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SHELLING, HEGEL, MARX AND LUKÁCS: SOCIETY AS A TOTALITY IN HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The present article briefly and schematically presents some ideas related to the perspective of totality and historicism in the understanding of social being. To do so, it draws upon the thought of classical German philosophy (especially Schelling and Hegel), as well as the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Georg Lukács. The central idea that structures this text is that current social relations can only be correctly understood as a complex and antagonistic totality in historical development, with the overriding moment being the dominant mode of social production. In this sense, it is concluded by presenting the Marxist-Lukacsian position regarding the relationship between the totality of social relations and individuals, mediated by various social complexes, conceived as inseparable terms of the historical development of social being.

Descriptors: German classic philosophy; Historicism; Lukács; Marx; Organic totality.

SCHELLING, HEGEL, MARX E LUKÁCS: A SOCIEDADE COMO UMA TOTALIDADE EM DESENVOLVIMENTO HISTÓRICO	SCHELLING, HEGEL, MARX Y LUKÁCS: LA SOCIEDAD COMO TOTALIDAD EN DESARROLLO HISTÓRICO
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<p>Resumo: O artigo presente apresenta de forma breve e esquemática algumas ideias relacionadas à perspectiva da totalidade e do historicismo na compreensão do ser social. Para isso, recorre ao pensamento da filosofia clássica alemã (especialmente Schelling e Hegel), bem como às obras de Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels e Georg Lukács. A ideia que estrutura todo o texto é que as relações sociais atuais só podem ser corretamente compreendidas como uma totalidade complexa e antagônica em desenvolvimento histórico, cujo momento decisivo é o modo dominante de produção social. Neste sentido, conclui-se apresentando a posição marxista-lukacsiana em relação à totalidade das relações sociais e os indivíduos, mediados por diversos complexos sociais, concebidos como termos inseparáveis do desenvolvimento histórico do ser social.</p> <p>Descritores: Filosofia clássica alemã; Historicismo; Lukács; Marx; Totalidade orgânica.</p>	<p>Resumen: El presente artículo expone breve y esquemáticamente algunas ideas referidas al punto de vista de la totalidad y del historicismo en la comprensión del ser social. Para ello, se recupera al pensamiento de la filosofía clásica alemana (especialmente de Schelling y Hegel) así como la obra de Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels y Georg Lukács. La idea que estructura todo el escrito consiste en que las relaciones sociales actuales solo pueden ser correctamente comprendidas como una totalidad compleja y antagónica en desarrollo histórico, cuyo momento decisivo es el modo dominante de la producción social. En este sentido se concluye presentando la posición marxista-lukacsiana respecto de la relación entre la totalidad de relaciones sociales y los individuos, mediatizados por diversos complejos sociales, concebidos como términos inseparables del desarrollo histórico del ser social.</p> <p>Descriptoros: Filosofía clásica alemana; Historicismo; Lukács; Marx; Totalidad orgánica.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

In 1987 Margaret Thatcher said that “society does not exist, what exists are individuals”,¹ thus summarizing one of the main commonplaces of the neoliberal ideology then in full swing.

However, this extreme individualism, still predominant today in the hegemonic common sense, is not the only tendency of the ideology of capitalist society. Throughout history, we can also find a diametrically opposite tendency: the absolutization of society (or of some supra-individual entity) over human subjects. Some extreme examples of this point of view are fascism, Nazism and social Darwinism, among many others.

Faced with these two diametrically opposed positions - absolutization of the individual or absolutization of society - Marxism has its own point of view, its understanding of society and the human individual. This conception is heir to a long theoretical tradition that has its roots in the thought of the Classical Greeks, of Plato and Aristotle, of Heraclitus and Epicurus.

However, the most direct antecedent of the Marxist position can be found in Classical German Philosophy: that theoretical movement which, linked to the names of Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, produced a revolution in thought comparable to the revolution that the French had produced in society.

I consider that a Marxist, concrete and therefore dialectical understanding of the relationship between the individual and society - and of society itself - is an indispensable precondition for the development of critical and emancipatory thought. I therefore propose here to offer a brief - and perhaps somewhat schematic - presentation of how four great thinkers solved this problem. These thinkers are Schelling, Hegel, Marx and Lukács.

CLASSICAL GERMAN PHILOSOPHY, SCHELLING AND NATURE AS ORGANIC TOTALITY

Friedrich Schelling was a unique and precocious philosopher. At the age of about 25 he was already among the great luminaries of German thought, with particular success among poets, Romantic intellectuals and natural scientists.²

Schelling's thought - especially that of the young Schelling, since this philosopher in his later years will assume a position in many respects antagonistic to the spirit of his youthful work^{3,4} is the direct heir and continuator of Kant and Fichte. As happened to Fichte with respect to Kant, Schelling will construct the decisive elements of his philosophical system in the belief that he is simply continuing or completing Fichte's philosophy. However, once he had developed his system, it became evident that it was a new philosophy, in some respects contrary to that of Fichte's. If in Fichte's philosophy the human **I** - not the **empirical I**, but the universal **I**, the general **I** - is to be the absolute subject, and nature merely a passive field of action, in Schelling's thought the objective-natural world acquires a renewed importance.⁵

This is no accident: Fichte's major work⁶ was written and published with an eye on the Jacobin Revolution of 1793-94. Just as Robespierre tried to create a new world out of the determined action of the Jacobins and the *Sans Culottes*, Fichte⁶ thought that the objective world arises by virtue of the activity of the **I**, of pure subjectivity which alienates^a itself from itself in

^a For the sake of simplicity, I use the terms "alienation" (Entäußerung) and "alienation" (Entfremdung) interchangeably here. In the work of the four thinkers discussed in this article (especially Hegel, Marx and Lukács), these terms have diverse and usually precisely delimited meanings. But as this differentiation escapes the problematic

order to create unconsciously the material world: the **not-I**. And then it would be precisely the task of philosophy to recover the consciousness that alienated the world, that objectivity (the **not-I**) that resolves itself into alienated subjective activity. The totality of the existent, from this point of view, is that which is objectified - that which is alienated - by the activity of the **I**.^{5,7}

In contrast, Schelling's philosophy emerges and develops after the tragic fall of the Jacobins and at the height of the natural sciences and the theoretical crises produced by this development.⁵ The philosophy of the young Schelling, then, has an eye on nature.

