

Marx—ontological critique of capitalist society: the critique of labour¹

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Introduction

To begin with, I would say that, today, the referent of all criticism of capitalism, of the social order duly universalized by capital, does not exist, except, of course, only as increasingly vague ideas about socialism. There are, so to speak, almost protocol-like mentions of a socialism that nobody can say what it is any more, nor even believes to be possible or even desirable. Of course, those who fight at all levels and for their rights, against the iniquities, the miseries, the infamies of capitalism, inside, outside, on the margins, deserve respect and solidarity. However, with all due respect to these struggles, to the “limited struggles of everyday life,” experience has shown that they are largely innocuous, ineffective. There is no doubt that they will continue to be fought, because they emerge spontaneously from the infamies and perversities of our society, yet truthfully their fate has been retail dissolution, whether in defeat or in consented (acceptable, assimilable) conquests. They are not capable, have not been, of converging on something that could shake the structures of modern capitalist society.

It seems urgent, therefore, to ask about the reasons for this inability. First, because it is obvious that revolts and struggles against violence, misery, oppression, infamy, etc. cannot by themselves put an end to violence, misery, oppression, infamy, otherwise they would never have existed. The first violence, misery or oppression would have generated the struggle which would have immediately abolished it.

It may be suggested that the question is explained insofar as all discourses, speeches, analyses, slogans that inspire and, many times,

vicariously incite struggles in healthcare, education, trade unions, ecology, etc., have a black hole as their (critical) backdrop. They criticize capitalism, healthcare as a commodity, but they do not and cannot deny capitalism, nobody can deny it today. Do we want a better capitalism, with quality universal public healthcare, but still, outside this sphere, can continue to preside over all the other dimensions of social life? What if the struggle is ecological? Do we want a clean capitalism, which respects nature, but which, respectfully, continues to command an infinite process of accumulation? What if the struggle is an educational one? Would quality public education for all be the reason for the struggle? However, if the demand is met, could capitalism continue to educate subjects capable of reproducing its social relations held intact elsewhere? Conclusion: if nothing but capitalism is credible and, above all, desirable, capable of seducing people, what exactly do we want when we criticize and fight against the modus operandi of capitalism? Therefore, we can understand why the practical actions of dissensus are extinguished in the indifference of the same continued itself.

One cannot help but notice and register that these struggles seem to be all the more comforting the more fanciful are the ideas inspiring them. In this matter, moreover, and with due (and major) differences, the review of two books on the Revolution of 1848 written by professional conspirators published in the journal edited by Marx and Engels, *Neue Rheinische Zeitung Politisch-ökonomische Revue*, in April 1850, may be illustrative. In their extensive commentary on the role of conspiracy and conspirators in the political events of the time, the authors of the review (Marx and/or Engels) remark that conspirators were not limited to the “general organization of the revolutionary proletariat.” Essentially, the

conspirators were interested precisely in replacing the process of revolutionary development (of the workers themselves), operating in its place and, in its name, producing a crisis so as to “start, impulsively and spontaneously, a revolution,” without the necessary conditions for this being present. Consequently, the review continues, it may be asserted that for the conspirators the “only condition for revolution” is organization, i.e., “the adequate preparation of their own conspiracy.” Marx and Engels consider it essential to mark the substantive difference between the scientific stance they adopt in analysing the dynamics of capitalist society to unveiling the concrete possibilities it opens up for a radical transformation of this social order and, consequently, the objective spaces for the transformative practice of the subjects, and the attitude of those who imagine revolution as an organizational problem. For this very reason, they qualify the latter, the conspirators, as “alchemists of the revolution,” because they possess the

the same chaotic thinking and the same narrow obsessions as the alchemists of the past [...] they cling to inventions which are supposed to work revolutionary miracles: incendiary bombs, destructive artefacts of magical effect, revolts from which one expects effects the more miraculous and surprising the less rational is their basis. (MARX; ENGELS, 1850, p. 311).

