

THE CONCEPT OF THE HISTORICAL PROCESS IN KARL MARX'S FORMEN

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Abstract: This essay analyses the concept of "historical process" formulated by Karl Marx in the work *Formen, die der capitaleistischen Produktion vorhergehen*. Marx emphasizes the way in which a real historical process can be revealed only when certain conditions arise which will be fully realized only in the capitalist mode of production. These conditions will lead to the emergence of the employee and modern individualism.

Keywords: historical process, mode of production, social relations, property, wage labour.

The aim of this essay is to analyse the concept of *historical process* that we encounter in Karl Marx's *Formen, die der kapitalistischen Produktion vorhergehen*¹. Here, the historical process only appears as a specific quality of particular communities in which a discontinuity has taken place and been verified, a qualitative change taking place between *the original conditions of production* and the member of the group. With this concept, Marx clarifies the principle of human reproduction - obviously, not only from the point of view of biological generation - that consists, on one side in the appropriation of external objects; and on the other side, in their submission to a subjective purpose, by seeing the object as the rendering of one's own activity, and not only as a prerequisite. This subjectivation is, in fact, the "formation of the object" in itself. Or, for Marx, the original conditions of production cannot be engendered by

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¹ K. Marx, *Formen, die der kapitalistischen Produktion vorhergehen*, in Id., *Grunrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie, (Rohentwurf) 1857-1858*, Dietz Verlag, Berlin 1953, tr. it. *Lineamenti fondamentali della critica dell'economia politica. 1857-1858*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze, 1974, vol. II, pp. 94-148.

themselves: consequently, the mechanisms of unification between individuals and the natural conditions of their exchange with nature, leading to an appropriation of the external world, are not susceptible to explanations - which would be equivalent to asserting that they are not the results of an historical process. And we emphasize once more the fact that Marx places here a clear equivalence between theory (explanation) and history (historical process), between a logical and a descriptive category. This allows us to understand that certain notions, such as “historical processes”, are already loaded with meaning inside his theories. and not just simple expositive constructs.

In fact, Marx clearly states that, in the situation of unity between man and nature, we cannot speak about a “historical process” but only about limited and repetitive development. Only when a real separation between individuals and natural conditions of existence is achieved, and just in this particular circumstance - verified, in a complete and exhaustive way, in the relationship between capital and wage-earning work - can one speak about historical processes and, consequently, offer explanations. The isolated individual, who Smith and Ricardo place, in nature itself, as the point of departure of history, reveals himself to be in fact its historical result.

Every time that labour presents itself in an inseparable homogeneity with the organic body (which happens when using cattle in agricultural jobs, and also in the event of employment of slaves or servants for working the land, although with a different degree of intensity), in other words when this unit is posited as an inorganic condition of production, then the full development of subjectivity and therefore of the historical process is not possible.

In the words of Sofri, “Marx places at the origin of human history an ingenuous relationship between man and nature, with the earth seen as the inorganic condition of its reproduction [...]. The relationship between man and earth is mediated by his belonging to a community, which forms the presupposed basis for the appropriation and exploitation of the soil”².

In *Formen* subjectivity and historical process appear as the two faces of the same coin, so we could assert that the first represents the weft and warp of the second.

One of the historical conditions for the development of capitalism is the separation of free labour from the means of labour and the material of labour (these last two elements, the means of labour and the material of labour, constituting the objective conditions for the realization of free labour).

² G. Sofri, *Il modo di produzione asiatico - The Asian way of production*, Einaudi, Torino, 1969, p. 43.

Therefore, the separation of the worker from the land and, subsequently, the disintegration of small real estate properties and of collective property occurs in the first instance. In both forms of property (small real estate property and collective property), man enters a property relationship with the objective conditions of his own labour: therefore, the union between labour and the presupposed materials/means of labour is verified. The worker possesses “an objective existence independently from work/labour [...] he is the owner of the conditions of its effective existence”³.

Individuals perceive themselves either as separate owners of properties situated one beside the other (in the case of small real estate properties) or as incarnations of common property (in the case of collective property).

The scope of labour in these primitive forms of property and relative community is not the production of a value (better: value production is not the essential scope, since although there happens to be a surplus that can be exchanged, this is a residual, marginal fact that does not affect the fundamental reason of existence of these social forms), but the maintenance of the individual, his own family and his entire community.

Therefore, the original shape of social relations between individuals is that of relations between owners (in the two already presented forms); the figure of the worker, in its exclusive, pure shape, is successive and is an historical product, meaning that it is not immediately present but needs particular conditions that can only be created by the development of production, relationships of property and social relationships.

