

# Marx and the Ontology of Social Being

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**Abstract:** Although inspired by very different motivations, Geörgy Lukács (in his *Ontology of Social Being*) and Roy Bhaskar (mainly in *The Possibility of Naturalism*) attempted to unveil the key elements of the ontology entailed in Marx's social theory. The paper intends to show that some of these elements can be truly employed to depict a general image of society. The following determinations are considered more extensively: teleology, which distinguishes human activity; knowledge and value taken as objective determinations of society; the structural character of the social world; the category of totality; and historicity, characterised by the notions of law (understood as tendency), development and uneven development.

## Introduction

For the majority of human beings, including some of the most erudite exemplars of the species, the word ontology sounds like an esoteric statement, not to say like a bad word. Its meaning, however, is far from being inaccessible, even to the reader most unaccustomed to its usage, and can be found in any dictionary of average quality: it refers to the general considerations about existence, reality, the being. In the case of the ontology of society, then, the term ontology refers to the determinations that distinguishes society as a form of being, expressing its difference to the previous forms of existence.

For those who intend to deal with the ontology of social being within the limits of the Marxist tradition, it is necessary to take into account, from the beginning, the fact that *none* of Marx's oeuvres has something like the specification of the general determinations (i.e. the ontology) of social being as its main theme. What somehow saves this project from anticipated failure is the fact that, in the most relevant moments of the Marxian production – and these moments are not scarce at all –, the analysis has not only implications for the depiction of the general properties of society, but frequently makes these implications explicit.

At least two thinkers attempted to make use of the work of Marx as the keystone for the construction of an ontology of social being: the philosophers György Lukács, in

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his posthumous work, and Roy Bhaskar, in his first books<sup>2</sup>. These two contributions are employed here as flashlight to illuminate the elements of some widely known Marxian arguments that cannot be forgotten in any serious theoretical effort to define the limits of what can be transcendentally (i.e., universally, in a historical sense) labelled as *social*.

The argument of this article is distributed into five sections. The first is intended to pave the way for the subsequent analysis. This is done in two steps: firstly, by demonstrating that teleology is a crucial category in Marx's social theory; secondly, by establishing the exact relation between teleology and labour – the activity of material reproduction of human beings. The second section examines more deeply the category of labour in order to recognise the general presuppositions that allow the existence of an activity with its inherent configuration. Among these presuppositions value and knowledge are highlighted in the analysis, for reasons that will become clear later. A third section deals with the relation between human activity and the social structures that condition it, which are the two broader domains of social existence. In the sequence, in the fourth section, the interest relies on a theme obviously important to the study of society: historicity. Besides delimiting exactly the meaning of the claim of historicity as a feature of society, the section tries to associate this category to that of development. The latter category, in its turn, builds up the bridge that leads the argument to the discussion of the category of freedom, which is briefly inspected in the article's concluding section.

### **1. Teleology, labour and social being: avoiding mistakes and preparing the foundations of the analysis**

The elaboration of an ontology of society can and should be organised as a response to two questions that are easy to state but obviously hard to answer: (1) What distinguishes society from the previous forms of existence (i.e., inorganic and organic

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, after producing several papers on the theme, Bhaskar reoriented his philosophical production to a domain totally unfamiliar with Marxism. In fact, with this reorientation Bhaskar's 'new' philosophy became irreconcilable with Marxism, because of its closeness with a kind of mystical and religious thought. The works Bhaskar produced before 1998, however, are undeniably a valuable contribution to the Marxist tradition. From this material, his second book, *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Bhaskar, 1979), is taken here as a direct source. In the case of Lukács, his posthumous work mentioned is the *The Ontology of Social Being*. Of Lukács' enormous and complex book, only a small part (three chapters) were (poorly) translated into English. Two of these chapters (that on *Marx* and that on *Labour*) have been extensively used and quoted here.

nature)? (2) Which are the general, universal, properties that, *as* general, universal, properties, make it possible to characterise social being in any concrete historical condition? The answer to these two questions is so intimately related that one could choose any of them as departing-point. Here the analysis begins by dealing with the first question.

The two attempts to unveil the ontological principles implicit in Marx's work in which the present argument is based on (those of Lukács and Bhaskar) consider that this author distinguishes society by its dependence on human activity. In other words, it is an activity that has *teleology* as its distinctive property<sup>3</sup>. Some more steps are necessary to grasp precisely the meaning of this assertion. By now, it is enough to indicate that, when teleology is emphasised, the consequence is that social being is characterised by the truly specific determination of the material reproduction of the species that constitutes society. That is to say, the peculiar attribute of the material reproduction of human beings is precisely teleology.

