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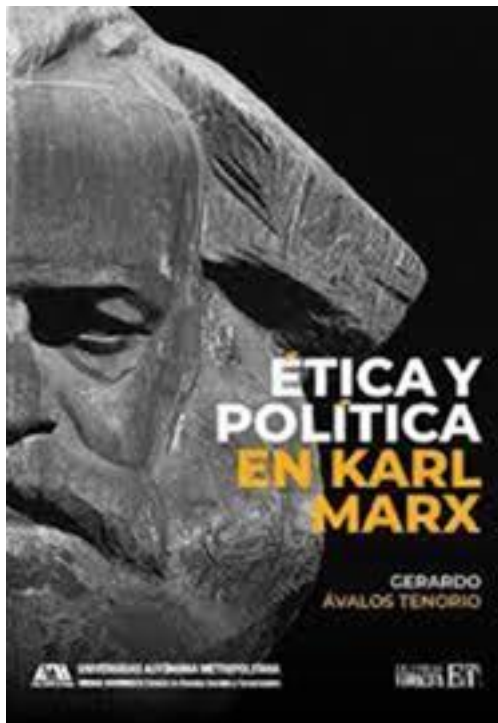
Book Review

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## Avalos' Thought on The Contemporary Pertinence of Marx's Political Philosophy

ÁVALOS, GERARDO. ÉTICA Y POLÍTICA EN KARL MARX.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The book “Ethics and Politics in Karl Marx”<sup>1</sup> is very current and fundamental for reflecting on the great contribution of the political theory worked out and proposed by Marx that is implicit in his critique of political economy, especially in the specificity of the contemporary moment in which several critical authors call a “polycrisis” of capital<sup>2,3</sup>. The “polycrisis” has the confluence and interweaving of various dimensions of the capitalist crisis: economic (inflation and depression), ecological (climate and pandemic) and geopolitical (war and new international divisions). Relying on Marx’s critical thinking is fundamental in this turbulent context

## **BROADER IDEA: WHY READ THIS BOOK?**

Gerardo Ávalos’ book, by offering us Marx’s profound contribution, not through an economic perspective of his thought, but above all in the valorization of his philosophical-political source in his critique of political economy, reinforces the understanding of the philosopher from Trier - as Gerardo mentions - about the understanding of modern society, its structuring logic, its world organization and its contradictions.

The book adequately illuminates the understanding of these turbulent times of capital and allows us to have the lucidity to face it. Such confrontation cannot fall into the trap of the (liberal) left, which, in its bid for a unique solution through the State, through its public policies, as a way of solving these problems.

Particularly on this issue, Ávalos deepens the understanding of the essence of this State, precisely, the deduction of the “State form” from the “value form”, which demonstrates the link between Hegel’s logic and the logic of the critique of political economy. By understanding the “State form” in this context, he shows that its movement is linked to the whole movement of capital. That is to say: understanding that essence is fundamental to perceiving the limits of public policy, for example. Therefore, there is no solution through this bet, since there is an organic relationship between capital and the State. Ávalos insists on this in his more general argument.

All this becomes clearer in the context of the State political form, under the new types of fascism that are emerging on the contemporary scene, in some countries, in which Capital and the State are articulated to guarantee the need for this increasingly violent reproductive movement on the exploitation of the working class (expropriation of their rights) in the environment of the crisis.

As we know, in summary, Marx’s work is structured around three main axes: 1) the dialectical method; 2) the labor theory of value; 3) the perspective of revolution. All these axes are discussed by Ávalos throughout his book, but under creative and brilliant approaches. To emphasize at least the third axis here, Ávalos already highlights in the introduction to his book that although the impulse to transform the world, throughout Marx’s studies, was tempered, it was never discarded. To exemplify a concern of Marx’s in his youthful writings, Ávalos reminds us of the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: “Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it”<sup>1,(15)</sup>. And if we follow his more mature work, in “Capital”<sup>4,5,6</sup>, Marx reveals the logic of the movement of Capital, under the form of value, with his strong critique of that process, as Ávalos points out in chapter 2: critique of the split in the modern world, critique of alienation, critique of fetishism, critique of reification, critique of despotism, etc.

All these dimensions, especially the critique of the value form, can assure us of the strength of his revolutionary perspective to transform this cruel way of life, recalls Ávalos, a “stolen life”.

For this reason, Ávalos makes it clear that through Marx we can understand the contemporary world as more violent and with a global geopolitical order determined by more concentrated power groups. Hence, Marx<sup>4</sup> offers us the perspective of social revolution, always aiming at human emancipation.

## **THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK DESERVES ATTENTION**

To ensure a common thread on the revolutionary nature of Marx's contribution, valuing his ethics and politics, Ávalos traces a very articulate path between his 8 chapters, providing an itinerary of reading and reflection that is increasingly enjoyable and profound.