Gregarism, which is a natural community founded on consanguinity, introduces itself as the presupposed owner of the land. The tribe is the preliminary condition for the appropriation of the objective conditions characterizing individual and collective life. Private property belongs, at the same time, to the community. The work process is not the title on whose basis one approaches property, but the product of gregarism.

A more complex typology, as consequence of a more dynamic society, is verified as a result of widening natural groups. The community is, still, the presupposed fundament - but ceases to appear as the common substance of which every individual is a manifestation. This is verified when the fulcrum of associate life stops being the countryside and becomes the city. While, in the old typology, the village is an appendix of the countryside, when the city becomes stabilized it is reduced to being an accessory of the latter. In the city, the community acquires an external existence separated from that one of single individuals. And as a collective

³ K. Marx, *Lineamenti fondamentali della critica dell'economia politica - Fundamental directions in the critique of political economy, 1857-1858*, voll. II, p. 95.

unit it opposes others of its kind, appropriating, through war, the exclusive use of land. In the cities, due to military necessity, segmentation of society and the formation of a two-tiered system of property occurs: on the one hand *ager publicus*, collective ownership that meets common needs and, on the other hand, individual ownership. The latter is no longer just the temporary possession of a common good but is completely separate from *ager publicus*. In tribal systems individual possession can be enhanced only through temporarily working together, for example through the construction of large collective works, such as the aqueducts. When this function of valorisation, mediated by collective labour, gradually declines, the purely natural character of the communities dissolves.

The community - which Marx defines *tout-court* as a State - in the city is, at the same time, a reciprocal relationship between free and equal individuals and a guarantee of this same mutuality. In fact, the single individual is a private owner only in his quality as member of the State. Being a citizen is a prerequisite for owning individual property, and not vice versa. The importance of the State as a precondition is such that the purpose of free farmers is to not to accumulate wealth but to reproduce those conditions that make them community members. When guaranteed self-sufficiency, their excess time is put at the service of the State, for example, in warfare. As Marx accurately summarizes: "ownership of their work is mediated by the conditions of labour, from the plot of land which, in its turn, is guaranteed by exceeding labour loaned by members of the community in the form of military service etc."⁴. The community member reproduces himself through cooperation in labour done in the service of the community and not by means of collaboration in wealth-producing labour. The owner of a private farm holds it in his quality as a citizen and, in turn, as the State's landlord.

Another form of property is that which Marx calls Germanic. The Germanic community is not concentrated in cities. Classical antiquity is characterized by cities based on land ownership and agriculture. The Asian model is instead an undifferentiated unit of villages and countryside. The Germans lived in small family groups separated from each other. In this case the community acquires consistency only in particular cases, for example, during an assembly in which general questions are discussed. Here there is no union, but a meeting of subjects who are also land owners. The community has no independent existence, as in ancient cities, since there is nothing that represents it symbolically (i.e. the existence of administrative officials in charge of the different needs of social life). The Germans have common property existing alongside private one, but this is

⁴ Ibid., pp. 101-102.

not the *ager publicus* of the Romans representing the economic existence of the State, but a part of the territory that is not subdivided since it serves, in this form, as a means of production (e.g. for hunting, firewood etc.). For the Germans, the common ground is only considered as integration of individual property. While in ancient times, private property is mediated by the community (the individual owns it only as a member of the community), for the Germans it is the existence of the community and the *ager publicus* which have to be mediated by the subjectivity of the individual (better, mediated by reciprocal relationship between self-employed owners). It's the house which constitutes the autonomous centre, after the Germans. Says Marx:

“In the Germanic community form the peasant is not a citizen of the State; that is, he is not an inhabitant of the city; at its base there is the isolated, independent family habitation, guaranteed by the union with other similar habitations of families of the same tribe who assemble occasionally for war, for religious reasons, in order to decide in matters of justice etc, with the aim of putting into effect such mutual guarantees. Individual real estate ownership is introduced here neither as an antithesis of communitary real estate nor as being mediated by it, but quite the opposite. The community exists only in the mutual relations between these land owners. The communitarian property in itself is thus introduced as a collective accessory element regarding individual residences in connection with the habitat of the tribe and the appropriation of land. The community is not the substance in which the single individual is only introduced as an accident; neither is it the general element, that is an unit in existence either for its ideal image, or the existence of the city and its urban needs in contrast with the needs of a single individual [...] on one side the community itself is a community of language, of blood, etc which presupposed an individual owner; on the other hand, it exists in concrete terms only in the effective assembly re-united for common scopes”⁵

The Germanic model is cantered on the countryside, proceeds along a trajectory that sees a deep rift between city and countryside and, at last, demands the assertion of a process of urbanization of the countryside (contrary to antiquity that knew instead an inverse process, the ruralisation of the city).

