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PhD in Economics and Political Economy

**THE COMPLEX LINK BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL
AGENCY AND ECONOMIC THEORY**

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INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS.

Every economic theory is structured starting from general assumptions about human nature and the behavioural patterns of people. As stated by Davis¹, the mainstream economic theory does not really explain the individual, and what is believed to be a realistic description of the human being in economics is actually an abstract conception that represents the various subjects indiscriminately parts of people, countries, organizations, animals, machines – indeed anything to which a maximizing function might be attributed. However, today it is well-accepted the refusal of a rapacious and a-social individual, determined solely by the pursuit of personal advantages within a context of unbridled social Darwinism. With respect to this point, heterogeneous approaches have developed with interesting proposals and new leading research programs such as, for example: game theory, behavioural economics, experimental economics, evolutionary economics, neuroeconomics, complex adaptive systems theory, and the capability approach².

The purpose of this thesis is to discuss the link between individual agency and economic theory from a perspective of the history of economic thought. The common ground that connects the three papers presented is the reflection upon three different theoretical approaches concerning human conduct in the complex economic world.

The first paper is related to the approach to political economy represented by Sraffa's price equations. As is known, in *Production of commodities by means of commodities* Sraffa's results not only do undermine the marginalist concept of capital and its theory of value and distribution, but have also the purpose of revitalizing the old standpoint of Classical political economy. The goal of the first paper is precisely to show how the Classical Sraffian approach can be a valuable point of departure for the discussion of the behaviour of individuals or groups in the economic activity.

The second paper analyses the thought of Destutt de Tracy, founder of the French liberal group of *Idéologues*. His observations seem to be the result of the intersection between the making of economic theory and the passionate attempt to find a system of moral philosophy that describes the individual as bearer of a plurality of passions.

¹ John B. Davis, (2003), *The Theory of the Individual in Economics Identity and value*, London: Routledge.

² See John B. Davis, (2011), *Individuals and Identity in Economics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The third paper deals with *Analytical Marxism*, which attempts to interpret the heterodox ideas of Marx by means of the intellectual categories of neoclassical economy. In particular, I focus on the relevance given by *Analytical Marxism* to the action of the individuals, under the influence of psychological factors, in order to strive for the possible realization of a “just” society.

Philosophical issues are inherent in economic theory and play a role behind the scenes. It emerges that, from the adopted point of view, the development of economic theory poses fundamental epistemological questions. We can conclude that the proper dialogue between economics and philosophy can bolster the meaning and relevance of economic theory.

ECONOMIC THEORY AND PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY: MARX, GRAMSCI, SRAFFA AND THE STUDY OF HUMAN NATURE³.

In the present paper, we ask whether in the “new” Classical political economy as re-proposed by Sraffa the concept of homo oeconomicus is really replaced by a different, satisfying theory of human behaviour and social change. In order to discuss this issue, we believe that Sraffa's note "Metafisica" (Sraffa D3.12.4) may be of particular interest. Here Sraffa maintains that many commentators may consider that the important part of his work is the analytical one, without being able to grasp the importance of the historical contextualization, which, on the contrary, is fundamental to discuss and understand political economy and, in general, society and human nature. We reflect upon this note of Sraffa trying to show a possible pathway to integrate the analytical part of his work with the historical analysis based on the materialist philosophical anthropology proposed by Marx. For this purpose, we will discuss first the joint vision of Pierangelo Garegnani and Andrea Ginzburg to trace a compatibility between Sraffa's thought and Marx's thought. Then we put forward some hints of a theory of history neither deterministic nor mechanistic, where the relation between "structure" and "superstructure" is far from being static or direct. In order to do so, we will refer to both the "young" and the "late" Marx, interpreted through Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Therefore, we conclude that the historical subjectivity bears crucial elements of unpredictability when it is studied through the materialist anthropological view and what does theory lose in terms of predictive power is counterbalanced by its broad and flexible view of the multiplicity of outcomes in the unfolding of historical phenomena. This can cast fresh light on the approach to the study of social relations and institutions in space and time.

Keywords: Gramsci, Individualism, Marxian anthropology, Sraffa, Surplus Approach.

