

Karl Marx as a Philosopher of Human Emancipation*

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ABSTRACT: A crucial element of Marx's edifice is his fight for human emancipation. From the critical analysis of Hegel's political philosophy to the Capital he considers the issue of emancipation and discovers circumstances, in which work and practice of human beings lead to alienation of social relations. The contradiction typical of capitalism becomes overstepped in the revolutionary practice of the proletariat that can fulfil its emancipatory mission breaking consciously through quasi-natural conditions of its social reproduction. Even the revolutionary movements that failed contributed to the "progress of the recognition of freedom" much more than traditional political institutions.

I

From its beginnings of his critical analysis of Hegel to the uncompleted late work *A Critique of Political Economy*, Marx's philosophy is committed to the goal of human emancipation. I should like, therefore, to introduce my hypotheses with a quote of the young Marx from 1843, since it expresses, as it were, the driving motif of his whole philosophical and political activity.

"Every emancipation is a *restoration* of the human world and of human relationships to man himself. Human emancipation will only be complete when the real individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen; when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and in his relationships, he has become a species-being; and when he has recognized and organized his own powers (*forces propres*) as social powers so that he no longer separated his social power from himself as political power." (Marx-Engels 1978, p.46 / MEW 1, 370)

Marx carries on the struggle for emancipation as it was led by bourgeois advocates and their emancipative philosophy which, from humanism *via* the enlightenment right up to idealism, developed step by step into a philosophy of human freedom and historical responsibility. It did so by beginning to lead the discussion of emancipation back to "the world of human beings, to the conditions of people themselves" in order to make individuals aware of their social practice and thus to make it available to them.

But at the same time Marx critically confronts its results at which the bourgeois-emancipatory movement stopped after achieving political power and which bourgeois philosophy legitimised in its most mature form, in Hegel's philosophy of the state of history as the principal end of social development. Hegel's philosophy reveals the limitations of the bourgeois emancipation movement which sees its fulfillment in political liberation alone. In this it documents its inability to overcome new forms of social injustice and repressive circumstances at the same time. Such a philosophy shows what it is to give up critical-emancipatory ideals after the achievement of political demands and to turn what was achieved into affirmation and apology, even if this comes about at the expense of a new class of socially deprived people for whom the emancipation movement of yesteryear has no validity.

Like no other bourgeois philosopher before or after him, Hegel recognised and stated the inner contradictions and strife of bourgeois-capitalist society. He not only - as he says - worked out the dependence and distress of the class tied to work (Hegel 7, 389); he also underlined expressly "that despite an excess of wealth bourgeois society is not rich enough to check excessive poverty and the creation of a penurious rabble" (Hegel 7, 390) since both are incurably renewed by industrial production methods and reproduced to an increasing degree.

Although Hegel sees this basic contradiction in the economic basis and admits that the political state can only mitigate it but never abolish it, he nevertheless proclaims that the bourgeois state is the highest fulfillment of human morality; for here the will of the individual and the will of all come together in a living unity insofar as the political freedom of the individuals is constitutive for modern states, as too the will of all in patriotic sentiments is the basis for the political thinking and action of the individuals.

In his critical analysis of Hegel's philosophy, Marx makes it clear that Hegel not only states a limit of his own thinking, but states the principal limitations of the bourgeois emancipation movement itself. It was always directed only at progress in the awareness of political, constitutional freedom in its intellectual and political struggles; it doesn't realize that it itself must be grateful to an economic development, to the process of the economic independence of citizens through capitalistic production methods. Thus it also can't see that this process which creates civil wealth and freedoms at the same time creates also a new class of socially repressed and exploited people tied to their work whose basic deprivation at the hands of capitalistic production methods cannot be abolished by political or civil freedoms.

The emancipative bourgeois philosophy, politics and pedagogy began with the promise of the liberation and self-fulfilment of all individuals in a democratic society the responsibility for which was born by everybody; and gradually this movement did succeed in realizing political freedoms of the individual and democratic constitutions. However, from Hegel until today, bourgeois philosophy has not reflected upon the connection of political emancipation and economic development. Therefore capitalistic or industrial production methods as a contradiction in the way of the emancipation of all people seem to such a philosophy on the one hand to be an insuperable fact which has to be simply accepted, and on the other the said philosophy considers achieved political freedoms in modern civil states to be already the fulfilment of all possible liberation. Here lies the reason for turning from an emancipatory theory into an apologetic one.

