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Individualism and Social Change
An Unexpected Theoretical Dilemma in Marxian
Analysis

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Individualism and Social Change

An Unexpected Theoretical Dilemma in Marxian Analysis *

Vitantonio Gioia **

Marx (especially in his youth) develops an original analysis of individualism, rooted in the structure of modern society. He criticizes on the one hand Hegel and many representatives of the 'Hegelian left', on the other hand 'vulgar materialism' and Feuerbach. Nevertheless, it remains true that in Marxism (especially in Second-International Marxism) 'individualism' was seen negatively and, consequently, the individual and their activities were always pushed towards the background, in order to emphasize the relevance of collective factors (classes, state, political parties, etc) for explaining social change.

The question is whether this outcome has its roots in Marxian analyses or it is the result of a theoretical distortion by early Marxist orthodoxy, due to the lack of knowledge of young Marx's significant works: the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right was published in 1927, the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the German Ideology were published in full version in 1932 and the Grundrisse were published in 1939-41.

However, to reclaim young Marx's rich analysis of modern individualism seems important in order to build a historically oriented analysis of individuals and of their relations to society. This approach would let us move away from the prevailing axiomatic approach of both mainstream economics—centered on homo oeconomicus and their selfish motives—and many representatives of contemporary sociology, who aim at building universal explanations based on the hypothesis of rational agents acting in a social environment inhabited by 'isolated individuals', at the expense of the historical features of individual activities.

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1. Introduction

It may seem paradoxical to focus on a ‘theoretical dilemma’ in Marxian analysis with reference to the birth and the role of modern individualism in capitalist society. In fact, Marx (especially in his youth) developed an original analysis of individualism, rooted in the structure of modern society. He set himself in continuity with the reflections of the great thinkers of the Enlightenment (Rousseau, Condorcet, Kant, etc.), while criticizing Hegel and many representatives of the ‘Hegelian left’. Nevertheless, it remains true that in the Marxist view the role of the individual has always been pushed towards the background, in order to emphasize the relevance of economic and collective factors (classes, state, political parties, etc.) for explaining social change. The question is whether this theoretical outcome has its roots in Marxian analysis or whether it has been the result of a theoretical distortion of Marxist orthodoxy.

The latter view seems partially confirmed by the fact that Marxist orthodoxy was built on the basis of only part of Marx’s works: the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* was published in 1927, the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and the *German Ideology* were published in their full version in 1932 and the *Grundrisse* was published by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute of Moscow in 1939-41. So Marxist orthodoxy was built without the knowledge of the texts in which Marx largely developed his reflection on modern individualism and its role in capitalist society. But this approach raises two questions:

- if orthodox Marxists did not perceive the relevance of modern individualism, it is likely because the Marxian works that they considered did not place the same emphasis on this topic as the young Marx’s reflections;
- if this is the case, we have to explain these differences in Marx’s view, with reference to individualism and its role in modern society.

As we will see, the new model of individualism was a decisive factor in the building of historical materialism. On August 11, 1844, Marx wrote to Feuerbach, pointing out that his writings concerning human nature and men's interactions were "certainly of greater weight than the whole of contemporary German literature put together" (CW 3, p. 354)¹. According to Marx, Feuerbach had overcome the metaphysical individualism of Max Stirner and Bruno Bauer: "The unity of man with man, which is based on the real differences between men, the concept of the human species brought down from the heaven of abstraction to the real earth, what is this but the concept of *society!*" (CW 3, p. 354). And yet, because of his naturalistic vision, he had also produced an inadequate model of individualism: "the relation of man to nature is excluded from history" (CW, 5, p. 55). Once again, the category of 'man', defined only with reference to man's natural endowments, replaces the category of "real individual", concealing man's social and historical roots. If "the real production of life appears as non-historical, [...] the historical appears as something separated from ordinary life, something extra-superterrestrial" (CW 5, p. 55). The fact is that: "As far as Feuerbach is a materialist he does not deal with history, and as far as he considers history he is not a materialist" (CW 5, p. 41).

According to Marx, the individual dimension can assume a paramount importance, only under the conditions that the whole of individuals' endowments is conceived—beyond the common traits of human nature—within the interaction between individuals and their historical environment. On this basis, we can understand the relationships between individuals and productive forces (in the context of a specific social organization), as something that strengthens human faculties:

The appropriation of these forces is itself nothing more than the development of the individual capacities corresponding to the material instruments of production. The appropriation of a totality of instruments of production is, for this very reason, the development of a totality of capacities in the individuals themselves. (CW 5, p. 87)

The characteristics of modern individualism depend on its social embedding, for the simple reason that the mental and moral structures of individuals, the

¹ In the following, Marx & Engels 1975-2005 will be abbreviated as CW followed by volume number, page(s).

changing features of their needs, the patterns of their desires, the whole of their activities are socially and historically determined (Dewey 1999, p. 40).

In this perspective, a mechanistic vision of the relationship between the productive system and individual behavior is distant from Marx's conception. Individuals' choices and activities are determined by the awareness about their social conditions, giving rise to collective orientations capable to induce social changes. The social transformations retroact on the individuals, modifying their perception, culture and needs, giving rise to new problems and asking for new solutions. As a consequence, in the young Marx's view automatisms—determined by the social position of the individual (according to the approach of vulgar materialism)—are not contemplated, nor is the efficacy of individual activity considered (as in the idealistic view) as separated from the conscious perception of its material condition of existence. Social changes are the result of collective activities, but collective activities cannot be adequately explained without reference to individual behavior: individuals with their motives, their awareness, their capability to solve problems in innovative ways (individuals as “agencies of deviation”, according to Dewey's definition of impulse; Dewey 2008, p. 67), overcoming the routine and the passive attitude, suggested by the dominant ideology: “Individuals have always proceeded from themselves, but of course from themselves within their given historical conditions and relations, not from the ‘pure’ individual in the sense of the ideologists” (CW 5, p. 78).

As we will see, the rich analytical perspectives linked to this original model of individualism of the young Marx shift into the background when Marx reflects about the economy as “anatomy” of capitalist society, disappearing almost completely into the Marxist tradition, exclusively interested in the focusing on the economic conditions making possible the transition from capitalism to socialism. In other words, the theoretical pathway toward the construction of an individualism characterized by a social dimension, because of the propensity of the individual for social change, has been neglected. As a consequence, the theoretical (and practical) horizon has been completely filled by the liberal (and neo-liberal) model of individualism, which emphasizes the features of a rapacious and a-social individual, determined solely by the pursuit of personal advantages within a context of unbridled social Darwinism.



This paper will focus on the following aspects:

- the originality of the category of individualism of the young Marx and its role in the making of historical materialism;
- the gradual loss of importance of this category in the work of the mature Marx, because of his growing emphasis on the theoretical centrality of ‘economic mechanism’, in order to forecast the ‘necessary’ evolution of the capitalistic economy;
- the consolidation of this view in Marxism of the Second International, with reference to the issue of the transition from capitalism to socialism;
- the recovery of the young Marx’s approach in Antonio Gramsci’s analysis;
- finally, we will hint at the current relevance of Marxian reflections and this model of individualism for contemporary social sciences.

