

The Critique of Philosophy and the Practical Ground

Reflections on a Marxian Approach

Silvia De Bianchi

(University of Rome “La Sapienza”)

Every comment would be immensely helpful, please send it to silvia.dbn@googlemail.com

***** DRAFT ONLY *****

1. The Critique of Philosophy

The question: “Is there a Marxian philosophy?” sheds light on one of the most important controversies about historical materialism. According to Marx the critique of philosophy must be improved and every metaphysics must be rejected. By considering this premise a question arises: “What is Marxism?”. “Marxism is the system of Marx’s conceptions and doctrine”¹ as Lenin stated in his *The teachings of Karl Marx*. This definition however seems more a dogmatic and tautological one. Yet in the same passage Lenin provided another twofold definition of Marxism: on the one hand it represented the modern materialism and scientific socialism, on the other it showed the character of a revolutionary doctrine producing common strategies to support the working class. **This view reveals that Marxism, as a system proceeds by connecting the critique of philosophy with a practical ground.** With “practical ground” I mean what Marx called “the process of practical human energy”:

It is superfluous to add that men are not free to choose their productive forces – which are the basis of all their history – for every productive force is an acquired force, the product of former activity. The productive forces are therefore the result of practical human energy; but this energy is itself conditioned by circumstances in which men find themselves, by the productive forces already

¹ Lenin, *The teachings of Karl Marx*, 1940.

acquired, by the social form which exists before they do, which they do not create, which is the product of the preceding generation².

Marx remarks that his system cannot be a complete one, rather it must include reality into a process and Marxism itself is modified by this process as well:

For it [dialectical philosophy], nothing is final, absolute, sacred. It reveals the transitory character of everything and in everything; nothing can endure before it except the uninterrupted process of becoming and of passing away, of endless ascendancy from the lower to the higher. And dialectical philosophy itself is nothing more than the mere reflection of this process in the thinking brain. It has of course also a conservative side: it recognizes that definite stages of knowledge and society are justified for their time and circumstances; but only so far. The conservatism of this mode of outlook is relative; its revolutionary character is absolute – the only absolute it admits.³

Dialectical philosophy finds its own place in the historical materialism that Marx and Engels supported. According to historical materialism the matter and the motion (that of bodies and of minds) are universally connected to each other in complex relationships historically determined. These relations in the world are not determined by a certain view of the world or philosophy, but properly every philosophy is produced by the relations realized in the world. In these terms Marx and Engels intended their reflection as “the first conscious representation of reality” and accomplished a critique of philosophy. Moreover, as the reality changes continuously and necessarily, historical materialism should provide, through dialectics, laws for this change, without embracing any idealism, as Engels firmly points out in the *Anti-dühring*:

Marx and I were pretty well the only people to rescue conscious dialectics from German idealist philosophy and apply it in the materialistic conception of nature and history⁴.

² Letter to Annenkov, 1846, in K. Marx, *The Poverty of philosophy*, London 1973, pp. 201-217; p. 203.

³ F. Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, New York 1941, p. 12; see also pp. 11;13;44-45. Explicitly in some of these passages Engels clarifies that the critique to Hegel concerns the whole dogmatic content of the Hegelian system, rather than the dialectics that aims at dissolving dogmatism. For further details about the unlimited character of Marxian approach see R. Geraudy, *Marxism in the twentieth century*, London 1970, p. 38.

⁴ F. Engels, *Anti-dühring*, Moscow 1959, p. 16.

Furthermore in his *Ludwig Feuerbach*, Engels remarks that the world should not be conceived as a complex of things, but it must be considered as a complex of processes:

In this way, however, the revolutionary side of Hegelian philosophy was again taken up and at the same time freed from the idealist trammels which in Hegel's hands had prevented its consistent execution. The great basic thought that the world is not to be comprehended as a complex of ready-made things, but as a complex of processes⁵.

