensively. Marx says in the "Grundrisse":

Certainly, labour obtains its measure from the outside, through the aim to be attained and the obstacles to be overcome in attaining it. But [...] that this overcoming of obstacles is in itself a liberating activity – and that, further the external aims become stripped of the semblance of merely external natural urgencies, and become posited as aims which the individual himself posits – hence as self-realization, objectification of the subject, hence real freedom, whose action is, precisely, labour [...]. Labour becomes attractive work, the individual's self-realization, which in no way means that it becomes mere fun" (Marx 1973, Grundrisse English ed., 611 = Marx 1974, Grundrisse German ed., 505).

This passage, the whole context of which Marx put into brackets, points beyond a strict separation between the realm of necessity during labour time and the realm of freedom during leisure time. It shows that one must differentiate between general characteristics of labour, common in all types of society, in this case the characteristics that one works in order to arrive at aims which have been posited and that one has to overcome obstacles in attaining them, and characteristics specifying class societies, in this case that the aims of the labour process have been posited by those who own and/or control the productive means and appropriate the surplus labour of those who neither own nor control the productive means but work with them in order to survive or to live adequately according to the respective historical and cultural standards.

Marx never combined his various insights to a theory of prerequisites, impediments, phases and characteristics of an alternative classless society. Yet based on a synopsis of his writings, the following impediments can be systematized: Capitalism is quite flexible and grants only what is absolutely necessary to prolong its existence, classes are divided into sub-classes, petty bourgeois proprietors defend the capitalist system. The organizations of repression, namely the army and the police forces, improve their operations over time. Veiling techniques in the mass media as well as the exploitation of scientifically enhanced control repress pre-revolutionary sentiments and activities.

Rather than class conflicts, national wars dominated the 20th century. "Workers of all Countries Unite!" was a call for action, not a diagnosis. Class solidarity is undermined by actions against minorities. Economic-social developments become less transparent; capitalists do not only wear

character masks, but can also become invisible beyond most democratizing control. There is more to lose than chains – and in an age of means of mass destruction, not only a world can be won, it can also be lost. Short-term survival needs or granted privileges delay mid- and long-term goals – the more active workers left their home countries since the 19th century for more promising new worlds. The longer capitalism exists, the more it may appear as a historical necessity, deeply engrained in all major institutions. Therefore mainly a networking of alternatives already realized at smaller scales will contribute to revolutionary upheavals that can be successful in long terms also for generations after the revolution, i.e. an overthrow of economic, cultural and political exploitation and repression.

In general, Marx's procedure of specifying alternatives was a projection of rational planning within companies to a national and even world economy and of highly motivated, politically active and responsible workers to all citizens of a classless society. Do the socio-economic processes since the mid-19th century not require more up to date concepts of alternatives? Which characteristics are made obsolete according to more recent theories of de-/civilizing processes, emancipative discourses, and system-specific rationalities?

A few of the historical limits of Marx's concept of alternatives can be sketched via a more general specification of a sociology of alternatives taking into account the pertinent theories of Elias (esp. 1939 and 1984), Habermas (mainly 1962, 1981, 2006 and 2007), and Luhmann (1995, 1996, 1997 and 2010; cp. Ludes 1989 and 2011), e.g., development patterns of state formations and failing states, de-/civilizing behaviour standards, focusing on means of violent destruction and of self-/constraints (rather than on the means and relations of production), discourses, system-specific rationalities and functionally equivalent alternatives. All these impediments to and transformations of the prerequisites for a classless society require new diagnoses and actions.

In general, alternatives are usually understood as desirable (historically necessary, "notwendige", which already for Marx meant: revolting against misery), consistent, and realizable social actions, processes, or structures fundamentally different from the predominant ones: As Marx emphasized particularly in the "Grundrisse" (quoted above): if there were no concrete models of alternative social relations in present societies, any attempt at overthrowing them would be utopian. In Marx's early metaphor from "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm> [accessed March 30, 2012]): "these petrified relations must be forced to dance by singing their own tune to them!"