Marx, in contrast, stays with the original, more principle perspective of human emancipation. For him too it is a question of the realization of freedom and morality in a "unity of individual will and the absolute will". But he doesn't at all see these as fulfilled in the modern state. The unity can be achieved, rather, only where the social contradictions and class antagonism produced by capitalistic production methods are overcome. This fulfillment, then, of freedom and morality is still to be achieved; it still has to be fought for by the revolutionary movement of the socially repressed and deprived in a revolt against capitalistic production conditions. The goal of this revolutionary revolt is human emancipation beyond the limits of bourgeois-political emancipation, the building of a solidaric society of free individuals, a humane world society of humanity as such.

In order to show the real conditions of the possibility of such work from the *Paris Manuscripts* of 1844 to the late work *A Critique of Political Economy*, on the critical analysis of the basic contradictions inherently in capitalistic production methods in order to work out the possibility and the necessity of their abolition on the basis of the conditions which made them arise and of the logic of their developmental laws. He demonstrates that the political economy of bourgeois society is by no means

an anthropologically determined, fixed fact, but rather is produced - even if unconsciously - by social practice and therefore in principle can be revolutionized by conscious and solidaric action of individuals.

II

In order to grasp analytically the inherent condition of capitalistic society Marx has to probe, deeper than bourgeois, social philosophy and philosophy of history which, since it only reflects on constitutional freedoms, cannot see the connection of these with the economic basis. The main starting point for Marx's theory after 1844 is social production, work and practice. From the very beginning the unity of these three basic determinants of human survival and action must be underlined. For where these are pulled apart - so that, for example, the working struggle with nature and the communicative practice of human relations are understood to mean anthropologically determined, separate lines of development - we fall back to the level of bourgeois social theories and cannot grasp the elementary contradictions of our present social reality nor find a single possibility of overcoming it.

In its most elementary sense, the concept of social production, work and practice states that it is people themselves who produce their relationship to nature, to other people, and who produce their forms of thinking. Of course, there are conditions dictated by natural history and natural conditions of being human, but these themselves are subject to re-forming in history through social production. Thus social production stands at the center of the dialectic of human beings and nature, insofar as on the one hand human beings as a species are necessarily a part of nature and can only retain and secure their material subsistence in a constant struggle with nature, but on the other hand it is the production and reproduction of our social life through which our relationship to nature is determined and changed in the process of ongoing history.

Furthermore and above all, social production is the basis and the motor of what we call history, for it is people themselves who, by subsisting in society, form their social lives at the same time in all social and cultural, practical and theoretic forms elaborates in the *Foundations of the Critique*: "Not only do the objective conditions change in the act of reproduction, e.g. the village becomes a town, the wilderness a cleared field etc., but the producers change, too, in that they bring out new qualities in themselves, develop themselves in production, transform themselves, develop new powers and ideas, new modes of intercourse, new needs and new language." (Marx 1981, p.494 / MEW 42, 402)

The "individuals who produces in society" by definition - for "production by an isolated individual outside society... is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living together and talking to each other" (Marx 1981, p. 84 / MEW 42, 19) - they create themselves, then, in their social work and practice, the conditions of their cultural definiteness in which they live.

What is decisive here is that Marx from the very beginning is beyond the difficulty of previous political philosophy between Rousseau's social contract of isolated individuals who are supposed to constitute society and Hegel's reason of the absolute will which asserts the general, social ideal with the aid of a trick through the action of the individuals. Marx is beyond this insofar as it is in the social production of individuals that society and individuals are constituted at all; or as Marx puts it in the *Paris Manuscripts*: "just as society itself produces man as man, so is society produced by him" (Marx-Engels 1978, p.85 / MEW 40, 537). Thus the social production of individuals proves to be the driving substance of all history.