³ Part of this paper was written during my visiting experience in Strasbourg at BETA centre (*Bureau d'économie théorique et appliquée*) from February 2020 to May 2020 (interruption due to Covid-19 pandemic). The Project of this paper has been awarded with the STOREP Grant 2021 and ESHET Young Scholars Seminar 2021. A working paper has been published by STOREPapers. (<http://www.storep.org/wp/working-papers/>)

1. Introduction

In *Production of commodities by means of commodities* (since now *PMCM*) (Sraffa 1960) the path and goal undertaken by Sraffa was not just to construct a price theory as such, but to provide a modern reappraisal to the “submerged and forgotten” Classical theory of value and distribution. In the present paper, we ask whether in the “new” Classical political economy the concept of *homo oeconomicus*⁴ is really replaced by a different, satisfying theory of human behaviour and social change⁵. To discuss this issue, the point of departure can be the following Sraffa’s note, in which he states:

Economics is only social - no Crusoe. Individual conditions (hypothetical) in the first place do not exist as such (individual always influenced by education, habits, imitation, social standards and conventions, etc.): in the second if they existed, could not be simply summed up - they should be combined in a much more complex way. Proceeding from individual to social is legitimate if it is a way of proceeding from simple to complex as we shall do; not if intends to proceed from cause to effect, as often is done (Sraffa D1.16).

Here Sraffa gives useful hints to try to answer the question raised. Firstly, he underlines that economic life is a social phenomenon, depending on historical conditions; so, the analysis must start from the notion of socially determined individuals, rather than the abstract idea of “subject” (i.e. Robinson Crusoe). Indeed, we will discuss how the former can be depicted through a materialistic anthropology, along the lines of Marx and Gramsci, and be, at the same time, the adequate premise for a renewed economic theory, in which social relations take shape within the production process and in such a way that the analyses so structured are able to highlight the role of social interrelations and historical forces in determining the evolution of economy.

Regarding the second part of Sraffa’s quote, the explanation of “proceeding from the simple to the complex” appears an implicit reference to Marx’s method of

⁴ On Sraffa’s refusal of the concept of *homo oeconomicus* see Gehrke and Kurz (2006).

⁵ Not all the scholars agree on this possibility. See, for example, Hodgson (1991, 174): “[...] The Sraffian approach does not offer a theory of human agency and interaction. It simply suggests that the long-period positions will somehow reflect and affect the expectations and actions of agents. [...] [T]his lack is a serious weakness. In consequence it cannot be claimed that Sraffian analysis provides a completely adequate or entirely appropriate foundation for post-Keynesian theory”.

determined abstractions, and the procedure from cause to effect addresses the topic of the proper meaning of causality in economic theory. These statements are key points to interpret in a specific way his equations along anti-deterministic lines in order to single out the implications of Marx and Gramsci's materialistic philosophy as mentioned before.

The article is structured as follows: section 2 reviews some points of the literature on the interpretation of Sraffian equations, to try to establish their compatibility with a materialistic philosophical theory of human behaviour and social change; in section 3 we discuss Marxian and Gramscian anthropology, focusing on some possible limitations to its validity. Finally, we draw some conclusions to set in one framework Sraffian theory and Gramsci's philosophy of praxis, in order to expound the idea of an "individualism" historically founded.

2. Interpreting Sraffa's equations and the restatement of Marx.

The economic magnitudes of the theories that assume that exchange, not production, is the central moment of the economic process are resolved through the interplay of the forces of demand and supply. The interplay, in general, leads to an equilibrium; although its existence, unicity and stability are ensured only under very restrictive hypotheses. The general conceptual framework so founded is entirely subsumed within the analytical schema of price determination, pretending to formulate a *neutral corpus*, where it vanishes the connection between economic theory and political aspects of society. In so doing, the economic forces determining the economic magnitudes pretends to be reduced to the domain of individual choices, resting on the maximizing behaviour and the principle of substitution between goods and productive factors⁶ (Bharadwaj 2017, 225). Thus, the theoretical (and practical) horizon has been filled by the theory of methodological individualism in which the whole is to be considered as the sum of many individual choices where each agent behaves according to his rationality (and, in case, his own emotions), whilst the social power and influence of classes or groups is not explicitly dealt with (Gioia 2019, 4).

⁶ As is known, the phenomena of reswitching and reverse capital deepening show that, in general, we cannot safely assume well behaved schedules on the market of goods and productive factors (Sraffa 1960, cap. VI; Garegnani 1979, 45 ss.; Garegnani 1985).