Engels clarifies also that the proper cognition of this process corresponds to the application of this motion to reality in every field. The rupture with idealism and criticism is marked by an approach according to which the material, i.e. social and economic processes become the central characters of theory and the frame of reference for human collective agency. These processes might be grasped through dialectics, intended as the science and method of the general laws of motion, both natural and of thought. Therefore the great question for modern philosophy, that of the relationship between thought and being, i.e. "Geist und Natur", was answered by Engels and Marx emphasizing that the social consciousness must be explained by the social being⁶. In other words thought and being are unified dialectically, by configuring in historical materialistic terms the relationship between man and nature, so that Marxism conceives of ontology in terms of history. Thus in raising the question: "Is there a Marxian philosophy?", we should consider **firstly** that Marx and Engels developed a critique of philosophy, by showing that philosophy is one of the aspects of the social consciousness, a historically determined way of reproducing human consciousness. In the capitalistic society, philosophy is one of the powerful means, that of ideology, used in order to continue the reproduction of the same productive relations. For Marx and Engels "ideology"⁷ is understood as absence of consciousness of its own relativity, in this sense there couldn't be any Marxian philosophy. The Marxian reflection is not strictly philosophy because it does not aim at the conservation of present productive relations, rather it tries to abolish them. **Secondly**, the Marxian approach (historical materialism), that would present itself as

⁵ Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, p. 44.

⁶ Hegel had made of nature something to be thought and that is "for" thought itself. Marx and Engels tried to make thoughts material.

⁷ See R. Geraudy, (1970), p. 49 for the meanings of ideology by Marx and Engels.

a science (as dialectics⁸), analyzes real social and economic processes, only in order to change the world, and it tries also to grasp the role played by philosophy in the complex of processes of production. Therefore philosophy is considered as depending and connected to other sciences (it is an activity that is not superior to any science). **Thirdly**, as the Marxian approach considers whole system of production and reproduction of human relations, concerning the relative motion of reality⁹, i.e. the historic society, the Marxist conception of history puts an end to philosophy in the realm of history¹⁰, stressing the importance of the practical ground as a critique of reality.

2. Marxism as the System of Processes of human Organizations

By considering the main aspect of dialectical materialism, the economic one¹¹, Marx and Engels developed the point of view that considers the collective agency of human beings and aims at explaining historically different manners of motion concerning together thought and nature¹².

Marx developed in his doctoral dissertation on the differences between the Systems of Epicures and Democritus, the concept of “*enérghēia*”¹³. This concept played an important role in the field of historical materialism. Thanks to this concept reality can be represented immediately, because this idea reflects the law of motion concerning the action of matter and the human agency. Since human knowledge reflects nature¹⁴, the social knowledge of human beings (the different conceptions and doctrines in different fields of science and philosophy) reflects the economical system of society. Thus, it is not human consciousness that determines human

⁸ For the definition of dialectics see K. Marx, *Capital. A critique of Political Economy*, London 1976, vol. I, pp. 101-102.

⁹ See the letter to Annenkov in K. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, pp. 212-213.

¹⁰ Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, p. 59. Philosophy as well as science does not have an autonomous history, rather depend on social relations.

¹¹ Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 90: “What I have to examine in this work is the capitalist mode of production and the relations of production and forms of intercourse [Verkehrsverhältnisse] that correspond to it”.

¹² See Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, p. 47.

¹³ “*En-ergheia*” (Ενεργεῖα) from Greek “*En-ergon*” (Ενεργον) generated the word “*Energie*” and corresponds to the German word *Handlung*. Generally it expresses the process of an action, especially the process of a force’s agency (power) at work. The study of this concept is very important for the difference Marx underlines in the *Capital* between labour and labour power.

¹⁴ See Engels, *Anti-dühring*, p. 466.

beings, but it is their social being that determines their consciousness¹⁵ and the way of production of the material life¹⁶ is the condition for social, political and rational process of life. The turn this approach proposed consists in studying the laws that determine consciousness considered as a result of a practical and collective activity, rather than a ready-made object to analyze. Every discipline, like philosophy, law, religion or psychology, that runs on the human consciousness as a “thing in itself” has to be considered ideology if it presents itself as absolute truth value, but it might have a relative truth value¹⁷.

In the Foreword of the *Grundrisse*¹⁸, Marx clarifies that philosophy is an instrument for the maintenance of the present relations of production. Philosophy, law, religion, art are means of defence and balance of power. They have a proper function in the process of life reproduction: the reproduction of the material consciousness. Indeed they reflect and are produced by real social relations, that in the Capital are inverted¹⁹ (as Marx shows recurring to the rhetoric figure of chiasm²⁰) or alienated.

