Leaving out of consideration whether particular philosophers regarded themselves as being or not being neo-Marxists, the term 'neo-Marxism' is used in the present paper to describe those attempts of renewal and redetermination in Marxist philosophy which are varied in nature but have much in common regarding humanistic and humanizing endeavours and which originated as a consequence of the criticism of Stalin and the "de-Stalinization" processes in the Communist-ruled countries of Eastern and Central Europe. Apart from the revisionist traditions originating in the first three decades of our century, some beginnings of theories evolving earlier and some critical voices, in the geographical area mentioned above, the neo-Marxist endeavours referred to in this paper started in the late 1950s (e.g. with George Lukács's statements in the year 1956, Leszek Kołakowski's essays in Nowa Droga and Nova Kultura and with Agnes Heller's lectures on ethics); it reached its prime in the 1960s and, despite the fact that in this context the year 1968 represents a climax, the process of disintegration had already begun at the time of the occupation of the ČSSR, and in the course of the 1970s neo-Marxism lost its significance as one of the creative powers in the ideological and social life of Eastern and Central Europe. In the countries under Communist rule philosophical neo-Marxism is dead. Its main representatives in Poland, Hungary, the German Democratic Republic and the USSR, and even in Yugoslavia — represented in that country by the prominent 'Praxis'-group — were partly forced into an 'inner emigration', such as e.g. Milan Machovec in the ČSSR or Mihaly Vajda in Hungary, partly sent abroad, as happened to Leszek Kołakowski and a number of members of the so-called 'Budapest School' (i.e. the disciples of Lukács; e.g. Heller, Fehér, Márkus). The end of neo-Marxism cannot be traced back to outside influences only, such as Party resolutions and interdictions, but also to the inherent logic underlying neo-Marxist thought itself i.e. to the fact that neo-Marxism 'surpassed itself'. This is expressed by Kołakowski in the third volume of his work on The Main Trends of Marxism: "taking the rules of rationalism seriously, one could no longer be interested in the
degree of faithfulness to Marxist tradition...” “Through the multitude of ideas which were only to supplement or enrich it (Marxism), Marxism disintegrated” (pp. 505ff). A survey taken of young Hungarian philosophers in 1978, the results of which were first published in an illegal (Samizdat) paper, showed, that the philosophers interviewed had entirely lost touch with the philosophical problems of Marxism, were indifferent towards the trends in Marxist philosophy and did not want to be considered Marxist philosophers. What had been termed a ‘Renaissance of Marxism’ by George Lukács in the 1960s, turned out to be the ‘agony of neo-Marxism’. “The opponents of official Marxism”, says the Hungarian Husserl expert Mihaly Vajda in an essay published in the West, “drew the consequences from the destruction of the renaissance: they ceased to be Marxists”, not by becoming renegades, but “because they understood that the oppression and exploitation within their own societies were linked with un reformable Eastern European Marxism” (Irodalmi Ujság (Paris), 1980/3–4, Page 15). In other words: A reformation of Marxist philosophy proved to be unfeasible.

A general description of neo-Marxism in Eastern Central Europe has to deal with the answer to the question: What was new about neo-Marxism? The main new development was that in the Communist countries a second, uninstitutionalized, more or less independent, “freely floating” Marxism emerged which existed alongside the officially acknowledged Marxist-Leninist ideology. This “New Marxism” implied by its mere existence that there was more than one kind of Marxism, that in fact Marxist pluralism was possible; at the same time, the emergence of neo-Marxism represented a criticism of the conventional (official) Marxist theory and practice. Consequently, the Party leaders in fact interpreted the first neo-Marxism’s revisionist views as representing a criticism, an opposition, and the creation of plurality. This interpretation meant to keep these views apart from Marxism, reasoning that the revisionists had their place not within but outside of Marxism. Thus, from the very beginning, the matter at stake for the neo-Marxists had been their right to exist, the truthfulness of their new kind of Marxism and the possibility for different Marxist trends to exist. This is how in 1968 Predrag Vranicki, a philosopher from Zagreb, Yugoslavia, came to express his thesis that “the idea of having only one Marxist philosophy or one homogeneous structure of this philosophy is to be radically rejected and the necessity of differing variations is to be acknowledged.”