The solitude of this position on the left is practically intolerable, since it not only confirms the total incapacity of the different social movements to cause any fundamental disturbance in capitalism, but also underlines that the movements themselves do not and cannot aim at a radical transformation of the form of sociability posed by capital. For this very reason, it is prudent to seek company and help in consecrated authors. It seems that Zizek, for example, has the same problem in mind when,

addressing the protesters of the *Occupy Wall Street* movement, he makes the following warning:

Do not fall in love with yourselves, nor with the pleasant moment we are having here. Carnivals cost very little—the real test of their value is what remains the next day, or the way our normal, everyday lives will be changed. Fall in love with hard and patient work—we are the beginning, not the end. Our basic message is: the taboo has already been broken, we don't live in the best possible world, we are allowed and obliged to think of alternatives. There is a long road ahead, and before long we will have to face really hard questions—*questions not about what we don't want, but about what we WANT.* (emphasis added). (ZIZEK, 2011, s.p).²

The Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, for his part, who does not believe that Zizek's ideas can in fact contribute to changing the world, declared emphatically at the launch of his latest book, *How to Change the World*: “That the 21st century needs more Marx [...] And, due to his absence, much of the contemporary anti-capitalist movement—both within and outside the labour movement—*represents protest rather than aspiration.*” (author's emphasis) (CARLETON, 2011).³

What both authors highlight is exactly what can be called the black hole of critique: the dissolution, the erasure of the ontological critique of capitalism elaborated by Marx. Without this critique—and perhaps this is why Derrida (1994), in his way, has stated that “there is no future without Marx”—the system disposes of a social consciousness conforming to its appearance: the ultimate form of social life, without space and without time—outside of which and beyond which nothing can exist.

2 Zizek's speech to *Occupy Wall Street* protesters at Liberty Plaza, New York, September 2011. Translation published in Boitempo's blog.

3 This, and all other quotations from the originals in other languages, were translated by the author of this article.

To illustrate what it means to live without time, without future, one can turn to Lukács, though, for the same purpose, it would also be possible to evoke numerous Marxist theorists. In the 1967 Postface to *History and Class Consciousness*, written especially for the re-edition of the work, Lukács makes the following comment:

It is not surprising that [...] in this book (*The Theory of the Novel*) [...] the hope for an *escape route takes on a purely utopian and unreal character. It was only with the Russian Revolution that, including for me, a future perspective opened up in reality itself* (emphasis added) (LUKÁCS, 1974, p. 351).

For the sake of our argument here, we need only add that, at that time, the left still had Marx's ontological critique at its disposal. The left today, by contrast, has to rebuild it, to seek its fragments beneath the rubble of Eastern Europe.

The other side of the absence of such Marxian ontological critique is what Žižek (2002) calls "hegemonic ideological coordinates," i.e. the ontology of a supposedly insurmountable world—the world of capital—which, for that very reason, nullifies the meaning of political struggles, but reinforces, admittedly, politicism. To illustrate this effect of the "hegemonic ideological coordinates", he contrasts the violence of terrorist attacks and suicide bombings with the violent 2011 protests in England, prompted by the murder of a young black man by the police, and the wave of torched cars in Paris in 2005. For Žižek the first type is carried out in the service of the "Absolute meaning provided by religion," while the second represents "zero-degree protests, violent actions demanding nothing." According to the author, interpreted correctly, the fact that the protesters lack an agenda denotes the political-ideological situation of our day: "Opposition to the system is no longer articulated in the form of a realistic alternative,

or even as a utopian project, but can only take the form of a violent explosion." And even when he preaches non-violence, such as the movement of the *indignados* in Spain, dissent equally resents the lack of meaning, of an alternative, as the apolitical tenor of his discourse makes evident:

Their protest is made on behalf of the 'inalienable truths that must be respected in our society: the right to housing, employment, culture, health, education, political participation, free personal development and the right of consumers to a healthy and happy life'. They call for 'an ethical revolution. Instead of placing money above human beings, we should restore it to our service (sic)'. They express a spirit of revolt without revolution (ZIZEK, 2011).⁴

However, precisely because of these 'hegemonic ideological coordinates', what is crucial is to know how to reconstruct counter-hegemonic ideological coordinates whereby the idea of revolution can have meaning, can make sense. To this end, it is imperative to restore the critical dimension of Marxian thought as an ontological critique.