2. Human nature, individualism and history in the young Marx

Of course, I do not want to reconstruct Marx’s ample and rich reflection on human nature. The purpose of this paper is much more limited: to emphasize those aspects of Marx’s analysis of human nature which stress the individual’s capacity for social change. At the same time, I will inquire into the reasons leading Marx to push towards the background the reflections that were central to his youthful work. Schaff was right when he wrote that the young Marx’s anthropological analysis was a genetic element essential to the definition of historical materialism: “it is historically true that in Marxism the category of the human person was not deduced by the presuppositions of historical materialism, but, on the contrary, that the starting point of Marx’s sociology was the problem of the individual” (Schaff 1966, p. 73, see also p. 79; my transl.). Of

course, it is quite ingenuous to believe—as Schaff does—that historical materialism can keep its genetic footprint apart from every analytical development or every scientific purpose pursued (Schaff 1966, p. 39).

Marx, in his analysis of modern individualism, reflects at the same time on its contradictory features and on the different interpretations of it present in the contemporary literature. In fact, the explanations proposed on the one hand seemed contradictory, on the other they were characterized by a common epistemological approach: they isolated one motive of individual behavior, trying to interpret it as a universal and unchangeable feature of modern individualism. On the one hand, Hegel had emphasized the individual as “consciousness”, becoming “self-consciousness” through history (CW 3, p. 331 ff.), Max Stirner theorized the individual as ‘Unique’, radically irreducible to the social order, and the “hegemony of the spirit in history” (CW 5, p. 62, p. 144 ff.), Bruno Bauer saw the individual as ‘consciousness’ on the basis of their religiousness (CW 5, p. 97 ff.; CW 3, p. 157 ff.), and Feuerbach, abstracting from historical processes, in order to explain “the religious sentiment by itself”, presupposed “an abstract—*isolated*—human individual” who is naturalistically determined (CW 5, Th. 6, p. 4; p. 37, p. 41). On the other hand, Enlightenment materialism (above all in the French version) isolated the material character of man, emphasizing man’s univocal dependence on the natural environment (CW 5, p. 409 ff.; see: Badaloni 1976, esp. p. 62 ff.) and political economy, indicating egoism as a prevalent aspect of the individual, tried to link the dynamics of their needs with a peculiar social type (capitalism): individual and society were seen as a result of a ‘natural evolution’ (CW 3, p. 217-21, see also CW 3, p. 164-67). Of course, the question was neither the search for a common trait characterizing the category of individualism, or the existence of those features inquired into. According to Marx, focusing on a minimum common denominator was to be considered a legitimate scientific operation, the question was: how this common trait of the nature of individual was acquired and whether it allowed a sound analysis of individual behavior and its changing aspects in history.

From this vantage point, we see in Marx’s view a significant epistemological passage, which we find already, within the Scottish Enlightenment, in Hume and Smith. According to Hume, in order to overcome the metaphysical foundation of the reflection about ourselves, we have to leave that “tedious lingering method” that traditional philosophy had hitherto followed, aimed at the devel-

opment of particular inquiries about individuals and their relationship with the world. In fact, such inquiries were developed on the basis of an unquestioned view of the world and they were directed more towards the confirmation of that general (and *a priori*) view, than to the discovery of the features of the individual. But Hume added, if we really want to analyze individuals and their behavior, we have to start directly from “human nature itself” (Hume 2007 [1739], p. 4). This would also contribute to overcome the old metaphysical view of the world.

For Marx also, the analysis of the individual, through their common traits and changing characteristics, is a key for focusing on the social structures and their historical evolution. So, Marx’s preliminary reflections about the natural dimension of individuals does not represent a residue of an old philosophical tradition, but an original approach to the reading of economic and social transformations. The inquiry into the *Gattungswesen* (the essence according to the genus) is the way to focus on the natural endowments that make history and historical change possible, by means of human propensity to act (praxis), modifying the natural environment in order to satisfy their needs (CW 3, p. 276-77, 333; on this, see: Dumont 1977, p. 139-40; Pezzano 2012, p. 9 ff.; Basso 2008, p. 38 ff.). These endowments belong specifically to the human species, differentiating it from other animal species, characterized by a passive and adaptive behavior with respect to the natural environment:

The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is its life activity. Man [...] has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity. (CW 3, p. 276; see also: CW 5, p. 31)

According to Marx, we cannot avoid considering ‘man’ as a natural being, as a starting point for every inquiry about man and society:

Man is directly a natural being. As a natural being and as a living natural being he is on the one hand endowed with natural powers, vital powers—he is an active natural being. These forces exist in him as tendencies and abilities—as instincts. On the other hand, as a natural, corporeal, sensuous, objective being he is a suffering, conditioned and limited creature, like animals and plants. That is to say, the objects of his instincts exist outside him, as objects independent of him; yet these objects are objects that he needs—essential

objects, indispensable to the manifestation and confirmation of his essential powers. (CW 3, p. 336)

Given these natural propensities, the life of the individual implies immediately a lot of practical activities and complex relationships with the environment. Cooperation and development of communitarian links are strategic in order to satisfy present and future needs, following human projects and conscious activities: “man’s consciousness of the necessity of associating with the individuals around him [is] the beginning of the consciousness that he is living in society at all” (CW 5, p. 44). It is then not contradictory to say that “history is the true natural history of man” (CW 3, p. 337), since man, exploiting the features of his “nature”, transcends his “animal dimension”, characterizing himself as an eminently historic being, who builds his own personality by acting in historically determined environments. Individual personality and its evolution are, then, linked to the consciousness of “real, active men”: “Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious being, and the being of men is their actual life-process” (CW 5, p. 36). This consciousness implies, at the same time, the building of views about the world, determined by every particular stage of social development. The personality has not only a ‘social character’, but also the changing character of a process; it is not the product of supra-human forces, but that of a social man, a ‘self-creation’:

The conditions under which individuals have intercourse with each other [...] are conditions appertaining to their individuality, in no way external to them; conditions under which alone these definite individuals, living under definite relations, can produce their material life and what is connected with it, are thus the conditions of their self-activity and are produced by this self-activity. (CW 5, p. 82; on this, see: Cimatti 2011b, p. 101; Pezzano 2012, p. 9 ff.)

The critique of essentialism addressed to Marx with reference to this issue is quite surprising. In fact, whether by essentialism we mean that the ordinary world is a sort of appearance or manifestation of something intrinsic to it, conceived as a hidden cause, it is clear that Marx’s *Gattungswesen* (or, in general, his view on “human nature”) does not have these characteristics. The general proposition that man (as natural being) is part of a natural environment, which he can modify, because of his propensity to act in a creative way (praxis), is

not an explanation. It is, if anything, a propaedeutic pathway to the building of scientific explanations. The fact is that essentialism is often used in a general and uncritical way with reference to every attitude aiming at the inquiry into aspects or issues that are outside the formal contexts of ordinary scientific representations. Nevertheless, scientific systems are not the world, but mental structures built (Adam Smith would say: by our 'imaginary machine', see further) for its explanation. There will always be an external reality to know and, on the other hand, there is no phenomenon or relationship between phenomena, even the simplest one, that expresses a theory by itself. Theories always imply human activities and ingenious capabilities able to insert the empirical phenomena in our scientific systems in a correct procedural way. Frankly speaking, I find amazing the attempt to consider this reference to human nature as a form of essentialism. If it were so, as Popper himself pointed out, it would be an acceptable form of essentialism, since science has to be "capable of real discoveries", overcoming the empirical aspects of the observed phenomena: in "discovering new worlds our intellect triumphs over our sense experience" (Popper 1962, p. 117). From this point of view, the convergent preoccupation between moral philosophers and social scientists with reference to the human nature category is significant. Moral philosophers aim generally at controlling and bending the impulses and instincts linked to the category of human nature in order to conform individual behavior to the prevalent rules of the processes of civilization; social analysts tend to consider the concept of human nature as irreconcilable and, even, dangerous for the formal structures of our scientific reasoning and for the principle of rationality at the basis of the human behavior which they adopt. Anyway, moral philosophers and social analysts do not consider the possibility that in those inner forces of man and in his "natural and vital powers", developing in historical environments, it would be possible to find a leverage for social change.

