

The abstract/concrete relation in the method of political economy¹

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Introduction.

Marx's method is a topic of special relevance for the development of Marxist theory. I do not mean the overall relevance of the method as an essential moment of all scientific research, but to the specific nature of its current relevance for Marxism, due to the consequences of the pronounced difference between the philosophical bases of Marxism and the bases of the dominant, non-Marxist science. The philosophical basis of Marxism is materialism, understood as a philosophical current, as opposed to idealism, the philosophical basis of non-Marxist science. Its method is dialectical logic, in opposition to the dominant formal logic³. Given the absolute dominance of idealism and formal logic in the scientific *establishment* of capitalist societies, which furthermore is projected over common sense forms of thinking in general, and given the smaller number of materialists and of Marxist researchers within these milieus, it is not hard to understand the difficulties that emerge for the apprehension of the particularities of Marxist philosophy and method, but also the possibility of its distorted apprehension resulting from the dominant influence of an antithetical mode of thought⁴.

The faulty apprehension of Marx's theoretical method shows itself, in the first place, in the methodological deficiencies of Marxist theoretical production, and secondly, in the scarcity of texts that deal with problems of method⁵. In Brazilian economic literature, in which Marxist production is modestly represented, this insufficiency is obviously more pronounced. One cause of this is the insufficient in-depth discussion on the topic, in contrast with its complexity and with the variety of relevant aspects and angles of reflection that it entails. Given the complexity of the subject, a paper must limit itself to the analysis of just a few aspects of it. Taking this into account, the main object of the present article is the significance and relevance of the concepts of the concrete and the abstract in Marx's method, as applied to Political Economy.

Given the limitations inherent to a writing in article format, I will not be able either to cover my topic completely, for example, through a more exhaustive exploration of texts cited, or to do an in-depth analysis of certain important aspects of Marx's method and their implications, such as dialectics and the meaning of its polemic historical and logical character. I am also unable to make reference to important methodological references from some of Marx's other works, such as *Capital* itself and *Theories of Surplus Value*, nor of some of Engels' essential works and those of other Marxist authors. For the sake of caution and method, the present text will basically explore Marx's (and Engels's) early methodological works.

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³ There is a difference between these two distinctions, since materialism and idealism are mutually exclusive, whereas dialectical logic incorporates formal logic within it.

⁴ An expressive example is the so-called Analytical Marxism, an unpalatable Marxism that is based on methodological individualism, the philosophical opposite of Marxism. See its defense in Roemer (1989) and its critique in Wood (1989) and Lebowitz (1994), among others. An interesting example of the determining influence of the dominant mode of thinking on the criteria of thought is Oliveira's (1997) article, which seeks to evaluate aspects of Marx's method – based on materialism and dialectics – using the criteria of the opposite method – based on idealism and formal logic – which causes him to use contradiction only as a particular case of formal logic. In my view the evaluation of one theory using the criteria of another theory that is based on opposite premises is innocuous.

⁵ In a brief survey of the most important Brazilian economic journals over the last decade, I was able to identify the following articles devoted to the method in Marx: Oliveira (1997), Paula (1994), Paulani (1994) Saad Filho (1997) and Silvestre and Calazans (1995).

One cause of the difficulties that are frequently attributed to the discussion of Marx's method stems from the fact that Marx himself never wrote an explicit and unequivocal work on that subject. In saying this, I am also implying that his one text bearing this subject as its title – MPE⁶ – is insufficient as an exposition of his method. It is possible, however, that one of the sources of difficulties is the controversy amongst Marx scholars, with regard to the degree of rupture or continuity in the evolution of Marx's thought, beginning with his first writings from the early 1840s. This polemic seems to have been unleashed with the 1960s publication of his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 (EPM). Nonetheless, Marx wrote a number of texts of an eminently philosophical and methodological nature at the beginning of his activities, as will be shown, thus leaving no reason to give such particular attention to the EPM⁷. If we follow the sequence of these texts we can find a clear and satisfactory exposition of the philosophical and methodological principles that form the groundwork for his theoretical work in the years that follow. The analysis of this sequence of texts supplies significant arguments regarding the existence of an essential continuity in Marx's work, based on the methodological principles that he devoted himself to defining in the early years of his career. Furthermore, these texts, when taken together, seem to supply quite a complete exposition of the essential aspects of his method. One of Marx's statements, in the preface to the CPE, published in 1859, is a significant confirmation of this continuity. In this passage Marx discusses the result of his methodological studies, beginning with his critique of Hegel's philosophy of right through the texts he elaborated in Brussels – the important TF and GI, explaining that this general result, "once reached, became the guiding principle of my studies" (CPE, p. 20/100). The fact that Marx made this statement in 1859, almost 15 years after writing the works he refers to, and after having prepared the first general draft of *Capital* in the form of the *Grundrisse*, is quite significant.

The chronological sequence of the texts shows that Marx's most important methodological writings, during the forties – the GI, TF, HF and PPh, in this order – were written after the first two initial texts in which he defined his position regarding two fundamental aspects of method. These texts are *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* and the EPM. In the first work, Marx situates himself clearly within the philosophical terrain of materialism, based on the critique of Hegel's idealism⁸. In the EPM, Marx makes his first endeavor in the critique of Political Economy, as represented mainly in the works of Smith and Ricardo. He points out that his critique is based on the concepts developed by Political Economy itself, but adopting the contradiction between private property and labor as the cornerstone of his analysis. Marx concludes that Political Economy, in spite of its recognition of labor as the source of value, positions itself completely on the side of private property. He also makes it clear that the labor that Classical Political Economy refers to is not labor in general, but labor in the particular form of alienated labor, that is, labor subjugated by capital. The procedure that Marx follows, by reworking the analysis of Classical Political Economy through the utilization its own concepts, but from the point of view of labor, enables him to reveal the contradictory class interests that are at the root of capitalism.

⁶ Marx's most frequently cited methodological texts are identified in this paper with the initials of their title words in English, as indicated in my bibliography. Wherever possible, I have consulted the original German versions as well as the translations into English. The first set of page numbers cited pertain to the translated versions, the second to the German original. Some of the quotations from English translations, however, have been extracted from internet sites, in which case their page locations cannot be identified.

⁷ Upon a first evaluation, it is not obvious that the EPM contribute in an important way to our understanding of Marx's method. Rather, it seems that the way Marx deals with alienation and alienated labor constitute the strongest basis for the debates occurring at the appearance of the English edition.