Of course, social being has behind it the natural being and, as its immediate antecedent, the organic existence – the 'world of life' and its particular mode of reproduction (biological evolution). Nevertheless, a necessary connection between the material reproduction of the being and teleology is not to be found in any form of being previous to society, by the simple fact that there is nothing in nature like an intentional activity. (Lukács, 1978, p.74) Someone could remind us that consciousness has already a relevant role in the reproduction of the most developed animals. This is not sufficient, however, to endow the practice of these animals with a teleological character, given that their consciousness is nothing but a (powerful) additional tool at the service of a reproduction biologically fixed<sup>4</sup>. It is only in the activity of humans that, as will be shown, consciousness becomes the directive, central, moment of a process really teleological, in which the result of action is mentally anticipated and then executed in practice. (Lukács, 1980, p.22)

The characterisation of the specificity of social being by teleology places the sphere of production and reproduction of the material conditions of existence of human beings (in a single word, economy) and the corresponding practice (labour) at the centre of the ontology of society. (Lukács, 1978, p.4-5) Those who intend to bring to light the ontological implications of Marx's oeuvre should, then, depart from his considerations

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<sup>3</sup> Cf.: Bhaskar (1979, p.44); Lukács (1978, p.7).

<sup>4</sup> Instead of the consciousness, one could think of a fifth paw or second mouth, for example.

about labour. This, at first glance, seems to simplify the problem, because Marx is confessedly a thinker that studied labour. But there are at least two complications here.

First, the considerations that contribute to the recognition of the *ontological* implications of the analysis of labour are those that attempt to grasp *general* properties of such activity, and not those that refer to *particular* properties of concrete forms of labour (wage, slave etc. labour). This significantly reduces the base of Marxian texts disposable to investigation, but does not impede it insofar as the material about the issue is not really scarce, besides being highly informative.

Most serious, though, is the second problem: if there is something like a misunderstanding about Marx's work, it certainly refers to the centrality the author attributes to the category of labour. Numerous, not to say most, interpreters of Marx consider that his work, specially his economic work, ascribes to labour a hierarchically superior character in the domain of human activity. In many, maybe in most, cases Marx's critical intervention is understood as the theoretical foundation of the defence of a (post-capitalist) society. A society in which individuals *primarily recognise themselves as workers and primarily realise themselves as workers, by taking advantage of the (actual) possibilities of expanding their freedom in and through labour*<sup>5</sup>.

In this particular, both Lukács (Ibid., p.30-32; 63-69; p.151) and Bhaskar (1979, p.43) are very explicit (and successful) in the defence of the point of view that the centrality of labour in the ontology of society implicit in Marx's work does not and could have rely on the allegation of a hierarchically superior position of labour in the corresponding sphere of being (the sphere of human practice). To express it in Lukács' terms, the centrality of labour, taken in its ontological (general) sense, should be understood as *ontological priority*, so defined:

[...] the principle of ontological priority must be clearly distinguished from the epistemological and moral etc. value judgements that beset every idealist or vulgar materialist systemic hierarchy. If we ascribe one category ontological priority over the others, we simply mean that one of them can exist without the other, without the opposite being the case. This holds for the central thesis of all materialism, that being has ontological priority over consciousness. What this means ontologically is simply that there can be being without consciousness, while all the consciousness must have something existent as its presupposition or basis. This does not involve any kind of value hierarchy between being and consciousness. (Lukács, 1978, p.31)

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<sup>5</sup> A quite rigorous critique of this perspective can be found in Postone (1993).

Regarding human practice, it is quite evident that the ontological priority of the activity of material reproduction of the species (i.e., labour) is due only and exclusively to the fact that no human activity is possible in the absence of... human beings provided with the material conditions that assure their activity<sup>6</sup>. But it does not follow from this that labour is, in any social conditions, the only, most valuable, most libertarian etc. form of practice. It should be clear, on the other hand, that there are particular historical contexts in which labour really acquires this prominence, as it occurs in the social formations in which the development of productive forces is so limited that the activity of material reproduction of the species almost entirely occupies individuals' lifetime. This is also the case of capitalism, though in this social formation, the prominence of labour stem from completely different causes, associated to the mercantile nature of production itself<sup>7</sup>.

In other words, labour should be recognised as the centre of the ontology of society because all other forms of human activity fundamentally depend on the capacity of our species of providing its subsistence in less than 24 hours per day. This capacity, in turn, is determined by the development of productive forces, on the one hand, and by the degree of complexity of social needs to be satisfied by labour, on the other. This, and only this, is the sense of the famous Marxian statement that labour is the basis (or the determination in the *last* instance) of social development.

It should be observed that this way of dealing with the centrality of labour does not reduce the importance of labour in the ontology of social being. On the contrary, because labour is the activity of material reproduction of the species, it is to be found in the (longstanding) emergence of humans from organic nature. This means that labour objectively constituted the ontological 'model' of all other kinds of human practice, which could only be formed in the image and likeness of the original form of practice of the species. It is for this reason that the attempt to unveil the ontology of society implied by Marx's work has a promising departing-point in the general characterisation of human activity that the author, in various texts, develops from the analysis of labour.

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<sup>6</sup> It worth to recall here a famous quote from *The German Ideology* of Marx and Engels: 'the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, [is] the premise, namely, that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to "make history". But life involves before anything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life'. (Marx & Engels, 1974, p.48)

<sup>7</sup> About the relation between the mercantile basis of the production ruled by capital and the prominence that labour acquires in capitalism, see (Duayer & Medeiros, 2008).