⁵ Ibid., pp. 107-108.

All three forms of precapitalistic production (Asian, ancient and Germanic) have in common one fundamental aspect: agriculture and real estate represent the base of economic order. Here, the aim of economic activity is the production of use values and the reproduction of the individual in his relationships with the community he belongs to. As a result of that, the following are verified:

- the appropriation of the natural conditions of labour and land, appropriation that is not a consequence of labour but presupposes labour;
- the main objective condition of labour is not introduced as produced by labour, but as already existing as nature;
- the relationship with land seen as property of the individual is introduced, from the beginning, as an objective way of existence that is a presupposed requisite for the development of the activity, and not just a simple result.

After all, Marx asserts that the existence of property presupposes that of community, as no property would exist without community, just as no language would exist without community either. The relationship between man and land, in the shape of property, is always mediated by the occupation, either pacific or violent, of a physical space by part of a group - in a natural way, or a historically evolved way. The individual cannot introduce himself as an isolated individual anymore, as it happens with the modern wage-earning worker. That which Marx describes in *Formen* is this very process leading from the original natural condition in which the community is a presupposition of property upon the conditions of labour (the community is the substance and the individual - just an accident of it)⁶ to the complete separation between individual and the property of instruments of labour, that characterizes the capitalist mode of production.

For the community to continue to subsist in the previous conditions is necessary that the objective conditions presiding the reproduction of already existing relationships between individuals and communities are reproduced.

In reality the simple circumstance that increases the production amount or the population places the premises for the overcoming those conditions, and therefore for the disappearance of natural communities and their forms of property.

⁶ Says Marx: “relationship with the objective conditions of labor is mediated by existence as a member of the community; on the other hand the effective existence of the community is determined by the form of property upon objective conditions of labor”⁶, Ibid., p. 109.

In precapitalistic modes of production, the reproduction of already existing relationships between the individual and the community is the base for the development of the individual and, therefore, this development is limited, because predetermined by the reproduction of the *status quo*. For individuals, existing relationships in a community are introduced as presuppositions and therefore objective.

In natural communities a free and complete development of the individual is not possible since this would enter in contradiction with the conditions of reproduction of the original relationships of the community. The more resistant community is, for Marx, that which he defined as Asian, since in it the individual never becomes independent when confronting a community where production is self-sufficient and manufacture, closely tied to agriculture.

But which is the limit for the means of productions and their correlated antique social orderings?

Marx writes a beautiful page of the *Grundrisse* in which, at first sight, he seems to celebrate “the elevated” ancient conception according to which man is always the scope of production. In this context the problem is which owner generates a better individual and citizen, and not one with greater wealth. The modern world turns all that over: the purpose of man becomes production, and the scope of this latter is wealth. The scope of modern vision is “petty” only if it is maintained within “the limited bourgeois form”⁷, inside of which it appears like alienation, renunciation on the part of man to place his own fine advantage, independently, above an external one.

However, forced by the narrow cage into which bourgeois economy constrains the existence of wealth, it - Marx writes - is none other than the “universality of the needs, the abilities, the enjoyments, the productive forces [...]”. What is this, if not the full development of the dominion of man over the forces of nature, or those of so-called nature, and even those of his own nature? Which thing is this, if not the absolute manifestation of its creative dowries, presupposing that the previous historical development, which renders equal to itself the totality of development, that is of the development of all human forces as such, were not measured on a meter already given? In which man it is not reproduced in a determined dimension, but produces his own totality? Where he does not try to remain something in becoming but is in the absolute movement of becoming?”⁸.

Therefore, for Marx, the separation between individual and community, the division that generates the modern, consists in producing, on the base of past development, in itself, the conditions of its own

⁷ Ibid., p. 112.

⁸ Ibidem.

reproduction; in transforming that which appeared as a condition into a result.

The isolated man, the free worker who sells his own labour force are not natural conditions but the fruit of long historical transformations. Marx writes; “man isolates himself only through the historical process. Originally, he is introduced as a being who belongs to the human species, to the tribe, like a gregarious animal [...] Exchange is one of the main means of this isolation. It renders gregarism superfluous and it dissolves it”⁹.

Which are the necessary conditions for capital to find the free worker?