⁸ "The first work which I undertook to dispel the doubts assailing me was a critical re-examination of the Hegelian philosophy of law (...). My inquiry led me to the conclusion that neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended whether by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind, but that on the contrary they originate in the material conditions of life, the totality of which Hegel, following the example of English and French thinkers of the eighteenth century, embraces within the term "civil society"; [and to the conclusion - CMG] that the anatomy of this civil society, however, has to be sought in political economy" (CPE, Preface/100).

In the texts that he then went on to write, Marx took his critique of idealism further and perfected his conception of materialism, benefiting from the rigorous critique of naturalist materialism provided by Feuerbach, the author who introduced him into the critique of Hegelian idealism. The chapters on method, in HF and PPh, are essential in clarifying the sources of the idealism's methodological errors (especially with regard to the use of abstraction as a method) and on the way of conceiving of knowledge of reality from a materialist point of view. But it is in the first chapter of GI – the most important text of this phase, from a methodological perspective – that Marx and Engels set up the groundwork for their own view of the method for the analysis of social evolution. A scarce ten years later, in 1857, Marx elaborates his important MPE. In this work, although there are no conceptual innovations, Marx systematizes the process of theoretical elaboration in economics, through the application of the principles of a general materialist philosophic conception, as developed in the aforementioned earlier works.

This article seeks to analyze Marx's method as applied to the economy. Although this method constitutes an application of general principles to a particular field of knowledge, to which Marx arrived exactly in this order, it does not appear to be the most appropriate order for the exposition of his results. In this text I will take the opposite route, from the method applied to the economy to general principles, so that the latter will be put forth as a justification and foundation for the method of economics.

On the method of research of the economy, or the dialectics of the abstract and the concrete

In the MPE Marx formulates a proposition that becomes the synthesis of his method, based on a materialist and dialectic conception of reality. According to this proposition, the process of knowing, in economics, is carried out over two stages. The first begins with the population

and moves “from th[is] imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations. From there the journey would have to be retraced [which is the second stage - CMG] until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as a chaotic conception of the whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations” (MPE, p. 100/36).

To this, Marx adds:

“The latter [i.e., the journey from the abstractions to the concrete] is obviously the scientifically correct method. The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many diterminations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation [Anschauung] and conception” (ibid., p. 101).

The terms abstract and concrete, a part of the German philosophical terminology up to Hegel, have different meanings in Hegel and Marx. In a first approach the abstract refers to a concept produced through the so-called method of abstraction, which consists of extracting - as a mental representation - a specific part or aspect of the perceivable reality⁹ (Inwood, p. 41). It is in this sense that Marx uses the term. The abstract is therefore a product of thought, which consists of the mental representation of an isolated element of empirical reality, as it is directly reflected in thought. In this sense the abstract constitutes an elementary stage in knowledge but it is not knowledge itself, since the latter cannot be reduced to the representation of one or several isolated aspects of reality. Knowledge consists of the

⁹ As an alternative, “abstraction” can be defined as a process through which non-essential characteristics are eliminated from a group of phenomena, preserving the general characteristic that is common to all of them.

concrete, that is, of the apprehension of the object under analysis as the whole of parts which are interrelated in a particular way, or in the internal structure of the object¹⁰.

In the beginning of the aforementioned text, Marx asserts that the correct method for economics, at a first glance, *seems* to mean to start from the “real and concrete”, such as the population of a country and its quantitative distribution in classes, or between the city and the countryside, or in different branches of production. But he goes on to observe that population, understood in such terms, is an abstraction, and an empty concept to the extent that we leave out the classes of which it is made up and the elements that support the latter, such as wage labor, capital, etc. (MPE, p. 122/35-36).

Population comes up twice in his argument, and both times he makes mention of the classes that compose it. However, it appears the first time in a way that Marx considers inadequate, although not so the second time. This provides an apparent contradiction. The explanation for this is that in the first instance classes appear as mere numerical subdivisions of the population, alongside the subdivisions of city and countryside, in branches of production, etc., whereas in the second classes are constituting elements of the population, and referred to their bases in labor and capital, among others, thus expressing organic connections. Therefore, although in the first instance population is the real presupposition, it is “an abstraction”, since it constitutes the mental representation of an isolated aspect of a complex whole¹¹. Thus, the population as a point of departure “would be a chaotic conception [Vorstellung] of the whole” (ibid, p. 100/36).

The meaning of the concept of the concrete, in Marx’s exposition, requires a more detailed discussion based on two essential distinctions. The first consists of the distinction between the *real concrete* and the *concrete in thought*, understood respectively as point of departure and result of the process of knowing. The concept of the concrete can only be appropriately applied to the second meaning, in the specific sense that reality is comprehended or interpreted by thought as an organic whole. The second distinction is a consequence of Marx’s materialist conception and refers to the concrete as a point of departure. This should be understood in a twofold sense. In the first sense it represents material reality, which exists independently of thought and is its presupposition. This is the appropriate meaning of the expression *real concrete*, because it designates the really existing material or empirical world, which is the real point of departure of all thought. However, the point of departure of the *process of elaboration of knowledge*¹², as indicated by Marx, is the real concrete as mental representation, in other words, as an expression of the immediate perception of reality by way of the senses, given that this perception is a chaotic representation of the whole. To designate this representation as the *sensorial concrete* seems appropriate (Dicionário, 1984, p. 6; Inwood, p. 41).

There is a certain imprecision in the way the concept of the concrete has been used in the literature. The meaning that Marx gives to the concrete is the representation of the intelligible real, which implies a notion of totality as a synthesis of many linked elements, or many determinations, as in the above quotation. In this case Marx uses it as a category of the mind rather than of empirical reality¹³. Hegel expresses himself in an identical fashion, at least in the following passage: “... the idea is essentially concrete, given that it is the unity of distinct determinations” (Hegel, p. 103). The identification of the Latin term *concretus*, from which it originates, makes its meaning clearer: “formed or arisen from aggregation” (Inwood, p. 41). Although it seems that Marx coincides with Hegel in conceiving of the

¹⁰ “Concrete knowledge of reality is only possible if the parts, abstracted from the whole through thought, are rearticulated in the concrete whole.” (Corazza, p. 38)

¹¹ The abstraction, in this case, is the representation of the population as a simple numerical aggregate of parts according to different classification criteria. The numerical aggregates thus constitute the extraction or abstraction of one characteristic of the population – its number – from the general context.

¹² A distinction is suggested, which will be clarified shortly, between the process of knowing as a whole and the process of elaboration of knowledge as one specific instance of it.