But - and here we come back to the decisive problem of Marx's dialectic of history - this production and reproduction of their living conditions through social work and practice of individuals initially

proceeds completely unconsciously in their individually motivated actions, so that to single individuals the respective socially unconsciously produced form of their work and practice do not appear as created production and power conditions and their ideological legitimization retroact as alien powers over acting individuals who actually are their producers. This is what Marx terms alienation and describes in the Foundations as follows:

"As much, then, as the whole of this movement appears as a social process, and as much as the individual moments of this movement arise from the conscious will and particular purposes of individuals, so much does the totality of the process appear as an objective interrelation, which arises spontaneously from nature; arising, it is true, from the mutual influence of conscious individuals on one another, but neither located in their consciousness, nor subsumed under them as a whole. Their own collisions with one another produce an alien social power standing above them, produce their mutual interaction as a process and power independent of them ... The social relation of individuals to one another as a power over the individuals which has become autonomous, whether conceived as a natural force. As chance or in whatever other form, it is a necessary result of the fact that the point of departure is not the free social individual." (Marx 1981, p.196 / MEW 42, 127)

Such alienation and reversal lies at the base of all social formations until now: from the archaic cultures *via* the agrarian states right up to our present industrial societies. In all these formations of spontaneous natural societalisation the "individuals producing in societies" cannot find self-fulfilment as producers of their living conditions; they are, on the contrary, determined by the socially unconsciously created conditions.

But as Marx underlines, the basis for the proof of the principal possibility of overcoming the alienation and false conditions lies in the fact that they can be brought to our attention, discovered. Since the alienation is itself a product of social practice - even if unconscious - it can also be revolutionized, namely through the unified power of individuals who have become conscious, decisive bearers of the society who shape it. Thus Marx formulates, revealing logic of his dialectic of history, in the *Paris Manuscripts*:

"How, we now ask, does man come to alienate, to estrange, his labour? How is this estrangement rooted in the nature of human development? We have already gone a long way to the solution of this problem by transforming the question as to the origin of private property into the question as to the relation of alienated labour to the course of humanity's development. For when one speaks of private property, one thinks of being concerned with something external to man. When one speaks of labour, one is directly concerned with man himself. This new formulation of the question already contains its solution." (Marx-Engels 1978, p.80 / MEW 40, 521f.)

Summarizing we can say: the social practice of individuals is substantially the basis of all history, but as long as this practice runs in a spontaneous-natural fashion, i.e. the social individuals are not conscious of themselves as social beings or of the social responsibility of their actions, what they created and create will be experienced as if it were the consequence of a natural law, having become so by necessity, and so as something which determines them and rules over them. Only when such individuals become conscious of their alienation can they revolutionize the conditions alienating them and begin to take the shaping of such a process of becoming conscious, to lead the process as a bearer of social practice.

The stringency of this dialectic of history lies in the fact that Marx sees that social production i.e. *via* the individuals now conscious and acting together, to overcome the alienation caused by us ourselves. Only in this Marxian conception does the dialectic become a historical one and become what Hegel had only assured: substance, which is the base of all history, becoming a subject, in

which becoming a subject does not mean only theoretic understanding but consciously planned social production, work and practice of consciously unified subjects: only through this will human emancipation be brought about.

III

Also all the late writings of Marx, the uncompleted mammoth undertaking of A Critique of Political Economy, bases on this basic idea of the dialectic of history. This can be demonstrated: from the texts of the various drafts of the *Critique* and from its fragment of *The Capital*. But mostly people do not realize that Marx is trying to uncover here the logic of capitalistic production methods as a logic of alienation which rules over civil society. The *Critique* is a negative theory, i.e. the reconstruction of capitalistic production methods in the logic of its developmental laws is carried out in order to prove that the capital has to perish necessarily from its own consistent, logical development.