Somewhat similar to Marx's diagnosis of a monopolization of the productive means and potentialities of economic wealth, Elias postulated a more general mechanism of the monopolization of various means of control as a major integrator of ever increasing interdependencies, going hand in hand with:

- An increase of population size, communication, the division of labour, the use of money and urbanization,
- An increase of taxes and the domination by centres of power,
- The decrease of power and income of the aristocracy, its loss of the monopoly of the effective use of weapons, enhancing the dependence on others,
- A development of new war technologies,
- The purchase of soldiers, and
- A monopolization of the state's exercise of physical force financed by taxes.

According to Elias' theories of civilizing processes and of the developments of more realistic means of orientation, sociological diagnoses should not limit themselves by highlighting either the means and relations of production (like Marx) or disenchantment, bureaucratization, and rationalization (like Max Weber). These realms should not be separated for they remain highly interdependent and shaped by the density of populations or the degree and type of the monopolization of physical force. *Long-term intergenerational interdependencies point beyond alternatives within any living generation's reach.* Since the experiences, anxieties, projects, constraints, and self-control of billions of past humans have led contemporary generations to the present conditions, these chains cannot be exploded or unfettered nor would this be desirable for they have become deeply engrained patterns of humans and institutions. The chains of generations are stronger than the fetters of capitalism. Or, in Marx's (Marx and Engels, Selected Works 1, 398) words in "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte": "The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living."

In contrast to Marx's philosophical speculations about transformations of human nature, which he considered as basic for a classless society as the socialization of the means of production, es-

pecially in the Paris manuscripts and the “Grundrisse”, Elias interpreted books on good manners over centuries as indicators of actual changes of the behaviour and personality structures of the secular upper strata in the West in the context of state formations and state failures. In Elias’s (1977/2009, 9, 13, 16f) words:

Complementary processes of functional differentiation, social integration, and civilization are strands of this complex long-term development. [...] One encounters simultaneously a deepening mood of doubt regarding the worth of such progress. People accept its advantages and fear its dangers. [...] The same holds for the shifts and fluctuations that are taking place in the power differentials between state societies. [...] Therefore, it is to the unplanned contradiction between the continual advance of scientifically acquired means of orientation in the sphere of non-human nature and of the corresponding chances for the exercise of control [...] and the relative backwardness in the development of the human world [...] that we must attribute a large measure of the growing strength of the voices and doubt in the value of all progress [...] One remains, correspondingly, incapable of developing more adequate means of orientation towards and of controlling such progress.

Elias (1977/2009, 27f) continues: “One may think, for example, of the false planning that would be involved if, without systematic sociological investigation of its development potential [...] one imposed the pure economic models of relatively capital-rich industrial societies on to a capital-poor society with a predominantly illiterate peasant population”. Alternative intergenerational long-term goals (cp. Elias 1984) can become means of orientation and communication only if they take into account chances and limits of (de-) civilizing processes and of the developments of more realistic means of orientation and communication as well as demographics and the length, density, and intensity of intergenerational figurations.

4. Chances and Limits for Alternatives at the Beginning of the 21st Century?

The Google founders and their employees who have grown up with the Internet have “considered its principles to be as natural as the laws of gravity. [...] But Page had a real vision: just as Google’s hardware could be spread around the world in hundreds of thousands of server racks, Google’s brainpower would be similarly dispersed, revolutionizing the spread of information while speaking the local language” (Levy 2011, 5 and 271). New types of information mining and knowledge networking have undermined the 19th and 20th century prioritizations on land, natural resources, labour power and capitalist organization as main or even only sources of (surplus) value. Fuchs (2012, 6) argues: “Google would lose its antagonistic character if it were expropriated and transformed into a public, non-profit, non-commercial organization that serves the common good”.

From the perspectives of the 20th and early 21st century social sciences, Marx focused on the economic class struggles, hardly on political developments. An exception is the work “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”, which gave us insights into the role of the “Lumpenproletariat” and the corruption of politics. Only an especially pertinent statement on peasants may be quoted here, for it shows Marx’s awareness of blatant differences between the peasants and industrial workers, still highly important, e.g., in contemporary China and India: “The small-holding peasants form a vast mass [...] much as potatoes in a sack of potatoes. [...] In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants [...] they do not form a class” (Marx and Engels, 1969, 398). Yet, this inability of communication provides us also with an example of the relevance of information technologies and devices for a new “working-class network society” (Qiu 2009).