¹³ “Marx uses the term ‘concrete’ in two distinct circumstances. First, to distinguish the actual from the conceptual and second, to distinguish, within the sphere of the conceptual, concepts that are more or less determinate in thought.” (Saad-Filho, 1997, p. 110)

concrete as a category of thought, there is an essential difference: for Hegel the real is situated in the realm of ideas, with the empirical as merely the appearance, whereas for Marx the real is the empirical, the material world, and ideas are the reflection of the latter in thought. Thus the concrete as a category of thought constitutes merely the way in which thought reproduces the real as it is, a totality of many interconnected elements. Thus, it is legitimate to use the expressions, the *real concrete* and the *concrete in thought*, although Marx himself did not use these terms¹⁴, since the real totality, as the real integration of its material components, is the empirical, while the concrete in thought is merely its reproduction as the only possible way in which the human being is able to do so¹⁵. In this sense the term *sensorial concrete* acquires full meaning, since what is captured directly by the senses is not the real as an articulated totality but as chaos.

The *concrete in thought* (theory), in contrast to the former, is, as its name indicates, the concrete as a product or result of thought through a process of synthesis, of aggregation, in which the significant parts of reality are combined in a totality, in where they are dynamically articulated in a specific way. Which are the parts of reality whose synthesis makes up the *concrete in thought*? They are the reasoned parts of the real concrete, that is, elaborated by thought from the sensorial concrete, in the form of concepts or simple abstractions that are isolated and extracted from the initial chaotic whole and reduced to their elementary expressions. Thus, abstractions represent the significant components of the researched real. The mere grouping together of these components, however, does not constitute a coherent and articulated reproduction of the whole, but just a collection of isolated pieces. As such a collection, this grouping does not in itself express the understanding of the real concrete, since it does not present an internally articulated whole and does not identify its laws of motion. In economics the identification of simple abstractions, i.e., of the elementary pieces of the economic system, was initially carried out - according to Marx - by 17th century economists, who isolated “a small number of determinant, abstract, general relations such as division of labor, money, value, prices, etc.”(MPE, p. 100/36)

These abstractions are the raw material of real knowledge, as represented by the *concrete in thought*, whose elaboration makes up a second stage that Marx conceives as the scientifically correct method. Thus, the process of the elaboration of knowledge by thought consists, in the first place, of the elaboration of abstractions or concepts, starting from the sensorial concrete – which is the first stage – and in the second place the re-construction of the real through thought, starting from elementary abstractions – the second stage – from the abstract to the concrete as such, the *concrete in thought*. Schematically, the *process of elaboration of knowledge* can be presented in the following way:

sensorial concrete → set of simple abstractions → concrete in thought

process of elaboration of knowledge

After mentioning the elaboration of the simplest abstractions by the 17th century economists, Marx says that, “as soon as these individual moments had been more or less firmly established and abstracted, there began the economic systems [that is, the first drafts of the economic *concrete in thought*, or theory – CMG] which ascended from the simple relations, such as labor, division of labor, need, exchange value, to the level of the State, exchange between nations and the world market” (MPE, p. 100-1/36). Smith is

¹⁴ It seems that both Marx and Hegel used the term “concrete” with no adjectives, as in “real concrete” for example.

¹⁵ The confusion arising from insufficient definition of terms can be illustrated by Corazza’s assertion, that Marx “begins from the concrete whole” and, after the mediation of abstraction, “returns to the concrete whole”, thus collapsing the points of departure and arrival, while correctly adding that at the point of arrival it is “reconstructed by way of thought.” (Corazza, p. 39)

one of these builders of theoretical systems, but one who still struggles with contradictions between the representation of the sensorial concrete and the concrete in thought:

“In A. Smith political economy had been developed until a certain totality, in some sense it had established its field of action. On the one hand he follows the inner connections of the economic categories - or the hidden structure of the capitalist economic system [the *concrete in thought* - CMG]. On the other hand he presents the interconnexion in the way it is observable in the appearances of competition, i.e., in the way it appears to the unskilled observer [the *sensorial concrete* - CMG] (...)” (TSV2, my translation).

The concept of practice as the basis of thought

The process of the elaboration of knowledge through thought is just the mental stage of the process of knowing, which begins in the *sensorial concrete*. But how is this sensorial concrete formed? According to the materialist conception, it constitutes the reflection of the material world in the mind, as mediated by the senses. Yet this reflection is not understood by Marx as an individual and contemplative subject-object relationship, nor as a continuous linear relationship that begins with sensations and ends in knowledge. It is rather a process of continuous repetition that integrates the continuous process of exchange between human beings and nature, through labor, which constitutes the material production. Upon producing¹⁶, that is, transforming natural materials, human beings continuously interpret the effects of their acts on nature, and, in doing so, interpret nature itself, its structure and its dynamics, and continuously test their interpretation, by observing the positive and negative effects of their action based on previous interpretation¹⁷. Based on this observation, he reformulates and refines his interpretations, which is what constitutes the process of elaboration of knowledge. It is in this sense that the materialist philosophy postulates that practice is the criterium of truth¹⁸. In synthesis, it can be said that the process of knowing consists of two stages, the first of which is the material or physical action of the human being over material reality – nature, on the one hand, and society, on the other – by means of labor, and the second, its intellectual action over the same, which is the process of the mental elaboration of knowledge as based on the *sensorial concrete*. Together, these two stages make up *practice*. Thus, it seems well-founded to assert that the process of knowing coincides with the concept of practice¹⁹. Thus being,