Besides, the charge of 'essentialism' addressed to Marx neglects that his epistemological view was explicitly critical of those who considered, through unfounded abstraction, the human being as an 'essential reality' (as a spiritual being) capable of creating history while preserving invariant features. The personality of individuals, materialistically determined, has a historical character which depends on the social contexts within which they live. Culture and ideas about the world are built in the interaction between individuals and between in-

dividuals and nature. Of course, according to Marx, society is not uniform in its morphological traits: social organizations change and in the course of history become different historical types, endowed with original distinctive characteristics. The explanation of individual personality has to be, therefore, sought with reference to these different historical contexts. Consciousness is nothing else than awareness about the “existence of men” about “their actual life-process”. History cannot be reduced into “self-consciousness as spirit of the spirit”, because it is at each stage

a material result, a sum of productive forces, a historically created relation to nature and of individuals to one another, which is handed down to each generation from its predecessor; a mass of productive forces, capital funds and circumstances, which on the one hand is indeed modified by the new generation, but on the other also prescribes for it its conditions of life and gives it a definite development, a special character. It shows that circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances. (CW 5, p. 54)

This reference to the natural propensities of man (*Gattungswesen*), however, has a decisive importance in Marx’s analysis. From a certain point of view, it can be said that Marx applied to social analysis and to the individual-society relationship that sense of the ‘limit’ that Kant used in his theory of knowledge. As Kant tried to avoid the propensity of reason “to overstep the limits of [possible] experience” (Kant 1900, p. 74; 143-146), so Marx, with reference to the natural propensity of man, defines a possible process of social change depending on the relationships between two polarities: human awareness (and activities) and the material conditions of existence, rooted in fundamental biological aptitudes appertaining to the human species. Of course, if the distinctive characteristics of the historical processes and their scientific explanations have to be searched for in the circular interaction of these two polarities, this does not imply the complete annihilation of the ‘natural propensities’ of individuals. The *Gattungswesen* forms a sort of genetic basis for the ‘necessary social relationships’, but it is not reducible to them. Natural endowments (vital and natural forces, human creativity, etc.) can be reinforced or hindered by ‘social relationships’, but they are not created by them. It is the reason justifying the irreducibility of individuals to society, even though individual development is the result of the historical determinations of the social organization.

The inversion of individual and society (interpreting individual as a univo-

cal and total product of society), is—if anything—a result of those ideological views, in which the material conditions and historical circumstances “appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*”; this phenomenon “arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process” (CW 5, p. 36). As a consequence, if the idea of ‘human nature’ that goes unchanged through history, even determining it, is not conceivable; the idea that a human being can be mechanically and totally determined by the social environment is equally inconceivable. It is a view that Marx continues to emphasize, recalling it in the *Capital*: we “have to deal with human nature in general, and then with human nature as historically modified in each epoch” (Marx 1976, p. 759 fn.).

In this sense, we can also refute the “obstinate old legend” about the anti-individualism and about the organicist view of Marx (Geras 2016, p. 11; Basso 2008, p. 9 ff.). Such interpretations are derived, *inter alia*, by a superficial reading of the *6th Thesis on Feuerbach*: “human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations”. Now, if we isolate this sentence from the wide reflection about the human nature and the *Gattungswesen*, we would reach paradoxical conclusions radically incompatible with the thought of Marx. If we assume the idea of a complete derivation of individual features from the social environment, the category of human praxis becomes inconsistent with the work of the young-Marx. It would also be difficult to understand the critiques that Marx addressed against the univocal environment-individuals relationships of vulgar materialism or to explain the whole of Marxian analysis about the role of ideologies: if the motives of human action were completely attributable to the characteristics of the social system, all of human activities would be immediately clear and transparent, because men could not escape behavioral canons which are merely adaptive in nature (it is the way adopted by economics). Furthermore, the inquiry into “human nature” would simply be pleonastic. It would have been sufficient to start from the features of social systems, given the coincidence between the characteristics of the society and the constitutive traits of the individuals. The contradiction would be even more relevant if we consider Marx’s intention to represent human activity as an activity aimed at changing social relationships, when they were perceived as a limit for further human development. The hypothesis of the dominion of society over individuals would eliminate any possibility of social

change. In fact, given the tendency of social systems (and of the many sub-systems that characterize them) to preserve themselves, and given the power over individuals of the economic and social mechanisms, the coincidence between individual motives and the reproductive exigencies of the social system excludes *a priori* social change. The sole possibility of change would seem to be related to the Hegelian “law of the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa”, which Engels in the *Dialectics of Nature* (CW 25, p. 357 ff.) considered central in scientific materialism. It seems rather difficult however to attribute such a vision to Marx.



3. Marx and classical economics: from human nature to the “anatomy” of modern society

Given this rich reflection on human nature and individuality, we have to ask whether the subsequent marginalization of the issue of the individual and its development as a condition of social change in Marxism has to be attributed to the analytic distortions of orthodox thought or whether its basis can be found in the reflections of K. Marx after 1845-46. In fact, while it is true that the youthful work of Marx was not known at the time of the spread of Marxism and Socialism, it is also true that if such an issue had had the same relevance in the work of his maturity, this would not have escaped his interpreters. In my opinion, the large and engaging confrontation with classical economics has had a decisive effect on this specific aspect, determining a sort of epistemological shift that partially changed the Marxian object of research. Of course, this did not modify the anthropological orientation of Marx’s approach and his interest in human emancipation, but the economic factors and their internal relationships assumed the role before played by individual and human nature from

the epistemological point of view. The sign of these different theoretical perspectives can be found in Marx's judgments on the analyses of Adam Smith and David Ricardo. As is well known, Smith and Ricardo defined the object of research (modern capitalism), isolating the distinctive features of the new economic system and its original working mechanisms. Obviously, on this basis their analyses can be critically compared (Dobb 1975, p. 324-335), focusing on the logical contradictions of their scientific systems. Of course, this is only one side of a possible comparison, the other being the basis of the different epistemological perspectives they adopted, which we want to emphasize for the purposes of this paper.