Concerning political developments, Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), for example, was the major political figure in Germany during (and beyond) Marx’s lifetime and chancellor from 1871 to 1890. Analyzing his autobiography “Erinnerung und Gedanke” and his (partially dubious) talks with various contemporaries as well as a major biography of Bismarck by Gall (1983) showed how different the historic challenges, conflicts, and victories are. Experiences with and attitudes towards physical violence and the role of the state far surpass considerations of economic developments. This applies also to the first social democratic chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany (1969-1974), Willy Brandt’s autobiographical writings and a biography on him (see Ludes 1989, book 2).

Marx and Engels recognized the failure of the 1848 bourgeois revolutions and even acknowledged “Bismarck’s ‘historically progressive’ achievement of German unity, they did not fully work out its implications” (Hobsbawm 2011, 71). This is in line with Hobsbawm’s (2011, 86) diagnosis that “ahistorical voluntarism” is less adequate and successful than political decisions in the “frame-

work of historical change, which did not depend on political decision”, Rosa (2005, 477f) concludes in a similar manner, yet in terms of basic institutional upheavals, that the political project of modernity – due to the de-synchronization of socio-economic development and political steering – may have reached its end, giving way to a short-term muddling through. A recent account of “Confidence Men” (Suskind 2011) offers a few examples of how “the Audacity of Hope” (Obama 2006, cp. accounts of the first female chancellor of Germany in Langguth 2010, esp. 371f) is cut off by the influences that Wall Street and Washington have had on the US President.

Therborn (2010, 13) emphasized the significant “concentration of capital, just as Marx predicted” in the US from 1905 to 1999 as well as the development of “new terrain”: “Habermas abandoned the systemic contradictions analyzed by Marxist theory, replacing it first with a distinction between different kinds of action and knowledge interests, and later with a conflict between the social system and the ‘life-world’” (Therborn 2010, 79, see also 123 for possible long-term future alternatives).

Kurt H. Wolff (see the discussion of an existential turn in sociology in Ludes 2007) emphasized that the human potential of self-destruction became ever more obvious since the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. This threat to human survival reframed and undermined all previous social diagnoses. Since the end of the Cold War, military budgets decreased in many democratic and richer countries, partially due to the higher technological efficiency of ever more advanced systems of mass destruction. State budget shares were balanced somewhat and for limited phases in order to finance welfare measures and repair costs in capitalist crises.

Marx’s and later sociological theories “have assumed that the basic institutional formations that developed in European modernity [...] will ‘naturally’ be taken over, with possible local variations, in all [...] modernizing societies [...] But the reality that emerged proved to be radically different. Developments [...] did not bear out the assumption of ‘convergence’ of modern societies. They actually indicated that the various modern autonomous institutional arenas – the economic, the political, the educational or the family are defined and regulated and combine in different ways in different societies and in different periods of their development” (Eisenstadt 2010, 2). According to Eisenstadt (2010, 12), various trajectories and interpretations of modernities and modernizations decouple from Westernization.

The detection of alternatives is therefore characterized by the co-ordination of often highly distinct life worlds, patterns and rhythms of change and corresponding common sense or social scientific theories. There is no standard continuum of measure-units, as they have existed for generations for time, space, or economic values. It must rather be developed for any realistic long-term alternative. Only via the mutual feed back of concepts of alternatives in all their major dimensions of desirability, consistency, and the potentials for the realization of “desirable” actions, processes or structures, can fundamental transformations be prepared. Obviously, such attempts will be fettered time and time again by privileges that defend and enhance class struggles from above (which Warren Buffet considered as successful in the US) and by veiling alternatives.

