

Marx: the Method of Political Economy as an Ontological Critique¹

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- 1 OLIVA, Antonio; OLIVA, ÁNGEL; NOVARA, Iván (eds.). **Marx and Contemporary Critical Theory: the philosophy of real abstraction**. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 113-129. Translated by Anahí Prucca. Transcribed by V. S. Conttren, January 2021.
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Introduction

This chapter deals with the so-called question of the method in Marx. The debate around the methodological issues in the Marxist tradition are mainly based on the famous text entitled 'The Method in Political Economy', which appears in the introduction of the *Grundrisse* (Marx 2011a). Though unfinished and not published by the author, it constitutes the only work in which Marx deals explicitly with the issues relative to the method. It is then natural that it is the obligatory reference for the theoretical arguments on the Marxist method.

As the chapter consists in a critical contribution *inside* the Marxist tradition, it is worth warning, and not just for convention, that other dimensions of the work of the authors here mentioned are not being questioned: the critical commentaries concentrate only in their interpretations of the 'Method...'. It is even important to recognize the value of these works in the divulgation of the Marxist text, as well as being of importance to enlarge and enrich important aspects which surge from it.

The critique realized in the chapter seeks to show, in the first place, that it is a serious misunderstanding to suggest that Marx settles the general lines of *his* method in this writing; second, and even more relevant, that, with Lukács³ as an exception, the most influential interpretations cannot account for the ontological orientation of the Marxist text, precisely the fundamental dimension of his critique. With this purpose, the chapter starts transcribing the passages of

3 See Lukács (2012), chapter IV, section 2, for a detailed analysis of the matter elaborated by the author.

the work of Marx of interest for our discussion. Then, it examines what some authors have elaborated to illustrate the most characteristic elements of what could be considered the standard interpretation. Finally it suggests that Marx describes the procedures of science in general and not of his method, reason why it can be inferred that the resolution of the matter is not properly of a *method*, either *gnoseological* or *epistemological*, but *ontological*.

Marx's Method?

The critique cannot be elaborated without quoting the large initial passage of "The Method of Political Economy," which synthesizes the ideas of Marx (2011a). To facilitate the exposition, it was decided to use italics for the most commented passages by the literature on the matter:

When we consider a given country politico-economically, we begin with its population, its distribution among classes, town, country, the coast, the different branches of production, export and import, annual production and consumption, commodity prices etc. *It seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics, with e.g. the population, which is the foundation and the subject of the entire social act of production.* However, on closer examination this proves false. *The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn are an empty phrase if I am not familiar with the elements on which they rest. E.g. wage labour, capital, etc. These latter in turn presuppose exchange, division of labour, prices, etc. For example, capital is nothing without wage labour, without value, money, price etc. Thus, if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception [Vorstellung] of the whole, and I would then, by means of further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts [Begriff], from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest*

determinations. From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations. The former is the path historically followed by economics at the time of its origins. The economists of the seventeenth century, e.g., always begin with the living whole, with population nation, state, several states, etc.; but they always conclude by discovering through analysis a small number of determinant, abstract, general relations such as division of labour, money, value, etc. As soon as these individual moments had been more or less firmly established and abstracted, there began the economic systems, which ascended from the simple relations, such as labour, division of labour, need, exchange value, to the level of the state, exchange between nations and the world market. The latter is obviously the scientifically correct method. The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concretization, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation [Anschauung] and conception. Along the first path the full conception was evaporated to yield an abstract determination; along the second, the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by the way of thought. (Marx 2011a: 54. Italics added).

As we shall see now, in general, those two paragraphs have been used to affirm or suggest that Marx considers *his own* the second method — the retracing phase — the scientifically correct method. Callinicos, for example, after quoting the passage, concludes that “This, then, is Marx’s method of analysis. [...] So we move first from the concrete to abstract, breaking down the concrete, using these to reconstruct the whole. We shall see this method at work when Marx analyses capitalist society in *Capital*” (Callinicos 2004: 74).

Carchedi seems to support an identical interpretation. Quoting Marx’s passage in which he suggest that it is necessary that “From there the journey

would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations," he highlights that "this is what Marx calls the «concrete in thought». The «retracing» phase is the dialectical deduction, the unfolding (reconstruction in thought) of more-and-more concrete, detailed, and articulated notions of reality derived from their potential state. Each step in the unfolding is a (temporary) conclusion, but also the premise for the following step in the chain of deductions." (Carchedi 2011: 46).