In the total project of the *Critique* Marx is not, as in his early writings, after the dialectic proof of the possibility of alienation which at the same time makes the conditions of the possibility of its abolishment visible. But he tacitly presupposes this proof when he, following the immanent logic of the capital, works out its inherent contradiction. From the first sentence of *The Capital* - "The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities" (Marx 1990, p.23 / MEW 23, 49) - to the anticipated end perspective of the *Critique* towards the end of the first volume of *The Capital* - "But capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a law of Nature, its own negation. It is the negation of the negation." (Marx 1990, p.662 / MEW 23, 791) - his whole analysis of the capital moves without exception in the immanent reconstruction of the logic of capital, which is a logic of alienation and absurdity.

The elementary contradiction of capitalistic production methods lies in the fact that individuals acting in society allow themselves to be determined and ruled over by the logic of the capital; but the capital is nothing but accumulated, objectified work which in itself is dead and which procures all its power and movement alone from the incorporation of its laws of movement and development, however, the capital acts as if it existed in its own right and was itself productive, and it is exactly through this that it carries on the continued and continuing negation of living work - and so too of living individuals who actually are the existential basis of all social life.

If the *Critique of Political Economy* is not understood from its undertaking to demonstrate negatively that the capital can never bring about the fulfillment of human practice in the development of its logic, then its negative, theoretic character is misconstrued, from the very beginning. He who reads *The Capital*, then, as ontological existence analysis or as a foundation of a new economic misunderstands its theoretic approach just as much as those leftist critics who, for example, miss a fundamental phenomenology of human work in *The Capital* as too of the variety of human life, and who therefore reproach Marx of economism; they only show that they have not grasped the meaning of the negative and descriptive analysis of *The Capital*.

Thus there can be no positive talk of revolutionary practice inside of the *Critique*. It is clear that the capital must perish from its own contradiction - that can be demonstrated in the logic of the capital in its growing contradictions - , but that this self-destructive tendency will not end in chaos and barbarism; that it will eventually lead to a solidaric society which will overcome capitalistic production methods. All that is not at all to be deduced from the contradictions of the capital. This will alone be the work of individuals who have become aware of the alienating logic of the capital and have revolted against it together; but the negative, descriptive analysis of capital cannot treat of this positively.

Thus we can see - even if indirectly - that the existing dialectic of history already in the *Paris Manuscripts* forms too the theoretic basis of the *Critique*, although it cannot be a direct theme in *The Capital* since it is here a question of the structural laws of alienated form determination in social production alone. But the social production of living individuals forms the basis, substantially, of society dominated by the capital, and this is what finally is the decisive contradiction for the capital which cannot be overcome: for the more the capital makes of itself the "automatic subject" of social development, the more it takes away the acting individuals on which it itself depends. In its logic of alienation the capital has to perish from its own contradictions in any case. But this "in any case" is not dependent on the capital; it is dependent on the individuals now aware of their social practice and their solidaric liberation movement, for only in this way can social practice which forms the base of all history substantially become a subject i.e. only in this way can socially acting individuals become subjects of their own social practice and of history.

IV

In the integration of the gigantic, uncompleted project of the *Critique* in the context of his dialectic of history it becomes clear that the *Critique*, which Marx carried on more and more doggedly and exclusively from 1857 until his death, even if it had been finished, only represents a fragment - even if a necessary one - of his dialectic of history. The critical analysis of the basic contradictions of existing society and its development tendencies is an essential aspect in the concretion of Marx's theory which does not only have to be continued according to the development of society so far as a *Critique of Political Economy*, including a theory of the state and of world economy, but also has to be extended inside and outside the theory towards a critique of everyday life and of political ecology, which should also comprise social practice in the family and in education, in science and technology - just to name a few examples.

But even in such a circumspect extension the critique of capitalistic production methods in its logic of contradiction which dominates all societal life is only one task in the continuation of Marxian theory. The second concrete task at its side must be the further development of revolution theory. It is well known that Marx did not develop this second side of his dialectic of history, which as shown cannot be treated in the *Critique*, beyond some elementary sketches; but that does not mean that he gave this up, as some maintain, but pursues them in his political and historical writings and political-practical statements until his death. Lenin, Trotzki, Luxemburg, Gramsci, Lukacz, Reich, Marcuse, Lefebvre tried to close the gap Marx left behind in working out the question of the revolutionary class, of the formation of class consciousness and of the organisation of a revolutionary movement etc.