Therefore, a critique of the political, cultural and mediated networked synchronization of alternatives requires the following long-term efforts (see Ludes 1989, book 2 and Ludes 2011, ch. 1):

- Since there is no physical or biological model for the perception of alternatives, intergenerational networks of alternative social models must be ascertained and enhanced.
- Since the discrepancies of systems and life worlds (to use Habermas’s theory of communicative action) do neither allow for near-natural standardizations nor for discourse-based agreements or contracts, other modes of co-ordination will come into the focus of analyses and synopses, characterized by cognition, communication and cooperation.
- Yet these modes of interaction are continuously threatened by violent conflicts or even wars. One needs to develop means of communication and orientation, which enable societal alternatives, that are not only grounded in class analyses, but in networking long-term goals.
- This implies the re-synchronization of functionally distinct realms in the minds of people across generations. Thereby ever more realistic concepts of alternatives emerge, which could again shape the mentalities, especially the projects of actions and institutions as well as master narratives of ever more groups of people taking into account their mutual interdependencies over longer periods of trajectories.
- Such clarifications will allow for some standardization of alternatives, for limited areas, realms, times and issues.
- Only if such standards appear as more or less obvious, not only in cognitive but also affective terms, will they function as acceptable thresholds of otherwise timeless discourses.

This diagnostic challenge calls for an intergenerational dialogue of theory-formation, in which the means of orientation and communication, of control and self-control, of reproduction and destruction inter-depend with those of production. The variety of culture-specific, transcultural and even globalizing alternative actions, processes, and structures and of criteria for their specification and agreement is so wide that no conscious consensus can be reached. Such models of orientation and communication clearly point beyond individual, short-term perceptions and must allow continuous feedback from the intended and unintended consequences of interactions and “interpassivities” for various classes, groupings and time horizons. Thereby common standards emerge, which contribute to new behaviour patterns and mentalities. Consciously communicated alternatives always are embedded in less conscious horizons and frameworks (cp., e.g., Honneth 2011, 540-567).

Habermas (2011, 33-38) proposes human rights as a regulatory institution, which Ludes (2011, chapter 8) puts into the context of traditional print, broadcast and web media, symbolically generalized media of communication of money, power, truth or love, and the long-term means of orientation, space, time, and alternatives. Since the historically new global crisis of financial capitalism with its repercussions of economic fragilities and state bankruptcies, Habermas (2011, 100-129) sees a re-shuttling of “political alternatives”, which would have been deemed unrealistic before. He calls for the right for unbiased political communication, especially concerning communication about the weapons of mass destruction employed by the global financial markets. The continuous interventions of state regulations in the crisis made transparent that capitalism cannot reproduce itself autonomously from the state, but rather drives the state to collect taxes that are used for resolving capitalism’s state of emergency.

Yet: “The evolution of humankind is a contingent, open-ended process, driven primarily through five fields of forces of the mode of livelihood, of demographic ecology, of distributions of recognition, rank and respect, of cultures of learning, communication and values, and of politics” (Therborn 2011, 84). Only self-critical re-conceptualizations of traditional concepts can serve as driving forces for radical transformations of informational capitalism, which, however, tends to monopolize rankings of valuable information and knowledge (cp., e.g., Halavais 2009). Therefore, the appropriation of ICTs in the service of alternative commons has become a major means of revolting against the oligopoly of the means of production and destruction via new means of cognition, communication and cooperation (cp. Fuchs 2011a, section 5). “Given that alternatives frequently do not want to build their organizations on commodities and advertising because they think this will corrupt their political goals, they are frequently facing problems like lack of resources, precarious self-exploitative labour, lack of attention/visibility, etc” (Fuchs 2011b).

Yet, in addition to these and the impediments to Marx’s trajectories towards an alternative, classless society sketched above, we must see clearly that the very base of Marx’s diagnosis has become obsolete: More than two thirds of the world were almost completely outside of Marx’s research (despite a few reflections in newspaper articles on India), namely almost all of Asia, Africa, Latin America. In globalizing socio-economic, military, terrorist, ecological, communication processes in the 21st century, these previously excluded regions and populations will shape also the rules of globalizing capitalism.