## 2. The analysis of labour as a means to unveil decisive determinations of social existence

*Capital* itself (particularly in the first section of Chapter VII) is one of the texts where Marx examines labour in an attempt to find out its universal properties. Before offering a synthesis of this analysis, it is necessary to observe that, in it, Marx tries to unveil (universal) properties of any human practice worthy of being referred to as 'labour' by examining one of its specific forms (i.e., wage labour, prevalent in the capitalist era).

In other words, in that particular passage of the book, Marx does not inspect the kind of labour subjected to capital with the purpose of revealing properties that denote its *specificity*<sup>8</sup>. His intention, conversely, is to discover and enounce (abstractly) the *general* properties of the productive activity of human beings. Naturally, these universal properties of labour must be present in every historical period. This makes it possible to find them in the analysis of any particular form of labour, but is not sufficient to entirely characterise the productive activity of any society<sup>9</sup>.

Considering what has already been stated, even someone who has never heard of the famous chapter of *Capital* could suppose by now that the intentional nature of labour is put in the foreground of the analysis advanced by Marx. This is so, to repeat and emphasise, because it is precisely the teleology entailed in labour that distinguishes this activity of material reproduction in its specific *human* pattern from the material reproduction of the other forms of life – including of those species that reproduce themselves by means of something that can be called activity (for instance, all other animals). It is not for other reason, by the way, that Marx makes use of the brilliant

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<sup>8</sup> As known, the most decisive distinguishing attribute of capitalist production is the orientation towards surplus-value. This peculiar trait of labour in capitalism, it should be mentioned, is examined in the second section of Chapter VII, where Marx paves the way for building up the argument of the rest of the First Book (which deals with the production of value and surplus-value).

<sup>9</sup> It is really impressive that, in spite of the clarity of the argumentation of *Capital* itself – and of the explicit warning made at the famous 'Introduction' to the *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*, which has been published also as a sort of introduction to the *Grundrisse* (Marx, 1975, p.17-48) –, there are still those who interpret that passage of *Capital* as a description of emancipated labour, i.e. of the labour that *should be* found in socialism, for instance. It is obvious that that description applies to socialist (in fact, communist) labour, but it also applies to wage labour, to slavery etc. True it is that, in none of this historical formations, labour is constituted only by its general properties, just like no individual can have her individuality characterised by the properties that make of her not exactly a determined individual, but a human being as any other: enormous brain, opposing thumb etc.

contrast between labour and the biological reproduction (of bees and spiders) to stress the teleological nature of human activity. (Marx, 1967, p.178)

Now, it is also crucial to take into account that, in our teleological activity, teleology does not operate in abstract, in ‘the void’, but upon ‘material causes’: objects collected from the world, have they suffered previous human intervention (raw materials and instruments of labour) or not (subjects of labour directly collected from nature). Basically, what human beings do in their productive activity is to execute a mentally designed plan that consists of a combination of causal properties of objects materially disconnected in the world. This plan has the deliberate purpose of bringing into being a material form that the world would not create by itself – a material form adequate for the satisfaction of some human need and, for this reason, esteemed as value (in this case, as *use-value*). (Ibid.)

Based upon Marx’s argument, Lukács has employed the expressions ‘*teleological positing [Setzung]*’ and ‘*positing [Setzung] of causality*’ to denote the general organisation of human praxis from the mentally defined goal to the materially objectified (i.e., *posited*) result. (Lukács, 1980, p.33) The activity begins with the (ideal) teleological positing and comes to an end (if successful) with the concrete objectification (*positing*) of the goal already materialised as product, on the one hand, *and of the causal sequence that produced it*, on the other. With the pairs of categories, hence, Lukács intended to highlight both the teleological determination of human praxis in general and the fact that the product results from a combination of causes *created – the combination, not the causes, it should be clear* – by the subject of the activity that, concretely and not ideally, is responsible for the emergence of something in the world. It can be concluded from all this that the combination of teleology (freedom) and causality (necessity) is what really characterises labour and, with it, social existence in itself.

To draw the limits of sociability with precision and disclose some of its most relevant determinations, it is necessary to take into consideration at least two implications of the description of human activity as a combination of causes and intentions. First, it should be noticed that one of the presuppositions of an intentional activity that operates upon objective material causes is *knowledge* of causal properties of the things of the world. (Ibid., p.11-12) If a human being is to, for example, convert determined objects (wood, metals, fibers etc.) into a chair, she needs to know, somehow, which, among the materials (subjects and instruments of labour) immediately

at hand, are suitable for the purpose. If the chair is to appear in the world, thus, the materials collected should have the adequate causal properties to, in a proper combination, give rise to its useful shape.

The demonstration that knowledge is a presupposition of the productive activity of human beings can and should be employed as the departing-point of any attempt to identify the ontological origin of the development of higher forms of consciousness, such as scientific theories. The same demonstration, on the other hand, makes it clear that certain forms of consciousness can perform a relevant role in social reproduction even when generalised in the form of false conceptions about social or natural existence. In this case, of course, the forms of consciousness should be sufficiently adequate ('true') to assist the successful realisation of the practice to which they are immediately referred. For instance, even if combustion is attributed to a magical process, dominating it within a reproducible act of labour entails the recognition that some materials are *objectively* appropriated to produce it (wood, straw, dry leaves) while others are not (ice, metals, mud).