Ontological critique

Having mentioned the dissolution of Marx's ontological critique and, furthermore, having stated categorically that de facto critique is an ontological critique, it is necessary to justify such a position. Which I shall now do in a very synthetic way, although, I believe, this does not undermine its essence.

To return to the categorical statement—de facto critique is ontological critique. Not only in theory, but also in everyday disputes, positional

4 Zizek (2011) is the source of all the quotes in this paragraph.

differences, when substantive, are settled as ontological differences. As a parenthesis, to define it synthetically, since the weight of the argument rests on it, I would say that ontology concerns the being of things. Accordingly, to say that theoretical disputes are resolved into ontological differences is to say that they depend fundamentally on the distinct conceptions of being on which the controversial positions rest.

Staying in the scientific field or, rather, within the philosophy of science, it is possible to speak without exaggeration of a consensus according to which substantive differences between theories or theoretical systems and, by extension, between radically distinct ways of portraying the world are resolved on the ontological level. This truth is present even in the most widespread contemporary orthodox theories of science, such as those of Kuhn and Lakatos, even if the authors, with the ontological relativism they consciously or unconsciously advocate, fail to enunciate this self-evident content of their theories. Indeed, the conclusion to which their notions of paradigm and rigid core of SRPs (Scientific Research Programs), respectively, necessarily lead to is that all theories posit and presuppose an ontology that constitutes the source of their structural axioms and of the landmarks that delimit the empirical terrain in which they are valid, or their empirical jurisdiction. This amounts to saying that substantive disputes and controversies between distinct theoretical systems do not admit empirical resolution, and precisely because the empirical terrain in relation to which they are plausible is drawn by their particular ontologies. One can better understand the issue by imagining the intersection of different 'theoretical systems' constituting a common empirical domain, in relation to which, therefore, they are empirically equivalent.

It follows that the resolution of the controversy, being neither empirical nor logical-formal, can only be ontological. A conclusion reached by Kuhn and Lakatos, naturally without stating it clearly. On the contrary, they do so in an oblique way, when they sustain, each in his own way, that ontological questions do not admit rational resolution. The first, by claiming that the paradigms of disputed theoretical systems are incommensurable; the second, by arguing that the rigid cores of different SRPs are inscrutable. Which is to say, on both counts, that we cannot rationally justify our most substantive beliefs about the world. This is an ontological relativism whose absurdity could hardly be exaggerated, for it entails the ultimate irrationality of our figurations, conceptions or ideas about the world, the inescapable presupposition of all our practices, the foundation of all the ends we pursue in them, the basis of all our notions of the possible and the impossible. It implies, finally, that the meaning of human-social practice as a whole is inescapably irrational. The most deleterious corollary of this wholesale ontological relativism is simply the disqualification of emancipatory practices: given that the objective world is unknowable, our practice has to be confined to the immediately existent, the positive. It has to be merely reactive, a posteriori conformation to contingent changes in the external world. Emancipatory practice has a presupposition that our knowledge, for this relativism, cannot satisfy, namely, to grasp the objective legalities that govern the social world.⁵

Against such ideas we maintain that critique is indeed ontological critique. However, this does not imply denying, of course, that there is another kind of critique. In every discipline, each of its scientific traditions is maintained and developed by internal criticism, criticism by means of

5 For a more detailed exposition of the argument, see Duayer (2010).

which the theoretical system of these traditions perfects itself—discards superficial, insubstantial theories and replaces them with others. However, as long as tradition exists, such criticism does not reach its founding, structural presuppositions, nor can it reach them, of course, on pain of abolishing tradition itself. In one word, such criticism does not, and cannot, alter the description of the world, the very ontology on which tradition is founded.