Classical approach to value and distribution is rather centred on relations between aggregates, apparently ignoring the importance of individual choices. The Classical equilibrium as re-proposed by Sraffa describes the compatibility among all productive processes; technological condition of production, quantities of commodities and distribution of income between entrepreneurs and workers are given and, on this basis, prices are reckoned (Sraffa 1960). Then, the causal relation going from production to exchange is clear⁷. Since not all the variables are subsumed under the domain of price determination, the theoretical foundation of Classical political economy is worked out in a system of economic interdependencies altogether different from that envisaged in the supply-and-demand based theories⁸. This, we will show, can lead to a flexible methodology, thanks to which we can integrate a strong analytical structure with a historical dimension, to understand the system of hierarchical interactions of social agents occurring in our societies⁹.

Since the availability of the documents in the Sraffa Archive in the Wren Library at Trinity College, the literature offers contrasting arguments about the evolution of Sraffa's thought, especially regarding the legacy of his cultural project¹⁰. According to Garegnani's reading (2005), Sraffa re-discovered Classical economics starting from his critique of the Marshallian idea of "real cost", which he replaced with the Quesnay's proposal of "physical real cost"¹¹. Two consequences follow: firstly, Sraffa's critique of the marginalist (or of "marginism", adopting his language) use of subjective elements in the theory of demand and supply¹²; secondly, the implications of his adoption of an "objectivist" point of view.

The meaning of "objectivism" is far from being unique in Sraffa's thought, but has changed over time (Kurz and Salvadori 2005). However, in order to build a materialistic theory of human agency and interaction, we have to reject the reading of Sraffa's objectivist position such as to configure a positivist philosophy dominated by scientism, given his interest in the methodology adopted for the study of natural sciences; moreover, we must propose a different meaning. Were economics studied

⁷ Sraffa D3/12/7: "In short the equations show that the conditions of exchange are entirely determined by the conditions of production".

⁸ On this point see Dobb (1973) and again Bharadwaj (2017).

⁹ On this point see Gilibert (2002).

¹⁰ See, for example, Roncaglia (2009).

¹¹ See, also, Naldi (2020).

¹² See Marcuzzo and Rosselli (2011); Fratini (2018); Cesaratto and Di Bucchianico (2021).

in line with physics, which ultimately aims at explaining the entire structure of the world in terms of numerical quantities and mathematical relations, no possibility of further investigation of Sraffa's philosophical materialism would be conceivable. As a result, it would be valid the position previously mentioned by Hodgson, as well as the one put forward by Pasinetti (Pasinetti 2012, 1312): Sraffa would not rely on any institutional set-up, nor would have any idea of economic agent.

According to another interpretation, the basis on which Sraffa derives the equations that describe a system in a merely reintegrative state would be the thought of Vilfredo Pareto and Alfred Marshall (Gehrke and Kurz 2006; Kurz, Gehrke and Salvadori 2019). In fact, here the necessary constraint is of objective nature, dictated by the technical conditions of production. It is therefore the "real physical costs" of production that determine the relative values of goods. This confirms the objective point of view of classical political economy; but it is also in line with Pareto's intuition, according to which in economic equilibrium the subjective aspect plays no role. We would then be in front of a form of objectivism that can be described as "supervenience physicalism"¹³, and one could go so far as to say that, according to Sraffa, all economic facts depend on events in the physical world (Davis 2012). According to the approach we are examining, Sraffa would have been aware that a closed system hypothesis¹⁴ was necessary for the purposes of his procedure for determining the value of goods in an economy without surplus. However, with reference to an economic system that produces surpluses, different interpretations have been offered. Davis maintains that Sraffa continues to adopt a relatively closed system (Davis 2017, 160), while, according to Kurz, in this case the natural science point of view forces Sraffa into a blind alley. Therefore, what lies outside his objective characterisation has to be referred to institutional and political factors affecting distribution, along the line of Adam Smith and his idea of the "scramble and dispute for the surplus". (Kurz 2012, 1559).

The intellectual relation between Sraffa and Wittgenstein is, also, at the centre of the reflection of Arena, who reconstructs the reciprocal influences between Sraffa and

¹³ According to this concept, supervenience can be defined as a relation of dependence between two things that excludes their identification. For more details see Davis (2012).

¹⁴ Later in the paper we will turn on the distinction between open and closed system. The difference between an open and a closed system lies in the dialogue economics can have with other social sciences.

Wittgenstein concerning the possible relation between Sraffa's "snapshots" and Wittgenstein's "surveyable representations" in order to support the idea of a partially common morphological and "physiognomic" conception of the society (Arena 2013; 2015; 2020)¹⁵.