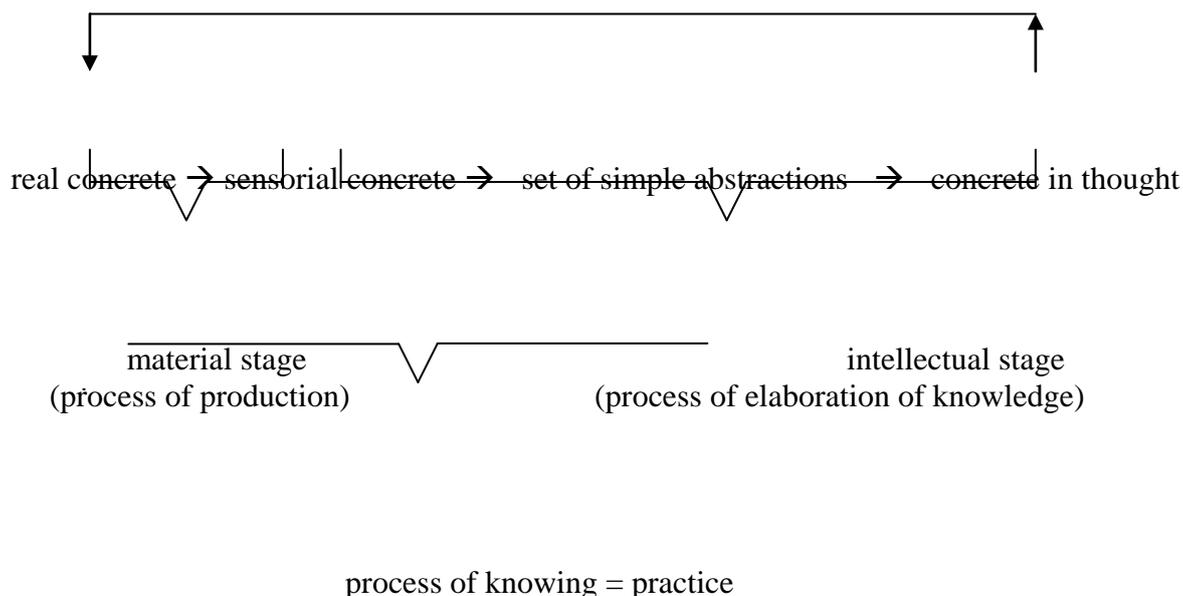
¹⁶ The empirical premises of Marx's theory, as laid out in GI, are essential for the understanding of his theory, but cannot be discussed in detail here. Two aspects that are relevant for the present discussion should however be mentioned. The first is that human beings move beyond the state of mere animals when they begin to produce their means of subsistence, in other words, to labor. From there on, their survival comes to depend essentially on production and, in consequence, on labor. In other words, the need to labor in order to survive is the strongest and most urgent factor to condition the society, in the sense that no social organization is possible without fulfilling this requirement. In consequence, the fundamental factor that explains the form of social organization in each moment resides in the way this society produces its means of material subsistence, which coincides with the mode in which social labor is organized. The second aspect is that only from this moment on do human beings begin to think, since thought consists of the mental representation of acts that are necessary for production which express this two-fold relationship with nature and with one another.

¹⁷ Any act of production, even the most basic, involves the manipulation and transformation of natural materials with the premeditated goal of obtaining a product as result, which is a new material endowed with the desired useful aim. Such a process requires consciousness of the existence of definite material cause-effect relations. This consciousness results from the repeated and continuously perfected carrying out of acts with a defined purpose, and constitutes the process of knowing as a whole.

¹⁸ “The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth - i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question” (TF, 2nd thesis). Lenin further developed these ideas (Lenin, 1982, p. 103-108).

¹⁹ The concept of practice which Marx proposed in the TF, seems to consist basically of an opposition to the conception of both objects of reality and sensorial perceptions as if they resulted from passive contemplation. From Marx's point of view, perceptions result, on the contrary, from practical or material *activity* and for that reason constitute categories of practical action rather than contemplation: “The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism - that of Feuerbach included - is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human*

the following schema seems to adequately represent Marx's point of view on the nature of practice and the process of knowing as a whole:



The arrow in the top part of the diagram, from the *concrete in thought* to the *real concrete*, emphasizes the fact that knowledge, as the result of this process, acts continuously back on material practice, feeding into it and again being perfected by it. The diagram is also intended to present the basis of the Marxist notion that theory and practice are two activities that cannot exist in isolation from one another – there is no practice without knowledge of the end to be achieved, and knowledge is not elaborated without carrying out practice- although both can be separated as functions of different individuals, as will be seen.

On the other hand, human beings, since the beginning, organize themselves in groups and produce as members of a group, based on progressive forms of division of labor, or, in other words, on progressive social forms. Consequently, production should be seen not as individual production but as social production, and its basis is not individual labor but labor that is socially combined within a structure of division of labor. This has two implications. First, that all individual products are but a part of the entire total product, not only in quantitative terms but even more fundamentally, in qualitative ones, since each producer supplies a different product. This means that no individual can survive on the physical product of her/his labor alone, from which he/she obtains only a part (the more developed the division of labor, the smaller the part) of the means of production and consumption essential to survival. The second

activity, practice (...). (TF, 1st thesis). The defect of the preceding materialism is therefore a double one: it either conceives of the real object in a contemplative way as an external object, or it conceives of it as representation, but also in a contemplative way. Marx adds that Feuerbach conceives of the reality as an object distinct from the object of thinking, i.e., from the representation of the object (which is correct), but doesn't conceive of the human activity as *objective activity*. In thesis 5 he states that sensuousness should be conceived as "practical, human-sensuous activity".

implication is as follows: both labor and its product must be divided amongst members of society, which presupposes continuous interaction among them, conditioned by the structure of the social process of production. This structure of interactions constitutes what Marx denominated the *social* relations of production and distribution, that make up the *economic structure* of society and the object of Economics as a science²⁰ (CPE, p. 20/100). This means that the *real concrete* that makes up the material basis of the specific process of knowing represented by Economics, is the network of relationships established by individuals, in a particular society, for the production and distribution of the means necessary for survival²¹. Thus, the concept of practice or process of knowing encompasses two sets of relationships, the relations between human beings and nature and the reciprocal relations among human beings in society²². Economic theory, the result of the process of elaboration of knowledge in this area, constitutes a specific *concrete in thought*, a totality of multiple interrelated elements that are the abstractions or concepts that express the social relations of production and distribution. It is for this reason that Marx sees economic theory as social theory.

The division of the process of knowing into two stages – the material and the mental – has an important consequence. In the beginning, the material action upon nature and its interpretation, that is, material and mental practices, are carried out by the same individuals. However, as the division of labor evolves, a gradual division between material and mental labor is instituted. This means that material and intellectual production gradually come to be carried out by different individuals, with implications that will be discussed below.

Finally, we should pay some attention to the relationship between the *concrete in thought* and empirical reality. This relationship comes to mind when we reflect on whether the *concrete in thought* coincides with empirical reality, which on the one hand would seem to be the case, since the former is meant as the reproduction of the real as a coherent totality; yet on the other hand, this would seem not to be the case, since it constitutes only a mental category. In the first place, if we suppose that the process of elaboration of the *concrete in thought* has been technically correct, we should conclude that this effectively represents the reality to which it refers. But how does this concrete compare with reality itself, as initially mentioned and characterized as chaotic? A bit of reflection shows us that empirical reality – the *real concrete* – is not chaotic. What is chaotic is the representation of reality as directly apprehended by our senses, in other words as a sensorial category still unelaborated by thought. The apprehension of reality as the coherent totality that it is requires that direct and chaotic representation be changed by thought into an equally coherent totality. Yet the result of this process, the *concrete in thought*, is a product of thought, completely made up of abstract material, that is, abstractions or theoretical concepts²³. The *concrete in thought* is therefore a category of thought rather than of reality. As such, it cannot be expected to correspond directly to empirical reality. Perhaps an example from economics can make this clearer. Taking the categories of value and average rate of profit, we see that these are concepts or abstractions that are part of capitalism as a *concrete in thought*, yet they do not exist in the abstract form in any capitalist economy. What we do find is a certain expression of values into different price systems according to the country and the period in time; and the expression of the average rate of profit as different moving structures of specific profit rates. Capitalism itself, understood as a *concrete in*

²⁰ “Economic categories are only the theoretical expressions, the abstractions of the social relations of production” (PPh, 2nd obs. /130).