In the first instance, dissolution of the relation with the land as a natural condition of production, since all the forms in which this type of property is present presuppose a community in which the land is owned in common. That presupposes, in its turn, that the producer possesses the necessary means for living both before and during the production act. In fact, as owner of common property, this supplies him with all the requirements he needs in order to survive.

Secondly, the relationship in which the worker turns out to be also the owner of the labour instruments must be decomposed. The property of these latter demands one preliminarily particular form of manufacturing labour, that of handicraft. The system of corporations, in which the capitalist it is still introduced under the figure of the master, is connected to this last one. Here we find the heredity of work techniques, the organization of labour and the instruments of labour.

And lastly, the dissolution of those relationships in which the workers are a direct part of the objective conditions of production, and as such they are appropriated (slaves or serfs). For the capitalist, the condition of production is labour and not the worker. Labour, in fact, can be completed, as an example, also by machines.

These are, for Marx, “the historical presuppositions necessary in order to find the worker as free worker, as working ability lacking in objectivity, purely subjective, in counterpoint to the objective conditions of production and to his non-property, linked to other people's property, being valuable in itself, as capital”¹⁰.

But it is necessary to underline that we are not here in front of a flat historicism, the present is not already inscribed in the past, it is not a necessary development of it. The historical process, for Marx, does not indicate a concatenation but a transformation, and the result is not predeterminable.

⁹ Ibid., p. 123.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 126.

Let us pull the lines of reasoning to their natural conclusion.

To a determined plurality of modes of production corresponds a determined plurality of social formations. How do we pass from one social formation to the other? Marx writes that “a social formation does not perish until it has developed all the productive forces to which can give place”. The development of productive forces engenders the passing of the social form but it does not destroy the same (that is, it does not destroy the development of productive forces, or better - it does not destroy the same productive forces). In other words, the development of productive forces destroys the correspondent social formation but without involving the dissolution of the same productive forces. Indeed, productive forces are transferred (their development is free of their old covering origin, and it is either transferred or it produces) another social formation to which they have given life through a new way of production.

That implies the individuation of a place in which the continuity of productive forces (continuity being understood here as continuity in the increase of intensity), meets the discontinuity of historical ages. Marx calls this “the economic formation of society”. The economic formation of society is, after an expression used by Cesar Luporini, a “*unicum continuum*”¹¹ that transgresses the discontinuity of historical ages, means of production and social formations.

The notion of the economic formation of society is used by Marx in order to designate the non-interrupted continuity of economic weaving, in the discontinuity and successive plurality of social formations. It denotes something that cannot be locked up in the specificity of a particular way of production, or one particular social formation.

But, above all, the concept of an economic formation of society offers Marx the occasion to raise the problem of the continuity and discontinuity of historical course.

The precapitalistic individual forms characterized in *Formen* do not exhaust the past at all. Marx's problem is that he has a theory of the historical process that provides a reason for the occurrence of the capitalist way of production. To such an end, it distinguishes between elements presenting a character of continuity (productive forces, economic formation of the society) and others that introduce a discontinuity character (production means, social formations).

¹¹ C. Luporini, “Marx secondo Marx - Marx according to Marx”, in *Critica Marxista*, 2-3, (March-June 1972), p. 54. The article has been reprinted in the *Dialettica e materialismo - Dialectic and materialism*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1974, volume of the same author.

Therefore, Marx reconstructs a historical process delimited in time and space, the capitalist way of production, in which various social formations interact within the increase of productive forces (the development of the economic formation of the society). The inner connection between various ages of the social process of production, that is their continuity, appears, when analysed *a posteriori*, to introduce a necessity character. But this is only an appearance, since it is an *a posteriori* matter.

The historical course is, instead, empirical and not teleological; however, it always re-produces itself in specific “forms”. Thus, such forms (we remember that, for Marx, forms are means of production, social formations), are not just solidifications of empirical material; they are not only in relation with the material conditions which produce them, but also present a systematic character. This means they, as forms, are internally connected - beyond being logically and individually connected - with a determined way of production. These forms command the historical course: the dialectic relationship between systematic development of forms and historical processes is the architrave that supports the mature work of Marx.

Therefore, if a “necessity” exists for Marx, it is only of a structural type, relative to the effects forms have upon the historical process. The effects of forms upon historical processes leave space for the opportunity of arranging the empirical, not in an indefinite way, but only inside possibilities determined by the same forms. A logical process that designs a type of evolutionist, therefore necessary, distance can only be found inside a fixed way of production. While the nexus between a way of production and another way of production is not totally dedicated to the case but attached to a series of real possibilities. Therefore, this continuity concerns the concrete (or the content, if we use the rhetorical figure of contained/container); while the discontinuous concerns the forms (means of production, social formations; that is, that which comes from the part of the container), shapes that must systematically be constructed through abstraction (see, to such purpose, the *Introduction to Il Capitale*). The Vera Zasulič¹² letter of February 1881 excludes one needful interpretation of the various social formations.