The critique exercised between traditions, ontological critique, on the other hand, addresses itself in particular to the structural presuppositions of the tradition being critiqued. Consequently, it must be a critique that refigures the world, that posits and presupposes another ontology. It is precisely in this sense that Marx's critique is an ontological critique—in this case, a critique of capitalist society, of the socio-economic formation established by capital. It figures the social world in a radically distinct way not only from the everyday forms of consciousness of that society, but also from its scientific forms of consciousness, which, on that condition, are obviously plausible, empirically valid, though criticizable, as they are by Marx.

One may ask: why is ontological critique essential? Because human-social practice is a teleological, intentional, finalistic practice, and therefore depends crucially on a more or less unitary and coherent signification or figuration of the world, no matter whether it is composed of heterogeneous elements like science, religion, everyday thought, superstition, etc. Therefore, as the meaning of the world is a presupposition of teleological practice, it is the way in which the world is meant that enables and supports a particular practice. As Lukács underlines,

[...] regardless of the degree to which this occurs consciously, all ontological representations of men are to a great extent under the influence of society, whether the dominant component be that of everyday life, of religious faith, etc. These representations play an extremely influential role in the social praxis of men and often solidify into a social power [...] (LUKÁCS, 1986, p. 58).

The world of capital, if it is to be reproduced by the teleological practices of the subjects, generates and at the same time requires a certain ontology or, if you like, a certain compound of ontologies, which refer to such reproductive practices. Conversely, the emancipatory practices of this form of sociability, which are effectively transformative practices, have to be grounded in another ontology. A critical ontology of the former. It follows, therefore, that ontological critique is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the emancipation of estranged, oppressive, iniquitous, and disgraceful social structures.

Hence, it was stated above that Marxian ontological critique ought to be restored. It must once again become the frame of reference for the critique of capitalism so that practical actions against it can converge on a movement capable of shaking and overcoming it. This restoration, however, presupposes a return to the essential dimension of critique, that is, critique of the mode of production under capital. That is, critique of labour under capitalism, not critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labour.

Critique of the centrality of labour

This interpretation, due to the American author Moishe Postone, is supported by two passages by Marx, one from the *Grundrisse* and the other

from a text that appears in the MEW edition of the *Grundrisse*, which is a kind of primitive formulation of *For a Critique of Political Economy*.

Considered in itself, circulation is the mediation of presupposed extremes. But it does not pose these extremes. Therefore, it itself has to be mediated not only in each of its Moments, but as a totality of mediation, as a Total process. That is why its immediate being is pure appearance. *Circulation is the phenomenon of a process taking place behind it.* (emphasis added) (MARX, 1953, p. 920).

Now, if exchange is mediation of extreme presuppositions, by employing Marx's typical mode of inference, i.e., *retroduction*,⁶ it is possible to conclude that

- 1) generalized exchange cannot be at the origin of history;
- 2) and if this were the case, we would have to presuppose isolated associated individuals with originally complementary endowments and, therefore, predestined to exchange. That is, we would have to postulate that such individuals with their endowments constituting a unit fell from the sky by parachute (although it is known that parachutes were not yet available at the beginning of history);
- 3) for this reason, it is reasonable to admit that at the origin of history what exists are various socio-economic formations, constituted by explicit, clear social relations between subjects;
- 4) that is, material production was originally rooted in these explicit social relations;

6 According to Bhaskar, typically, the construction of an explanation for—the production of knowledge of the mechanisms of the production of—some newly identified phenomena will require the construction of a model for the mechanism that, if it existed and acted in the postulated manner, would explain the phenomena considered. This movement of thought, which can be characterized as 'analogical-retroductive', always has to raise existential questions. For the question whether or not the postulated mechanism acts in the postulated way cannot, of course, be decided by theory alone, since in general several possible explanations will be consistent with the phenomena, reflecting the general underdetermination of theory by experience. Cf. Bhaskar (1986, p. 61).

5) it can be stated, therefore, that none of the various pre-capitalist social formations had subjects relating to each other as workers. The subjects did not belong to them because they laboured, i.e., because they were workers. Quite the contrary, because they belonged, among other things they laboured.

6) and—for the sake of argument—that in none of these pre-market social formations did labour function as a mediating social category.