As is well known, Marx often manifests surprise (and, sometimes, a certain impatience) with reference to the fact that Smith seemed to move "with great naïveté in a perpetual contradiction" (CW 31, p. 390), emphasizing the difference between an esoteric vision and an exoteric one, between his capability to focus on "the intrinsic connection existing between economic categories or the obscure structure of the bourgeois economic system" and his loitering on the representation of the apparent and deceptive dynamics of economic phenomena (CW 31, p. 390). Finally, Marx points out, Ricardo "steps in and calls to science: Halt!", isolating the "the starting-point for the physiology of the bourgeois system". He, focusing on the "determination of *value by labour time*", grasps the "contradiction between the apparent and the actual movement of the system" and he builds (or tries to) a consistent scientific system (CW 31, 2, p. 390-91). Ricardo, the "scientific deficiencies of his procedure" (CW 31, p. 392) notwithstanding, represents for Marx the most advanced analysis of modern capitalism, imposing his system as a general point of reference. Marx does not find relevant that the object of research, 'the capitalist economy', is built on the basis of a different epistemological approach compared to Smith and that this could imply—at least partially—different analytical purposes. In particular, the 'economic order' of Adam Smith was far away from that of Ricardo concerning a specific aspect: the relationship between the mechanism of the economic order, according to its distinctive features, and the effects on it of individual behaviors. In Smith's opinion, the representation of a 'whole', through a scientific system based on the use of inductive-deductive procedures (Gioia 2019), did not imply that it actually functioned as predicted by the theory or that the behavior of the agents were necessarily those envisaged by the (assumed) mechanisms

of the economic system. This depends on two aspects: the way in which Smith saw the relationships between his scientific system and the investigated reality, and his belief that the autonomy of individuals and their free choices could produce unforeseen effects on the economy and society. As is well known, Smith assigned a central role to scientific representation, because without it the explanation of the facts and their causal connections would have been impossible. Nevertheless, according to Smith, we have to be aware that:

- 1 we cannot derive the scientific explanations from the simple collection of facts, but, at the same time, our theoretical representations cannot exhibit the structure of the world (Smith 1980 [1795], p. 45 ff.; Berlanda 1984, p. 20 ff.);
- 2 our scientific imagination (the “imaginary machine”) allows representations of the world viable for adequate explanations of the “real chains” we observe, through appropriate analytical and procedural devices (Smith 1980 [1795], 66-67, 105);
- 3 these explanations represent our knowledge of the relations between facts, on the basis of a unified image of the whole, built by the social analyst with reference to the distinctive features of the investigated world; such knowledge can change if new facts and new causal relationships show its inadequacy (Raphael-Skinner 1980, p. 20-21, Whightman 1975, esp. p. 50-52).

Of course, as for economy and society, the facts to explain are the behaviors of individuals and the results of their activities within the context of a system endowed with original features. Such a system supposes the prevalence of some categories of behaviors and its ability to orient (by means of endogenous mechanisms, institutional arrangements, cultural traditions, etc.) individual behaviors in accordance with its exigencies of preservation and development. The fact remains, the dynamics of the system depends not only on the automatism of its internal mechanism, but also on the behaviors of individuals. *Ex ante* we cannot decide which will be the real dynamics of the system, for the simple reason that individual behaviors are determined by a larger variety of motives than those supposed by social analysts, and some of them might not be completely compatible with the logic of the system.

Philosophers use to think that individuals behave in the way envisaged by the logic of their theoretical system, but this belief is unrealistic and based on erroneous analyses about the motives of individuals. In fact, Smith points out, “traditional philosophy” can insist on the necessary convergence between in-

dividual behaviors and exigencies of the economic (and social) system, because of the procedure adopted for establishing the motives of individuals. They normally start by aprioristic and 'abstract' views of society, isolating its predominant features and attributing them to individuals as their real motives. But if we derive individual motives (for instance: selfish sentiments) from the features of the system, without a preliminary study of human nature, the convergence between individual activities and the dynamics of the system is only an *a priori* hypothesis (see: his critique to Hobbes and Mandeville). Of course, Smith maintains, we cannot underestimate the role of some motives (selfish sentiments) of human behavior, which are surely grounded on the "natural effort which every man is continually making to better his own condition" (Smith 1976 [1776], 2, IV.9.28, p. 674), but we cannot foresee the way in which they are really performed, in order to attain in every specific situation the purpose of bettering "his own condition". In particular, the certainty that it necessarily occurs in the envisaged forms (because it is desirable or 'rational', according to the perspective of the social analyst) is unrealistic and erroneous from the analytical point of view.

Anomalous behaviors normally occur in society and the economy. They arise from individual activities and are rooted in social and economic attitudes, determined by endogenous changes of the environment. So, if in society inappropriate behaviors can be caused by the "corruption of moral sentiments", the same occurs in the economy, where inappropriate behaviors can be caused not by the impact of external factors on the market (State, social rules, ethics, etc.), but just by its ordinary working: "not only the prejudices of the public, but, what is much more unconquerable, the private interests of many individuals, irresistibly oppose it" (Smith 1976 [1776], 1, IV.2.43, p. 471). As a consequence distances can arise between the scientific representation of the world and its historical evolution and this represents a permanent challenge for the social sciences (Heilbroner 1982, p. 434 ff.; Winch 1978, p. 167 ff.; Pesciarelli 1988, p. XL ff.). Of course, Smith admitted, the pride and presumption of the philosopher lead him to consider his scientific representation of the world as the only possible:

even we, while we have been endeavoring to represent all philosophical systems as mere inventions of the imagination, to connect together the otherwise disjointed and discor-

dant phenomena of nature, have insensibly been drawn in, to make use of language expressing the connecting principles of this one, as if they were the real chains which Nature makes use of to bind together her several operations. (Smith 1980 [1795], p. 105)

A relativistic attitude, grounded on his peculiar inductive-deductive approach, pervades the entire work of Adam Smith. Ricardo's theoretical universe, deductively built, is different. Ricardo is convinced of the priority of the stability of his scientific system, in the belief that it perfectly reflects the real world—what T. Hutchison has defined as “the enormous simplification of the full knowledge postulate” (Hutchison 1994, p. 196). The concept of “natural order” of his system is closer to that of Quesnay and French rationalism rather than to that of Adam Smith and the empirical rationalism represented along the axis Locke-Hume-Smith (Jonas 1964, p. 53-80). Besides, the explanatory efficacy of his scientific representation is guaranteed by the postulate of the structural stability of the economic system. Individual behaviors, in the case of activities not convergent with the structural rules (‘natural laws’), cannot affect the long-term dynamics of the system and its rational order. They—like those historical events not foreseen by the evolutionary logic of the system—represent a kind of ‘accidental’ or inessential “in the sea of singular empirical data” (Hegel 1991, p. 31). They are simply irrelevant for the understanding of social order and its endogenous necessities.

Economists are exclusively called on to represent the essential structure of the world. For this reason, Ricardo considers unacceptable taking into account those “accidental” historical changes that seem to introduce doubts regarding the scientific representation of the world (De Vecchi 1993, p. 21-24). Think, for instance, of the Ricardian reflection on economic imbalances or the anomalous aspects of international trade. In the case of economic crises, he criticized Malthus for focusing on “temporary effects” (Ricardo 1973, 6, p. 133), sacrificing the relationships between the structural variables that emerge in the long run. In the case of the effects of the international commerce on the dynamics of economic systems, he again accused Malthus of letting himself be fooled by superficial and contradictory events, which are more practical in nature than scientific ones. One must not forget, he stresses, that “that is a question of fact and not of science.” If we were to give relevance to these facts, we would risk

compromising the structure of our scientific representation. On the other hand, he adds, the recourse to the facts might always be used against theories: “might be urged against almost every proposition in Political Economy” (Ricardo 1973, 6, p. 64).

