

Marx, Lukács and the ontological foundation of the social classes

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Abstract: What is the ontological articulation between labour (metabolical interchange man-nature) and abstract labour in Marx and Lukács? How does the relationship man-nature play the role of founding category of social being in modern capitalistic societies? What are the similarities and distinctions between wage earners and proletariat? These are the questions this paper addresses.

In vast areas of the academic intellectuality, of syndical organizations and even of left political organizations, the current counterrevolutionary period is taken - face value -- as the demonstration that labour would no more be central for social life. A political situation (even if serious and long for decades) is assumed, without questionings, as the demonstration of the falsehood of the Marxian conception of the ontological centrality of labour.

There are always problems of methodological order when ontological determinations are deduced, direct and immediately, from the sphere of politics. To begin with, the Marxian conception of labour as the founding category of social being (as "the necessary condition (...) the everlasting Nature-imposed condition of human existence"¹) only makes sense along with the recognition that workers were not the political decisive class in pre-capitalist societies. In Marx and Lukács, the centrality of labour elapses from the decisive "ontological verification" that without the organic exchange with the nature there is no sociality whatsoever -- and it does not elapse from the political centrality of labouring classes along the whole history.

Another reasoning affirms that the transformations in production processes in the last two or three decades would have essentially changed the relationship between productive structure and social classes.

¹ Labour as "the necessary condition for effecting exchange of matter between man and Nature; it is the everlasting Nature-imposed condition of human existence, and therefore is independent of every social phase of that existence, or rather, is common to every such phase." (Marx, 1979:183-4)

From the reorganization of production in factories and services is incorrectly assumed the merging or fusion between the productive and the unproductive labour and between manual and intellectual labour. These two factors would have converted all wage earners into the same social class. Such conception, under the most varied forms, is present in all theories that propose the proletariat to be "workers" as doctors, administrators, engineers, teachers, social workers, the marketing professionals, public employees and so on.²

In opposition to all these views, I would like to submit what follows.

Without the transformation of nature there is no social reproduction. Because of this, any social formation as a whole and all of its social praxis, "direct or indirectly" (Lukács, 1981:135), arise from the new needs and possibilities unceasingly produced in the organic exchange with the nature. Therefore, labour is the social being's founding category, as we already mentioned.

In opposition, all social praxis that are not labour transform – not nature -- but social causality. From here arises the known distinction by Lukács between the primary and secondary teleological inputs (*teleologische Setzung*). While labour transforms nature, the secondary teleological input transforms a causality whose continuity depends on the concrete individuals' singular actions. What means that the ideological dimension is, in the praxis that are not labour, not just in the side of subject, but also in the causality to be transformed.

This elementary ontological situation makes the objectivation in labour much different from the objectivations of all other praxis. Labour inputs "causal connections" that are the material reproduction of the society. Every other praxis, every secondary ontological input, unchains "causal connections" that are pure social relations, that are purely relations between human beings.

When we achieved industrial capitalism this situation goes through a significative change because abstract labour makes much more complex the relationship between labour and social totality. Though, the essence of that relationship goes unchanged.

Labour and abstract labour

² Among the most important texts in this Field, we find Braverman, 1981; Bottomore, 1992; Gallie, 1998; Mallet, 1963; Belleville, 1963.

What makes labour a very singular category is its social function: to assist the need, primary and indispensable, of transforming nature in use-values. It is in this sense that Marx and Lukács argue the material production to be the founding moment of social reproduction.

The case of Law is exemplar: it appeared to assist the need for organizing a society divided in social classes so as to guarantee private property and the exploitation of man by man. Its role is of such an importance in class societies that in its absence we could not have the slave labour, nor the medieval labour, nor yet the proletarian labour. Law is so an indispensable social complex to the exploitation of man by man that without it we could not have slavery, serfdom or proletarian labour.

So, much today as in the past, to organize labour is not the same as to transform nature. To organize was always and stays indispensable to exploit labour, but it is not labour. Because – to make short a long history - the objectivation of the acts that seek the organization and the control of labour are always secondary teleological inputs and, never, primary ones.

Sure, every secondary teleological input is founded by labour (organic exchange between man and nature); not less true is that every primary teleological input requires the complex of secondary teleological inputs that corresponds to it (the ideology). So, without the medieval conception of world (*Weltanschauung*) cannot take place the daily actions of servile labour, without the bourgeois world conception proletarian labour would not happen, etc. Therefore, there is a rigorous need between labour and the ideological complexes, in the sense of *Weltanschauung*. This need, however, exists only because labour is the founding moment of every ideological complex (with all the rich and articulated mediations in each case), -- and not because the secondary teleological input is labour.

In the capitalist society of our days, two factors should be considered with all their mediations:

1) abstract labour refers to the surplus-value production, in other words, it is "productive labour" of surplus-value or "unproductive" of surplus-value (Marx, 1975:531-2). Since an enormous amount of activities was converted in abstract labour, and since the fundamental of the organic exchange with nature is ruled by capital under the form of abstract labour, the daily overlap of abstract labour and labour is such that resembles an identity;

2) in spite of that, without the transformation of nature, there is no capitalism. Just as in the pre-capitalists societies, labour, the organic exchange with nature, remains the “everlasting Natur-imposed condition of human existence” (Marx, 1979b:184). In other words, the regency of capital should not take

us to disregard that, without the transformation of nature by labour there is no capital. Between labour and abstract labour there is an overlap, never an identity. If the reproduction of capital absorbs in its circuit of valorization good part of labour (organic exchange with nature), this doesn't mean that we have an identity between the valorization of capital and the reproduction of the society. Labour is an "everlasting (...) condition" of human life, the abstract labour just a "condition" for the capitalist society.