To conclude, the critique of philosophy is possible only through the critique of political economy, that is a critique of philosophy is a necessary consequence of the critique of reality. This implies a strong practical ground on which Marxism has to be based and theoretically this corresponds to the unity of being and thought from a historical materialistic point of view.

3. The practical Ground

According to Marx the laws to be analyzed concern reality, i.e. life reproduction, the consciousness of praxis and the processes of production, opening the field of the great and rich category that Marx called “social economical structure”, that is the

¹⁵ For further details see the critique of Marx against Proudhon on the inversion that philosophy, especially metaphysics, produces in the field of representation of reality, K. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, pp. 35;117-8;179-80.

¹⁶ See Marx’s Postface to the second edition of *Capital*, vol. I, pp. 101-103.

¹⁷ See the passage quoted above, note 3.

¹⁸ See D. McLellan (ed.), *Marx’s Grundrisse*, London 1971.

¹⁹ As Marx remarks in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 35: “M. Proudhon might just as well have inverted the order of things”.

²⁰ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 180: “M. Proudhon, by saying that, in the dialectic movement, ideas are no longer differentiated, has done away with both the shadow of movement and the movement of shadows, by means of which one could still have created at least a semblance of history”.

complex of historical processes of human organizations²¹. Without a collective agency based on a practical ground Marxism could not be a pure critique of philosophy. The vitality of Marxism lays on its internal capability to be modified following real historical processes, by giving general laws of modification of reality in order to liberate exploited people, i.e. to let them know the necessity of real processes in order to change them. Thus only the practical ground enables every reflection on reality:

We see how subjectivity and objectivity, spirituality and materiality, activity and suffering, lose their antithetical character and thus their existence as such antithesis only within the framework of society; we see how the resolution of the theoretical antithesis is only possible in a practical way, by virtue of the practical energy of man. Their resolution is therefore by no means merely a problem of understanding but a real problem of life, which philosophy could not solve precisely because it conceived this problem as a merely theoretical one²².

What is the guideline Marx seeks in order to make a system of his doctrine? The guideline concerns class struggle. According to Marx and Engels, classes, like particles, fight each other and produce “enérgeia”, in other words their fight produces history. In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels clearly state:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.²³

The Marxian approach recurs to materialism and to the economic doctrine to explain reality, but it needs something more to be able to change it. **The struggle of classes is properly the element connecting the reality of specific productive relations** (the mode of production now associated to capitalism), **with the materialistic laws of continuous motion changing reality**. Marx focused on bourgeois and proletariat as masses, agents of production and reproduction, whose **conflict** realizes history and different configurations of society:

²¹ See Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, London 1977, pp. 98-99 for the determination of consciousness as a social one.

²² Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, pp. 103-4.

²³ K. Marx, F. Engels, The communist manifesto, Harmondsworth 1967, p. 79.

Within the ruling classes themselves, the foreboding is emerging that the present society is no solid crystal, but an organism capable of change, and constantly engaged in a process of change²⁴.

The historical point of view is that of masses and of their agency, so that the Marxian concept of “*enérghēia*”, as conflict, corresponds to the concept of *Handlung* applied to entire classes. Furthermore it is remarkable that to Marx and Engels in the modern society the conflict between classes is the reflection of the immanent conflict Capital/labour. For this reason the practical ground on which the Marxian approach is based must concern the necessary organisation of the working class as a collective agent, that operates in the Capital. The working class is part of the enormous organism, that is the Capital (*Das Kapital*), and depends on complex relations of which it is aware thanks to the struggle against exploitation. Indeed, as Marx remarked, “productive forces and social relationships are means of Capital”²⁵, but the “Capital sets itself up as a mediator between the various labourers and the form of circulating Capital”²⁶. By considering the second side of the coin, that of mediation of Capital in its form of circulation, rather than the nature of fixed Capital alone, I maintain that a Marxian approach to question of technology and language could be improved.