A recent “Citizen’s Guide to Capitalism and the Environment” (Magdoff and Foster 2011, all following quotations will refer to this book) may exemplify the projection of analyses from one country, i.e., the United States, to a global theory. A rhetorical device is the unqualified use of “we”, e.g.: “We are constantly being told” (7), “we have an economic system” (12), “our economic system [...] we must look” (30), “We must also recognize” (38) and so on till the call for collective actors, which are even more vague than previous conceptions of a class in and for itself, e.g., “people organizing and fighting” (131), “society decides” (135), or “We the people” (151). Similarly, the political economical analyses, mainly based on developments in the United States and exclusively on publications in English, not taking into account any of the above theories from, e.g., Elias, Habermas, Hobsbawm, or Therborn, reify “the economic system” (12, 30), the “present system” (36), “capitalism” (7, 56, 101), “the capitalist system” (59), “the system” (83-85), “the democratic system” (91), “the current system”, “the logic of the system” (93), “system”, “the system”, “the capitalist economic system” (96f) “capitalist society” (111) or “society” (66, sometimes referring to the US alone, sometimes to the whole world without clear distinctions). Based on these generalizations, even more universal “realistic alternatives” are proposed, “Creating an entirely different system [...] a truly revolutionary form of change – the transition to a new system altogether”: The simplifying “planning” proposed becomes evident in the metaphor of “what the house is to be like [...]. Similarly, once society decides that it is critical to fulfil the basic needs of people, then – after some general agreement is reached as to what these needs are – a system that plans production and distribution

is required in order effectively to achieve those ends” (135). Compared to this “Guide”, Marx’s original concept of a classless society may appear as more concrete and aware of historic circumstances – and Habermas’s theory of communicative action and discourses as even more realistic.

Magdoff and Foster’s analysis is based on the ecological catastrophes due to a (US, global) capitalism inevitably based on economic growth and endless profit seeking, yet it neglects, e.g., “liberal market and more cooperative varieties of capitalism” (Lane and Wood 2009). The very short reference to Beck (111) avoids Beck and others’ publications on reflexive modernization, unintended consequences, and methodological nationalism. Therefore, also in the light of this “Guide”, the intergenerational dialogue proposed in this essay offers alternative theory strands to be taken into account.

Worldwide, mixed economies and regulations dominate. Or are there state societies, in which various public institutions do not exert some degree of control over capitalist enterprises? So-called communist societies failed and the globally important “communist” People’s Republic of China never met the prerequisites for and characteristics of a classless society, which were sketched above. (See Mennell 2003, de Swaan 2003 and Mao’s calls for violence as summarized in Chang and Halliday 2005, especially chapters 45-51.)

As Vogel (2011, 706f) argues: “The transition from a predominantly rural to a predominantly urban society and the spread of a common national culture are among the most fundamental changes that have occurred in Chinese society since the country’s unification in 221 B.C. [...] When China began opening in the 1980s, there were virtually no rules in place for food and drugs, product and workplace safety, working conditions, minimum wages, or construction codes. [...] The situation in China under Deng was reminiscent of the rapacious capitalism of nineteenth-century Europe and the United States, when there were no anti-trust laws and no laws to protect workers. [...] In some ways the situation in China during the Deng era was also similar to the nineteenth-century American West before there were local laws and courts”.

Concerning global challenges, I will only quote at length Beck’s elaboration of his risk society theory in 2008 (b):

the fundamental principles of modernity, including the free market principle and the nation-state order itself, become subject to the change, the existence of alternatives, and contingency. You might even say, the historical power of global risk is beyond all the ‘saviours’ brought forth by history: not the proletariat, not the excluded, not the Enlightenment, not the global public, not the migrants of global society – if anyone or anything at all, it is the perceived risks facing humanity, which can be neither denied nor externalized, that are capable of awakening the energies, the consensus, the legitimation necessary for creating a global community of fate, one that will demolish the walls of nation-state borders and egotisms – at least for a global moment in time and beyond democracy. [...] However, global risk public spheres have a completely different structure from the ‘public sphere’ explored by Jürgen Habermas. Habermas’s public sphere presupposes that all concerned have equal chances to participate and that they share a commitment to the principles of rational discourse. The threat public sphere is as little a matter of commitment as it is of rationality. The images of catastrophes do not produce cool heads. False alarms, misunderstandings, condemnations are part of the story. Threat publics are impure, they distort, they are selective and stir up emotions, anger and hate. They make possible more, and at the same time less, than the public sphere described by Habermas. [...] World risk is *the* unwanted, unintended obligatory medium of communication in a world of irreconcilable differences in which everyone is turning on their own axis. Hence the public perception of risk forces people to communicate who otherwise do not want to have anything to do with one another. It imposes obligations and costs on those who resist them, often even with the law on their side. In other words, large-scale risks cut through the self-sufficiency of cultures, languages, religions and systems as much as through the national and international agenda of politics; they overturn their priorities and create contexts for action between camps, parties and quarrelling nations that know nothing about each other and reject and oppose one another. That is what ‘enforced cosmopolitanization’ means: global risks activate and connect actors across borders, who otherwise do not want to have anything to do with one another. [...] It is evident, that the taken-for-granted nation-state frame of reference - what I call ‘methodological nationalism’ – prevents the social sciences from understanding and analyzing the dynamics and ambivalences, opportunities and ironies of world risk society.