There would be no space here to unfold, with minimum rigour, the ontological proposition just stated into an epistemology that addresses so complex issues as the origin of refined forms of knowledge and the social utility of false forms of consciousness<sup>10</sup>. It is, anyway, crucial to maintain that knowledge is a precondition of the productive activity of human beings either for its conspicuous importance in itself or to put emphasis on a statement already defended: that the kind of consciousness required by teleological human activity cannot be subordinated anymore to a biologically fixed reproduction – i.e. by reproductive activities of the past. On the contrary, the kind of consciousness required by teleology has to be endowed with the level of development that allows it to occupy the position of directive moment of an activity that moves towards a future still not objectified, but already mentally 'posited'. (Ibid, p.65-66)

The second implication of Marx's analysis of labour has an intimate connection with this key role performed by consciousness in human activity: it refers to the fact that consciousness become the 'locus' of *choices* that, besides the properties indicated above, distinguishes the reproductive activity of human beings. To come to this conclusion, one should recall the statement, actually not sufficiently rigorous, that

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<sup>10</sup> Besides Lukács' *Ontology* itself, several papers of Mario Duayer deal with these issues. Cf.: Duayer (2001; 2010), for example.



human beings *collect* from the world the objects that will be subject to a transformation in and by means of labour. Much more correct would be to affirm that human beings *choose* some objects instead of others and that the choice concentrate on *concrete alternatives*, which are subjectively appropriated by subjects as *alternatives opened up to action*. (Lukács, 1978, p.74) Human action, therefore, has an alternative character. In the case of labour, the alternative character is expressed as a choice not only between the material forms taken from the world as subjects and instruments of labour, but also between *courses of action* (i.e. a choice of ‘how to do something’), a choice that focus on the activity itself. (Ibid.)

It is certainly a valuable merit of Lukács to have established the existing nexus between the ontological peculiarity (of the reproduction) of social being and ethics, precisely by demonstrating that human activity involves a choice among alternatives<sup>11</sup>. The key element to establish this nexus is a decisive category of any ethics: value, understood in the general sense of goal of human practice positively appraised and, thus, pursued by individuals (or, on the contrary, negatively evaluated and, thus, avoided). Lukács was capable to maintain that value is, as knowledge, a general precondition of human practice, precisely because this practice has an alternative character (that is to say, it involves choices). (Ibid., p.87) The point here is that choosing  $\hat{\phantom{x}}$  instead of  $\tilde{\phantom{x}}$ , independently of what  $\hat{\phantom{x}}$  and  $\tilde{\phantom{x}}$  are (a subject or an instrument of labour, a course of action, the colour in a painting etc.), implies a positive evaluation of  $\hat{\phantom{x}}$  (taken as useful, adequate, perfect, beautiful etc.) and a negative evaluation of  $\tilde{\phantom{x}}$  (useless, inadequate, imperfect, ugly etc.).

Demonstrating that value is a precondition of human action is highly important both for the construction of a social ontology and for the production of a materialist ethics. Regarding ontology, which is the exclusive focus of this paper, the relevance of the demonstration relies on the fact that, by means of it, it is possible to distinguish, as did Lukács, social existence by another peculiar decisive trace: the fact that emergences of new social objects have the character of values. In nature, even in the organic nature, forms of existence emerge one from another, but only from an external (human) perspective that which ‘came to existence’ can be judged as a value (useful, efficient, good etc.) for the general reproduction of the form of being to which it refers. In

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<sup>11</sup> In this particular, it is necessary to take into account that Lukács’ *Ontology* was written as an introduction to an Ethics – the author’s project interrupted by his death in 1971. The chapters of the *Ontology* here examined are those in which this nexus between ontology and ethics is more clearly indicated.

society, rather, the new forms of existence are produced by human activity as objectifications of choices, as values realised through and in action. (Ibid.: p. 83)

Moreover, taking into account that, for example, human beings choose the (correct, adequate, efficient etc.) course of action for the product to emerge from the combination of subjects and instruments of labour, it is now possible to affirm that not only the result of activity (the product), *but also the course of action is subjected to a value judgement*. It follows from this that human activity is, already in its primordial form, *self-judged*. It is thus an activity in which the subject judges alternative courses of action and chooses between them. It does not seem illegitimate to conclude that it lies here the genetic basis of moral, whose foundations are, then, as old as the activity that transformed a 'mere' superior primate into a human being. (Lukács, 1980, p.45-46)

Someone could recall here, with reason, that Marx himself gets close to the domain of ethics in his analysis of labour when he observes that human being, by acting 'on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature'. (Marx, 1967, p.177) This profound sentence can now be taken as the basis of the recognition that human beings have an opportunity not available to other species: the opportunity to judge and choose among forms of practice and, as a consequence, forms of life. This possibility endows the reproduction of our species with the peculiarity just mentioned, that can be alternatively expressed as such: among living beings, only humans are able to judge what something like a *good* life is<sup>12</sup>.