He begins, in **chapter 1**, by explaining Marx's philosophical position, marked by idealist materialism. The tone is provocative when he states: "Marx's philosophical position is materialist, but it is also idealist"<sup>1(21)</sup>. He says: "The philosophical point of view of ideas or forms is always 'idealist', since it is from thought and its operations of thinking from categories that constitutes the essence of this love of knowledge. Only on a more concrete level, and one that is historically delimited, is it possible to establish a possible difference between 'idealism' and 'materialism' and even more so to establish an opposition, even an ethical-political one, between these 'world views'"<sup>1(21-22)</sup>. Ávalos says that Marx had no choice but to take advantage of Hegelian dialectics to discover the reality of the invisible nature of value and of relational processes and processual relations. Without this, or rather, without the complex relationship between Marx's thought and Hegel's philosophy, it is impossible to understand the logic of the development of capital. This is something Ávalos insists on.

From there, in **chapter 2**, entitled "From Ethics to Politics", he goes through the identification of his critique of Hegel as political economy, to the valorization of the politics of emancipation. Ávalos points out: "the profound meaning of Marx's revolution is human emancipation as a process in which 'changing one's circumstances coincides with changing oneself'"<sup>1(57)</sup>.

Then, making clear the depth of Marx's critique, Ávalos goes on to examine, in **chapter 3**, the world's most widely read historical document, the "Manifesto of the Communist Party". His emphasis is on the ethical fruitfulness of the Manifesto. To this end, Ávalos draws attention to the "form of the Manifesto", in which human beings must be aware of their role in the world. That is to say, according to Ávalos, human beings must take their lives into their own hands and organize themselves according to reason, not letting themselves be carried away by the inertia of the domain through which work has hitherto transited.

From **chapter 4** onwards, including **chapters 5 and 6**, Ávalos emphasizes Marx's political philosophy in his critique of political economy. In doing so, he highlights, in the foreground, Marx's political conception that contributes to the political reading of "Capital"<sup>4,5,6</sup>. Ávalos says: "it is politics in the broad sense that encompasses deliberation about the forms and contents of life

in common, but conditioned by necessity, by the threat and risk to the reproduction of life itself'. Therefore, he concludes: "this is the politics of capital, which becomes world, becomes empire and from there returns to the fictional forms of 'economies' and 'national political institutions'". In this sense, Ávalos draws everyone's attention: "the separation between the economy as a non-political space and politics as an expressly institutionalized space entrusted to be the arena of liberal, democratic and republican agreements is maintained here"<sup>1(86)</sup>. In this perspective, we learn from Marx, through Ávalos, that as long as profit is dominant as the foundation and essence of the social order, "the existence of a specifically political space that institutionally condenses the participation of citizens in the decisions that affect them will be indispensable"<sup>1(87)</sup>.

Then, on a subsequent level (**chapter 5**), Ávalos argues that Marx's political theory, implicit in his critique of political economy, contributes to the discussion of the State in the production process. It would be better to talk about the "State-form" and identify it as a deduction of the value form. It is at this core of the value form that the logically negative role of the State lies, as an essential feature of the expression "State form". Ávalos points out: "the State is like a negative capital (Hegelian contradiction), that is to say, it does not seek profit for itself, but rather the reproduction of capital as a whole"<sup>1(113)</sup>.

Later, in **chapter 6**, Ávalos insists that the strength of Marx's political philosophy critically exposes the contradictions of modernity, thus allowing him to be called a transmodern thinker, seeking to contribute to the debate that was initiated by Marshall Berman<sup>7</sup> in his book "All that is solid melts into air", written more than 30 years ago. Marx's critical analysis of the modern mode of domination allows us to understand capital as a contradictory process of civilization and barbarism. Ávalos says: "capital is understood as a contradictory process that articulates the life of human beings and constitutes their humanity, their civilized character"<sup>1,(131)</sup>. But Ávalos also makes it clear that it is important to recognize that exploitation, domination and exclusion also occur in this form of civilization.

From there, Ávalos continues this reflection in **chapter 7**, in which he shows that in Marx's conception, capital is not only an economic system, but a mode of civilization that must be understood dialectically, adding up to barbarism. Thus, Ávalos argues that it is necessary and urgent to resume the study of Marx's "Capital"<sup>4,5,6</sup>, reinterpreting it in the light of humanity's evolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In doing so, he recovers one of the main creations of Jacques Bidet<sup>8</sup>, a French philosopher, who refers to the concept of "metastructure". With this concept, which

refers to the set of relationships established by free, equal and rational individuals, which are not only mercantile relationships, but also legal-political ones, one can understand much beyond the very structure of capital, characterized by exploitation, the accumulation of power and the structuring of classes, ... its barbaric character.