As is well known, Marx criticized Ricardo on economic crises, on money, on international trade, on the effects of competition on the economic structure, for his incapability to consider the role of the middle classes in the distribution of surplus, etc., denouncing the distance between his scientific representation and historical reality. Nevertheless, the fascination of Ricardo prevailed in his judgment, beyond the internal inconsistencies of his analysis, with reference to two aspects: the supposed certainty about the correspondence between scientific system and reality, and, above all, because of his belief in the necessary evolution of the economic system, according to its ‘natural laws’. So, the Ricardian analysis of the ‘anatomy’ of modern social formation pushed Marx toward a reflection on the economic field as the essential one for the inquiry into modern society. But as Max Weber pointed out, to have a historically determined system, viable for “constructing relationships which our imagination accepts as plausibly motivated”, and, hence, “objectively possible”, according to our “nomological standpoint” (Weber 1949, p. 92), does not authorize unequivocal and mechanical correspondences between theories and reality. In fact, such a hypothesis would introduce in the social sciences those “naturalistic prejudices”, which on the one hand, would make scientific explanations difficult, and on the other hand, would give to scientific theories a normative structure (Weber 1949, p. 94). Probably, through Ricardo, Marx re-opens the path towards the recovery of that “powerful tradition of philosophical and naturalist teleology”, which profoundly characterized the vision of “liberal economists of the time” (Myrdal 1975, p. 251). So, Marx seems to accept, in some way, that inversion between individual and society, which he had harshly criticized in his youthful work. This passage will be decisive for the subsequent evolution of Marxist thinking, even though Lenin, as a strict reader of *Das Kapital*, warned about the risk of this reductionist approach: the analysis of the anatomy of society cannot be sufficient for the social analyst, just like the study of human anatomy cannot exhaust the study of man (cf. Lenin 1977, p. 57-58).



4. Some developments of Marxist views after Marx: from the “final economic crisis” to socialism

As is well known, the extraordinary diffusion of socialism in the last quarter of the 19th century was not the effect of direct reading of *Das Kapital*. But apart from this, we have to acknowledge—as Vilfredo Pareto pointed out—that its importance was remarkable in the popular imagination not only because it seemed to respond to the thirst for social justice, but also because it did that in a “scientific way”, according with the expectations of the time (Pareto 1987, p. 334 ff.; Pareto 1961, § 1009, p. 401). Not by chance did Marxist scholars emphasize in *Das Kapital* this character of a neutral scientific analysis, deriving the necessity of socialism from it. Within such a discourse, historical materialism was seen as a general interpretative canon, in many respects comparable with the positivistic theory of evolution. The recurring focus on the Marxian reflection about the contradictions between the capitalist mode of production and the development of the productive forces as a neuralgic and inevitable mechanism able to assure social change, facilitated the inattention on the complexity of the historical determinations of capitalist society. As a consequence, the reference to the centrality of economic factors was conceived as a sort of unquestionable general *explanans* of social dynamics, reserving to political strategy an ancillary role. It is amazing that since the 1880s (Marx died in 1883), “the concept of revolution was simply equated with the collapse of capitalist society” (Steinberg 1979, p. 79). Such an approach was favored by the fact that in the work of Marx there did not exist for political theory “an analogous corpus” comparable with that devoted to economic theory (Hobsbawm 1978, p. 247). Marx and Engels had generally considered the issues related to the political and institutional evolution of society as “secondary problems” (Hobsbawm 1978, p. 247). The low importance attributed to political theory inevitably translated into a

substantial eclipse of a thorough reflection about the role of subjective factors in the analysis of capitalism (Bobbio 1976, esp. p. 21-41; Cerroni 1973, esp. p. 84-97; Cerroni 1982, p. 103 ff.).

This theoretical approach, primarily concerned with the analysis of the “anatomy” of society, was further amplified by Engels, whose *Anti-Dühring* played an essential role in the international diffusion of Marxism (Stedman Jones 1978, p. 320). The most authoritative members of the Second International (Bebel, Bernstein, Kautsky, Plechanov, Aksel’rod, Labriola, etc.) were so influenced by this book that Kautsky confessed that *Anti-Dühring* had helped him “to understand *Das Kapital* and to read it in a correct way” (Stedman Jones 1978, p. 320, see also Steinberg 1981, p. 159-174). It is not surprising, then, that they spread the idea of the “final crisis” of capitalism as an economic event and Kautsky (1881) wrote: “Our task is not to organize the revolution but to organize ourselves for the revolution; our task is not to make the revolution, but use it” (Steinberg 1979, p. 79). A view he will confirm ten years later (1891), in his commentary about the *Erfurt Program*:

We consider the breakdown of the present social system to be unavoidable, because we know that economic evolution inevitably brings on the conditions that will compel the exploited classes to rise against this system of private ownership. (Kautsky 1971, p. 90)

The “final crisis of the capitalist economy” was “justified” with arguments deriving predominantly from the theory of the lack of proportion (between the productive sectors), or, to a lesser extent, from the under-consumption theory. Nevertheless, the theorists of the Second International did not use a pure theory of the lack of proportions (remembering the outcomes it had given in Tugan-Baranowsky) and, with the exception of Rosa Luxemburg, they did not even adopt a pure theory of under-consumption. The Marxian critique of Malthus, Sismondi and Rodbertus were continuously recalled: under-consumption does not explain the genesis of economic crises, Engels wrote, even if it is a recurring phenomenon within them:

The under-consumption of the masses is a necessary condition of all forms of society based on exploitation, consequently also of the capitalist form; but it is the capitalist form of production which first gives rise to crises. The under-consumption of the masses is therefore also a prerequisite condition of crises, and plays in them a role which has

long been recognised. But it tells us just as little why crises exist today as why they did not exist before. (CW 25, p. 272)

Within this mechanistic vision of economic (and social) dynamics, the theory of the anarchy of production seemed to assume a catalytic role, as it could encompass a theory of the lack of proportions in which under-consumption was conceived as a kind of inevitable major disproportion. On the other hand, this reference to under-consumption and to the lack of effective demand seemed functional to the explanation of imperialism. Rosa Luxemburg expressed this connection between under-consumption and imperialism in extreme form in her *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913) (which, not by chance, is subtitled: *A contribution to the economic explanation of Imperialism*). This approach was largely shared: think of Kautsky, Bebel and even Lenin (*Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, 1917), who in his youthful writings had severely criticized the analytical relevance of the under-consumption theories (vs Sismondi and his Russian followers).

The successes of the trade unions (especially in England), the positive electoral results of the Social Democratic Party and the “Bernstein-Debatte”¹ accentuated the reflection on the political strategy of the working class, but in the circles of Marxist orthodoxy the general approach, centered on the theory of the economic collapse, was largely confirmed. The relevance of the theory of the “final crisis of capitalism” continued to be unquestioned but, with reference to the issue of the transition to socialism, reflections arose whether it should be the result of a “violent political revolution” or the consequence of reformist policies. The view of a possible peaceful transition to socialism (Cunow 1970, p. 424-30) gained a growing weight in the internal debates, both because—as Conrad Schmidt noted—it would be difficult to realize the radical “socialist reforms” on the ruins of the old social order (Schmidt 1970, p. 266), and because the conviction that a ‘political rupture’ would have preceded the economic collapse of capitalism also gained ground (Engels in CW 25, p. 254 ff.; Hilferding 1910, esp. chap 25; on this, see: Napoleoni 1970, esp. p. XLIV-LXX).

Rosa Luxemburg severely criticized this view. In her opinion, the recurring

¹ The “Bernstein-Debatte” was originated by a series of articles published with great furor between 1896-8 in the socialist journals *Neue Zeit* and *Vorwärts*. They constituted the basis for the publication of Bernstein’s *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie*, 1899.

crises of the capitalist economy constituted only a prerequisite for political revolution: there is undoubtedly a continuous mutual influence between the political and economic aspects of social becoming, but the determining and decisive factor remains, in the ultimate analysis, the economic one. According to Luxemburg, while the organization of the economy and its productive systems “approach more and more the production relations of socialist society”, “its political and juridical relations established between capitalist society and socialist society a steadily rising wall”. In this situation, only “the hammer blow of revolution, that is to say, the conquest of political power by the proletariat, can break down this wall” (Luxemburg 2008, p. 65-66; on this: Cerroni 1973, p. 70-75). The fact remains, that these discussions were rigidly confined within the space of economic reflections and the idea of the economic collapse of capitalism (Cerroni 1971, p. 17; Perrotta 2018, p. 137-151).