I believe that the above analysis would already be sufficient to show *how critical Marx is of the centrality of labour, since it is a specific feature of capitalism*. But it can be reinforced by the following passage from the *Grundrisse*:

[Commenting on the] ... dissolution of the small freeholder-ship of land, as well as community ownership based on the Eastern community. [He adds:]

In these two forms, the worker relates to the objective conditions of his labour as his property; it is in this case a question of the natural unity of labour with its objective presuppositions. Hence the worker, independently of labour, has an objective existence.

In both forms, individuals do not relate to each other as workers, but as owners—and members of a community who at the same time work. The putting of the individual as a worker, in that bareness, is itself a historical product. (emphasis added) (MARX, 2011, p. 388).

Therefore, it is exclusively under capitalism that the individual appears in such bareness, stripped of other social relations, which he can only properly experience if, beforehand, the individual becomes a worker. It is only in this society that individuals, to use another passage from the *Grundrisse*, carry in their pockets their nexus, their link with society, with other individuals. (IBIDEM, p. 105). That which they carry in their pocket, money, is the result of the sale of their products, even if the commodity

sold is their own labour power. That is, only in this society, by its mercantile character, the subjects relate as mere workers. Therefore, as Marx underlines in the passage reproduced above, it is only in this society that the objective existence of individuals presupposes their existence as workers. The generalized exchange, then, particular to capitalism, shapes the sociability of the subjects as workers, a sociability that presents itself to them as something external to them. And on these occasions Marx always reminds us that this is not a cognitive problem; the thing presents itself as such: strange and estranged.

For this reason, labour is central only in this society. Only in this society do subjects relate indifferently to their specifically human life activity, to the content and purpose of their labour, which for each of them is only of interest as a means of access to the conditions of life produced by others. Hence, they rationally view their labour and its product as pure quantity, i.e., one-dimensionally. The result of this very particular way of the producers relating to their product is a mode of production, a production of the material conditions of life with an internal device, exclusively of its own, that makes it necessarily a growing production. And increasingly estranged. Capital as dead, past, objectified labour, one might suggest that, in the Marxian analysis, this is the fundamental contradiction of this mode of production, namely, subjects are subsumed, enslaved to the dynamics of the product of their labour. They are subject, thus, to the abstract domination of the product of their labour as capital.

For no other reason Marx suggests that the silkworm would be a perfect wage-labourer if weaving were not a condition of its existence, a manifestation of its life, but activity as a mere means to ensure its subsistence as a caterpillar. For the same happens to the wage labourer,

who produces for himself only the wage, mere means of survival, and, therefore, cannot experience the period during which he labours “as life, as manifestation of his life. [...] On the contrary. Life for him begins where this activity ends, at the table, the pub, the bed” (MARX, 1959, p. 401). By conceiving of labour as sacrifice, Marx notes, Adam Smith also perceives and expresses this negative character of wage-labour. Naturally, since the historical forms of labour—slave, serf and wage-labour—represent an external compulsion, labour immediately presents itself as it actually is, that is, repulsive. This is why in A. Smith, rest, i.e., non-labour, appears as freedom and happiness. After all, according to Marx, he could not imagine that labour was an act of freedom. In other words, Smith did not even suspect “[...] that the overcoming of obstacles [to the attainment of the posited objective] is in itself an activity of freedom [...] hence, as self-realization, objectification of the subject, thence real freedom, whose action is precisely labour” (MARX, 2011, p. 509).

Accordingly, real freedom in the Marxian analysis, properly understood, means self-realization, and not the enslavement of subjects to labour as external compulsion, whether in the form of domination and personal subordination, or in an abstract form. These forms of external forced labour cannot appear as *freedom* and *happiness*. Neither can labour, according to Marx, which “has not yet created for itself the objective and subjective conditions [...] for labour to become appealing as labour, as self-realization of the individual.” (IBIDEM, p.11). For material production, labour can only possess this character, to be effectively free labour

1) if its social character is established, 2) if it is simultaneously labour of a scientific and general character, and not an effort of the human being as a natural force trained a certain way, but as a subject appearing in the production process not only in a simply

natural form, emerging directly from nature [*naturwüchsig*], but as an activity regulating all the forces of nature. (IBIDEM, p. 11).