Like Fichte, Schelling⁵ seeks to solve the unresolved problems of Kant's critical philosophy. Let us recall that Kant poses the problem of thought, the problem of philosophy and knowledge as a subject-object relation, where the subject is the active, regulative moment in the production of knowledge. From Kant's perspective, intuitions, sensations, acquire their meaning (their form) thanks to the active faculties of the human intellect.

Kant⁸ puts this idea as follows:

Reason, carrying in one hand her principles alone, according to which alone coincident phenomena can avail for laws, and in the other the experiment, which she has conceived according to those [principles], must turn to nature to be, to be sure, instructed by it, but not in the capacity of a schoolboy who lets the teacher tell him whatever he wishes, but [in the capacity] of a judge in the exercise of his office, who compels the witnesses to answer the questions he puts to them.⁸⁽¹⁷⁻¹⁸⁾

And further on:

If intuition should be governed by the nature of objects, I do not understand how one could know *a priori* anything about it; but if the object (as an object of the senses) is governed by the nature of our faculty of intuition, then I can very well represent to myself that possibility.⁸⁽²⁰⁾

Human knowledge, then, is always mediated by the faculties of this active subject: we know things as they present themselves to the transcendental subject, to the forms of the intellect. Things in themselves are, from this point of view, unknowable.⁸

Particularly relevant to the object of our exposition is the question of the antinomies of pure reason. In two words, Kant's idea is the following: human reason - this active faculty of the subject - is not satisfied with partial knowledge, with relative and limited knowledge, isolated and unconnected to each other, but precisely, reason aspires towards totality and the unconditioned. In

of the present work (at least at the general level we are developing it here) we allow ourselves the license to use them indistinctly.

other words, reason seeks to organize knowledge into a totality of meaning, it seeks to understand the totality of what exists. However, the principles of reason that regulate this effort to know the totality - the cosmological ideas - are antinomical, from them four pairs of antinomies (of equally valid principles according to reason and contradictory to each other) are derived. The misfortune is that from the point of view of pre-Hegelian logic, contradiction is synonymous with falsity and error.

That is, cosmological ideas-these principles of reason-are irremediably contradictory, and yet human reason cannot escape this conflict of its own. This is how Kant put it:⁸

There we have now the whole dialectical play [i.e., the contradictory play] of cosmological ideas, [...] which [...] have not been conceived arbitrarily, but which reason is necessarily led to them in the continuous progress of empirical synthesis, when it sets out to free from all conditions and to embrace in its unconditioned totality that which according to rules of experience can only be determined conditionally.

[...]

But in this application, and in the progressive enlargement of the use of reason, philosophy, by beginning in the field of experiences and gradually rising to those sublime ideas, shows such dignity, that if she could sustain her pretensions, she would leave far behind the value of every other human science, since she promises [to give us] the foundation for our highest expectations and prospects concerning the ultimate ends on which all the efforts of reason must, at last, converge. [...] these are questions for the solution of which the mathematician would gladly give all his science; for the latter can procure him no satisfaction in regard to the supreme ends of mankind and most dear to it.⁸⁽⁴⁵⁶⁻⁴⁵⁷⁾

Finally, Kant⁸ will maintain that these contradictions can never be resolved, but must be regulated, understood, under the rule of that constitution of the republic of scientists which the “Critique of Pure Reason” claimed to be. But from this point of view, an absolute, true, rational knowledge about the most important things - for example, the question of the relation between freedom and necessity - is unfortunately impossible.

Fichte^{5,7} was not satisfied with Kant’s solution to this Faustian conflict of reason. It could be said that Fichte’s position was that the original problem in Kant was to be found in the mere idea of the existence of **things in themselves**. Fichte will maintain that it is not possible for there to be in consciousness things that are outside of consciousness, for that implies a contradiction. To solve this problem Fichte⁶ thus posed the necessity of an unconditioned and absolute first principle of all philosophy: the autogenesis of the I. Thus, his solution consisted in a radical subjective idealism, in which the generic **I** puts the world, thus dissolving the thing in itself and the original

source of the Kantian antinomies. The contradictions that arise in the totality of rational thought are, in this way, resolved and dissolved in the **I**.^{5,7}

I consider that the identity and difference of Fichte's and Schelling's philosophy is contained here. In his "Doctrine of Science," Fichte⁵ asserted that there are only two possible consistent systems of philosophy: criticism and Spinozism. The first, which assumes and accepts the absolute character of the "**I**". The second, which pretends to transcend it. This is how Fichte puts it:⁶

I also observe that one must necessarily arrive at Spinozism if one goes beyond the **I am** [...]; and that there are only two truly consistent systems: Criticism, which recognizes this limit, and Spinozism, which skips it.^{6(20, author's bold)}

Fichte is going to assume, decisively and unilaterally, Criticism, taking Kant's thought further on. For his part, we could say -perhaps risking a simplification- that Schelling will seek to integrate both systems: Schelling's philosophy could be read as a synthesis between Spinoza and Kant/Fichte.^{2,9,10}

The starting point of Schelling's own philosophy is to be found in the question of teleology - the end-oriented activity - raised by Kant in his "Critique of the Faculty of Judgment".⁵ This interest derives, as I mentioned earlier, from Schelling's attention to the natural sciences (which required, of course, going beyond Fichte's moral **I**). Especially, the issue here is, first, biological (i.e., organized beings) and second, nature as totality.

In two words, Kant¹¹ argued that we cannot say that in nature there is indeed a teleological activity, an activity directed to ends (for this is specific to human subjectivity). And yet living beings cannot be understood in a merely mechanical way. Therefore, Kant holds that natural teleologism is an idea introduced by the intellect (*a priori*) in order to be able to understand living beings and nature as an organized totality. This is where Schelling goes beyond the Kantian approach.

Schelling⁸ poses the problem as such:

Nature, both as a whole and in its particular products, will have to manifest itself as a consciously produced work and at the same time as a product of the blindest mechanism; **it is teleological without being teleologically explicable**.^{9(16, author's bold)}

Schelling, then, will seek to solve the problems of critical philosophy not with one philosophical system, but with two systems of philosophy: the System of Transcendental Idealism, on the one hand, and the Philosophy of Nature, on the other.