An interested observer, Werner Sombart in his *Sozialismus und Soziale Bewegung im 19. Jahrhundert*¹, summarizing the essential aspects of those debates, indicated two main limits: on the one hand, their economicist torsion, on the other, the lack of rigorous investigations about the role of subjective factors in social change (Gioia 2015). Sombart did not question the “necessity of socialism”, emphasizing the crucial role played by Marxian analysis about the relationship between material conditions of existence and social change, but he considered unacceptable the *Zusammenbruchstheorie* (‘theory of self-destruction’) and the idea that it could have a central role for the transition to socialism (Sombart 1909, p. 86-87). If anything, he continued, contemporary capitalism would be characterized by recurring “periods of chronic depression” and stagnation. For this reason, Sombart proposed to correct the famous Marxian expression that capitalism will dig its tomb in the course of its development. In his opinion, “it would be more correct to say that it was preparing its bed of sickness” (Sombart 1909, p. 87; on this, see: Priddat 1996, 1, p. 291; Chaloupek 1996, 2, p. 172).

According to him, the main problem of those debates derived from the fact that they completely neglected the ideal component, which is predominant in

¹ As is well known, this work was the result of a series of eight lectures on socialism held in 1896 by W. Sombart in Switzerland (invited by the Swiss Society for Ethical Culture). They were soon published in several editions and translated into many languages (Epstein 1909, p. v-vi).

the construction of a new social system. Social evolution is caused by changes in historically determined “relationships of powers”. They do not change mechanically, on the basis of the dynamics of economic factors, but only if an ideal propensity towards the change produces an adequate capacity of political control and a transformation of the political systems addressed to the development of more democratic institutions, able to modify the cultural contexts and the motives of human activity (Sombart 1908, p. 60 ff.; 1909, p. 53 ff.; on this see: Lenger 1996, 2, p. 257-8, Lenger 1997, p. 148 ff.). If we only use leverage on the economic factors, the reference to the role of the subjective factors (through “class consciousness”) will only represent an ineffective and ideological surrogate. Lukács himself would later admit that the exclusive reference to economic factors in the view of the transition to socialism had facilitated the adoption of an idealistic approach with reference to the category of the “class consciousness”: “As to the way in which the problem was actually dealt with, it is not hard to see today that it was treated in purely Hegelian terms” (Lukács 1972, p. xxii, see also p. xxvii ff.).

5. A revolution against “Das Kapital”. Antonio Labriola and Antonio Gramsci: the Italian way toward the rediscovery of the role of political subjectivity

Gramsci largely developed this issue in his *Prison Notebooks*, where we find the attempt to propose a new vision of Marxism, which could overcome the theoretical limits which had distorted its evolution. Such limits were also traced back to those naturalistic and positivistic attitudes which had characterized the thought of K. Marx. Along this pathway Gramsci recovered the scientific contribution of Antonio Labriola (Gramsci 1975, 1, p. 309; 2, 1241ff., 1507 ff.), who had emphasized the following aspects:

- 1 the originality of historical materialism and its scientific autonomy with respect to other philosophical views (idealism, positivism, neo-Kantianism, old materialism) (Labriola 1968b, p. 18-19, p. 86 ff., Labriola 1968c, p. 188 ff.; Labriola 1968d, p. 320-340).
- 2 the need to free Marxism from economism, which had transformed historical materialism into a general interpretative canon, mechanically applicable

to every social situation in order to foresee its evolution, apart from detailed historical analyses (Labriola 1968a, p. 59-60; Labriola 1968b, p. 76 ff., p. 98 ff.).

3 finally, the emphasis on the role of human subjectivity in social change (Labriola 1968a, p. 54-56; Labriola 1968b, p. 83, p. 105-107; Labriola 1968d, p. 336).

Of course, we cannot reconstruct the entire reflection of Gramsci (and Labriola) on this issue, but we can probably give the sense of Gramsci's approach, with reference to two articles—*The Revolution against Capital* and *Utopia*—which he published in 1917.

In the previous section, we recalled in synthesis what is considered as a common starting point of Marxist inquiries into contemporary capitalism and the prevalent view about the transition to socialism. With reference to Marx, Marxist scholars tried to demonstrate that the socialism should have been the result of the most advanced capitalistic organization of the economy and society. As is well known, history so far has led to the realization of socialism in countries which were not capitalistically advanced and which were even difficult to define as capitalist societies, in a proper sense (young Lenin's analysis of the capitalistic nature of Russian society was a successful invention). Anyway, this view was grounded on a mechanical application of the historical materialist approach, linking social changes to the evolution of the economic system. Within it, the role of subjective factors was irrelevant and, in every case, exclusively determined by economic dynamics (development of productive forces). According to Gramsci, a theoretical revision of the view of historical materialism was needed and the Russian Revolution seemed to represent an ideal event to begin with:

1 “The Bolshevik Revolution consists more of ideologies than of events. [...] This is the revolution against Karl Marx's *Capital*”. Now, the new events have overcome the old ideologies: “Events have exploded the critical schemas determining how the history of Russia would unfold according to the canons of historical materialism. The Bolsheviks reject Karl Marx, and their explicit actions and conquests bear witness that the canons of historical materialism are not so rigid as one might have thought and has been believed” (Gramsci 2000, p. 33).

2 “if the Bolsheviks reject some of the statements in *Capital*, they do not reject its invigorating, immanent thought. These people are not ‘Marxists’, that is

all; they have not used the works of the Master to compile a rigid doctrine of dogmatic utterances never to be questioned” (Gramsci 2000, p. 33).

3 “They live Marxist thought [...] which represents the continuation of German and Italian idealism, and which *in the case of Marx was contaminated by positivist and naturalist incrustations*. This thought sees as the dominant factor in history, *not raw economic facts, but man, men in societies, men in relation to one another, reaching agreements with one another, developing through these contacts (civilization) a collective, social will; men coming to understand economic facts, judging them and adapting them to their will until this becomes the driving force of the economy and moulds objective reality*, which lives and moves and comes to resemble a current of volcanic lava that can be channelled wherever and in whatever way the will determines” (Gramsci 2000, p. 33, my italics).

4 During the social changes of a country devastated by unspeakable suffering and miseries, the ideal and voluntaristic component became prevalent: “*Mechanically at first, then actively and consciously after the first revolution [february revolution], the people’s will become as one*”. (Gramsci 2000, p. 34, my italics).