What the interpretations of Arena, Davis and Kurz seem to have in common is the distance between Sraffa and Marx's historical materialism. The aim of this paper is precisely to verify whether it is possible to trace a compatibility, or even a complementarity, between Sraffa's thought and Marx's thought, starting from the social power relations that influence the distribution of income. Our starting point is the following question: what is Sraffa's idea of evolution and change? Apparently, Sraffa would focus on static equilibrium, but, just in his vision of evolution and change, important aspects emerge, which cast light on his epistemology.

Trabucchi and Rosselli (2019) have shown how Sraffa's critique of "marginism" is far from being the outcome of an epistemological pre-conception but is grounded in his views on the appropriate method to deal with actual economic phenomena. For instance, the question what could be the value of a commodity at different times, example of a so-called "process of change", has an answer which is not susceptible of a general treatment since the price of a commodity in the period under scrutiny is also the results of specific historical and social conditions and, so, subject to a variety of outcomes. This cannot be duly appreciated if adopting a demand-and-supply apparatus, because there is "nothing less than a declaration of faith in universal determinism, for nothing else can support the belief in the actual existence of a *prescribed path*, which must inevitably be followed" (Sraffa D3/12/46; *emphasis added*). Had Sraffa approved a "vulgar" materialist philosophy, there would be no point to discuss the determinism intrinsic to the demand-and-supply apparatus; moreover, the rejection of any form of determinism is a fundamental premise in order to conceive an open theory of human agency and interaction.

As suggested by Ginzburg (2019, 108), within the Classical scheme in an open system the conditions of formation of the surplus are also traced to historical and social reasons and are not *a priori* determinable through deductive procedures. As he observed in previous papers (Ginzburg 2013; 2015), the core argument to support this

¹⁵ Interestingly, Ginzburg (2019) finds a common ground between Sraffa, Gramsci and Wittgenstein, since they would share a common basis represented by Marx's Theses on Feuerbach.

point of view lies in the concept of causality, explained along anti-mechanistic and anti-deterministic lines.

The theory in *PCMC* has been synthetically labelled as “descriptive analysis”¹⁶; however, in *PCMC*’s analysis the notion of causality does exist. The knowledge of the philosophical writings of Hertz (Sraffa D1/9) supported Sraffa’s criticism of the simplified, often anthropomorphic and ethnocentric, concept of causality widespread at his time, which had a strong inclination towards anachronism and was implicitly teleological. In addition, the study, presumably started in 1927, of the works of A.S. Eddington helped Sraffa to trespass the simplified concept of causality, according to which the same effect may not spring from two alternative causes and *vice versa*¹⁷.

Indeed, the reflection of Sraffa on causality is the solid ground for his criticism of the principle of sufficient reason – that is, every cause is necessarily followed by an effect and every effect is necessarily associated with a cause – such that, in a well-known note (Sraffa D.3.12.7), we read:

When we have defined our “economic field”, there are still outside causes which operate in it, and its effects go beyond the boundary. This must happen in any concrete case... The surplus may be the effect of the outside causes; and the effects of the distribution of the surplus may lie outside.

Here Sraffa notes that, once defined the economic field, and after studying the necessary relations within it, it is necessary recognize how further external causes operate in it. Then, the “closed system is in communication with the world” and becomes an open one.

We read this point together with the passage where Garegnani notes that the relations between the variables in Classical theories should be studied on different levels of abstraction, depending on whether they are in the “core” of necessary quantitative relations, or outside it. The relations in the “core” are the “economic field” in the passage quoted above, where technology, quantities and one distributive variable are known, and prices and the other distributive variable are to be determined. They are susceptible of a rigorous, abstract and general treatment, whose

¹⁶ See Sen (2003).

¹⁷ Just to mention few more, Sraffa also studied Jules Henri Poincaré and L. L. Whyte, see, again, Kurz and Salvadori (2005).

result holds in a specific situation of the production process. Outside the core, all relations are more complex and must be examined following separate logical stages. Now we can study the role of institutions, social conventions, political choices and so on; the relations that we establish are specific, and less general than those we observe in the “core”¹⁸.