The whole philosophy of Kant and Fichte - the critical philosophy - constituted, so to speak, the movement from the subject to the object (either regulatively, as in the Kantian subject, or creatively, as in the Fichtean **I**). That philosophy constitutes the theoretical development of the movement - of the activity of the subject - that knows according to its own faculties and capacities to the objectivity of the world. The limit here is precisely the **thing in itself**, that last bastion of the unknowable, that which remains eternally outside the subject: a problem that Fichte sought to solve by denying its existence. Schelling⁹ will in no way discard critical philosophy. But he is going to propose the necessity of its complement, of its counterpart: the system of nature.

If critical philosophy is the movement of thought (of the subject) towards the knowledge of the world (the object), the philosophy of nature is for Schelling⁹ the inverse movement: the movement from natural objectivity towards human subjectivity. Schelling⁹ clearly states this idea when he says:

To raise **the objective** to first and to deduce from it the subjective is [...] the task of **natural philosophy**. If there is therefore a **transcendental philosophy**, there remains for it only the opposite direction, to **start from the subjective as the first and absolute, and let the objective arise from it**. In the two possible directions of philosophy are thus divided transcendental and natural philosophy [...].^{9(11, author's bold)}

In this sense, about the natural sciences and the philosophy of nature, he says:

The complete theory of nature would be that by which the whole of nature would be diluted into an intelligence. The dead and unconscious products are only unfortunate trials of nature to reflect on itself; but the so-called dead nature, in general, is an immature intelligence, hence in its phenomena, although unconsciously, already shines the intelligent character. Nature reaches the supreme goal of becoming completely object by the supreme and ultimate reflection, which is none other than man [...].⁹⁽¹⁰⁾

This movement occurs, then, as a result of the proper, autonomous activity of nature itself, which in its diversity of forms (mechanical, electrical, chemical, organic, etc.) ends up producing human reason. The central problem here is that this activity cannot be understood in a purely mechanical way, precisely because both the biological organism and nature as a whole escape mechanical logic. In a very interesting passage in "On the Soul of the World: A Hypothesis of Higher Physics for the Explanation of the Universal Organism,"¹² Schelling states the following:¹²

When we inquire into the origin of the concept of organization, we find the following.

In the mechanism of nature (as long as we do not consider it as a whole that returns to itself) we recognize a mere succession of causes and effects, none of

which is anything in itself subsistent, permanent, persistent - in two words, nothing that truly forms a world and is something more than a simple phenomenon, which originates according to a certain law and disappears again according to another law.

If, however, [...] nature were to compel the same material principles, which in general end up simply vanishing into singular phenomena, to act within a given sphere, then this sphere would express something permanent and immutable. The phenomena within this sphere would not now be that which is perennial (they, in fact, would also here arise and vanish, vanish and arise again), but that which is perennial would be the sphere itself, within which those phenomena are comprehended: this sphere could not itself be a simple phenomenon, because it would be that which arises in the conflict of those phenomena, the product, and so to speak the concept (that which remains) of those phenomena.^{12(179, our translation)}.

It is not possible, then, to think of organisms as arising from mechanical causes; the series of mechanical cause-effects is an infinite series that is prolonged without further ado, while the organism implies a series of causes and effects that are reciprocally placed. Schelling¹² says that “[...] such a being, which we must consider as being at the same time cause and effect of itself, we call organized [...]”.^(182, our translation) The circulatory system of an animal is not the cause of the respiratory system, nor the latter the cause of the nervous system, and so on. These systems presuppose, produce and require each other. The same is true on the scale of nature as a totality. If the mechanical relations are like a line of causes and effects, the adequate image of the organism is the circle that closes on itself. The question, then, is how it is possible for the organism to emerge from the mechanism. Schelling’s answer was that what is truly original is the organism, the totality of nature considered as a great organism. Just as within the biological organism there are also chemical and mechanical relations, but subordinate to biological activity, so the totality of nature is conceived by Schelling as a great organism, where the mechanical and chemical relations are aspects, partial moments of this great total organism. Thus, a correct understanding of nature, from Schelling’s point of view, is not built up by a sum, an aggregate, of the knowledge of the physicist, the chemist, the biologist, and so on. On the contrary, the correct knowledge of nature must start from and be oriented towards the totality, conceiving physics, chemistry, etc. as moments, aspects, of that one whole.^{7,12}

It is not our purpose here to develop Schelling’s system further. Suffice is to say that the two aspects of his philosophy (Transcendental Idealism and Nature) end up being re-unified not in rational thought. For Schelling an absolute rational knowledge about the world is not possible since it implies a contradiction: that the subjective is objective. In Schelling’s philosophy, the grasp of

the absolute - the subject-object unity, that highest ideal of classical German philosophy - is an attribute of aesthetic intuition, of the artistic sensibility of a great artist who immediately grasps that which in nature lies hidden from the ordinary eye, who reunites that which has been divided but which was originally one and the same thing.^{7,9} Thus the young Schelling⁷ illustrates the summit of his philosophy:

The ideal world of art and the real world of objects are therefore products of one and the same activity; the meeting of both (the conscious and the unconscious) **without** consciousness, gives the world; **with** consciousness, it gives the **aesthetic world**.^{7(17, author's bold)}

Despite the idealistic - and in many ways mystical - character of Schelling's philosophy, it is to his credit that he has extensively and profoundly developed the central category we are dealing with here: the category of **organic totality**. The natural world (and within it the human being) cannot be thought of as an aggregate of things, as a mere sum of indistinct atoms, indifferent to each other, but rather as an internally organized whole, where each aspect is not a simple part but - to use a Hegelian term - a **moment** of the totality. The whole, in this way, precedes the parts, determines them and gives them their meaning and function. The parts, in turn, are indifferent neither to each other nor to the whole: they do not exist outside the whole (a hand – as Aristotle¹³ exemplified - separated from the human body ceases to be properly a hand).

HEGEL'S DIALECTICAL LOGIC AND HUMANITY AS A SPIRITUAL TOTALITY IN HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Hegel, that youthful friend of Schelling's, will take Classical German Philosophy to its highest peaks. If, after the moral enthusiasm of Fichte, German philosophy with Schelling had returned to the problems of the natural sciences, with Hegel philosophy had turned its attention to human history, not as a mere occurrence but as the decisive ground of philosophical thought.