²¹ These relations are determined, in both aspects – production and distribution – by the structure of the division of labor among the members of a society (with extension and depth determined by the level of technical development of production and distribution) and by the legal regime of property over the means of production, which will be analyzed below.

²² “The production of life, both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relationship” (GI, History/29-30).

²³ “The totality as it appears in the head, as a totality of thoughts, is a product of the thinking head, which appropriates the world in the only way it can, a way different from the artistic, religious, practical and mental appropriation of this world. The real subject retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before (...)” (MPE, p. 101/37).

thought - the mode of production - does not exist in the real world as such, but as objective historical forms which Marx called social and economic formations.

The theoretical product of economics is therefore, a mental representation of the economic structure of society, which in the case of capitalism seeks to portray the general internal logic of the system but does not represent any specific capitalist economy. How is this mental representation related to its empirical forms of existence, such as the North American or Japanese economies? The answer is that the *concrete in thought* can be elaborated in varying degrees of “concretion” or “abstraction”²⁴. Thus, the mode of production constitutes a *concrete in thought*, with abstraction of the characteristics that distinguish one national economy from another. A greater degree of concretion - or lesser degree of abstraction - would require suspending the abstraction of national characteristics and incorporating the specific characteristics of a country into the concrete as represented by the general concept of mode of production. Marx pointed out that, if it is easy to follow the course from the empirical to the abstract, it is on the other hand difficult to go the inverse route. He illustrates this with the concept of fruit in order to demonstrate the contrast between materialist and idealist ways of working. The observation of any particular fruit – an apple, for example -, enables the observer to immediately identify the object as a fruit, whereas if one were to ask for “the” fruit, this would be impossible to fulfill, since there is no particular object for “the” fruit. The request, however, could be fulfilled if one asked for a fruit with specific characteristics, thus making it possible to identify the particular fruit that was desired. This means that the identification of an empirical that corresponds to a particular abstract cannot be direct, but requires the addition of more concrete elements²⁵.

In synthesis this means that the *concrete in thought* is not the real itself, but the *logical* representation of the real, which Marx called the essence of the real in opposition to its appearance. Therefore the product of intellectual activity – the *concrete in thought* or theory - is the representation of the essence or the internal connections of reality, which is not directly perceived through the senses but must be elaborated through reasoning. However, the conception of appearance in Marx, unlike in Hegel, does not constitute the phenomenological manifestation - fleeting and casual - of essences that reside in an absolute idea, but constitute the actual form of existence of the material world, as it is captured by the senses.

The opposition between idealism and materialism.

What we have discussed thus far provides an adequate basis for the presentation of the point of view of philosophical idealism and the critique of it that Marx provides, particularly in its Hegelian form. Our exposition of Marx’s view of the dialectics of the abstract and the concret attempted to provide a synthesis of the materialist character of his theory of knowledge, which can be summarized in a formula that is common to presentations of philosophical materialism: ideas are a reflection - but as sensorial practice, not as contemplation - of the material world in the human mind, which means that material reality has an existence that is prior to and independent of consciousness. Philosophical idealism, which reaches its greatest development in Hegel’s philosophy, postulates just the opposite, that ideas take precedence over material reality²⁶. Philosophical idealism is recognized as a projection of religious ideas, predicated on a divine force that creates the world according to a specific plan whose fulfillment

²⁴ Here we use the second meaning given to the concrete, as pointed out by Saad Filho, in other words, the differentiation in the mental sphere of “concepts that are more or less determinate in thought.” (Saad Filho, idem).

²⁵ “It is as hard to produce real fruits from the abstract idea “the Fruit” as it is easy to produce this abstract idea from real fruits” (HF, ch. 5.2/60).

²⁶ “My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of “the Idea,” he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of “the Idea.” With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought. (Afterword/p. 20).

constitutes the background of both natural and human evolution²⁷. The development of knowledge is seen as a process of progressive expression of the divine will – or the Absolute Idea, according to Hegel – in the human mind, to the same extent that historical evolution is seen as the progressive fulfillment of this project, which expresses itself in the objective plan as the antithesis of spirit and then returns as a synthesis, or as the fulfilled concrete to the sphere of the ideas.

Thus, philosophical idealism interprets concepts or abstractions in ways that are diametrically opposed to materialist philosophy. The fundamental difference between these two conceptions lies in the origin of the simple abstractions that make up the raw material for the *concrete in thought*. Philosophical idealism attributes these abstractions to a supernatural origin. This enables it, in its Hegelian version, to interpret the world as the gradual fulfillment of the Idea at the material level. In this case abstractions are conceived of as logical categories that make up the real essence of empirical categories. According to Hegel, following the idealist tradition that comes from Plato, an abstraction does not represent a real object but rather its ideal essence, of which the different objects of a same family are phenomenal variants. Since Plato this notion has supported the view of the essential stability of a reality that possesses an eternal and unchangeable nature, in the face of the variety and diversity of real phenomena that, in their apparent variability, are seen as multiple manifestations of the same immutable essences. According to Hegel, it is this set of essences that make up the concrete, which is a category of the spirit. In this sense, material reality is, for Hegel, a chaotic collection of embodiments of abstract essences which acquire meaning only when reduced to these essences residing in the Spirit, which constitute the internally articulated totality or the concrete.

According to Marx, idealism turns the relationship between real objects and their representations as ideas or abstractions around, which results in the two philosophies defining abstraction in opposite ways. Marx developed a critique of the idealist definition, both in its general expression, in HF (Chapter 5.2 The secret of speculative construction) and in its application to economics, in PPh (Chapter 2.1 The method). In short, the idealist method sees real objects as mere fleeting manifestations of abstract and immaterial essences, whereas the materialist method sees abstractions as products of intellectual elaboration that is based on material practice and that constitute generalizations of the common characteristics of varied real objects. Marx demonstrates this with the concept of *fruit*. In a materialist sense the concept *fruit* is the result of a generalization or abstraction of a nature that is common to various real objects such as apples, oranges, etc. In this example the fruits are the actual categories, whereas the concept *fruit* is a product of the intellect, an abstraction resulting from practice-based reflection (HF, ch. 5.2/p. 60). In the idealist sense, on the other hand, the abstraction *fruit* constitutes the actual category in the form of an immaterial essence resident in the sphere of ideas and that manifests itself in differentiated phenomenal appearances of the particular fruits, which are mere imperfect and fleeting embodiments of the same immaterial and abstract essence. (Ibidem, p. 60-61).