This integration between the analytical method and the historical dimension proceeds along two lines that, ultimately, determines the consistency between Marx and Sraffa¹⁹ along anti-deterministic lines. The theory now appears articulated in two stages: first, Sraffa’s system of equations, which deals with the relations in the core, can fully replace relative price determination according to the labour theory of value²⁰. Secondly, the “core”, which is the part of the analysis that describes necessary quantitative relations, and the subdivision of the analysis into separate logical stages represent the starting point to reconstruct the totality of reality in accordance with Marx’s method of “determined abstractions”. This method employs abstract categories not deriving from general hypotheses, but rather from the observation of reality; hence, the scientific theory is set up on the basis of this kind of generalisation²¹. The use of determinate abstractions makes it possible the reconstruction of the concrete reality as a synthesis of many particular determinants, organically combined, proceeding from the simple to the complex, and without disregarding the influence of the historical and social circumstances in relation to which they actually manifest; deductive and inductive element are not clearly separable²².

¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of the structure of the “core”, see Garegnani (1987).

¹⁹ Sraffa (D3/12/4) writes that the ultimate result of his work would be “a restatement of Marx, by substituting to his Hegelian metaphysics and terminology our own modern metaphysics and terminology”. See, also, Ginzburg (2016) and Maffeo (2000) which have shown such consistency.

²⁰ On this point, see Petri (2015) and Garegnani (2018).

²¹ This is the well-known original definition of the method: “If one were to start with population, it would be a chaotic conception of the whole, and through closer definition one would arrive analytically at increasingly simple concepts; from the imagined concrete, one would move to more and more tenuous abstractions until one arrived at the simplest determinations. From there it would be necessary to make a return journey until one finally arrived once more at population, which this time would be not a chaotic conception of a whole, but a rich totality of many determinations and relations” (Marx and Engels CW 28, *Economic Manuscripts of 1857-58 Introduction*, 37–45). See also, *ex multis*: Lange (1970, 85) and Garegnani (1984, 321).

²² Gramsci observes: “Critical economics has sought a fair balance between the deductive and inductive methods, i.e. to construct abstract hypotheses [...] on the effectual reality, “historical description”, which gives the real premise to construct scientific hypotheses, i.e. to abstract the

This leads to the foundation of a materialistic philosophy in which “individuals producing in a society - hence the *socially determined production by individuals is of course the point of departure*” (Marx and Engels CW 28, *Economic Manuscripts of 1857-58 Introduction*, 17, emphasis added).

3. No necessity in history: Marx’s and Gramsci’s anthropology.

Sraffa in his note D1.7 cites the German economist Robert Liefmann and his statement related to the need of giving in economics a specific sense to human action; to this purpose, it is valuable attributing to it a basic and unitary principle and creating the theory deductively²³. For instance, in the utilitarian approach every action is no more an end in itself, but rather a mean to reach the final end: utility. But, Sraffa continues, this answer is not satisfying. In the note D1.20, indeed, he reports Sidgwick’s statement that “the importance for seeking the best definitions [is] far greater than the importance of finding it”. Then, starting from a basic and unitary principle, it is not possible to find any definition of “human nature”, so, Sraffa concludes, we must start again from the beginning and let some doubts raise.

Similarly, Gramsci, looking for a solution to the question “what human nature is”, affirms:

The problem of what man is, then, is always the so-called problem of "human nature," or of so-called man in general; in other words, it is the attempt to create a science of man (a philosophy) that *has for its starting point a "unitary" concept, an abstraction capable of containing everything "human"*. But is the "human" – as a concept and as a unitary fact – a starting point or a point of arrival? (Gramsci 2007, 186, emphasis added).

In fact, according to Gramsci, the best definition of human nature is the ensemble of social relations, which includes the idea of becoming, since there is no “human” in

economic element or those aspects of the economic element to exercise the scientific examination” (Gramsci 1975, 335, our translation). “L’economia critica ha cercato un giusto temperamento tra il metodo deduttivo e il metodo induttivo, cioè di costruire ipotesi astratte [...] sulla realtà effettuale, “descrizione storica”, che dà la premessa reale per costruire ipotesi scientifiche, cioè per astrarre l’elemento economico o quelli tra gli aspetti dell’elemento economico su cui si vuole attrarre l’attenzione ed esercitare l’esame scientifico”.

²³ In the specific case of Robert Liefmann, the principle is hedonism; he thought that the profit motive is the essential and unique element for the economic organization in the society.

general but a lot of “humans” in particular that become and manifest themselves through history²⁴. The ideas of “becoming” and “history” allows us to avoid the deterministic influences dominant at the time; this is the reason why Gramsci adopted the expression “philosophy of praxis” instead of “historical materialism”. As is known, in Italian the term “filosofia della prassi” (“philosophy of praxis”) was coined by Antonio Labriola to design an autonomous and independent philosophy capable to highlight the influence of social actions made by social groups²⁵. Before proceeding with this topic, however, we must come back to Marx and Engels.