Antonio Gramsci did not hide the difficulty of a challenge such as that of realizing a socialist society in a country which did not have the necessary level of economic maturity, but he was convinced that “the revolutionaries themselves will create the conditions needed for the complete and full achievement of their goal. And they will create them faster than capitalism could have done” (Gramsci 2000, p. 35). Gramsci insists on a issue which will be central in his *Prison Notebooks*: as the increase of material wealth depends less on the time of labor and on the quantity of labor, but more and more on the powerful capability of men educated in the use of science and technologies, so the development of a social system depends on the cultural richness of individuals rooted in always more complex social contexts, oriented by advanced political-institutional networks. On this basis, it is possible to conceive and plan original processes aiming for the development of the whole of mankind. Besides, we should know that such projects of human development need not only the analysis of “raw economic facts” (the “anatomy” of the society), but especially the inquiry into the distinctive features of the social systems, their cultural attitudes and their institutional arrangements:

The truth is that no two political constitutions are the same, just as no two economic

structures are the same. The truth is that the formula is anything but the arid expression of a glaringly obvious natural law. Between the premises (economic structure) and the consequence (political constitution) the relations are anything but simple and direct; and the history of a people is not documented by economic facts alone. The unraveling of the causation is a complex and involved process. To disentangle it requires nothing short of a profound and wide-ranging study of every intellectual and practical activity. (Gramsci 2000, p. 45, on this, see also: Gramsci 1970, I, p. 462-465)

The emphasis on that “profound and wide-ranging study of every intellectual and practical activity” is important in order to highlight the link between the development of subjectivity and the political-institutional context, avoiding those unacceptable simplifications which had exclusively insisted on the economic aspects of social dynamics, neglecting the relevance of the modern state and the cultural phenomena of a civilized country. On this aspect, as Umberto Cerroni pointed out, if Lenin was the heretic Marxist who realized the revolution against Marx’s *Capital*, Gramsci can be considered the Leninist heretic, who, through such an approach, imagined the social transformation against Lenin, who—as the author of *State and Revolution*—pictured a simplified and unacceptable representation of the modern state, with reference to the way in which the institutional arrangements can hinder or promote the development of the individuals (Cerroni 1978, p. 49).

Nevertheless, it is useful to remember that Lenin himself reflecting later on this issue reached the same conclusions and criticized the serious limits of his analysis in *State and Revolution*. In fact, in 1923 (a few months before his death) he proposed (*Better Fewer, but Better*) a double self-critical judgment about his previous analyses: he criticized again the economic interpretation of social changes and, at the same time, acknowledged that his view about the role of the modern state was inadequate. As far as the first aspect is concerned, he writes:

we started not from where we had to start according to the theory (of all kinds of pedants) and in our country the political and social revolutions preceded the cultural revolution [...] Now, we have to do this cultural revolution in order to become a completely socialist country; But for us this cultural revolution implies incredible difficulties, both of a purely cultural nature (since we are illiterate), and of a material nature (since, in order to become educated men, a certain development of the material means of production is necessary). (Lenin 1977, p. 839-840)

As for the second aspect, he emphasized the need to inquire in a more profound way into the role of the modern institutional systems within a Marxist perspective, because the “proletarian state” is in a “deplorable” situation, and the task of improving the “state apparatus” “is very difficult and it is far from being solved, and is an extremely urgent one”:

Either we prove now that we have really learned something about state organization (we ought to have learned something in five years), or we prove that we are not sufficiently mature for it. If the latter is the case, we had better not tackle the task. (Lenin 1977, p.847 ff.)

On this aspect, Lenin wrote, that the Russians had to learn from the more advanced capitalist countries. Such as Germany and England: “in order to renovate our state apparatus” and as the representatives of proletarian culture “we must at all costs set out, first, to learn, secondly, to learn, and thirdly, to learn...” (Lenin 1977, p. 848, see also p. 852).

As we can see, this view represented the distinctive aspects of the Gramscian research project of 1917: the development of human subjectivity depends not only on economic growth and the scientific development it promotes, but also on the institutional arrangements and the symbolic forms guaranteeing processes of socialization. The features of the individuals, determined by continuous interactions with social environment, are central to promoting social change. In fact, their motives are intertwined with the more complex structure of needs (starting from the exigency of social justice and human equality), which invert individual behavior from a merely adaptive attitude to a creative one. Only on this basis, do we have the possibility of overcoming the ideological bonds of capitalist society, which consider the “economic structure and its exigencies” in a theological way, as supra-human forces driving men’s lives. Men can, then, re-appropriate their destiny: “man can dominate his own destiny, he can do it himself, creating his life (on this: Labriola 1968b, p. 142).



6. Conclusions

Some years ago, Norman Geras in his *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* gave us a synthetic view of scholars (as Louis Althusser, Tom Botto-more, Robert D. Cumming, Eugene Kamenka, Vernon Venable, Robert Tucker, Kate Soper, Colin Summer, Sidney Hook, etc.), who refuted Marx's analysis on human nature, trying to build, as Althusser pointed out, a "theoretical anti-humanism" (Althusser 1969, p. 219 ff.; on this, see Geras 1983, p. 49-50; Gold-mann 1969, p. 166 ff.). The young Marx's analysis on individuals and human nature was considered a sort of residue of a philosophical tradition which was inappropriate for social analysis. In this short conclusion, I will try to show that the recovery of Marx's reflection has neither an archeological purpose nor that of solving some interpretative aspects within the limited field of Marxist scholars. In my opinion, the recovery of this Marxian issue can have significant effects for contemporary social sciences, opening analytical perspectives devoted to a better integration between the historical characteristics of social systems and the features of individuals. From this point of view, I find difficult to understand the reasons for the anti-humanistic attitude which has characterized some interpretations of Marx's thought: I cannot see the advantages it should offer for the analysis of the economy and society. A humanistic viewpoint does not bring to diminish the relevant Marxian contribution to the analysis of the capitalistic economy or to underrate the role of the economy in modern society. On the contrary, it lays at the core of Marxian analyses aimed at discovering the human roots of every social fact, escaping the theological trap which sees facts or things as dominating human life (e.g. the 'fetishism of commodities').

Without this humanistic attitude, Marxian analyses would be close to those of liberal and neo-liberal economics, which inverts the relation between the purposes of the economy and the purposes of men, in the conviction that, in the long run, they can coincide (on this, see Heilbroner 1986, p. 163, 170). Besides, this cannot but create a de-historicized view of individualism and a distorted idea about the relationships between individual and society. The former and the latter become the terms of an unresolvable antinomy: on one side, we find an isolated and impotent Self (with a given structure of needs and a tightly limited range of possible choices within the 'capitalist rules of action'); on the other

side, we find the omnipotent society, determined by the fatalistic character of its natural laws (Plekhanov 1960, p. 56).

Now, if we take a rapid glance at many contemporary analyses of individualism or to the reflections on the relationships between individuals and society, we find an impressive and recurring dissatisfaction among social analysts. As far as the first aspect is concerned, Weber emphasized the difficulty of a univocal definition of “the term ‘individualism’”, which “embraces the utmost heterogeneity of meanings” (Weber 1988, p. 208). Dewey harshly criticized the “perversion of the whole ideal of individualism” (Dewey 1999, p. 9, see also p. 51 ff.), pushing for a new model of individualism. Hayek was profoundly disappointed by the reflections concerning individualism, especially considering its centrality for social sciences: it has been “abused and [...] misunderstood” in its meaning and “distorted [...] into an unrecognizable caricature” by its critics and its followers (Hayek 1958, p. 2). More recently, Charles Taylor has observed “how shallow and partial are the one-sided judgments” we use with reference to the features of “modern individualism” (Taylor 1989, p. X) and Lukes has emphasized the difficulty of disentangling the “rich semantic history” of individualism (Lukes 1971, p. 45). The idea that the “individual person may be seen as—or actually is—a set of sub-individuals, relatively autonomous ‘selves’” does not seem a practicable solution (Elster 1985, p. 1), because it determines an increase of the problems to face. So—as Elliot and Lemert pointed out—the inquiry of the complexity of the “many selves”, risks rendering more problematic the possibility of a univocal meaning of the modern individual and his relationship with society (Elliot and Lemert 2009, esp. p. xi-xxvii).