According to Marx, the idealist conception of the material sphere as a reflection of the ideal sphere, in addition to reflecting objective social contradictions also justifies itself in an illusion whose basis lies in the very nature of the process of knowing, discussed above, particularly as the social development reaches higher stages. This basis consists in the first place of the fact that to know is to reproduce the real through knowledge; in consequence, the *real concrete* appears initially in the *sensorial concrete* as an intellectual product, whose raw materials are previously elaborated simple abstractions that are also intellectual products. Thus, isolating the mental stage from the process of knowing as a whole, as schematically represented above, one can come to think of the world itself as a product of thought, whether that of the human being or of a superior being, which in Hegel is the Idea or the Absolute

²⁷ Referring to the evolution of German idealist philosophy up to Hegel, Marx states that “the Germans move in the realm of the “pure spirit”, and make religious illusion the driving force of history” (GI, p. 39).

Spirit²⁸. The illusion that the real world is a creation of thought is reinforced with the diffusion of the division of labor between material and mental activities, or between manual and intellectual labor. The fact that the intellectual stage of the process of knowing, or of practice, is carried out by individuals who are specialized in these functions and totally separated from direct productive activities, gives a basis to the claim that intellectual activity has autonomy in relation to material activity, and becomes an apparent justification for the primacy of the spirit over matter²⁹.

The succession of modes of production and changes in modes of thought

We have seen that ideas reflect human activity as a collective or social phenomenon rather than an individual one, encompassing the relations between human beings and nature on the one hand, and among human beings in society, on the other. It is a recognized fact that ideas and theories change over the course of history. Dominant ideas are abandoned and new ideas emerge. The principle of the elaboration of knowledge as starting from practice implies that the evolution of ideas should be conceived of as a reflection of the evolution of the relations between humans and nature and among humans in society³⁰. A ramification of this is that the history of ideas does not make sense unless linked to the history of human practice³¹. Although analytically separable into spheres of the natural and the social, human activity is a totality, since the sphere of the natural refers to the process of production which is a social process, as based on the division of labor. Marx postulated that the material practice, as conceived in this two-fold manner, generates particular patterns of social organization, or modes of production, whose configuration is given through the combination of two elements: the degree of development of productive forces, or technique, in the broadest sense, and the social relations of production, reflected in the juridical forms of property of the means of production. With regard to the development of technique, which presupposes the development of knowledge on nature based on the evolution of material practice, Marx postulates the existence of qualitatively differentiated levels of development. It is thus that successive historical epochs can be defined, characterized by progressive and qualitatively differentiated patterns of the technical basis of production. These levels, however, are linked to particular property regimes.

The role of the regime of property over the means of production is more complex and, given its social implications and essential character in modern societies, more explosive. According to Marx, for each level in the development of the productive forces there is a corresponding regime of property, in this order³². It is essential to note that this postulate is a necessary consequence of the materialist conception of the relationship between material practice and conscience, since property regime is a juridical category and therefore situated in the sphere of consciousness. Since the source of knowledge and the elaboration of concepts is natural practice, which conditions social relations – these being imposed, as we should remember, by the objective character of the production and distribution of means of sustenance – it can

²⁸ “In this way Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought concentrating itself, probing its own depths, and unfolding itself out of itself, by itself, whereas the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind” (MPE, p. 101/36).

²⁹ “Division of labour only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears. (...) From this moment onwards consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it really represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of “pure” theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc.” (GI, History/p. 31).

³⁰ “The same men who establish their social relations in conformity with the material productivity, produce also principles, ideas, and categories, in conformity with their social relations. Thus the ideas, these categories, are as little eternal as the relations they express. They are *historical and transitory products*” (PPh, 2nd obs./p. 130).

³¹ “Viewed apart from real history, these abstractions have in themselves no value whatsoever” (GI, p. 27).

³² “The various stages of development in the division of labour are just so many different forms of ownership, i.e. the existing stage in the division of labour determines also the relations of individuals to one another with reference to the material, instrument, and product of labour” (GI, p. 22).

be deduced that the property regime derives its nature from the technical configuration of production. Upon relating the results of his early research, in the preface to the CPE, Marx is explicit in this sense:

“In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production *appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production*. (...) *The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life*” (CPE, p. 20/100, emphases added).

The material production of life is the basis of all human activity, on the basis of which the productive forces develop through the progressive solution of the problems that successively present themselves, and it is the development of the productive forces that alters the configuration of the reciprocal relations between human beings in society³³.

There is an essential difference between the concepts of property as material appropriation and juridical regime. All production is the appropriation of natural materials by the producers. In the historical beginnings of productive activity, when the division of labor was limited and human groups were small, production and appropriation had an elementary collective nature, and there was no distinction between individual and collective appropriation, with the land as the fundamental means of production. This was the historical period that Marx called primitive communism. To the extent that the technical content of production is developed, the appropriation of natural materials makes use of materials that have been previously extracted from nature by the producer - the produced means of production -, such as tools, elaborated raw materials, etc. Thus, to the extent that the division of labor specialized families and groups of families into distinct branches of production, then agriculture and animal husbandry, city and countryside, production and consumption, etc. were progressively separated and the produced means of production became more relevant. Although there was no private property in the juridical sense, the means of production remained in the possession of the producers as means of the appropriation of the natural materials. Thus a mediation between individual appropriation by production and collective appropriation through the distribution of what was produced emerged. Specialized production individualized the appropriation of previously produced means of production and of the land, gradually giving rise to the juridical concept of private property, different from the concepts of appropriation through labor and through distribution³⁴. Thus begins the historical epoch of societies based in the private ownership of the means of production, distinguishable among themselves according to the specific form of this property regime that each of them takes on.

In primitive communism property is collective in the sense of common or general property of all members of the social group. Private property, on the other hand, does not mean the generalization of the property of the means of production as private and individual, but rather implies the limitation of property and its denial for one part of society, giving rise to a division of society into two classes, those who own and do not own the means of production. The institution of private property has as its counterpart the institution of the exploitation of the labor of others³⁵ which leads to the fracturing of society into a dominating and a dominated part, with decisive consequences for the process of elaboration of ideas.