For Hegel¹⁴ also nature is an organized whole, a totality of differentiated moments. Like Fichte, Hegel thought that the whole of nature was an alienation from the subject. But unlike Fichte, Hegel's subject is not the mere individual **I** (even if it is the "best I" of all individuals, the universal **I** that we carry within us, just as the *bourgeois* carries within him the *citoyen*). Hegel's subject is pure *logos*, pure thought. But of course, for Hegel thought is by no means that which happens inside the skull of human individuals. For Hegel¹⁴ pure thought, *logos*, is the pure subjective force that with its activity creates the universe and the human being, it is a kind of

cosmic subject that forms and produces the whole world. In human beings, in their history and activity, thought - according to Hegel - only develops and finally becomes conscious of itself.¹⁴

The object of Hegel's "Science of Logic"¹⁵ is precisely this pure *logos*, this pure active subject. Hegel defines it thus:¹⁵

[...] logic is to be grasped as the system of pure reason, as the realm of pure thought. This realm is truth **itself**, such as it is unveiled in and for itself; it may therefore be expressed thus: that this content is the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence, before the creation of nature and of a finite spirit.^{15(199, author's boldface)}

However, this pure thought cannot **remain** in this its general form. This logical **God**, this pure subjectivity, cannot perform its activity without objectifying itself. This objectification is precisely nature and the **finite spirit**, that is, human history, where - starting from nature as thought in its being-other, objectified thought - thought searches for itself, discovers itself.¹⁶

The motto of the temple of Apollo at Delphi, **know thyself**, is the motto of pure thought as existing in the form of human history, as spirit.¹⁷ Hegel says:¹⁶

The knowledge of the spirit is the most concrete of knowledge, and, for the same reason, the highest and most difficult. **Know thyself**; this absolute precept does not have (neither taken in itself, nor wherever it is found expressed historically) the meaning of a knowledge of oneself as of one's own particular capacities [...] but signifies, on the contrary, the knowledge of the truth of man, of the truth in itself and for itself, of the very essence as spirit.^{16(201, author's bold)}

For Hegel¹⁶ thought reveals itself in all forms of human activity - in all forms of the spirit: in politics and war, in family and business relations. But there are three forms of human activity in which thought tends to grasp itself in its pure form: Art, where thought intuits itself; religion, where thought represents itself; and philosophy, where thought finally grasps itself in the pure form that corresponds to its essence: dialectical logic.¹⁴

That - dialectical logic - is precisely the means by which Hegel is to solve the unresolved problems of Classical German Philosophy. Absolute knowledge, pure subject-object unity (something which, let us remember, constitutes a logical contradiction) can and must be realized rationally precisely because the principle of the development of reason and thought is not the lack of contradictions, but contradiction itself. Hegel states:¹⁸ "Contradiction is the rule of truth, non-contradiction that of falsity."¹⁵⁹ The objective contradictions of history, of human-social activity, the contradictions of thought and philosophical systems constitute precisely the active principle, the motor of the development of intellect and reason. Thus we return to the problem of Kant's

antinomies and the problem of totality: the contradictory character of the categories of the world, of reality conceived as totality, is not - for Hegel¹⁸ - a symptom of the impossibility of attaining fully objective, true knowledge. On the contrary, only the thought that gathers within itself the contradictory categories of the whole, the antinomic moments of the organic totality thought, only that thought that can resist contradiction and include it in its system can be called concrete thought and, therefore, true thought. Identity, the principle of non-contradiction, is for Hegel¹⁹ synonymous with vacuous abstraction, conceptual poverty, **lifeless solitude** and, therefore, falsity.

It must be said that it is by no means Hegel who first introduced the question of contradiction into Classical German Philosophy. From Kant's antinomies, through Fichte's contraposition of the **ego**, to Schelling's opposing forces of nature, contradiction occupies a central place in all these thinkers. We see contradiction playing a decisive role, for example, when Schelling¹² states that:

Wherever there are phenomena, there are already opposing forces. Thus the **theory of nature** presupposes as an immediate principle a **universal heterogeneity** and, in order to be able to explain the latter, a **universal homogeneity** of matter. Neither the principle of absolute difference nor that of absolute identity is the true principle; truth lies in the **reunion of both**.^{12(69, our translation, author's bold)}

This reminds us of the Hegelian principle - frequently quoted by the old Lukács - of the **identity of identity and non-identity**.

What differentiates, in two words, Hegel in his treatment of contradiction is, in the first place, his idea of dialectical logic - the logic of contradiction as concrete logic - and Hegel's effort not to eliminate contradiction at any point, but to include it in the system of thought. Both Fichte and Schelling at some point in their philosophy seek a non-contradictory principle or moment: in Fichte, the I as absolute principle; in Schelling, the aesthetic intuition as absolute and irrational meeting of what in the world lies as something opposed and contradictory.^{7,20} For Hegel, on the contrary, the concrete and logical-rational totality is always and necessarily contradictory. To know it is to know its immanent contradictions.

This point of view was extensively developed by Hegel especially in the field of human social relations, which Hegel not only always conceived of as a concrete totality, but also conceived of as a **totality in historical development**. Each society, each people, each culture constituted in Hegel's **Philosophy of History**¹⁷ a form of the spirit, a configuration of thought, an aspect of absolute truth. The historical time of each people and of each culture, its rise and splendor,

were linked to the development of some aspect, of some determination of the pure subject, of pure thought made human history. But as each culture develops precisely one aspect of the whole, it is unilateral and therefore the moment of its decadence must come, and the moment in which another people incarnates a new form of the spirit. However, since all history has an end - the self-knowledge of the spirit - this must be realized in some people, in some cultural-social configuration. This social form will be for Hegel precisely his own epoch, the epoch of bourgeois society, thus conceived as the ultimate configuration of human history, as a fully developed image in the social life of pure thought.¹⁴

Despite this supposed end of history, to which we will return later, for Hegel the concrete totality is not something given, but something in permanent historical development, in a permanent process of concretization and complexification, of the unfolding of its contradictions. Hegel¹⁷ expounded this idea with the beautiful prose that characterized him:

In history we walk among the ruins of the egregious. History tears us away from the noblest and most beautiful things in which we are interested. Passions have made it succumb. It is perishable. Everything seems to pass and nothing remains. Every traveler has felt this melancholy. Who will have been among the ruins of Carthage, Palmyra, Persepolis or Rome, without giving himself up to considerations about the expiration of empires and men, to mourning for a past life, strong and rich? [...] But another aspect is immediately linked to this category of variation: that a new life arises from death. This is a thought that the Orientals have already conceived, perhaps their greatest thought, and certainly the highest of their metaphysics. In the myth of the transmigration of souls it is contained, with respect to the individual; but even more universally known is the image of the phoenix, of natural life, which eternally prepares its own pyre and consumes itself on it, in such a way that from its ashes a new, rejuvenated and fresh life rises. [...] But when it lays down the sheath of its existence, it not only transmigrates into another sheath, but rises from the ashes of its former figure as a purer spirit. This is the second category of spirit. The **rejuvenation** of the spirit is not a simple return to the same figure; it is a purification and elaboration of itself. ^{17(47-48, author's bold)}

There we see the general idea of his historicism: the development of humanity (of peoples, as forms of the spirit) through their own activity. But also, as we said, for Hegel this development is not a mere succession, not even a mere complexification or development, but a teleological activity, an activity directed to an end. Continuing the considerations just cited, Hegel¹⁷ says:

The question imposes itself, then, whether behind the tumult of this surface there may not be an intimate, silent, secret work, in which the force of all phenomena is preserved. What may perplex us is the great diversity and even the inner

antagonism of this content. We see antagonistic things that are venerated as holy and that have aroused the interest of ages and peoples. The desire arises to find in the idea the justification for such decadence. This consideration leads us to the third category, to the question of an ultimate end in and for itself. It is this category of **reason** itself, which exists in consciousness, as faith in the reason that governs the world. Its demonstration is the very treatise of universal history, which is the image and work of reason.^{17(48-49, author's bold)}

For Hegel, the ultimate result of this historical activity is precisely modern society: the social world in which reason has unfolded in human life and thus made objective in its own image. Let us dwell for a moment on the Hegelian conceptualization of the capitalist world, on some aspects of his theorization of social life considered as a totality.

Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"²¹ constitutes the exposition of the system of forms of modern-bourgeois sociability. Since this is the ultimate configuration of the spirit, it includes in itself as superseded preceding social forms, which here appear as moments of totality. These social forms range from the immediate relations of subjects with objects and intersubjective relations (possession, property, etc.), passing through morality, to the objectified forms of social relations, the institutions that regulate activity in society (Family, Civil Society and State). According to the Hegelian method, the whole constitutes the determining moment, and the State is conceived here precisely as the whole, as the ultimate moment of the unification of the different aspects of modern society into a totality. The rest of the moments set out in the "Philosophy of Right"²¹ appear, finally, as differentiations within the modern State, as organs of the organic totality represented by the State.¹⁴

Now, Hegel had a profound knowledge of the contradictions of capitalist society. In fact, he was the only great German philosopher of his time who had systematically studied the English Political Economy.⁵ This understanding appears clearly in his "Philosophy of Right",²¹ most especially in his exposition of civil society, that is, bourgeois society. This is the sphere in which the substantial unity of the family disintegrates, in which the concrete and intimate relations of the family disappear and the *Godfather's* slogan "nothing personal, it's just business" reigns supreme. Here, individuals appear as abstract atoms that struggle to solve their needs and economic interests in their interaction with the rest. Although each one is only interested in his individuality and considers the rest as a mere instrument to solve his needs, each one is at the same time absolutely dependent on the others. That is to say, here the individual and society as a whole appear as antagonistic and at the same time reciprocally dependent.²¹ Thus Hegel expresses it:

In civil society, everyone is his own end and all other things are nothing to him. But no one can attain the whole of his ends without entering into relation with the others; these are then only means in view of the end of a particular individual.²¹⁽³⁴³⁾

Hegel knows very well that the principle of civil society - the laws of bourgeois production - lead to social antagonism, to the extension of poverty in an ever greater mass of the population and to the unprecedented phenomenon of scarcity in the midst of abundance. This point of view is revealed, for example, when Hegel affirms: “[...] in spite of the excess of wealth, civil society is not rich enough, that is, it does not have enough, in what it properly possesses, to remedy the excess of poverty and the engendering of the populace.”²¹⁽⁴⁰³⁾

Thus, Hegel elaborates not one, but (at least) two conceptions of the resolution of these contradictions. The first is a critical, radical and profound solution, a pioneering observation that pre-empted Marx’s theory of capital and the theory of imperialism of Hilferding, Luxemburg and Lenin. Hegel’s idea²¹ is that those contradictions are irresolvable at the national level, and that they therefore lead to the worldwide expansion of civil society: to specifically capitalist colonialism. For example, when he argues:²¹

By means of this dialectic of his, civil society, and first of all **this particular** society is led beyond itself, to seek outside itself, in other peoples who are backward with respect to the means, which it has in excess, or with respect to industry in general, consumers and, with that, the necessary means of subsistence.^{21(404, author’s bold)}

And further on:

This extended linkage also offers the means of colonization, to which - be it sporadic or systematic - the advanced civil society is driven and through which it procures, on the one hand, for a part of its population, on a new soil, the return to the family principle, and, on the other hand, it procures for itself thereby a new need and a new ground for its labor activity.²¹⁽⁴⁰⁷⁾

From this point of view, the social antagonisms of capital are irresolvable, they are in permanent geographical expansion (development of the colonies) by which the contradiction is displaced, not resolved. However, Hegel’s system (his guiding idea of the self-knowledge of the spirit, of the full realization of absolute thought) obliges to resolve the contradictions, obliges to show bourgeois society as the ultimate and finished form of human activity. Therefore, Hegel is compelled to resolve the contradictions of civil society by introducing a pre-capitalist category: the estates. The function that Hegel attributes to the estates is to restore the family principle within

civil society, erasing its contradictions. With his peculiarly complex way of expressing himself, Hegel thus puts the role of the corporation in relation to the State:²¹