If this interpretation of Marx's famous sentence is stretched to its limits, it is possible to recognise through it another ontological determination of social existence: its structured character. The key to move on to this new plan of argument is to be found in the expression 'changes his own nature' and, in particular, in the word 'nature'. At least two meanings can be attributed to the word nature in that sentence. The first and more restricted, but not less important, is related to human being herself, the subject of action. If determined forms of practice are to move from the ideal 'teleological positing' to the materialisation of its result, the subject of the activity has to 'change his own nature' in a certain way. In order to realise some working acts, it is clearly necessary to restrain instincts and/or to improve motor control and other physical and/or intellectual skills. (Lukács, 1980, p.45) An artisan, for instance, becomes a better artisan when takes

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<sup>12</sup> 'Because of language and labour, and the cultural possibilities they bring in their wake, we can transform what we are in ways that non-linguistic animals cannot. To discover what we are, to know our own natures, we have to think hard about it; and the result is that we have come up over the centuries with a bewildering array of versions of what it is to be human'. (Eagleton, 2003, p.111)

full advantage of his creativity and natural motor ability, being also true that the production of certain objects demand a quite expressive level of development of such conditions.

On the other hand, the word ‘nature’ in that Marxian sentence can be apprehended as synonym for ‘environment’, in such a way to emphasise the modifications of the natural world produced by our intentional activity. This is so because ‘nature’ for humans is not constituted just by inorganic (stones, water, atoms, gravity etc.) and organic (animals, plants, bacterias etc.) preconditions of human activity, but also by the set of objects that human beings produced with all this (cities, buildings, houses, chairs etc.) – objects that the natural world would not produce by itself. This means that, on the one hand, humans materially modify the world to introduce in it a ‘furniture’ (i.e. social objects) of her own and, on the other, that in doing it a change in the conditions of other transforming activities takes place<sup>13</sup>.

In order to defend that the social world has a structural character it seems enough to observe that, if human activity operates upon conditions that are external to the subjects of activity (even if created by the same subject in past moments), then there is an ontological difference between human practice and the *social* structures that condition it. It is possible to finally and immediately conclude, from this, that social existence is split into, at least, two domains: the domain of human activity and the domain of social structures that restrain, but also enable this activity. The following section closely examines the structured character of social existence.

### **3. Human activity and social structures: the two central domains of social existence**

The reader certainly recalls that the argument developed here departed from teleology, the decisive category of the ontology of social being implicit in Marxian theory. Some lines above, it was finally possible to maintain that the teleological practice of individuals modifies the structural configuration of the world and, in doing so, the proper conditions of the teleological action in the future. Being these the terms of the problem, it could be possible to conclude that human beings *deliberately* produce the structural conditions of their activity, so that society could be understood as the

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<sup>13</sup> It is possible to maintain already at this point that the reproduction typical of our species has an ‘extended character’, insofar as it is based on a process of creation of new determinations with and by means of past creations.

result of a general teleological construction. Teleology would characterise, thus, either human activity *and* the totality of the social edifice built up in and through it.

As a matter of fact, a closer inspection of the relation between human activity and social structures (that make it possible) leads to a quite different conclusion, a conclusion truly compatible with the general orientation of Marx's social theory. This is so because, in many moments and in different texts, Marx offers arguments that, if correctly interpreted, circumscribe teleology just to the domain where its existence can be really demonstrated: human activity. This is, it should be said *en passant*, a defining element of Marxian social theory, which can be disclosed by contrasting his theory to those based on ontological frameworks that attribute a teleological character to the totality of social life and even to natural existence, such as the religious ontology and, under different forms, idealism.

To correctly apprehend the relation between human activity and social structures from a Marxian viewpoint, it is necessary to improve the argument of the last section by adding up two statements<sup>14</sup>. First, it is important to take into account that the activity of each individual never operates in a vacuum of social relations: on the contrary, individuals always realise their intentions in relation to the realisations of other individuals. In these web of relations, the teleological orientation of determined practices can be restrained, favoured or modified by the effect of other practices (that is to say, of other 'teleological courses'). Anyway, it is certain that the result of the intentional activity of determined individual can and not rarely overcomes the immediate teleological realisation.

Second, it is necessary to recognise that the structural conditions of individual activity are not exactly *created* by individuals, in spite of the fact that they are affected (preserved or modified) by it. In other words, human beings do not create the conditions of their practice, but only reproduce or transform conditions inherited from the activity of past generations of humans (and from nature). It is impossible here to resist the temptation of generalising the meaning of the famous Marx's quote in which he tried to put emphasis on the historical conditioning of political choices: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited'. (Marx, 1996, p.32)

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<sup>14</sup> The argument of this section follows Bhaskar (1979, p.39pp.). Lukács offers a very similar argument in (Lukács, 1978, p.74-78).