The author describes the process of knowledge explained by Marx in terms of dialectical induction and deduction, different from their equivalents in formal logics. We are not trying to discuss, here, Carchedi's propositions, but if it is said that "Marx's starting point of induction is indeed empirical reality;" it is clear that for him, Marx, in fact, is talking about *his own* method.

Foley certainly shares a similar interpretation when he affirms that "This double motion is pervasive in Marx's writing." He thinks that *Capital* can be seen as "a movement to reconstruct in thought the whole complex of capitalist social relations beginning from the simplest abstractions — commodity, value, and money — and eventually arriving at the most complex and distorted forms, for example, the stock market and crisis." (Foley 1986: 4).

Basu, in a working paper for the Economics Department of the University of Massachusetts (Amherst), famous for its Marxist tradition, is convinced that, from the *Grundrisse* till the redaction of *Capital*, Marx puts into practice *his* understanding of "the correct method of political economy," which had been detailed in the "Introduction." According to the author, Marx explains that

“«ascending from the abstract to the concrete» is the only scientific way to understand a concrete reality like a capitalist society” (Basu 2017: 6). Such a movement ends “With a structured synthesis of determinations, which is how Marx visualized the reproduction in thought of the concrete reality he was studying” (Basu 2017: 6).

In his analysis of “The Method of Political Economy,” Netto observes that ‘the method in Marx’ is not the product of a sudden and fantastic *insight*, but of a long process of investigation. In his opinion, in the “Introduction,” after 15 years of studies, ‘the central elements of Marx’s method are “precisely” formulated. According to the author, the few pages of the work present synthetically “the bases of the method which made viable the analysis in *Das Kapital* and the foundation of Marx’s social theory.’ (Netto 2011: 19).

The author remembers that, in the process of knowledge, of theoretical production and of theoretical appropriation of the object suggested by Marx ‘it starts «with the real and with the concrete», which appear as given; through the analysis, elements are abstracted and, progressively, with its advance, some concepts and abstractions are reached which refer to the simplest determinations’ (Originally highlighted, Netto 2011: 42).

And he adds, based on the Marxist text, that this was the method adopted by economics in its origins. However, in the sequence of his analysis, Netto dismisses a crucial element of Marx’s argument. In fact, according to him, Marx claims that ‘the analytical procedure was a necessary element for the emergence of the political economy,’ and, nonetheless, it is not sufficient to ‘ideally reproduce (theoretically) the «real» and the «concrete».’ Supplied with the

simplest determinations, as Marx recommends, it would be necessary to make a retracted journey and reach the population not as a chaotic representation of the totality, but as 'rich totality of determinations and diverse relations.' This is the 'retracted journey,' he concludes, the one that Marx characterizes as 'the adequate method for a theoretical production.' And he closes with Marx's statement: 'The last method is clearly the scientifically exact method' (Netto 2011: 43).

It is not possible to affirm that, according to Netto, Marx refers to *his* method when he mentions the retracted journey as the scientifically correct method. Nevertheless, the way in which he presents and comments on the passages of the Marxist text undoubtedly lead the reader to that conclusion. In fact, even though he warns the reader that 'we do not offer, in the name of Marx, a set of rules to orient the investigation' (Netto 2011: 52–52), his analysis finishes as follows:

The theoretical knowledge is, (...) according to Marx, the knowledge of the concrete, which constitutes reality, but it is not directly offered to thought: it must be reproduced by it and only 'the retraced journey' allows this reproduction. We already pointed out that, (...) the concrete to which thought is capable to arrive through the method that Marx considers as 'scientifically correct' (the 'concrete in thought') is a product of thought which realizes a 'retraced journey'. Marx does not hesitate in qualifying this method as the one which consists in 'rising from the abstract to the concrete', it is 'the only way' by which 'thought appropriates the concrete'. (Netto 2011: 44–45)

The erroneous conclusion that is possible to infer from his analysis comes, according to us, of the omission of the passage, essential in the commented

text, in which Marx affirms that 'the economic systems ascended from the simple relations, such as labour, division of labour, need, exchange value, to the level of the state, exchange between nations and the world market'. (Marx 2011a: 54. Emphasis added.) Of course, by economic systems, Marx means economic theories, which, therefore, made the 'retracted journey'. Now, if according to him the economic science made the 'retracted journey', Marx could not consider exclusively his this 'scientifically correct method'.