But we shall try here, without referring to these further developments, to show the contours of Marxian revolution theory in its general constitution, because only through it can the project of human emancipation be fulfilled. After 1844 there is no doubt for Marx that the proletariat is the revolutionary class which will bring about human emancipation, led by the communists i.e. by that group of proletarians and intellectuals who have become conscious of the essential necessity of a revolutionisation of capitalistic production methods and who have joined together towards the goal of building up a revolutionary movement.

The fact that human emancipation can only come about *via* a revolutionisation of alienated social conditions through those affected by it, through the real bearers of social production, is laid down in the foundation of the dialectic of history. Marx deduces the fact that only the proletariat can be the revolutionary class in capitalistic society negatively from the *Critique of Political Economy*: the proletariat, the class of wage-earners, is the real bearer of capitalistic production, the Capital only lives on the basis of the exploitation of their living work; the more the Capital spreads out and seizes

all social life, the more people become wage-earners dependent on the Capital: the inherent contradictions of capitalistic development, which are reflected in recurring and growing crises, hit wage-earners existentially: therefore it is they - since they experience the explosive contradictions of capitalistic production methods directly - who first must be interested in abolishing the existing conditions; at the same time it is they who not only form the majority of people but also who really have all capitalistic production in their hands; if unified, they have the power to stop the whole capitalistic production process at any time; of course some leadership of the majority of the proletariat by a group of communists, by theoretically educated proletarians and intellectuals with affinity to their cause.

Marx did not elaborate more on his revolution theory, because he was convinced of his *Critique* would incite the proletarians in masses to join the revolutionary communist movement and convince them of the necessity of the revolutionary communist movement and convince them of the necessity of the revolutionary path to human emancipation. Thus Marx wrote in the *German Ideology*: "In the development of productive forces there comes a stage when productive forces and means of intercourse are brought into being, which, under the existing relationships, only cause mischief, and are no longer productive but destructive forces (machinery and money); and connected with this a class is called forth, which has to bear all the burdens of society without enjoying its advantages, which, ousted from society, is forced into the most decided antagonism to all other classes; a class which forms the majority of all members of society, and from which emanates the consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution, the communist consciousness, which may, of course, arise among the other classes too through the contemplation of the situation of this class." (Marx-Engels 1978, p. 192 / MEW 3, 69)

V

Summarising and with a view to our present problems we can sketch finally in three points the basic and lasting elements of the Marxian philosophy of human emancipation in careful contrast with Hegel's philosophy of history.

1. Against Hegel's understanding of world history as a "progress in the consciousness of freedom" which asserts itself as a "trick of reason" behind the backs of individuals, but also independently through their subjective interests, the young Marx underlines: "Reason has always existed, only not always in reasonable form... out of this conflict of the political state with itself, therefore, one can develop social truth" (Marx-Engels 1978, p.14 / MEW 1, 345). The inherent reason in human practice is the base of all history, in this there is complete agreement between Marx and Hegel, but, as Marx goes on to say, if it is left to itself it does not at all necessarily naturally lead to progress in the consciousness of freedom, but rather, just because it works in natural unconsciousness, creates many forms of alienation, produces both forms of repression and exploitation of people by people and destruction of nature.

As long as individuals only pursue in practice their own interests, so that socio-historical development asserts itself behind their backs as a power alien to them and as a law, so long will they not make any progress towards freedom and morality, but on the contrary the unconsciously produced condition, the economic, technical, state-bureaucratic, cybernetic facticities will more and more limit the decision horizon of subjects and exert alien power over them. It is exactly the present worldwide expansion of the industrialization process which shows us to what extent we are caught up in a progressing mechanism not exactly proceeding according to moral principles and whose partly devastating consequences for those starving in the Third World, for the raw material resources of a future generation, for the protection of the circulation in the biosphere, we grasp, but whose

consequences we have not been able to limit even with international counter-measures.