³³ This relationship is not reducible to the simplistic assumption of a linear determination of thinking by acting, but refers to the logical connection, or the logical primacy of practical activity in the process of generation of the categories of thought in the broadest sense, including those that pertain to the political, social and cultural spheres etc., and does not consequently exclude the reciprocal action between these and the sphere of material practice. This is, by the way, implicit in the two-way connection between material and intellectual practices: material practice permits the expansion of knowledge, which in turn permits the perfection of the former (GI, p. 43-44).

³⁴ According to Marx, the division of labor is a phenomenon of utmost importance, since it generates, on the one hand, the distinction between individual and collective interest, and on the other constitutes the basis of private property as a juridical concept (GI, p. 32-33).

³⁵ According to Marx, the concept of property, since Antiquity “corresponds perfectly to the definition of modern economists who call it the power of disposing of the labour-power of others” (GI, p. 32).

This division of society presupposes that the productivity of labor has reached a level that is high enough for the direct producer not only to reproduce his/her own life but also that of the proprietary class, so that the latter, in whole or part, no longer needs to engage directly in productive labor. This allows the division of labor to extend itself to the two parts in which practical activity is divided, that is, material and intellectual practices become functions of different individuals. More precisely, intellectual labor becomes the function of a part of the class of owners. The fact that theoretical elaboration becomes the exclusive function of one of the two parts into which society is divided has decisive consequences for the form that the concepts devised for understanding current social relationships take on. Thus, the denial of property for one part of society, the exploitation of the latter's labor, etc., which represent objective social relations as conditioned by the development of productive forces, express themselves as ideas that conform the social consciousness but are in fact produced by members of a specific class, the ruling class. Thus, "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force" (GI, p. 46), since the class that rules the production and the distribution of material means also rules in the production and distribution of ideas.

What do ruling ideas or theories consist of? In accordance with the material/intellectual relationship discussed above, they are "nothing more than the ideal expression [that is, in the form of ideas –CMG] of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance" (GI, p. 46-47). Thus, the division of society into antagonistic classes affects the intellectual instance of the process of knowing, giving it a specific bias, which reflects the specific nature of the existing class domination. Therefore, in the first place the ideas that express this domination are generated by the objective existence of domination, conditioned by the stage of development of productive forces. Consequently, it is not the previous emergence of ideas or of the intention to rule that gives rise to class domination, but quite the opposite. Second, it is the members of a specific social segment – belonging to the ruling class – who exercise the function of elaborating the system of ideas that prevails in society, conditioned as this also is by the actual development of productive forces. In this sense the ideas that express domination are elaborated as a justification of this domination, giving rise to the ideological interpretations that correspond to each historical epoch.

The elaboration, in the form of a self-justification of the domination, of the ideas that express objective relations of domination has two consequences: on the one hand, it allows for the notion that the dominant ideas of a period are independent of the specific character of class rule that is in effect, and theories are elaborated which postulate that the economic, social and institutional structures of each period are the product of the ruling ideas of the period, rather than the contrary. The ideas or theories which are widely accepted are thus conceived as the source from which reality springs, and are given responsibility for that which reality shows as either positive or negative. Thus the reality and more specifically the ruling class of the moment are exempted from responsibility. From this, the corollary that the transformation of social structures requires the previous transformation of prevailing ideas is deduced. On the other hand, the dominant class develops the claim that it is a particular system of ideas or conceptions that determine its rule as the imposition of a transcendental predestination (GI, p. 47). It is thus understandable that the ruling ideas, although they represent objective (but historically fleeting) relations that make one class the ruler, are formulated, on the contrary, as the expression of a *natural* human essence, that is, forever inscribed in the human being by nature. This mental operation allows the rule of a class in a particular moment to be presented as an eternal form of social hierarchy, expressing an eternal human nature rather than the fleeting interests of a class that rules for a particular period.

This is the type of conception of human nature that prevails in capitalism, to the extent that it attributes to human beings, as a natural essence, the set of ideas that express the rule of capitalist relations of production and distribution and consequently, the rule of the capitalist class itself. Thus, the physiocratic notion of a *natural order* - one of the original expressions of bourgeois ideology in general -

asserts that the mercantile capitalist order, that is, the social relations that characterize capitalism, express motivations that are intrinsic to human nature and thus represent a *natural* order³⁶. It follows from here that all other forms of social organization are *artificial*, since they collide with the *natural* innate motivations of human beings (PPh, 7th Obs./p. 139). In *The Wealth of Nations* this premise appears early on, in the postulate that the mercantile economy results from the propensity to exchange, seen as innate to human beings, which in consequence implies that the mercantile capitalist system is a natural order (Smith, Chapter 2). All ideas that express *specifically* capitalist relations and consequently, the rule of the capitalist class, are seen as reflections of *general* human attributes. In this way the *capitalist* form of private property is seen as the *general* form of property; the same occurs with the pursuit of private interest as a regulating principle; with the competition and triumph of the fittest; with the State as guardian of the capitalist order, seen as the *general* form of social order, and so forth.

This process of the “ideologizing” of reality constitutes the basis of methodological individualism, which postulates precisely that the explanation of the current social structure – which is capitalist – should be sought in the *natural* motivation of individuals, conflating them with the motivations of the *capitalist* individual and interpreting them as innate and *general* human motives. Applied to economics, this way of proceeding implies that capitalist economic relations which make up the basic structure of today’s society, have too their origin in the exteriorization of a previously existing human essence. Methodological individualism thus expresses, in the arena of method, the reversal of the direction of causality, which moves from material practice to ideas. In this sense its proceedings objectively constitute a theoretical justification of the rationality that is characteristic of capitalism. Economic rationality is thus also seen as eternal and unchangeable: its postulates are seen as motivations that are inscribed in the human being by natural rather than social order, and in consequence, the capitalist order is seen as the only social order that is compatible with human nature. This is the reason why Marx characterizes classical economy’s approach as ahistorical; it is unable to see capitalism as a historically conditioned social formation which, like all others, is destined to be replaced.

In the materialist conception elaborated by Marx, on the contrary, “the human essence is no abstraction inherent [inwohnendes: residing - CMG] in each single individual. In its reality it is [on the contrary – CMG] the ensemble of the social relations.” (TF - 6th thesis). Society is not a set of individuals – which would mean a population – but a network of social relations. It is in this sense that it can be said that, in Marx’s theory, the individual is determined by society, rather than the opposite. But in this case the human being appears as a passive being, which seems incompatible with the previously described conception according to which the human being is the agent of his/her own history, through practical activity. How can this apparent paradox be explained? The response is that the human being who makes her/his own history is not an isolated individual but the social collectivity, which elaborates a complex network of relationships between himself/herself and nature, of which consciousness is only gradually developed. In this way the individual, as conceived in isolation, and each generation, must confront objective conditions which they did not choose but within the context of which they must live and develop their practical activity, as described, through which they transform their context. Thus, the process through which the human being, as a social being, makes her/his history is in turn historically conditioned.