Besides, and here we get at the second aspect, beyond the repetitive insistence of economists on the *homo oeconomicus* approach (Hutchison 1994, p. 189-90; McCloskey 1991, p. 6-16; Davis 2003, esp. 81 ff.), many sociologists also adopt a similar view, starting from an atomistic vision of social life, centered on rational agents that move in contexts without institutions and historically relevant variables (Hodgson 2001, p. 14 ff.). The starting point is normally characterized by a definition of the individual obtained by isolating a supposed prevalent motive in his behavior, aiming to transform it into a universal feature of modern individualism. It is an old approach that Adam Smith had already criticized with reference to those “splenetic philosophers”, like Mandeville or Hobbes, who—“in judging of human nature” (Smith 2004 [1790], 3.ii.27, p. 148)—would isolate

individuals, considering exclusively their natural endowments and the desire to pursue only their own private good. This approach, on the one hand, does not explain sociability, because it cannot reconstruct the meaning of human interactions and lacks the understanding of the complex array of human passions at the base of human behavior; on the other hand, it presupposes—as given and unchangeable—the social organization that it claims to explain (Smith 2004 [1790], 7.ii.6-14, p. 363-370; on this, see Hodgson 2001, p. 14 ff. and p. 273 ff.; Raffaelli 1996, p. 5-34; Gioia 2019).

In the same way, some analysts of modern individualism consider the individual as a hedonist, narcissist, consumerist, a man without quality, by isolating features that appear on the surface of the individuals behavior in this historical phase. Once again, as the young Marx would have said, social analysts revert the relationships between society and individuals, univocally and uncritically attributing to the individual in general the features prevalent in contemporary society. On the other hand, the inquiry into the features of contemporary society, in order to focus on the historical determinants of individualism, is considered too problematic because of its exposure to the adoption of ad hoc assumptions that move away social science from that model of “parsimonious explanations” that social scientists prefer, following the explicative models typical of physics. However, Jon Elster has to admit (reluctantly), social science is more close to a “social chemistry” than to a social physics: “the time for social physics is not yet here, and may never come” (Elster 1995, p. 1, see also p. 248 ff.; on this, see: Giddens 1982, p. 527-539).

What is interesting is the fact that this approach was anticipated by the analyses of two scholars, Weber and Werner Sombart, who, through a rich and engaging confrontation with Marx, tried to build a theoretical alternative to him, emphasizing the role of the subjective factors in economy and society. As is well known Weber and Sombart appreciated Marxian historical materialism, emphasizing its originality and its usefulness for economic and social analysis. Nevertheless, they criticized the uncritical attitude of Marxist scholars, who transformed it into “a universal canon” with a ‘naturalistic’ basis, hypothesizing a necessary evolution of society (Weber 1949, p. 69-70, Weber 1992 [1904-05], p. 21 ff.). But “absolute necessities” do not exist in history, because economic and social phenomena are determined “in the ultimate analysis, by the psyche of the individuals” (Sombart 1894, p. 592; Sombart 1908, p. 11 ff.; on this: Pearsons

2002, p. 35; Lenger 1997, p. 151-3). The category of the “spirit of capitalism” was intended as a way of recovering the role of subjective factors (cultural, ethic, political, religious in nature) in order to understand the changes in the economy and society. As is well known, they used this category for explaining the genesis and development of “modern capitalism” (Gioia 2013, 2015).

Nevertheless, when they analyzed the individual-economy relationship with reference to advanced capitalism their views radically changed. In their opinion, the bureaucratic and technological dimension of contemporary society and its internal and inescapable rationality have destroyed the distinctive features of the social systems (capitalism and socialism are the same): individuals discover themselves as passive elements in an enormous mechanism. They are considered as “fragments” of an “unalterable order of things”, without any real autonomy. Weber’s “iron cage” and Sombart’s “economic machine” represent an unchangeable world. Individual and rational behavior, have to move within the “capitalistic rules of action”. Adaptive behavior is the only way in which individuals can survive. The creative and innovative human who built ‘modern capitalism’ is considered a fact of the past:

The capitalistic economy of the present day is an immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and which presents itself to him, at least as an individual, as an unalterable order of things in which he must live. It forces the individual, in so far as he is involved in the system of market relationships, to conform to capitalistic rules of action... (Weber 1992 [1904-05], p. 20)

The same conclusions we find in Sombart: capitalism, radically changing the ‘natural orientation’ of the old economic organizations, has destroyed every communitarian value, modifying even human nature. A ‘new mankind’ arose, the features of the individuals (entrepreneurs and workers) being strictly determined by the logic of the system:

Capitalism needed a new race of men in order to reach its ends. Men able to insert themselves in a big system, a capitalist firm [...] those marvelous feats of relations of superiority, subordination, and coordination, those skilful pictures composed of partial men (*Teilmenschen*). The new economic structure required these human segments: beings without soul, depersonalized, dispirited beings, capable to be components, or better: little cogwheels in an intricate mechanism. (Sombart 1927, 1, p. 424; my transl. from German)

And, as he wrote in his *Der Bourgeois*, this is an inescapable social reality:

Some people indeed expected to overcome [the giant Capitalism] by appealing to ethical principles; I, for my part, can see that such attempts are doomed to utter failure. When we remember that capitalism has snapped the iron chains of the oldest religions, it seems to me hardly likely that it will allow itself to be bound by the silken threads of the wisdom that hails from Weimar and Königsberg. (Sombart 1967 [1913], p. 357-58)

It is really amazing that strict interpreters of Marx's thought, as Max Weber and Sombart were, have reproduced in their analyses those epistemological distortions that Marx had radically criticized with reference to Hegel, Stirner, Feuerbach, and others. Of course, they ignored the work of the young Marx, but the fact remains: if their critiques of Marxist determinism seemed to recover the scientific perspectives of the young Marx, their analyses of late capitalism re-proposed that naturalistic determinism which they had denounced with reference to Marxism. Probably, their analyses would have had a different outcome if the structure of human needs was not only defined within the circular relationships between historical characteristics of society and motives of the individuals, building an unchangeable identity between human needs and exigencies of the economic system. The reference to that propensities of the nature of man that Marx inquired ("natural forces, vital forces" "as dispositions and faculties", as "natural impulses") would have allowed a better understanding of the present in a historical perspective. Not by chance, as Wallerstein pointed out, "the prevalent opinion in politics and mainstream social sciences has been that no major structural change is even worth thinking about", following in such a conviction the approach of neoclassical economics, which "bases its model on the assumption of a fundamentally unchanging social universe" (Wallerstein 2013, p. 5).

In my opinion, it is still a rich field of enquiry within which the approach of the young Marx and his radical humanism ("To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But for man the root is man himself", CW 3, p. 182) will have great relevance. Thus, whether Max Weber is right calling for 'historically-oriented analyses' concerning the features of modern individualism and the scientific explanations of individual behaviors, it is useful to not neglect the relationships between habits, culture, social rules and human nature:

Impulses are the pivots upon which the re-organization of activities turns, they are agen-

cies of deviation, for giving new directions to old habits and changing their quality. Consequently, whenever we are concerned with understanding social transition and flux or with projects for reform, personal and collective, our study must go to the analysis of native tendencies. (Dewey 1922, p. 93)

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