There is, consequently, not just a *quantitative* difference between individuals (human activity) and society (social structures), but a *qualitative* difference, a categorical difference: actually, as said, society is split into structural conditions and human practices<sup>15</sup>. While teleology is an indelible determination of human practices, it is a mistake to recognise it as a property of social structures, because these structures are never the successful or unsuccessful result of the operation of a universal teleology. On the contrary, they are the unplanned result of the spontaneous articulation of numberless, infinitively diversified and many times contradictory human acts. (Lukács, 1978, p.76-77)

This ontological proposition is clearly incompatible with the atomist description of society as a simple (quantitative) grouping of practices of individuals that, stretching this line of reasoning to its limits, become individuals before any contact with the society created in their activity. Instead of this image of a society produced directly by the activity of unsocial individuals, the image of society implicated by the work of Marx highlights the *articulation* of practices of individuals that find society ‘ready-made at birth’, so that they always operate under social conditions already set up. (Bhaskar, 1979, p.42-43) To say it in a few words, the emphasis here relies on social relations – the relations among individuals themselves and between individuals and social structures.

It is not for other reason, in fact, that Marx explicitly argues in favour of what Bhaskar (Ibid., 52) called relational conception of society: a conception of society as a set of relations between individuals and of relations between these relations (and not, to repeat, as a group of individuals or, more precisely, of individual practices). Individuals, moreover, always exist as subjects of social relations, in which they occupy social positions that give meaning to their activity. In other words, individuals never engage in relations as abstract, unsocial, individuals, but always performing the role corresponding to a social position (general / soldier; father / son; teacher / student, for example). Actually, there is nothing like an individual outside of these relations, nor relations without individuals that occupy positions that only make sense... relationally.

Summing up, there is a dialectical relation between human practice and social structures. On the one hand, social structures are dependent of human activity, for they

<sup>15</sup> This is a characterisation that demands further development. Both Lukács and Bhaskar themselves recognise that it is necessary to take into consideration the mediations between the domain of human praxis and the domain of social structures. While Bhaskar (1979, p.51) suggests, as a mediating element, the positions occupied by individuals when they participate of social life, Lukács points out to practice of collectives of individuals, such as social classes. (Lukács, 1978, p.90)

cannot reproduce themselves without it, though they are still not the deliberate outcome of this activity. On the other, human activity is enabled or restrained by the structural conditions of practice, though they are still not a mechanical outspread of such conditions, given that they preserve its teleological nature (and, hence, its alternative character, the values inherent to it, the role of subjectivity).

Up to now, the argument concentrated itself on human activity, which is the exclusive locus of teleology (not only in the social being, but in general). The intention was to delineate, by means of an analysis of preconditions, the general conditions of human activity that are more relevant to social existence. Now that the analysis could establish the dialectical nexus between the domain of practice and that of social structures, it becomes possible to explore a theme that cannot be disregarded by anyone who wishes to develop a social ontology: historicity.

#### **4. Historicity, development and... freedom**

It is necessary, at this point, to fill a gap in the argument by introducing a category that is indispensable in order to make sense of the historical constitution of social existence: *totality*. It is not without a certain apprehension that a Marxist, even today, deals with the category of totality. This is so, because, in numerous and usually insidious conservative critiques, the philosophical category of *totality* has been confused with the political notion of *totalitarianism* and its usage denounced as a definitive proof of a supposedly necessary connection between communism and autocracy<sup>16</sup>. The proper terms that define the (hegelian) category of totality are, nonetheless, enough to withdraw the confusion venally fostered by the most unqualified critiques of Marx. In a Marxian sense, as expressed by Lukács, totality is a ‘complex’ of ‘partial complexes’, that is to say, it is a form of existence constituted by the structural articulation of several structures. (Lukács, 1978, p.27)

To illustrate, consider society in terms of the interactions between two huge complexes (i.e., structural domains): human activity and structural conditions of activity (objects, forms of consciousness, values, linguistic structures etc.). Besides the split into these two general complexes, within each of them other specific complexes can be found. For example, human practices are constituted by particular domains of activities

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<sup>16</sup> A very interesting comment on this confusion, deliberately stimulated by the conservative ideology, between the categories of totality and of totalitarianism can be found in Žižek (2001).

which realise themselves with a relative degree of autonomy, at least in societies already minimally developed: the activity of material reproduction, artistic practices, the political activity, theoretical production etc. Analogously, the economic complex in itself can be considered in terms of the specific relation it has with any of the complexes of politics, science, the arts, religion etc. and/or in terms of the totality constituted by all these domains.

It seems clear that, admitted the complexity inherent to social being (or to any other totality), the allegation of historicity must be referred not only to the totality of relations, but to the possible diversity of situations among complexes. This is the minimum foundation of the analysis of the historical character of society, a foundation that reveals all its relevance when the issue of uneven development is taken in consideration, as will be the case below (in a very brief comment). Before dealing with this question, however, it is important to offer at least a general description of that which is called historical process. In this case, once again, Lukács' *Ontology of Social Being* (1978, section 3) can and should be used as the base of the argument.

It is really important to remark that Lukacs has set out his notion of historicity in terms of the philosophical category of *substance*. An object can be said historical if its inner constitution determines an irreversible course through time in which the *object is preserved as the object it is* by means of its own transformations. The historical process, in other words, is a process characterised by the 'ontological principle of *persistence through change*', being this dynamic persistence apprehended precisely by the category of substance. (Lukács, 1978, p.71) In doing so, Lukács redeems the category of substance, freeing it from the mistaken position in which it is statically conceived as a fixed substratum of the being<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, and much more important, understood dynamically, the category of substance makes it possible to defend that change and persistence are not mutually excluding determinations, but rather antithetical moments without which none of the poles could be even defined (for, obviously, there is no way to correctly define change without persistence and *vice versa*).