Finally, in **chapter 8**, he insists on the current fundamental rescue of Marx's philosophical project - so important for the present day - in which he maintains the validity of ethical socialism. Ávalos delivers a crucial message for current times of clear signs of capitalist barbarism: Marx's socialism means the overcoming, in Hegelian terms, of liberalism as well as democracy and republicanism.

In this perspective, in this chapter Ávalos argues his central thesis that Marx's socialism is not a utopia, but a philosophical construction of an ethical nature.

## **INSPIRATIONS FROM ÁVALOS' BOOK: SOME WORTHY REFLECTIONS**

With the turbulence of contemporary capitalism, it is important to reflect on its essence and the persistence of its problems. In this situation, repeated questions are becoming **commonplace**, especially among those who, like Ávalos, seek to rescue Marx's ethical socialism, understanding the limits of liberalism and republican democracy, and trying to overcome them.

Why stick with the "institutional" diagnosis of attacks on social rights instead of understanding the capitalist world? Why insist on the idea that the limits of social policies, for example, derive from the irresponsibility of some governments? Is it possible to bet on institutional construction, reforms in the rule of law, restoring the State (with democratic institutions), as some countries under progressive governments are trying to do, as a way to overcome the current crisis?

We understand that, without radical critical reflection on these issues, it is practically impossible to answer them in a simple way. Therefore, in order to fulfill a task of such magnitude, thought requires a transgressive quality that breaks the limits of everyday analysis and of the most sectorial confrontations, as Ávalos offers us in his book.

Thus, we believe it is important to understand Marx's political theory implicit in his critique of political economy, advancing in these studies of understanding the "State-form" in its link with the movement of capital, as a deduction of the value form, as developed by Ávalos.

In turn, it is important to mention, for example, according to Ávalos, the criticism of a "derivation" such as that made by Mathias and Salama<sup>9</sup>: in a mechanical way: commodity-value-

money-capital, and then the State is inserted, playing its role as an intervener in the economic world to help capital reproduce itself. In this sense, Ávalos argues that in this type of derivation there is no methodological rigor that logically makes the State emerge from the value form. For this, it would be necessary to move from a syllogistic logic that was sustained by Marx to a syllogistic scheme in which a global systemic and total unity is necessary, considering the monopoly of extra-economic processes.

Ávalos is clear in his critical arguments to these authors:

The form of value develops as an economic world dragging its constituent contradictions which, logically, explode in crises, in which, without doubt, the need for the negative moment of value (state form) appears, not only because capital devalues itself, but above all because to overcome such a situation a *capital* is required that contradicts its essence, that is to say, a capital whose objective is not to obtain profit<sup>1(90)</sup>.

To explain the logically negative role of the State, Ávalos continues:

It is not a capitalist but precisely a negative capital that fulfills the Hegelian syllogism of being-in-itself, being-for-itself, and being-in-itself-and-for-itself, that is, the intertwining of the One (the capital that Marx analyzed, in general and in the abstract, as if it were One), the multiple (the circulation of the capital One, but now in the realm of being many individual capitals, even fragmented into shares, and in perpetual competition) and, as a third moment, once again the One as a global capital, a systemic autopoietic totality, capable of intervening by any means to maintain total unity<sup>1(90-91)</sup>.

Ávalos argues that this unity refers to the “imperial form” and that the “State form” is deduced from it, which allows us to understand our nation-States on the periphery of capitalism as geopolitically weak and subversive, in general, subordinate to the sovereign nation-States of the central capitalist countries.

In the search for a logical-ontological derivation of the State’s need to reproduce capital, Ávalos’ contribution seems to be *sui generis* in this sense. His interest is oriented towards an ontological logical analysis, supported by Hegel’s contribution, to describe the logic of capital, under Marx’s explanation of the **form value** and to perceive the State (form-State) as a **relational process**, continuous, daily, which simultaneously expresses itself by concealing relations of domination generated by capitalist sociability.

In the light of the in-depth analysis carried out by Ávalos, we can discuss in greater depth the questions that have persistently troubled part of the Latin American left: whether it is possible to build democratic institutions to face the crisis of contemporary capitalism. In turn, we are

convinced, based on Ávalos, that the State, as negative capital, that is to say, as the political form of capital, uses its institutions, through public policies, to manage the global accumulation of capital.

For all these reasons, I would like to invite everyone to read this important work, as it is a hermeneutic exercise in Marx's political theory and his understanding of Capital. This work inspires everyone to develop critical categories, for example, to understand how the State is formed in the world of Capital, and above all to reflect on our subordinated States on the periphery.

Although the book has a very precise common thread running through the eight chapters, each chapter can be read individually, according to the reader's choice. Certainly, this type of reading will also strengthen the critical perspective for understanding today's capitalism, which, in its dialectical relationship between civilization and barbarism, as Ávalos argues, has presented itself much more in terms of the latter characteristic.

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