Quartim de Moraes⁴ also analyses in detail 'The Method of Political Economy' and, contrary to the authors previously studied, he does not seem to consider that Marx explains there what would be his method. However, in spite of the interesting contributions he offers to clarify Marx's positions, I consider that his analysis is inconclusive.

His explanation starts highlighting the apparently paradoxical character of Marx's initial statement that the correct starting point is the real and the concrete, the effective presupposition, to immediately suggest that, in a more rigorous way, this proves to be false. Instead of paradoxical, I would say that such an ambiguity can be seen as a rhetorical device to call the reader's attention, taking advantage of the perplexity aroused by the ambiguity. Quartim understands it in a different way, noticing, of course, that that is not what Marx wishes to suggest. He reasserts, with Marx, that in spite of the fact that the population is 'the the foundation and the subject of the entire social act of production', it is an abstraction if its determinations are ignored and, thence, if we only reach a 'chaotic conception of the whole'. In relation with the fact that,

4 Without the proper permission of the author, from now on we will only use 'Quartim' in the references, since the Marxist theorist is widely known in that way.

in Marx's text, '*representation* comes associated to chaos ... and is assimilated in an abstraction', Quartim emphasizes something important in understanding Marx's argument, and which is not generally highlighted:

Every common noun is a universal, the necessarily abstract result of a generalization operated in the collective practice. Transposed from colloquial language into theoretical discourse, the noun usually keeps its basic meaning. Thus, both in political economy as in biology, by population we understand a collectivity composed of individuals living in a specific area. It is evident that in this general level, the notion does not indicate some knowledge, but an object to be known, which is, however, susceptible of being progressively determined with more precision. (Quartim de Moraes 2017: 44)

In truth, when he talks about 'chaotic conception of the whole', Marx refers to the most immediate form of considering a country from the political-economic point of view, or rather, the country with 'its population, its distribution among classes, town, country, the coast, the different branches of production, export and import, annual production and consumption, commodity prices etc.'. Consequently, contrary from what is deduced from Quartim's text, in this case the population is not merely an abstract universal as any other common noun, once it is specified by those determinations. Besides, it is important to stress that, in spite of being abstract, it is still a type of knowledge, a type of representation, however chaotic it may be, which consists of some—pre-scientific, pre-theoretical intelligibility of the world, presupposition of the social practice of the subjects. Quartim seems to paradoxically agree with this because when he does a critique of Althusser's interpretation of the Marxian text—which is not necessary to reproduce here entirely—he claims:

(Althusser) should also explain that before being the raw material of theoretical production, the intuitions and representations constitute the lexical heritage of each language, and it results from the social practice. (...) They crystallize the social thought built up in each historical moment and they provide knowledge with the heritage of ideas which constitute the materials on which the theoretical work operates. (Quartim de Moraes 2015: 79/80)

In spite of being clarifying, I believe this passage deserves rectification, since, such as Marx suggests on the passage in question, as well as in other moments,⁵ it appears more adequate to invert Quartim's proposition and affirm that the intuitions and representations constitute the heritage of figurations of the world, the necessary requirement for social practice, and, on that condition, they are actually the material of which theories are made. Such an inversion is not only conceptually and chronologically more adequate, since the lexical heritage does not exist separately and 'before' the conceptual apprehension of reality,⁶ but it also explicitly states something obvious, namely that social reality, being the product of the intentional practice of the subjects, has to be always imagined, conceived by the subjects in some way.

In an alternative formulation of the same idea, from the truism that any

5 See below Marx's passage on the vulgar economy from the chapter about the Trinity formula.

6 As Lukács defends (2013): 'We have already seen how the teleological position consciously realized produces some distance in the reflection of reality and how, with this distance, the subject-object relation arises in the proper sense of the term. These two moments imply simultaneously the emergence of conceptual comprehension of the phenomena of reality and their adequate expression in language... In fact, word and concept, language and conceptual thought are linked elements of the complex called the social being, which means that they can only be understood in their true essence when related to the ontological analysis of the social being and recognizing the real functions which they exert within the complex'. (Lukács 2013: 84–85. Personal translation).

human activity has as necessary presupposition the existence of social structures, Bhaskar concludes that society provides means, rules and resources for everything we do. He means that, society with its structures is a necessary condition for any teleological activity. From this, it can be inferred that we do not create society, but it always pre-exists our actions. What we do with our practice is to reproduce and/or transform the— material and spiritual—social structures, which are the condition for our daily practice. In the words of the author: '(the) social world is reproduced and transformed in daily life'. And if the intentional practice acts on the pre-existing structures, reproducing or transforming them, it follows that some kind of knowledge of the structures is a condition for the practice (Bhaskar 1989: 3–4). Said another way, it can be concluded that our apprehensions of reality are not a result of what we 'capture with sensorial perception, but the result of the theories [and/or representations— D] in terms of which our apprehension of things is organized' (Bhaskar 1989: 60– 1).