The allegation of historicity, though, involves much more than 'simply' recognising the dialectical unity between persistence and change as expressed by the category of substance or stating that a historical process is marked by temporal irreversibility. To correctly characterise historicity the notion of *direction* in the

<sup>17</sup> It is somewhat surprising that a Marxist as competent as Postone has committed such a primary mistake. Mistake that, by the way, unnecessarily undermines the reputation of his very interesting (though polemic) reconsideration of Marx's work. Cf.: Postone (1993).

movement through time is equally crucial. In other words, an object can only be considered really historical if it is endowed with a structural configuration that *determines a movement in a certain direction*, be it actualised or not. This means that history is not a random and purely contingent passing of time, but a process that, though subject to contingency, has a causal nature. (Ibid., p.69-72)

When causality is at stake, it is unavoidable to deal with a problem created by the striking influence of the Positivist interpretation on the scientific thought and on the thought about science. Positivism is the source of the notion – spread across philosophy, science and the common sense – that the relations of cause and effect conceived as *laws* have the form proposed by Hume, that is, constant conjunctions of events of the form ‘whenever event *A* then event *B*’. It is not the case of offering here a critique of such understanding of causal process<sup>18</sup>, but it is still possible to call the readers’ attention to the fact that neither Marx nor any Marxist theory worthy of the label consider causality as a constant relation between events. Causality for Marx and Marxism is synonymous with *tendency*, which refers to the power of a form of existence of produce a certain flow of events, whether this flow be actually materialised or not (by the effect of opposing determinations).

The characterisation of causal processes as tendencies recorded as scientific laws has epistemological implications of great importance. For example, the notion of law as tendency suffices to avoid any attempt to convert an analysis of society into a prophetic futurology of any kind (astrological or econometric). It is once more necessary, anyhow, to concentrate the focus of the argument on the ontological plan. In this particular, one should take into account, above all, that the notion of law as tendency allows to conciliate two categories usually taken as incompatible in many philosophical or scientific theories (including some versions of Marxism): causality and teleology. (Lukács, 1978, p.159-163)

If causal relations (laws) are understood as tendencies, then there is no reason to maintain that, in the analysis of society, causality is incompatible with teleology. In fact, it would be necessary to leave aside the idea of causality itself if it could not be somehow related to the unique element capable of moving social existence: the intentional human action. The work of Marx, however, is full of analyses that point out to a solution to the problem by depicting, in a very illustrative way, the connection between causal relations and teleological practice. One of these analyses can be found in

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<sup>18</sup> Cf.: Bhaskar (1997); Lawson (1997).



Chapter XII of the first book of *Capital* (Marx, 1967), in the passage where Marx describes how the tendency for the unitary value of commodities to fall is formed in a non-teleological synthesis of acts whose teleological sense (i.e. the goal) is to obtain extraordinary profit (surplus-value). It applies to this tendency that which Lukács said of all economic tendencies discovered by Marx:

[...] although these law-like characteristics are syntheses, which arise in the real world itself out of the practical economic acts performed by individuals, who are conscious of them as such, yet their ultimate results, which are what is fixed in the theory, go far beyond the powers of theoretical comprehension and practical decision of the individuals who carry out these practical acts. (Lukács, 1978, p.42-43)

The false opposition between law and teleology is intimately related to the false opposition between historicity and contingency. (Ibid., p.101) To make the point straightforwardly, it is necessary to resume the notion of society as a totality, a '*complex of complexes*'. Any of the complexes that constitute the totality of social life is characterised by immanent, particular, tendencies that are not necessarily compatible one with each other. The sequence of events actually objectified as factual history is the result of the articulation of the most general tendencies of the being (those tendencies enrooted in the being's most decisive structural determinations) with particular tendencies (which are determinations of complexes associated with specific historical conditions). It follows from this that not only the total movement of social being can follow different directions, but also that it entails the possibility of purely contingent, casual, arrangements of causal forces<sup>19</sup>.

The same complexity that gives room to contingency as a fundamental category of social being should be taken into account to grasp the historical movement of each of the various complexes that constitute the totality of social being. The point here is that these complexes can be in a diversity of situations: for instance, some complexes can be developing 'faster' than others. This would immediately lead to the category of *uneven development*, if this could be done without answering the following question: what does exactly *development* mean in such context?

Going straight to the point, development means increase of the specific content of the form of being to which the term applies. (Ibid., p.45) For instance, the complex of life develops itself when the reproduction of forms of being becomes dependent on a broader set of categories not found in inorganic nature. In the same form, societies or

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<sup>19</sup> It should not be forgotten that the current analysis does not allude to the laws of nature, which increase even more the degree of complexity of social being.

any domain of social existence can be said more developed when its existential configuration and its reproductive logic depend on a broader set of categories with specifically social content. For instance, the forms of money develop as they disengage from the materiality required by commodities. Hence, paper money backed by gold can be said a development of commodity money and the same can be said of money not backed by gold in comparison to the backed one.

