

# THE PROBLEM OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY IN FORMEN, DIE DER KAPITALISTISCHEN VORHERGEHN BY KARL MARX

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**Abstract:** *The essay examines the complex relationship between methodology and historiographic research in Marx's works. In particular, fundamental texts such as the Introduction to the Critique of political economy were considered and, especially, the Grundrisse; in the latter, particular attention was paid to Formen, die der Kapitalistischen Vorhergehn. The authors attempt to reconstruct the deep bonds that link the theme of continuity / discontinuity typical of historical processes with another considerably important theme, that of the abstract-concrete opposition proper to methodological reflection.*

**Keywords:** *historical process, abstract-concrete, continuity-discontinuity, mode of production, economic formation of society.*

## Introduction

One of the crucial nodes of Marxian reflection concerns the critique of the necessity of that form of development within which economists structure their theoretical elaborations. This necessity, unproven, recalls a story concept, though never explicitly mentioned by certain authors, whose careful evaluation is necessary in order to overcome the unilateral vision of classic political economy<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> On the relationship between political economy and philosophy in Marx see the first chapter of the volume di M. Godelier, *Rationalité et irrationalité en économie*, Librairie Maspero, Paris, 1966, tr. it. *Razionalità e irrazionalità nell'economia. Logica e teoria strutturale nell'analisi economica*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1970, pp. 1-89. See also what

For Marx<sup>2</sup> the present is able to explain the past (i.e. the anatomy of man explains that of the monkey) as long as it is capable of self-criticism. Historiographical activity constitutes itself as scientific knowledge only from the perspective of self-criticism of the present. By self-criticism of the present one must not understand the activity of a subjective consciousness which, idealistically, even when separate from its own object, summarizes and includes in itself the evolution of the real. The self-criticism referenced by Marx is an objective movement that is at one with the domain of abstraction. This means that abstract categories “although they are valid – precisely because of their abstract nature – for all ages, are however, in that which is determined by this abstraction, the product of historical conditions - and possess their full validity only for, and within these conditions”<sup>3</sup>. This present – as well as the present of both Marx and bourgeois society – is distinguished by a specific “quality”: the category in which bourgeois societies express their relationships and through which it is possible to understand their own structure, allowing them “to penetrate at the same time the structure and the relations of production of all forms of past societies, on whose ruins and with whose elements it was built, and of which there are still residues just partially exceeded, while that which was just mentioned in few words has developed in all its meaning”<sup>4</sup>.

The privileged opinion states that the present point of view offers and demands, however, methodological accuracy, in that sense where it does not have to reach the extreme measure of cancelling all historical differences between the present and the past, and to see in the latter only the first: this is the error of the so-called historical evolution, which

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he writes M. Dobb, „La critica dell'economia politica”, in AAVV, *Storia del marxismo*, vol. 1, *Il marxismo ai tempi di Marx*, Einaudi, Torino, 1978, pp. 93-117.

<sup>2</sup> For an overall picture of Marx's thought see A. Cornu, *Karl Marx et Friedrich Engels: leur vie e leur oeuvre*, 4 voll., Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1955-1962.

<sup>3</sup> K. Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie, (Rohentwurf) 1857-1858*, Berlin, Dietz Verlag, 1953, Italian translation *Lineamenti fondamentali della critica dell'economia politica - Fundamental characteristics of the critique of political economy. 1857-1858*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1974, vol. I, p. 32. On the subject of abstraction in Marx see C. Bonevecchio, „Astrazione”, in *Dizionario Marx Engels*, edited by F. Papi, Zanichelli, Bologna, 1983, pp. 27-30; always valid the volume of E. V., Il'enkov, *Dialektika abstraktnogo i konkretnogo v "Kapitale" Marksa*, Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, Moskva, 1960, Italian translation, *La dialettica dell'astratto e del concreto nel Capitale di Marx*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1975 and the article of C. Luporini, „Il circolo concreto-astratto-concreto”, in *Rinascita*, n. 24, 20 ottobre 1962, republished in F. Cassano, *Marxismo e filosofia in Italia*, De Donato, Bari 1976, pp. 226-239. Useful indications also in L. Nowak, *U podstaw marksowskiej metodologii nauk*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1971, Italian translation, *La scienza come idealizzazione: i fondamenti della metodologia marxiana*, il Mulino, Bologna, 1977.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

considers the forms of the past as necessary intermediate stages, in order to reach a mature form. In this conception there is no space for self-criticism, and Marx casually notes that the bourgeois society is an antagonistic form of development: self-criticism is not introduced as a unique moment separated from the movement of the real, but is a function of contradictions, radical in itself.

### **Method**

The epistemological intrusiveness of the present in the past<sup>5</sup> would happen, in fact, “although the simple category may have existed, historically, before the actual one, it can only belong in its full intensive and extensive development to a complex social shape/form, while the more actual category was already totally developed in a less developed social shape/form”<sup>6</sup>.