After the **family**, the **corporation** constitutes the second ethical root of the state, that which is established in civil society. [...] [The corporation] brings together in an interior manner those moments which, in civil society, are primarily split between the particularity **reflected within itself** of need and enjoyment, and the abstract juridical universality, so that, in this meeting, the particular welfare is present as right and effected.^{21(412, author's bold)}

In this way, the passage from civil society to the State is purified of the contradictions of the production of capital (the contradiction between the particular and the universal of society). Thus, the state can be presented as a true social community in which each part of society has a concrete function that forms the realized spiritual totality of the modern State.^{21,22}

Hegel thus introduces a mystification, at least in a double sense. First, a supra-individual and even supra-social subject (pure thought) that develops teleologically in human history to realize its own end (self-knowledge). Second, and subordinate to that first mystification, Hegel introduces into his system of political philosophy the idea that the state (and the **universal class** of bureaucrats) constitutes an effective resolution of the contradictions of society, a real community - denying his own brilliant discoveries about the antagonistic character of civil society. Totality, then, despite Hegel's determined orientation towards the understanding of contradiction, is understood as a finally homogenized totality, purged of antagonism, and in a historical development which - in the last instance - is a false historical development: the history of an absolutized present.^{13,20,22,23} Thus Hegel²¹ concludes his political work with the following words:

[...] the present has abandoned its barbarism and its unjust arbitrariness, and truth [...] [its beyond, its beyond] and its contingent power, so that true reconciliation has become objective, reconciliation which develops the **State** into the image and effectiveness of reason [...].^{21(600, author's boldface)}

Let me go ahead and say that history has shown that if the word **Reason** still has any meaning, the modern State has nothing to do with the effectiveness of reason. But we must not be unfair to Hegel: his limitation is not the product of a personal error, but rather constitutes the historical horizon of his epoch. We should rather dwell on a fully rational and profound aspect of Hegel's thought: his materialist and historicist **tendency** regarding the role of labor in the understanding of social being. As the old Lukács would say, this is an aspect of Hegel's true ontology.^{5,21}

It so happens that while Hegel develops his cosmic conception of the unfolding of *logos* - of pure thought- in human history, as a **demiurge** that creates culture and humanity, Hegel also discovers and analyzes the central element of human activity: labor. In fact, these two aspects of his philosophy - one mystifying, the other realist - are intimately linked to each other: pure thought operates toward the world and humanity as does the human being toward the object of his labor. In fact, the famous idea of the “Cunning of Reason” is precisely the clearest manifestation of this conception: this **cunning** of the spirit of the world towards human subjects as the **instruments** of its historical realization is identical in its structure to the **cunning of** the human being with his tool and object of labor.^{19,20} The common factor here is the properly teleological activity. The specificity of human labor consists, from this point of view, in its teleological character: the end appears before the realization and governs its realization in the natural material. We see here that Hegel takes up the discussions of Kant and Schelling on teleology. We do not have space to develop this complex discussion: suffice it to say only that organic life has, at most, an internal organization without conscious finality, whereas conscious finality is a constitutive element of human labor.^{5,20}

MARX, THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIAL BEING AS A PRODUCT OF LABOR AND SOCIETY AS AN ANTAGONISTIC TOTALITY

The conception of labor, which we find in Hegel imbricated with its mystification, introduces and advances the pillar of Marx and Engels’ materialist conception of history. That is: the idea that the human being, that the totality of social relations, is the product of human activity itself, the product of labor.

The Marxist conception appears *in statu nascendi* in many texts of Marx and Engels of the 1840’s, and I consider it useless to look precisely in which of those writings the decisive change occurs. But, undoubtedly, among the exploratory texts where those thinkers will elaborate their conception, Marx’s “Manuscripts of 1844”²⁴ constitute a decisive step. In these manuscripts we can find an effort to elaborate a critique of Hegel that starts, precisely, from the understanding of human labor as the source of the human being himself. For example, this is how Marx outlines this idea in some of the passages of his manuscripts:²⁴

The animal is immediately united to its vital activity. It does not differ from it. He is **it**. Man makes his vital activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has a conscious vital activity. It is not a determination with which he immediately coincides. Conscious vital activity immediately

differentiates man from animal vital activity. Precisely for this reason he is a generic being. Or he is only a conscious being - that is, his own life is, for him, an object - precisely because he is a generic being. For this reason alone his activity is free.

[...] it is precisely through the elaboration of the objective world that man truly proves himself as a **generic being**. This production is his active generic life. Through this elaboration, nature appears as the work and the reality **of man**. The object of work is, therefore, **the objectification of man's generic life**: insofar as man does not only duplicate himself, as in consciousness, intellectually, but in an active, real way; and therefore, he contemplates himself in a world created by him.^{24(112-114, author's bold)}

And further on: “[...] the whole of so-called universal history is nothing other than the production of man through human labor [...]”.²⁴⁽¹⁵⁴⁾

In this way, Marx goes on to identify in labor - in the activity oriented by consciousness to modify natural material to adapt it to its own needs - the process of the emergence of the human being himself as a being differentiated from the biological being, as a specifically human-social being. This same point of view will appear throughout Marx's life,²⁵ even in “Capital”, when he states:²⁵

Labor is, in the first place, a process between man and nature, a process in which man mediates, regulates and controls his metabolism with nature. Man confronts natural matter itself as a natural power. He sets in motion the natural forces belonging to his corporeality, arms and legs, head and hands, in order to seize the materials of nature in a form useful for his own life. By operating by means of this movement upon nature outside himself and transforming it, he transforms at the same time his own nature. It develops the powers that slumber in it and subjects to its lordship the play of forces in it. [...] We conceive of work in a form in which it belongs exclusively to man. A spider performs operations reminiscent of those of the weaver, and a bee would put to shame, by the construction of the cells of its honeycomb, more than one master mason. But what advantageously distinguishes the worst master mason from the best bee is that the former has modeled the cell in his head before constructing it in wax. When the work process is completed, a result emerges that already existed in the **worker's imagination**, that is, **ideally**, before the beginning of the work process. The worker does not only effect a change in the form of the natural; in the natural, at the same time, he realizes his own objective, an objective that he knows determines, like a law, the mode and manner of his action and to which he must subordinate his will.^{25(215-216, author's bold)}

Thus, we see that Marx critically recovers and takes Hegel's rational aspect much further. The human being is not conceived, then, as a form in which pure thought reveals itself. On the contrary, the ideal is a moment, an aspect of labor; thought itself arises, is created, in specifically

human productive activity.¹⁴ It is not thought that is the absolute subject of history: the only absolute subject of human history is the human being himself.²⁴

Not only the immediate process of labor is dominated, then, by this teleological form of human activity: for Marx²⁵ all forms of human activity are shaped by this specific category. However, as Lukács²⁰ will later emphasize in his “Ontology of Social Being,” Marx maintains that teleological activity only exists in the work and activity of singular individuals or of human groups: the whole of social relations, the totality, human history is not in itself teleological.