There is one relevant implication resulting from this link between being and consciousness. According to what has been discussed, the rule of one class over another that is expressed in the dominant

³⁶ The physiocrats “see the capitalist form of production as an eternal natural form. For them, the bourgeois forms of production represent the natural form of production” (TMVI, 1977a, p. 338). “In so far as Political Economy remains [within the bounds of the bourgeois horizon] (...) the capitalist regime is looked upon as the absolutely final form of social production, instead of as a passing historical phase of its evolution” (Afterword). Thus, “economists express the relations of bourgeois production, the division of labor, credit, money, etc., as fixed, immutable, eternal categories (...) [and] (...) explain how production takes place in the above-mentioned relations, but what they do not explain is how these relations themselves are produced, that is, the historical movement which gave them birth” (PPh, 1st obs./126).

ideas of class societies, is not a result of the arbitrary imposition of rule but of the necessary organization of social production, imposed by the objective and not premeditated trajectory of development of the productive forces that leads, first, to the division of society in classes based on private property and thereafter to successive and qualitatively different forms of such societies, based on distinct forms of private property. This means that class division, and the consequent rule of one class over another, were the natural and in this sense inevitable results of the social development of each moment. If class domination reflects an organization of social production resulting from the objective development of social forces, it seems we should conclude that there is no justification for the development of well grounded ideas divergent from the dominant ones, that is, ideas opposed to the existing relations of domination. Or better yet, there would be no justification for the emergence of divergent ideas as representation of real relationships, since in principle, there are no actual relationships that diverge from those that prevail. Nonetheless, if real divergent relations arise, then ideas divergent from the dominant ones should also and necessarily emerge, as their reflection in thought.

And in fact according to Marx these kinds of ideas do emerge, also through the force of necessity as imposed by the objective development of productive forces, which generates new crucial configurations of the division of labor, creating new functions – and extinguishing old ones - in the structure of production and distribution, and generating the corresponding new relations of appropriation of the means of production and of the products. These new realities express themselves in the form of new conceptions, which Marx denominated as *revolutionary*, since they propose a reformulation or *revolution* in social relations, which are grounded, as should be reminded, in specific forms of property. What the new ideas propose is a qualitative alteration of the regime of property over the means of production. But they do not propose this based on abstract moral principles or notions of justice, but as a reflection of objective transformations of a technical nature that are underway in the structuring of productive forces, that supply the basis for an objective demand for the substitution of prevailing economic relations for new ones. These ideas do not emerge by themselves but are proposed through the mediation of the agents of the new relations of production, who constitute a new class in the process of development that springs from the ongoing transformations in the sphere of productive forces.

Thus, the new class emerges from a process of change that undermines the power of the current ruling class, because it emerges from the undermining of the productive relations on which such domination is based. According to Marx, this is what characterizes the emergence of a historical epoch of social revolution, which results from the contradiction that is established between “the material productive forces of society (...) [and] the existing relations of production or (...) property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto” (CPE, 21/100-1). It is the logical reasoning expressed above that justifies Marx’ following assertion, that “mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation” (CPE, *ibid.*)³⁷.

As we can see, this is the result of the simultaneous development of both the natural (new techniques) and the social (new division of labor) practical activities in production. The sphere of ideas, in all of its manifestations (scientific, political, artistic, etc.) reflects these developments. The fact that these reflections are not linear nor simple, but extremely complex, does not invalidate the logical

³⁷ Marx derives this proposition in a way rigorously coherent with the materialist principle of the generation of ideas through practical activity: “The existence of revolutionary ideas in a particular period presupposes the existence of a revolutionary class (...)” (GI, p. 47). The logical sequence begins from a transformation of the techniques, which in turn causes a change in the relations of production (property regime) whose objective expression is the emergence of a new social class, which since it is new is situated outside the criteria of legitimacy of the classes that exist until that moment. In other words, the new class does not fit within the existing institutional structure, but cannot be eliminated because it is a product of new realities emerging from the technical basis of society. The appearance of the bourgeoisie at the decline of feudalism illustrates this perfectly. This is an objective contradiction that reflects itself in the power dispute between the old and the new classes, which is essentially a dispute over the property of the crucial means of production.

connection that moves from practice to ideas, as long as the analysis seeks to supply a consistent explanation of the origin of the latter. If the logical connection proposed by Marx is denied, one must then attribute to ideas an origin that is external to objective human practice, which implies some form of idealism.

Several controversies have emerged in the Marxist camp based on different interpretations of these statements by Marx. Marx has for instance been accused of a mechanistic determinism on the one hand in the interpretation of the so-called base-superstructure relationship, and on the other, regarding the supposed inevitability of socialism. The author of a recent article characterizes as “vertiginous determinism” the logical sequence which leads to social revolution, summarized in the above paragraphs, and postulates the need to take other factors into account, such as the indetermination and subjectivity of the individual (Paula, 1994). Keeping the character of the *concrete in thought* in mind, as constructed on the basis of abstractions, the elements that Paula points to do not seem to contradict with Marx’s theory, since abstraction may both require and imply the elimination of much of what is considered indeterminate, without constituting a technical error, and subjectivity only conflicts with Marx’s approach if we attribute to it the capacity to generate concepts that are not linked to human practical activity. These questions are open to debate, for which I hope the present article may contribute.

Conclusions

In this article I have attempted to discuss the basic logical structure of Marx’ conception of the origin of ideas – or of the sphere of thought – and of their process of change over the course of history. This presentation has at the same time brought forward the implications of Marx’ materialist conception regarding the process of generation of ideas in general, without having the need to introduce innocuous doctrinal definitions.

The presentation sought to emphasize the causal link between the human being’s practical activity – in his/her combined relations with nature and with one another in society – and his/her mental activity, through which he/she reproduces the material world upon which he/she acts, as a totality of thought. This principle, applied to economics, better clarifies the meaning of Marx’s statements in his text *The method of political economy*. Through the detailed discussion of the implications of the relations between the abstract and the concrete as Marx describes them, I have sought a more rigorous definition of Marx’s conception of the process of the formulation of economic theories and, in following, of the process of their historical evolution, which parallels the evolution of forms of social organization or in other words, modes of production.

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