4. A Marxian Approach to Technology

I shall consider now one of the main aspects, that of technology (related to that of language), to which a Marxian approach could be fruitful. First of all in the *Capital*, Marx explicitly considers the active relationship between man and nature revealed by the technology. Secondly, as Engels emphasized, the standpoint of science, that is also the point of view of technology, reveals how an epoch conceives of nature. The Marxian approach considers science as the key revealing the proper reality of the existing state of affairs, science is represented as a process of formation: it does not exist as science in itself, but always as the science of the epoch supporting a particular idea of nature. For example in the *Grundrisse* Marx points out that:

²⁴ Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 93. See also pp. 747-8;769.

²⁵ Marx's *Grundrisse*, p. 143.

²⁶ Marx's *Grundrisse*, p. 137.

Nature does not construct machines, locomotives, railways (...) these are products of human industry (...) they are organs of the human brain, created by human hands; the power of knowledge made into an object. The development of fixed capital shows to what extent general social knowledge has become an immediate productive force (...) and to what extent social productive forces are produced not only in the form of knowledge but also as the direct organs of social practice; of the real life process²⁷.

Thus in the *Capital* Marx underlined the important role played by Darwin²⁸ for the studies of biology as the history of the organic processes of life. Comparing the work of Darwin with the theory of the relative surplus value, Marx encourages the developing of a history of technology that is a history of the organic process and relationship between human beings:

A critical history of technology should show how little any of the inventions of the eighteenth century are the work of a single individual. As yet such a book does not exist. Darwin has directed attention to the history of natural technology, i.e. the formation of the organs of plants and animals, which serve as the instruments of production for sustaining their life. Does not the history of the productive organs of man in society, deserve equal attention? [...] technology reveals the active relation of man and nature, the direct process of the production of his life, and thereby it also lays bare the process of the production of the social relations of his life, and of the mental conceptions that flow from those relations²⁹.

From this perspective the study about formation of inventions aims at constituting a history of technology rather than a philosophy of technology. A Marxian approach to this field should reveal the process of practical human energy through which an invention takes place (think of internet for example and its origin from the necessary improvement of military tools and strategies) paying attention to the role played by the organs developing and producing the social relations of human life: schools and universities.

This task has still to be accomplished even if it might provide evidence of the ideological nature of many contemporary analysis, for example, in the field of

²⁷ Marx's Grundrisse, p. 143.

²⁸ See Marx, *Capital*, p. 492.

²⁹ Marx, *Capital* vol. I, p. 493 footnote. More about technology, pp. 784-5;777-8 footnote. Esp. p. 777 for the progress of fragmentation of Capital and the development of the credit system.

philosophy of science³⁰. By following and improving the Marxian theory of circulating Capital³¹, it is evident that the tendency in our times consists in a generalized abstraction of relationship between consciousness and reality, consequently in a general abstraction of language. It corresponds to the complexity of human organization governed by the necessity of completing the circulation employing less **time** than ever³² (think of financial international transactions and of common language, tags, texts etc.), as Marx remarked:

We ought to conclude, on the basis of the laws of capitalist production as we have just expounded them, that the duration is variable, and that the length of the cycles will gradually diminish³³.

As underlined in the Appendix to the *Grundrisse*, “Capital is among other things also an instrument of production and also past, materialised labour”. In other words on the one hand production as one of the stage of circulating Capital as a whole contains the results of practical human energy, technology. On the other hand money spent as Capital in its circulating form operates through technology and language in order to accomplish the process of self-expansion of Capital itself. I maintain that these productive relations as organs (realized through technology and language and reproduced through schools and universities) reveal the proper historic way of conceiving of space and time of the human organization concerning a certain determined society. In fact the development of science seems nothing but one form of the development of human productive forces (i.e. wealth) and corresponds to a definite stage of this development³⁴. Generally, within particular production processes, technology as fixed Capital³⁵ is above all meant to be used to exploit nature as much as possible to obtain surplus value and in exploiting workers to obtain

³⁰ Consider the thesis of T. S. Kuhn according to which science would reproduce itself through the activity of scientific communities, not related to social and economic production. This is a complete mystification of reality.

³¹ For further details see the Marxian analysis about the process of accumulation of Capital. Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, pp. 709 ff.; especially, pp. 717-719.