Here, Marx places a distance between the development of social forms and the relative determination of existence. A simple category (for example, that of material possessions or of money) can historically exist before the actual, objective category (for example, property or capital). However, the simple category, in its intensive and extensive development, belongs to a complex social shape. On the contrary, a concrete category can also be introduced in completely developed form even in a less developed living totality. Therefore, social categories and shapes/forms possess, individually, an inner historicity not synchronized in comparison with the others, being able in themselves to present the case of one concrete category in a specific, arrayed social configuration. On the contrary, all the potentialities of a simple category can be sufficiently explained only through an advanced, living totality. This is the meaning of the Marxian expression “antediluvian existence”<sup>7</sup> of the simple categories, stating that “the simplest abstraction that modern economy places at its apex and which expresses an ancient and valid relation for all forms of society is introduced as practically true in this single abstraction only when dealing with the categories of modern society”.

Why does this happen? Until the separation of those specific ways in which a manifest category comes true is actually realized (for instance, taking as an example the concept of work, one passes from the idea of a

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<sup>5</sup> A brief overview of the historical process in Marx can be found in J. Topolski, *Oltre il determinismo e il volontarismo: la concezione marxiana del processo storico*, in C. Mancina (edited by), *Marx e il mondo contemporaneo*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1986, pp. 263-276. Also very interesting, for our purposes essay of, P. Vilar, *Marx e la storia*, in AAVV, *Storia del marxismo*, vol. 1, *Il marxismo ai tempi di Marx*, Einaudi, Torino 1978, pp. 60-90.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

particular job to that of “work in general terms”), the presence of a developed totality, in which no modality is predominant, remains necessary. Marx writes; “the most general abstractions only arise where a totality of elements is given the richest concrete development, where a single characteristic appears as common to a great number, even to a totality of elements. Then it stops being thought about only in a particular shape or form”<sup>8</sup>.

Wherever such a situation is accomplished, the abstract/simple category becomes the point of departure of political economy. In other words, the simple abstraction, as manifestation of an ancient and necessary relation in every form of society, is only considered to be “true” inside the mode of existence of bourgeois society.

Some years before the *Misery of philosophy*, Marx had challenged, in few but dense lines, the problem of temporal disconnection.

In the first instance, Marx finds that economists had explained the origins of production as being determined by a certain type of relationships - the bourgeois ones - but were not in a position to show the origin of those relationships, that is - the real movement generating them, the “movement of the (same) thing”<sup>9</sup>. Subsequently<sup>10</sup> he utters one important affirmation relative to the entirety of production relationships that form a totality in any given society. Or, how are we supposed to observe, or comprehend, this totality? We can - as classic economists do - limit ourselves to placing these relations of production in a chronological type of succession (while remembering that chronological succession is none other than the logical form of movement). In this way, however, the totality is disarticulated, and this happens because of the simultaneity of all its components. How can, then, an ideological construction which transforms the totality in many distinct societies that succeed each other in time, harvest the simultaneity of totality itself?

The simultaneity that characterizes the totality is given by the specific form of the connecting parts which compose it, a form which, if not correctly understood, leads to the creation of a unilateral, therefore false, relation instead of a chronological one<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> K. Marx, *Misère de la philosophie. Réponse à la philosophie de la misère de M. Proudhon*, (Paris, 1847), Italian translation, *Miseria della filosofia*, Rome, Newton Compton Editors, 1976, p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> See the *Third observation* in the second chapter of the *Misery*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>11</sup> On these aspects see: Helmut Reichelt, *Zur logischen Struktur des Kapitalbegriffs bei Karl Marx*, Europäische Verlagsanstalt GmbH, Frankfurt am Main, 1970, Italian translation, *La struttura logica del Capitale in Marx*, De Donato, Bari, 1973, pp. 155-167. Of considerable interest what they write Aldo Schiavone, *Per una rilettura delle «Formen»: teoria della storia, dominio del valore d'usa e funzione dell'ideologia*, in

The difference between the form of simultaneity and the form of temporal succession is clearly explained by Marx, in the *Grundrisse*. For instance, it appears obvious that any scientific discourse about society originally starts by determining the levels of land-related income and of real estate, both categories connected to agriculture, which represents the main means of production in all sedentary communities. Nevertheless, as Marx explains, to position this chronological beginning as a logical principle of social science is an error. Indeed, in every social form there is one determined type of production predominant on all others, that decides and defines relations inside the totality. It is precisely the domination that this form of production exercises on all the others which indicates the scientific criterion; and this overthrowing of temporal succession will open the gap through which the real connections and their inner relationships to the totality can be perceived. Marx writes “it would be therefore inopportune and erroneous to arrange economic categories in the order in which they were historically determined. Their succession, instead, is determined from their inter-relation in modern bourgeois society, and that is exactly the opposite of what is usually considered their natural relation corresponding to the succession of their historical development”<sup>12</sup>.

This passage directly leads us inside another famous Marxian text, which will be discussed in the second part of this forthcoming essay, *Formen, die der kapitalistischen Produktion vorhergehen*<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> K. Marx, *Lineamenti*, quoted work, p. 35.

<sup>13</sup> This text is part of a wider manuscript composed by Marx between 1857 and 1858. The writing was published for the first time in Moscow in 1939-41 with the title *Grunrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, quoted work, pp. 94-148.

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