In that sense, it can be asserted that Marx refers, when saying that it always starts in population, not to a mere noun, but to a representation of the population which, lacking an economic science, was the necessary condition for the agents in the real economic life. There is no doubt that is what Marx has in mind when he notices that

... if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception [*Vorstellung*] of the whole, and I would then, by means of further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts [*Begriff*], from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations...

The former is the path historically followed by economics at the time of its origins. The economists of the seventeenth century,

e.g., always begin with the living whole, with population, nation, state, several states, etc., but they always conclude by discovering through analysis a small number of determinant, abstract, general relations such as division of labour, money, value, etc. (Marx 2011a: 54)

The economic science, therefore, at its beginning stage, starts with the representation of population of the real agents of social production. Quartim is more emphatic when he highlights that for the economists of the seventeenth century 'there was no other way of moving on in the economic analysis', so that Marx was wrong to qualify that way as false. (Quartim de Moraes 2017: 45). Fact that Marx, according to him, admits tacitly in the sequence of his arguments:

As soon as these individual moments had been more or less firmly established and abstracted, there began the economic systems, which ascended from the simple relations, such as labour, division of labour, need, exchange value, to the level of the state, exchange between nations and the world market. The latter is obviously the scientifically correct method. The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation [*Anschauung*] and conception. Along the first path the full conception was evaporated to yield an abstract determination; along the second, the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought. (Marx 2011a: 54)

Interpreted in a correct manner, Marx's argument can be described as follows: the authors involved in the genesis of the economic science did not have where to commence but in the common representation(s) of the real

agents of the social production. Since the social reality is always represented,⁷ they started from those representations so as to discover, by means of analysis, 'a small number of determinant, abstract, general relations such as division of labour, money, value, etc.'. Knowledge acquired in such way, as we may infer from Marx's text, returns to practice and makes it more efficient because, now, the subjects act knowing some structures and the way they function.

In connection with the double journey—the round trip—of the Marxian text, Quartim contributes to dissolve the pseudo-problem with a simple and direct formulation, when he highlights the difficulties of understanding Marx's proposal. He says that 'It seems obvious that far from opposing to the first path, the second one presupposes it. The first departs from the representations of the common language to dissolve the representations in abstract determinations. The latter works with them to forge the analytical tools which permit to reproduce the "concrete in thought"' (Quartim de Moraes 2017: 45).

That is precisely one of the central points of the position defended in this chapter. But not for the same reasons presented by Quartim, who attributes to Marx the mistake of presenting as two paths what actually were three different moments of a sole process—of the beginning of the economic theory—an error, which may have caused the paradoxical character of the introduction. According to the author, Marx does not ease the understanding of his argument since he qualifies as false the first path. In his opinion: 'Marx artificially segments the

7 As Lukács observes: 'the totality of nature can be inferred in many ways, however strict the analysis be; in the social field on the contrary, the totality is always given in an immediate way' (Lukács 2012: 304. Personal translation). It is on this totality always immediately given where the subjects act and, consequently, they always refigure it in some way. On this matter, cf. also Duayer (2006, 2015).

history of the formation of the economic theory, presenting as two paths (one which ends, the other which starts in the 'abstract determinations') the three moments of a sole process' (Quartim de Moraes 2017: 45).