Despite this we can have the more elementary hope that we can halt these catastrophic development tendencies; for since all these economic, technical, governmental, scientific mechanisms are - even if unconsciously produced - themselves products of human practice and not of natural laws, they can in principle be overcome by human practice. This, however, presupposes subjects who have become conscious of their present, social situation and of their responsibility for the history of the world, and so who are prepared, together with others and each in his field, to halt this dangerous machinery and to work towards moral co-existence of human beings - Marx called this "revolutionary practice."

2. Now this demands a basically different philosophy, not one which sees itself as a post-reflective justification of self-fulfilling education process, as Hegel describes in the famous introduction to the *Philosophy of Right* with the picture of the owl of Minerva who only begins its flight "at the break of dusk". (Hegel 7, 28) No, for Marx philosophy is rather comparable to the "harsh cry of the Gallic rooster" in the aurora of a new age. (MEW 1, 391) Its grasp of previous history and presence is not post-reflective completion but conscious new beginning interested in the task of world history. In its own possibility of becoming conscious and making conscious, it understands itself as a practical moment of history open to decision, and so it is not satisfied with mere knowledge, but sees its task in rejuvenating. This philosophy knows that it is not only a question of interpreting past history, but rather that all depends on taking effect on the conditions through conscious work towards - as Marx says - "a human society or social humanity."

A philosophy which serves human emancipation in this way becomes criticism, no longer looks at history as a bystander seeing it fulfils itself of its own accord, but interferes in conflicts and struggles of the presence and stands up for those suffering from the existing conditions - in the West and in the East and elsewhere, because such a philosophy follows - as Marx says - "the categorical imperative to overthrow all those conditions in which man is an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being" (Marx-Engels 1978, p.60 / MEW 1, 385).

In principle this philosophy understands history as a process which has not yet been decided, but which, left to blind natural forces, is moving through unconscious human practice towards a ruinous future for human beings and nature; but there is still time for humanity to fall consciously into the arm leading it unconsciously. And here is the great historic task of the philosophy which is not concerned in its philosophical analysis with the confirmation of facticities or proclaiming some expectations of salvation, but - quite in the style of Kant - with the enlightenment of those concerned on the subject of their historic position and responsibility for history. For there can only be progress in the realisation of freedom and morality, in human emancipation, where there is insight and a struggle against opposing forces.

3. The result of this is a completely different picture of history and idea of an awareness of it. Not only the future progress in the realisation of freedom and morality depends on conscious, solidaric practice of those acting in the present, but also all preceding progress has by no means grown out of a "trick" of an anonymous reason but is the result of a historical emancipation movement; not in a linear fashion we might say - for this the opposing forces at all times were too strong - but below the surface the ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity took effect from the communism of early Christianity through the early protestant movement right up to the civil revolution and the socialist movement, but they cannot be put in deep-freeze, for they still take effect beyond that today in many social conflicts. These emancipation movements are essentially the bearers of progress in consciousness and in the realisation of freedom and not the states - as Hegel thought - which at best

codified in law what the former gained by their fighting efforts.

Thus it becomes clear that it is not first we who have to see a practice responsible for world history, if we want to have hope at all in history, for there has always been such a historically motivated practice. In this identification of the individual desire for liberation with anticipated morality in humanity, as reflected in emancipation movements, comes into being what one - putting a Hegelian concept onto its feet - can call the substantial reason of history becoming a subject. Directed to the still unfulfilled, but desired unity of individual will and the will of all in a solidaric society, these movements already fulfil partially such unity and thus create step by step the responsibility horizon of individuals for the history of humanity and of the world.

And this is not only the empty moral imperative of a humanitarian ideal which is broken by the real power of states - as Hegel says polemically against Kant's essay *Towards Eternal Peace* - but *vice versa* the world-historic unity striven for in the concrete emancipation movements is stronger than every nationalistic temper and every state framework because in them the substance of history itself becomes a subject in the individuals who stand up for it. Not only martyrs who withstood all kinds of torture are testimony for a more humane world, also the revolutionary movements who, even where they failed, aided the cause of "progress in the consciousness of freedom" more significantly than state constitutions ever could. Not in party politics, but with a vision for the responsibility for history, a philosophy of human emancipation in the sense Marx meant has to take part in the fray.

(translated by Allan Smith)

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