Social development, in brief, is ‘just’ the ‘retreat of the natural boundary’ – to employ a synthetic Marxian expression that Lukács insistently repeats. (Lukács, 1978, p.9) In a broader space, it would be important to demonstrate that this general tendency of development of social being provides the basis for a more precise causal specification. Lukács himself points towards this direction when he suggests that the retreat of the natural boundary involves, first of all, an increase of social productivity, that is to say, a wider and diversified production of specific social things. Unfortunately and surprisingly, Lukácsian analysis is disappointing exactly at such an important point, insofar as the author insists in associating this ultra-general law of social development to the law of value specified by Marx, which is a determination exclusive of the society ruled by capital<sup>20</sup>. (Ibid. p.166)

Nevertheless, to the present argument what really matters is to emphasise that the general movement towards a more explicit sociality is not a linear and continuous movement of all complexes, but a contradictory, heterogeneous, non-linear movement, subject even to periods of reversion. The category of uneven development, proposed by Marx, but insufficiently specified in his work, can be employed to represent the possibility of heterogeneity in the degree of development of specific complexes: for instance, a difference between the complex of the arts and that of economy. This is precisely what does Lukács (Ibid., p.122-134) when he avoids ascribing a purely economic meaning (i.e. the inequality of rhythms of the economic development among capitalist countries) to the category of uneven development, as did most Marxist literature until now.

The general line of social development – the retreat of the natural boundary – is, thus, complex, contradictory and unequally distributed among particular social domains. But it still expresses, in a universal plan, that which is most relevant in this form of being: the transformation of natural existence that makes human life increasingly free of

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<sup>20</sup> A rigorous demonstration of the relation of the law of value and capitalism can be found at Postone (1993) or at Duayer & Medeiros (2008).

the coercion imposed by natural determinations. It is not for other reason that the word 'free' appeared in the last phrase. Freedom is such an important category for the social ontology based on the work of Marx that should be considered in an exclusive section: in the present case, the conclusion.

## **Conclusion**

Invited to write the volume on Marx to a series of pocket books designed to present to a broad audience the general elements of the thought of reputed philosophers, Terry Eagleton (1997) correctly emphasised the nexus of Marx's oeuvre and freedom. Contrary to what could be supposed, this choice is not justified only or mainly by the need to reject the association of communism, readily identified with Marx, with the absence of freedom – an association incorporated to common sense with the support of dominant ideology. Eagleton's choice can be justified, first and above all, by the fact that the work of Marx comprises countless evidences that, for the author, social development has, as a general trend, the increase of freedom of the human gender and (not necessarily in harmony with it) of the individuals that concretely constitute it.

The expression employed, in the last section, to make sense of the general line of social development, the 'retreat of the natural boundary', expresses in its proper formulation this connection between freedom and social development. (Lukács, 1980, p.39) This is so because, for Marx, freedom is not something that can be defined merely in the subjective plan, as a sort of cathartic thought, reactive to conditions of veiled or explicit oppression. Freedom, in his opinion, is nothing but the degree in which humanity got rid of the coercion imposed by natural determinations (including those objectified in our body) and by the laws that spontaneously emerge from social development itself. This coercion is manifested, crucially, in the domain of material production, as Eagleton puts in the following passage of the pocket book just mentioned:

[For Marx] we are most human and least like the other animals when we produce freely, gratuitously, independent of any immediate material need. Freedom for Marx is a kind of creative superabundance over what is materially essential, that which overflows the measure and becomes its own yardstick. (Eagleton, 1997, p.6)

In a closer inspection of the notion of freedom suggested by Marx, it would be necessary to make it clear that, for him, the increase of freedom of the gender is

frequently conquered at the expense of the freedom of the majority of individuals that live in a determined historical epoch. It would be also important to demonstrate that, in the opinion of Marx (and Engels), communism is the period of social development in which humanity could finally harmonise the 'free development of each' with the 'free development of all'. (Marx & Engels, 1976, p.506). In this conclusion, however, the space is too limited for advancing an argument of this kind.

Fortunately, it is still possible to offer something as a last word. And this is the following: it was not necessary to reject any of the most basic principles of Marxian thought to maintain, in the previous section, that increasing freedom is the general content of social development. Besides, freedom has not shown up in the text neither as a kind of *ad hoc* surprising ending of an extensive line of reasoning, nor as an implicit presupposition kept in secret to be revealed in the end. On the contrary, it was only possible to deal with the question of freedom because some key elements of social existence were previously recognised: the teleological character of human praxis; the presence of value as a social category; the relation between social structures and human activity; and the set of categories necessary to make sense of the historical nature of social being.

The fact that the entire argumentation is inspired, directly or indirectly, by the work of Marx would be enough to prove that his critical intervention really has an ontological orientation. An ontological orientation that expresses itself even (or mainly) in the numerous texts in which Marx deals with very particular conditions of determined historical formations. It is certainly because both Lukács and Bhaskar departed from Marx that they could produce a consideration on the ontology of social being similar in so many aspects. It is a shame that still few Marxists are interested in this material. If this audience is increased by a single reader, motivated by this paper, its author will certainly feel it as a victory.

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