By virtue of this interpretation, Quartim risks a hypothesis to explain what he considers 'the paradox of the two paths'. According to him, Marx does not attribute to the first economists the mistake of starting at the first path, but to the analyses which start

... from the obscure representation of a living totality in the *nineteenth century*, when the simple elements, identified by analysis, had already allowed the economic systems to ascend to the level of the state... The great theoretical mission which should have been carried out, in the second half of the nineteenth century, was the critique of the political economy as it had been elaborated by Adam Smith in the last third of the eighteenth century and by David Ricardo and others in the first decades of the nineteenth century. (Quartim de Moraes 2017: 45)

In truth, if there is something that can be qualified as artificial, it is, doubtlessly, the hypothesis offered by Quartim, which cannot find any kind of direct or indirect support in the original. Contrary to what he proposes, the problem, according to Marx, does not consist in the fact that the first economists made a mistake for not making the 'retracted journey', for not totalizing by means of discovered relations and determinations. In truth, the problem is that they did not abandon the representation of totality from which they departed and, therefore, they maintained the notions on the immediately given reality, now enriched by the discovered determinations, and this is the reason for which they were dispensed of totalizing.

In short, we sought to illustrate in this section a very widespread interpretation according to which the 'retracted journey' is the hallmark of the method of Marx. The only exception is Quartim's contribution, though it is incomplete. In the next section, we show that the misunderstanding of those analyses has its origin in the fact that they are confined to the so-called problem of the 'method', while Marx's analysis evidently shows that the problem is of an ontological character, as we try to demonstrate in the following section.

Ontological Critique

The first matter to be observed for an adequate interpretation of Marx's thought is his categorical declaration on the instauration of the economic systems. As we saw above he stated that: 'As soon as these individual moments had been more or less firmly established and abstracted, there began the economic systems, which ascended from the simple relations, such as labour, division of labour, need, exchange value, to the level of the state, exchange between nations and the world market. The latter is obviously the scientifically correct method' (Marx 2011a: 54. Emphasis added).

Now, if Marx considered that the economic science proceeded in such a way, there is no doubt that for him, the economic science employs the scientifically correct method. Therefore, there is no basis for declaring that the second method, the retracted journey, is *his* method.

In fact, Marx could not even have the ambition of being the holder of the copyright of the scientifically correct method, since the retracted journey is nothing more than the synthesis process, that is, the process of totalizing, the

ultimate objective of the analysis process of any science. 'The descending path, according to Marx, is the indispensable premise of the ascending path. I think that what is meant by the latter being the scientifically (Wissenschaftlich) correct method is that political economy as a science (Wissenschaft) is first established by the various pieces of economic knowledge (Wissen) forming a system' (Kuruma 1969).

What use would science find in interrupting the process in its analytical moment and, thus, remaining with a group of inarticulate abstract concepts? And, consequently, being unable to produce any kind of knowledge about the studied reality, apart from the phenomonic results. In sum, the fundamental meaning of Marx's explanation can be expressed as follows: very science totalizes, it forms a figure of the reality in question, a reproduction of the concrete, as a result of the synthesis process. It does the retracted journey with the elements obtained in the analysis process. Hence every science sets up a new ontology or offers scientific arguments for the ordinary ontology(ies). As a consequence, it is possible to assure that for him, the problem of science is not totalizing but the way in which it does it, and the categories from which it departs:⁸

Man's reflections on the forms of social life, and consequently, also, his scientific analysis of those forms, take a course directly opposite to that of their actual historical development. He begins, post festum, with the results of the process of development ready

8 Lukács remembers that what Marx follows from the abstract to the concrete 'cannot start at an ordinary abstraction. [...] because, considered in isolation, any phenomenon could be taken, once it is transformed in an 'element' by means of the abstraction, as a starting point; only such a path would never lead to the comprehension of totality' (Lukács 2012: 312. Personal translation).

to hand before him. The characters that stamp products as commodities, and whose establishment is a necessary preliminary to the circulation of commodities, have already acquired the stability of natural, self-understood forms of social life, before man seeks to decipher, not their historical character, for in his eyes they are immutable, but their meaning. Consequently, it was the analysis of the prices of commodities that alone led to the determination of the magnitude of value, and it was the common expression of all commodities in money that alone led to the establishment of their characters as values. It is, however, just this ultimate money form of the world of commodities that actually conceals, instead of disclosing, the social character of private labour, and the social relations between the individual producers.

The categories of bourgeois economy consist of such like forms. They are forms of thought expressing with social validity the conditions and relations of a definite, historically determined mode of production, viz., the production of commodities. (Marx 2011b: 210–211).