Precisely for this reason Marx’s conception is radically historicist: the whole historical process is nothing more than the development of human labor, the socialization of social relations that unfolds as a fundamentally spontaneous process. That is to say, human history is conceived as the process by which human relations with nature are increasingly dominated by social activity and less and less naturally determined. At the same time history is conceived as the process by which human beings emerge, develop, and are culturally enriched as a product of their own activity. In fact, Marx and Engels^{26,27} argue that the whole of human history up to the present day is nothing more than the prehistory of humanity, the formative process of the social being. In this way, their thought orients us towards a current conception of history: history is something that is happening right now, it is not a mere past. Moreover, the possible overcoming of the contradictions that dominate the present would not constitute an **end of history**, but rather the beginning of a properly human history.²⁰

Now, throughout this **prehistory** of the human being, labor, the process of production, has always existed in various modifications, in various modes of production. Since the dissolution of the original community - in its multiplicity of forms - societies have been marked by social antagonism: one part of society systematically appropriates the surplus product of the labor of the other part, one part directs and the other obeys, one part governs and the other is governed, and so on. The most developed form of this social antagonism is bourgeois society, the society dominated by capital, by the law of surplus-value production.^{20,28}

This society, the metabolic system of capital, is characterized precisely by the universal extension of social relations, by the ever-increasing intensification of the social mediation of human activity and by the development of the productive capacity of labor as never before. However - and this is its peculiarity - this development of human capacity unfolds as a force that the human being does not control: on the contrary, the human subject, the working subject, is

controlled by this blind force created by his own activity - that is, the human being is controlled by capital.²⁹

From this point of view, Marx no longer conceives of the totality of social relations as some supra-human subject. On the contrary, that apparent supra-human subject-that demiurge that governs and controls social life with its will-is nothing more than the causal emergent of a certain mode of human activity, nothing more than the result of a certain form of social labor. Capital is the reified form of wage labor, of alienated labor and of the specific hierarchical and antagonistic division of labor that it implies. Thus we see that in Marx's thought there is in no way an absolutization of the totality of social relations as an entity in itself independent of real and acting human beings. On the contrary, it is these effective subjects who create with their activity this apparent supra individual entity, the totality of social relations as a blind force that governs them from outside (they do not know it, but they do it).^{20,24 ,25,26,29}

This is how Marx and Engels conceive the State in "The German Ideology"²⁶: as an emergent of a certain form of social production, as an emergent of social antagonism. The State, we could say, is the form acquired by the community when it is broken, broken by social antagonism in the elementary process of its production. Marx and Engels put it this way:²⁶

This embodiment of social activities, this consolidation of our own products in a material power erected over us, removed from our control, which erects a barrier to our expectation and destroys our calculations, is one of the fundamental moments which stand out in the whole of the preceding historical development, and precisely by virtue of this contradiction between the particular interest and the common interest, the common interest, as a State, takes on its own independent form, separate from the real particular and collective interests and, at the same time, as an illusory community, but always on the real basis of the existing bonds [. ...] on the basis of the classes already conditioned by the division of labor, which are formed and differentiated in each of these human conglomerates and among which there is always one which dominates over all the others.^{26 (33-34)}

Of course, this constitutes a frontal critique of Hegel's political conception: the State does not and cannot resolve the contradictions of society, but on the contrary expresses and unravels them. The State is not a real community, but an **illusory community**.²⁶

The Marxist principle of understanding society as a totality does not start, then, from an abstract totality that then differentiates itself internally. On the contrary, Marx's conception of society as a totality in historical development is based on the identification of its concretely general

form, of its dominant moment (*übergreifendes Moment*) and of its elementary cell.²⁰ Marx²⁸ said that the dominant moment of a totality in historical development:

It is a general illumination in which all other colors are immersed and which modifies them in their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific weight of all the forms of existence that stand out in it.²⁸⁽³⁰⁾

We find this principle when it comes to the understanding of society in general, in its diversity of forms: it is the pillar of Marx's social ontology - as Lukács is going to conceptualize it: labor as an originary phenomenon (*Urphänomen*)^b and as a model, as an archetype, of the rest of forms and moments of social life.²⁰

This same principle can be found in Marx's greatest work: "Capital".²⁵ There Marx will elaborate his conceptualization of capital starting from the commodity form. That is, identifying that moment which is not a mere generality, an empty abstraction, but an objective abstraction, a concrete abstraction, an abstraction which the capitalist system of production itself realizes as a concrete totality. The commodity form of the product of labor is not a mere abstract idea, but constitutes the most general abstraction effectively -ontologically- produced by the capitalist system of production. The commodity is not a metaphysical abstraction, but an immanent abstraction. Just as Marx will understand the set of social relations starting not from some abstract general principle but from the most abstract, effectively more general form of its being (labor), in the same way Marx will seek to understand that peculiar form of social activity (capital) starting from the most general moment of that activity: the commodity form, which Marx called its **elementary cell**.²⁵ And in the unfolded form of that elementary cell -in the generalization of commodity production- Marx will find the law that regulates capitalist production: the law of surplus value production.³⁰

As can be seen, here there is no generality, an abstract-given whole that then differentiates internally and complexifies itself (as happens somehow in Hegel - at least in his **false ontology**),²⁰ but here we have an immediate, effective process (labor or mercantile production), which in its generalization, in its universalization, produces a concrete system of social relations.³⁰

This ontological-methodological point is directly linked to the overcoming of Hegelian idealism: it is both a product of this overcoming and a presupposition. And indeed it has its ultimate foundation in the overcoming of all mysticism in the understanding of social activity.