Abstract labour and capital

Due to this fundamental distinction between labour and abstract labour, we must exam another aspect of the question: abstract labour contains/encompass different relationships with capital. A portion of abstract labour produces surplus-value and, another part, does not. To distinguish these two moments Marx used the categories of productive and unproductive abstract labour. This is a first differentiation inside abstract labour: from the point of view of capital, abstract labour can, or can not, produce surplus-value.

The second important differentiation is that surplus-value can be produced in the organic exchange with nature (primary teleological input) as out of it (secondary teleological input). Marx gives a well known example the school-master (Marx, 1975:532). In this example, the production of surplus-value happens without transformation of nature: money people had in their pockets is used as payment of the school monthly fees, and became capital in the bourgeois purse. The total wealth of society remains precisely the same, not a grain of it was added by this exchange of money between the consumer's pocket and the capitalist's purse.

Something very different happens with the labour of the proletariat: when transforming nature, the proletariat produces a before inexistent wealth. The total amount of social wealth is added with every minute of proletarian labour because, when converting nature in social goods, it produces the "substance of all wealth" (*stofflichen Inhalt des Reichtums* - Marx, 1975:50; Marx, 1979:36)

So, besides the distinction between productive and unproductive abstract labour, there is this second differentiation: not everything that produces surplus-value produces the "substance of all wealth", and, so, not everything that produces surplus-value is labour, is the organic exchange with the nature. Just as there is no identity between abstract labour and labour, but just an overlap, we also have just an overlap between the production of surplus-value and the production of the "substance of all wealth". If every

organic exchange with nature under the regency of capital produces surplus-value when producing the “substance of all wealth”, nor all production of the surplus-value transforms nature in the “substance of all wealth”

Just as in the pre-capitalist formations, also today the whole society lives on the appropriation of the "substance of all wealth" produced by those who convert nature into indispensable material goods. The school-master can produce surplus-value only after proletarians have produced the “substance of all wealth” under the form of surplus-value.

Therefore (and without denying the great innovations that capitalism brought in this area), our society also knows the ontological dependence of the totality of social life on the organic exchange with nature. Like pre-capitalist societies, today the "substance of all wealth" is produced by the transformation of nature (or, as in Lukács, by the "primary teleological input"). Labour is the founding category of pre-capitalist formations as much as it is of nowadays capitalism.

Labour, abstract labour, proletarians and workers

If we are correct in our delimitation of the relationship between labour and abstract labour, there are three aspects that deserve a careful exam:

1) the relationship between the manual and intellectual labour. Being labour a primary teleological input it necessarily is manual labour, for, as we find in Marx, "(...) just as a man requires lungs to breathe with, so he requires something that is work of man's hand, in order to consume forces of the nature productively". (Marx, 1979: 386) Labour, the founding category that produces "the substance of all wealth" is, always and necessarily, manual labour.

2) the relationship between capital and the proletarian labour, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This is an exploitation relationship in which proletarian's labour force is converted into merchandise and, under the form of abstract labour, produces the "substance" of the peculiar form of wealth that capital is. By the proletarians' exploitation we have the production of capital – without the wealth produced by the proletarian labour, therefore, it would be impossible the accumulation of surplus-value through secondary teleological input (as in the teacher of a private school example (Marx, 1979:509). Also in this sense, even under capitalism the organic exchange men-nature remains the founding category of social being.

3) the relationship between the proletarian's labour and the non-proletarians wage earners. If all "substance" of wealth is produced by the proletarian labour, the necessary consequence is that the non-proletarian wages come from the extracted surplus-value of the proletarian labour. In other words, the unique social class that lives from its own labour is the proletarian class. All the other classes – non-proletarian wage earners and the bourgeoisie -- live (direct or indirectly) of the exploitation of the proletarian labour. And because of this, all these classes have in common private property of the means of production as their condition of existence.

4) the distinct relationships between bourgeoisie and non-proletarians wage earners with the proletariat. Both the bourgeoisie and the non-proletarians wage earners exploit the proletariat. The bourgeoisie has the historical potency to exploit directly the proletariat by extracting the surplus-value. The non-proletarians wage earners, however, have not this social power and must live from the surplus-value that the bourgeoisie has extracted from the proletariat. This sets a contradiction between the non-proletarian wage earners and the bourgeoisie: the last one try to transfer to the first as little wealth as possible, the wage earners try to get as much as they can. This contradiction, of course, is not an antagonistic one (as it is between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie) for what is at stake is not private property but the amount of wealth to be transferred to the non-proletarian wage earners through the level of their salaries.

To conclude: when we consider going beyond capital, the proletarian centrality is decisive. It is the only class that has anything to lose – but its chains - with *Aufhebung* of private property.

The more immediate and visible theoretical consequence of the theories that dissolve the proletarians among the wage earners is the loss of the revolutionary subject. And then it is necessary less than a step to transit from the *Aufhebung* of the private property to the distribution of income, in other words, to transit from the revolutionary horizon to the social-democratic one.

The less visible – but not less important -- theoretical consequence is that these theories abandon the Marxian theory of labour (the organic exchange with nature) as founding category of social being in favor of conceptions that include in labour also the secondary teleological input, the intellectual labour. They somehow enlarge the conception of labour so as to encompass both the primary teleological input (manual labour, the organic exchange with nature) and also the secondary teleological input (the intellectual labour).

Today, it is necessary to recover, these rich and mediated relationships between labour (as the founding category of social being, the organic exchange man-nature) and the proletariat as the revolutionary subject. Without the Marxian-Lukácsian conception on this topic, it will be very difficult – if not impossible—to conceive a revolutionary project for our days.

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