It seems evident from these passages of the *Grundrisse* that, for Marx, genuinely free labour presupposes the development of labour productivity and, as a consequence, the progressive reduction of the living labour required, even with the expansion and diversification of needs that emerge from development itself. The free time created on the other hand is a growing time that can be devoted to other activities. This is precisely the content of the critique that Marx makes of Proudhon in the same context that we are examining. According to him, Proudhon's axiom that all labour leaves a surplus proves that he has not understood what is actually important in the discussion of surplus. All that matters in fact, Marx asserts, is that

[...] the necessary labour time for the satisfaction of absolute needs leaves *free* time (differing at the various stages of development of the productive forces) and, as a result, a surplus product can be created when *surplus labour* is realized. The purpose is to abolish the relation itself, so that the surplus product itself appears as necessary. Ultimately, material production leaves each human being surplus time for another activity (IBIDEM, p. 510).

From these considerations it follows that, following the Marxian formulation, the development of the social being has as an inescapable presupposition the increase of the productive force of social labour and, therefore, not only the progressive reduction of labour throughout the whole of the subjects' activities, but also the abolition of surplus labour, i.e., labour as an external compulsion. In other words, alongside the reduction of labour time such a development would entail the suppression of the negative character of labour as estranged labour. It is precisely for this

reason that the conversion of all labour into necessary labour is no mere semantic revision.

If this interpretation of Marx is plausible, one can argue that his ontological critique of capitalism, which must be restored, is a critique of the centrality of labour. It has nothing to do with the idolatry of labour, the tenderness for labour. Nor does it have anything to do with the heroicization of the worker, usually represented by the factory worker, who is then held to be solely responsible for human emancipation.⁷ At its most significant and universalized dimension, it is a critique of the enslavement of each and every one of us to the dynamics of our past labour, a dynamics founded on the centrality of labour, on our sociability as workers, though simultaneously dispensing more and more with labour and therefore with all of us as workers. Finally, it is a dynamic that, if not disarmed, renders humanity itself superfluous.

To conclude, taking advantage of the objection of my friend and colleague Virgínia Fontes, who, upon hearing these ideas, always asks how can I defend them if I am a Lukácsian, I consider it essential to stress the difference between labour as a specific and founding category of social being, as Lukács tries to sustain always on the basis of Marx, and the centrality of labour.

As far as I am familiar with Lukács' posthumous work, *For an Ontology of Social Being*, some of which I have even translated, I think that the ideas

7 In this respect I tend to agree with Eagleton, for whom Marx “does not focus on the working class because he perceives some shining virtue in labour. [...] As we have seen, Marxism wishes to abolish labour as soon as possible. Nor does it attach much political importance to the working class because it is supposed to be the most oppressed social group. There are many such groups—vagrants, students, refugees, the elderly, the unemployed and the chronically unemployable—who are often more dispossessed than the average worker.” (EAGLETON, 2011, p. 164).

I have defended above are not at all at odds with the conceptions defended therein by the author, particularly those he expounds in the chapter dedicated to labour. There, Lukács demonstrates that labour is the mediating category of social being par excellence. It is the category that accounts for the ontological leap from organic being to social being, precisely because through labour humanity creates the conditions for its reproduction, it creates itself. It is not our place here to elaborate on Lukács' formulations in this chapter. What is important is to stress that labour, as a mediating and fundamental category for the self-constitution of social being, cannot be the central category. It can be and is the founding, ineliminable category, as Marx argues, but by no means the central category.

The whole plasticity of social being, the increasing emergence and differentiation of spheres that is the hallmark of its historicity, the development of the capacities and respective enjoyments of human beings, this whole process is presupposed by the development of the productivity of social labour. All that we are, beyond mere biological reproduction, beyond mere physical survival, we are thanks to labour, or the increased productivity of social labour. I would therefore say that by definition labour cannot be central. On the contrary, the development and complexification of social being, made possible precisely by labour, means that the labour complex necessarily has an ever declining share in the ensemble of its constitutive complexes.

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