The bourgeois political economy, argues Marx, is the socially valid form of the thought, objective for those productive relations, whose content he tries to investigate. What he means is that it consists in a totalization, in a figuration, in a scientific ontology of the capitalist society. It departs from the representation, as all of them, takes distance and differentiates from it, but, in the process, it hypostatizes that form of life, and, in consequence, it is a-historical. But certainly, it investigates its structure and its dynamics—in a logical time, without history, that is, without substantial changes.⁹ It departs from the finished

9 On the characteristic temporalities of capitalism—abstract time and historical time—see Postone, in particular, chapter 8. According to the author, ‘the dialectics of the two dimensions of labour in capitalism can be understood temporarily, as dialectics of two forms of time. [...] the dialectics of concrete and abstract labour results in an intrinsic dynamic characterized by a peculiar treadmill effect’ (Postone 2003: 330. Personal translation.)

totality, fully developed, ignores its historical character; it proceeds analytically and produces a richly articulated synthesis, without history.

Marx makes a completely different analysis with what he calls the vulgar economy, precursor of the neoclassicism. In chapter 48 from the 3rd volume of *Capital*, entitled 'The Trinity Formula', he analyses the term as follows:

Vulgar economy actually does no more than interpret, systematize and defend in doctrinaire fashion the conceptions of the agents of bourgeois production who are entrapped in bourgeois production relations. It should not astonish us, then, that vulgar economy feels particularly at home in the estranged outward appearances of economic relations in which these prima facie absurd and perfect contradictions appear and that these relations seem the more self-evident the more their internal relationships are concealed from it, although they are understandable to the popular mind. But all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided. Thus, vulgar economy has not the slightest suspicion that the trinity which it takes as its point of departure, namely, land—rent, capital interest, labour—wages or the price of labour, are prima facie three impossible combinations. (Marx 2017: 1041).

It is therefore just as natural that vulgar economy, which is no more than a didactic, more or less dogmatic, translation of everyday conceptions of the actual agents of production, and which arranges them in a certain rational order, should see precisely in this trinity, which is devoid of all inner connection, the natural and indubitable lofty basis for its shallow pompousness. (Marx 2017: 1056–1057).

Here, Marx emphasises that the vulgar economy departs from the representation of the captive agents of the capitalist economy relations, and, instead of turning progressively different from it, it does completely the

opposite: it keeps the ontology (figuration/totalization) immediately generated and needed for those relations, and it systematizes them by means of a scientific apparatus and, this done, it goes back to the agents as a form of more efficient thought in the immediate practice.¹⁰ This is done with the seal of science.

As it was indicated in this chapter, I tried to demonstrate, first, that the usual interpretations of 'The Method of Political Economy' are directly contrary to Marx's text. On the other hand, as the title of the section points out, it concerns *The Method of Political Economy* and not *The Method of the Critique of the Political Economy*. Secondly, it was argued every science totalizes. The vulgar economy totalizes (synthesizes); the political economy totalizes; and the critique of the political economy, that is, Marx, also totalizes. Those totalizations constitute ontologies with a social force.¹¹ They offer the image to the subjects, backed by the prestige of science, by means of which they position themselves in their reciprocal relations and in their relation with the natural world.

If every science totalizes, signifies the world for the subjects, and, besides, provides a scientific apparatus to administer it, manage it, it follows that it is efficient in practice. Thus, the decisive theoretical battle between the theoretical systems can only take place at an ontological level—that is to say, ontologies in dispute, radically different ways of understanding the world. In other words, an effective critique is an ontological critique. If, as we saw in Marx, the political

¹⁰ See Duayer (2006).

¹¹ On the social force of ontology, Lukács says: '[...] independently from the degree of consciousness, all the ontological representations of men are widely influenced by society, no matter whether the dominant component is daily life, religious faith, etc. These representations fulfill an influential role in the social praxis of men and they are frequently condensed in a social power...' (Lukács 2013: 95. Personal translation).

economy is a form of thought valid and objective for the social life under capital; if it is economic science at the service of the management of that society; if it expresses and reinforces the ontological notions spontaneously generated; if, with its prestige, it not only elevates the common ideas to the exclusive figuration of society, but it also provides the techniques to reproduce it, then the critique of the political economy, as a substantial critique, creates a radically different intelligibility of the structure and the dynamics of the society ruled by capital, in the first place by restoring its historicity and, in consequence, by opening to the human practice the possibility of its transformation. It contributes, in fact, to create a new ontology in which humanity is not condemned to the infinite reproduction of the same or to being a mere spectator of history as an absolute contingency. In this sense, it overcomes the positivist, postmodern, post-structuralist and neo-pragmatic conceptions of history.

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