³² This element seems to me to be related to the “vanishing quantity” (*magnitudo evanescens*) of which Marx gives an account in Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 734. for the reference to the transformation of life-time into working-time, see *capital*, vol. I, p. 799.

³³ Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 786.

³⁴ See Marx’s *Grundrisse*, pp. 120-121.

³⁵ As Marx remarks in the *Capital*, vol. III, “Capital is merely circulating in a different form”.

relative surplus value³⁶. But according to my analysis it would be more interesting to approach the question of technology from the point of view of Marx's theory of exchange, by considering what kind of space (conceived, experienced or lived) is configured in the process of circulating Capital. In fact the way of reproducing life, through technology, improving quantitatively and qualitatively the capacity of exploiting spaces in nature, in favour of exchanges, produces new communication skills, modifying language. Changes in the language are one of the first intelligible signs in order to understand the tendency of the process of human organization and it is not a chance that Marx explicitly compare language with money³⁷ as the result of a praxis of the exchange (moreover this question is strictly connected with the problem that Marx and Engels underlined³⁸ pointing out that the primitive forms of organisations should be considered exceptions from historical materialism). I maintain that in order to unify the reflection on language with a history of technology, changes about language should be conceived in terms of time's modifications of living space³⁹.

This statement involves of course the question of the origin of language and could configure some interesting perspectives common to different fields concerning the nature of **space** and **time**. Indeed from a Marxian point of view space and time could be represented as fluid relations determined by the particular stage of development of every single society. They could be defined as a product of social relations and human organization of life. In other words, space and time could be conceived as a **result of praxis**, a particular one, that of exchange⁴⁰.

Conclusion

³⁶ See Marx's Grundrisse, pp. 94-95. Here I avoid to discuss thesis according to which Marx theory of value would be completely wrong, because the question does not concern merely the employment of fixed Capital, but rather the Marxian theory of exchange, by virtue of fixed Capital.

³⁷ See Marx's Grundrisse, p. 71.

³⁸ Engels, Anti-dühring, p. 41; Marx, Engels, The communist manifesto, p. 79 footnote; Marx, Capital, vol. I, p. 471 footnote.

³⁹ See the letter to Annenkov in K. Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy, p. 204 about the acquisition of new productive faculties and its effects on history.

⁴⁰ See also Marx's Grundrisse, pp. 32-33: "Circulation is but a certain aspect of exchange, or it may be defined as exchange considered as a whole. Since exchange is an intermediary factor between production and dependant, distribution, on the one hand, and consumption on the other, and since the latter appears only as a constituent of production, exchange is manifestly also a constituent part of production".

As I emphasized in §1 the critique of philosophy Marx and Engels realized consists in showing 1. the relative truth value of philosophy corresponding to a particular and historically determined society 2. how philosophy represents only one of the aspects of the social consciousness 3. what role philosophy plays in the complex of productive processes, namely in those concerning the reproduction of life. For these reasons it is impossible to accomplish a critique of philosophy without conceiving of dialectical philosophy as a means through which historical materialism explains reality. The latter seems for some aspects a science of philosophy or a meta-philosophy grounded on what Marx called “the process of practical human energy”. Therefore as I tried to show the critique of philosophy is intended by Marx and Engels as a consequence both of a practical ground and of the critique of reality. By applying the concept of “*enérgeia*” to the collective human agents, namely classes, I remarked how a Marxian approach follows real historical processes, by giving general laws of modification of reality in order to liberate exploited people, i.e. to let them know the necessity of real processes in order to change them. As the working class, conceived as productive force, is part of the enormous organism, that is the Capital (*Das Kapital*), it depends on complex relations of which it is aware thanks to the struggle against exploitation. Indeed, as Marx claimed, “productive forces and social relationships are means of Capital”, but the “Capital sets itself up as a mediator between the various labourers and the form of circulating Capital”. By considering the second side of the coin, that of mediation of Capital in its form of circulation, I suggested how a Marxian approach to question of technology and language could open fields of research in order to determine for example the question of nature of space and time, today considered especially from an epistemological or psychological point of view, but that should be regarded from a Marxian point of view as a question concerning the real life.