^b It is worth clarifying that this term, widely used by Lukács²⁰ in his "Ontology of Social Being", is of Goethean origin.

LUKÁCS' ONTOLOGY OF SOCIAL BEING: INDIVIDUAL, SOCIAL COMPLEXES AND SOCIAL TOTALITY AS A COMPLEX OF COMPLEXES IN HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The treatment that Georg Lukács³¹ elaborates in “History and Class Consciousness” on the question of totality is well known. Basically, his central idea there is that the revolutionary point of view, and thus the ascribed class consciousness of the proletariat, is identical with the point of view of totality, of the understanding of society as a developing totality. The loose parts can be criticized by bourgeois social science while the totality points to the historical and finite character of bourgeois society. The point of view of the totality shows the contradictions that will lead to the historical overcoming of capital.

It is not the object of this exposition to elaborate the criticisms that the late Lukács will make of his first great Marxist work. Suffice it to say that, personally, I consider all those criticisms to be fair and I believe that the Hungarian philosopher's last great work - the “Ontology of Social Being” - offers a superior perspective to “History and Class Consciousness”.³¹ Many elements of Lukácsian ontology have already formed part of my exposition. I would now like to refer to what I consider to be his most pertinent contribution to our problem of totality and historicity: the problem of the individual and the social totality.

For Lukács, the social individual as well as the totality of social relations are two inseparable and insuperable poles of all social activity. There is no human life that is not permanently oscillating between these two terms - mediated by diverse social complexes (economy, law, state, family, etc.) that is, mediated by diverse organically differentiated moments of the totality of social relations. These diverse social complexes - which make up society as a great complex of complexes - are not homogeneous among themselves: they have an unequal and diverse development, diverse historical sources and contingent interactions. Nevertheless, the point of view proposed by Lukács in his Ontology in no way abandons the idea of totality, but rather compels and develops it. Lukács²⁰ puts it this way:

[...] the social being is a complex of complexes whose reproduction is found in various and multiple interactions with the process of reproduction of the relatively autonomous partial complexes, where nevertheless the totality always exerts a dominant influence within these interactions.^{20(312-313, our translation)}

The fact that this complex of complexes (society as totality) is insuppressibly heterogeneous and diverse, that the various complexes interact with each other, influencing each other in contingent ways, does not detract from the fact that for Lukács there is a dominant moment. That is, a complex that constitutes the formative principle of all social life: the moment of production, of the economic structure of society.²⁰

The two inseparable poles of social life -individual and society- which are mediated by these diverse complexes, are equally the product of historical development, of the unfolding and universalization of labor as a specifically human activity. Both the individual and society are ultimately a historical product of labor. But, moreover, the properly social relation between the individual and the totality is at every moment an active, not mute, not passive relation. Herein lies the crux of the matter.^{20,24}

The individual human being relates to the genus in an active, productive way - unlike the animal, which only limits itself to embodying, to expressing with its biological activity, the biological genus to which it belongs - the human being participates in the genus insofar as he produces it daily with his work and activity. A specimen of *Homo sapiens* that does not actively participate -laborally- in the human genus will never overcome its animal stage. This means that for a human individual to be more than a *Homo sapiens* and to be properly a human being, he must enter into an active relationship -which has the individual as an unsuppressible subject- with the set of social relations, with the genus as such. This specificity of the social being is the product of work precisely because in work the human being objectifies his genericity, his generic being, and through work, he participates in the generic being produced by other subjects, by society as a whole. The passage from human prehistory to true, genuine, human history; the leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom, is intimately linked -for Marx and Engels^{24, 25} with the conformation of a social order that fully realizes this link between each individual and the human race. It is what Lukács¹⁹ calls the passage to a genuine **genericity for oneself** of the social being, where the genus is that which enriches the personality of each individual and, at the same time, the object of the activity of all. This is how Lukács put it:²⁰

Such a prehistory, the history of the becoming-human of the human, of the becoming adequate expression of the human genus by society, can end only when the two poles of the social being, human individual and society, cease to operate spontaneously in an antagonistic way one upon the other: when the reproduction of society promotes the human being, when the individual in his individual life consciously realizes himself as a member of the human genus.^{20(119, our translation)}.

But, tragically, capitalist society has created a chasm between the individual and gender. This relationship unfolds as an alienated one: gender is presented to each individual as something hostile and alienated, as something that confronts and dominates him from outside. What is an individual in the face of big industry, what is a singular person in the face of the modern state, the world market, or banking and finance capital? Actually, bourgeois society (which ideologically presents itself as the society of individualism) is in truth a society where the individual is worth less than nothing. Moreover, each social individual is turned into an anti-social individual, who participates in the genre in an indirect way, mediated by the products of labor that are presented in the reified form of commodities loaded with fetishism. Individuals participate in gender with their backs to gender, in pursuit of profit and private interest.^{20,25}

Thus, capitalist society produces the ideological antinomy we mentioned at the beginning of this article: either the individual is absolutized, negating gender, or gender is absolutized, negating the individual. Either the individual is everything and society is nothing or the individual is nothing and society is everything. These are two points of view proper to bourgeois society, produced by the social antagonism that separates and breaks the link between each individual subject and the whole of society, between the individual and the rest of the social beings that - in their common activity - actively produce the totality. We find these antinomical views as an ideological element in common sense as well as in philosophy, science and art in the modern world: forms of human intellectual activity which, by virtue of this antinomy, are affected and deformed.^{20,32}

Capitalist society is a **totality of social relations in historical development**. With its peculiar way of organizing **social labor** it has created colossal productive forces, at the cost of sacrificing individuals. It was not by chance that Marx compared capitalist progress to a “[...] horrible pagan idol, which only wanted to drink the nectar from the skull of the sacrificed”.³³

Bourgeois society is an internally broken totality, constituted by abstract individuals. But its understanding implies **overcoming that phenomenal moment** - which, being phenomenal, is not a mere illusion, but a real form of the immediacy of modern society - and understanding it as an **antagonistic totality in historical development**, as an internally organized and internally differentiated set of social relations, which has its formative principle - its dominant moment - in the prevailing, hegemonic, concrete form of social labor.

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