Correspondingly, global catastrophes and trends refer more to fatal discontinuities than the falling profit rate, e.g., influenza pandemics, transformational wars, terrorist attacks, global warming, changing water and nitrogen cycles, loss of biodiversity, antibiotic resistance. For example, poor "water quality is a much more common problem. In 2005 more than 1 billion people in low-income countries had no access to clean drinking water, and some 2.5 billion lived without water sanitation [...] About half of all beds in the world's hospitals were occupied by patients with water-borne diseases. [...] Contaminated water and poor sanitation kill about 4,000 children every day [...] Deaths among adults raise this to at least 1.7 million fatalities per year. Add other waterborne diseases, and the total surpasses 5 million. In contrast, automobile accidents claim about 1.2 million lives per year [...] roughly equal to the combined total of all homicides and suicides, and armed conflicts kill about 300,000 people per year" (Smil 2008, 199).

Both Habermas (2011) and Hessel (2011) argue for building more on the Human Rights declaration of the United Nations, which can be interpreted as a substantial globalizing progress compared to Marx and Engels's "Communist Manifesto" and its partially similar concrete proposals. The United Nations and UNESCO have evolved as institutions, which despite all their deficiencies when compared to utopian socialism lead us beyond previous nation-centered analyses; they lead us also beyond a bias on industrialized economies.

This diagnosis combines two exemplary and complementary forces calling for alternatives, namely "the perceived risks facing humanity" (Beck 2008b) and the enhancement of human rights: as global challenges requiring global institutions. Suggestions for solutions to such global challenges therefore need various approaches, not a monopolistic political economic diagnosis; some such complementary strategies have been prepared by the UNESCO's Human Development Reports since 1990. They integrate perspectives from and on all unequally developed regions, strata, and genders and take into account problems usually out of the sight of previous social theoreticians.

As Marx and Engels postulated in the "Communist Manifesto": "United action, of the leading civilised countries at least, is one of the first conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat" (quoted in section 2). In 2011, the Human Development Report stressed: "Yet there are alternatives to inequality and unsustainability. Growth driven by fossil fuel consumption is not a prerequisite for a better life in broader human development terms. Investments that improve equity – in access, for example, to renewable energy, water and sanitation, and reproductive healthcare – could advance both sustainability and human development. Stronger accountability and democratic processes, in part through support for an active civil society and media, can also improve outcomes. Successful approaches rely on community management, inclusive institutions that pay particular attention to disadvantaged groups, and cross-cutting approaches that coordinate budgets and mechanisms across government agencies and development partners. [...] Disadvantaged people are a central focus of human development. This includes people in the future who will suffer the most severe consequences of the risks arising from our activities today" (UNESCO Human Development Report 2011, ii and 1).

Therefore, only the application of the methods of Marx's original generalization of alternative models to more encompassing social developments as well as a critique of political economy can act as foundation for the creation of an update of Marx's concept of alternatives for the 21st century. It must be combined with more globalizing prerequisites and impediments for realms not determined by the modes of production and beyond short-term political goals. Re-combining social scientific long term diagnoses with emancipative actions against the exploitation of the majorities of societies and humankind is a challenge worth to become more dominant in a sociology of alternatives.

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