¹² Vera Zasulič's letter to Marx and Marx's reply can be read in full, including the various drafts of it written by Marx in the appendix to Teodor Shanin's (ed.) volume, *Late Marx and the Russian Road. Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism quantity*, Monthly Review Press, New York 1983, pp. 98-126. A partial translation into Italian of Marx's reply to Zasulič is in K. Marx, *Forme economiche precapitalistiche*, Editori Riuniti, Rome, 1977, pp. 157-60. On Marxian thinking about the Russian peasant world see P. P. Poggio,

Il Capitale introduces, therefore, a systematic and non-historical development of forms, that is, the continuous genesis of more and more complex shapes - and not the development of a unique form. The systematic and non-historical development of forms gives place to one radical differentiation of the same forms, because of the empiricism of their own contents. And, just for this reason, those contents can appear for what they are, that is - show their own factuality, and in such become accessible.

This is one of the merits of the scientific works of Marx: to have guaranteed a non-empirical access to the empirical.

Or, which is the connection between the two plans? That is, between empiricist processualism and the succession of forms? The connection is given by a mutual nexus of dependency: the succession of forms (that is, the discontinuous) can solely be conceptualized only when represented as generated by empiricist processualism but, at the same time, empiricist processualism is governed by forms. This circularity has a logical *prius* in forms. In what measure Marx remembers such purposes can be found in the *Preface* to the first edition of *Il Capitale*: “for the analysis of economic forms one cannot use either the microscope or chemical reagents: one and the other must be replaced by the force of abstraction”¹³.

The choice of abstraction, that privileged approach for the study of empiricist materials, does not have a conventional character but results necessarily once one has established the objective - to realize “the critique of political economy” - as stated in the subtitle of his more famous work. Only the reloading of the factual inside the domain of the critique of political economy will be able to concur with a historiography that is not just a chronological succession of pure external nexuses. The natural object has to be divested of its empirical garments by the means of a phenomenological approach which captures, primarily, the *form* in which it presents itself. The “form of the thing” is not an idea and an impalpable essence, but the way in which the thing is introduced, in which it appears to us externally. If not for the tie between form and object, the concrete shape of every object would become less important. The question on the nature of the “thing”, that is the logically coherent elaboration of the object, outside of every historical appraisal, does not mean we should arrest ourselves to purely speculative elaborations, but should earn a

La rivoluzione russa e i contadini, Jaca Book, Milan 1977, new edition 2017; E. Cinella, *L'altro Marx*, Della Porta Editore, Pisa, 2014.

¹³ K. Marx, *Il Capitale*, libro I, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1974), p. 32. On the separate-concrete relationship in Marx the old but always valid volume by E.V. Il'enkov, *Dialektika abstraktnogo i konkretnogo v "Kapitale"*, Marksas, Moskva 1960, in Italian translation -. *La dialettica dell'astratto e del concreto nel Capitale di Marx*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1961. was used.

historical dimension connaturate to the “same thing”, by approaching the temporality of every object, and replacing the outer connections by an objective nexus. After all, the phenomenological analysis of the empirical meets the systematic plan, but this encounter, however, is not accidental - is not the draft of an immediate subsumption of representations under a concept - but demands “a preliminary critical act”, a critique of political economy without which that encounter would have only a categorial character.

Only through the elaboration of forms, the *empiria* is recovered and rendered present in a way more conspicuous and perspicuous than its interlacing of history and arrangements. For forms, any reference to the concrete has a constituent character.

Therefore, the passage between form and matter, both discontinuous and continuous, is possible since the form, as already seen, is a unit of the multiple and this multiple does not have an individual, but a collective character. Moreover, the discontinuity of forms places them in contradiction to themselves, and the overcoming of this antagonism takes place during the historical process, in a social *praxis* that is not conventional (that is, constituted through a relation between persons presupposed to belong to the *praxis*; but it is the same *praxis*, by its impersonal character, that constitutes the basis of relationship between individuals, which will appear as a result). Therefore, it is “the advent of *praxis* as a social process which conditions a return to history in a determined form [...] That is, we see how, inside the *empiria* (at this point, already becoming history) can be constituted the structure, identical with the production of its effect”¹⁴.

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¹⁴ C. Luporini, *Marx secondo Marx - Marx according to Marx*, quoted work., p. 81.

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