Marx and Engels, in order to put “the man with his feet on the ground”, outlined a concept of plastic human nature, in which individuals are influenced by economic, social and cultural circumstances. But, at the same time, men are self-poietic, since, on its turn, the social and cultural context is continuously built and re-built by their capability to foster processes of transformation and change. Indeed, Marx and Engels give relevance to the will of the individual who establishes relations with other men, so that, all together, they modify the nature thanks to their work²⁶. Therefore, the will and the interlaced interests cannot be considered just as the consequence of individual choices *in vacuo*; they are the consequence of historical, economic, social and political events and forces, which shape the individual action and are shaped by it. To summarize, for Marx and Engels the economic agent is a concrete man/woman, seized in his/her process of empirically ascertainable human development, under specific historical conditions. In 1857-58, Marx writes:

Society does not consist of individuals but expresses the sum of the relationships and conditions in which these individuals stand to one another. As if someone were to say: for society, slaves and citizens do not exist: both are men. They are both men if we consider them outside society. To be a slave and to be a citizen are

²⁴ Gramsci (2007, 186): “[...] “human nature” is the “ensemble of social relations”; this is the most satisfying answer, because it includes the idea of “becoming” – man becomes, he changes continuously with the changing of social relations – and because it negates “man in general””.

²⁵ On this point, Antonio Labriola writes: “[...] The whole course of human events is a sum, a succession of series of conditions that men have made and laid down for themselves through the experience accumulated in their changing social life; but it represents neither the tendency to realize a predetermined end, nor the deviation of first principles from perfection and fecundity” (Labriola 1966, 123).

²⁶ Our interpretation of Marxian anthropology is compatible with the idea of *institutional individualism* proposed by Screpanti (2007, 83). We do not go in depth on this point now.

social determinations, relations between human beings A and B (Marx and Engels CW 28, *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft) [Grundrisse]*, 195).

However, we must mention a couple of critical points of this anthropology, to take into account when applying it to the study of social phenomena. Firstly, the dichotomous relationship between structure and superstructure. Engels writes in the letter to Bloch dated the 22nd of September 1890:

According to the materialist view of history, the determining factor in history is, *in the final analysis*, the production and reproduction of actual life. More than that was never maintained either by Marx or myself. [...] The economic situation is the basis, but the various factors of the superstructure [...] also have a bearing on the course of the historical struggles of which, in many cases, they largely determine the form (Marx and Engels CW 49, 34–35).

This statement seems quite one-sided: in fact, the study of a specific society is not so easy as a “simple equation of the first degree”²⁷ and cannot be deduced only according to its economic organization²⁸. The same idea is shared by Marx, as showed by Gramsci²⁹. Indeed, he cites Marx’s historical works, such as the *18th Brumaire*, the writings on the *Eastern Question*, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany*, *The Civil War in France*, to establish on firm ground a balanced interpretation of the dialectic between structure and superstructure.

The second critical point is the idea of progress. With respect to it, Marx and Engels seem to hold different opinions. Engels shares Hegel's position that temporality constitutes a fundamental dimension for discovering truth, since Truth, as a subject, emerges, is constructed and revealed in the course of time. Then, truth is a temporal, historical reality. Starting from this idea, Engels seeks a logic that should govern the historical evolution, that is the “dialectic logic”, as noted in Ege (2012). The aim of this

²⁷ Engels uses this very expression in the letter.

²⁸ This letter is often quoted by Gramsci. In addition, see also Engels’ letter to Schmidt dated 5th of August 1890 and Engels’ letter to Borgius dated 25th of January 1894 (Marx and Engels CW 49, 6–9; Marx and Engels CW 50, 264–268).

²⁹ Gramsci writes: “the assumption (*as an essential postulate of historical materialism*) that one can present and explain every political and ideological fluctuation as a direct expression of the structure must be combated [...] with the authentic testimony of Marx, the author of concrete political and historical works” (Gramsci 2007, 173). See also Forbes (1990, 30).

process is the emancipation of the individual, thanks to the victory over the logic governing the capitalist mode of production.

In *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of classical German philosophy* (Marx and Engels CW 26, 353–399), Engels writes that both individuals and social groups are endowed with conscience, act with rational intentionality and also with passion, and always work towards defined goals. Then, he argues that these actions, although important for historical inquiry, cannot alter the fact that the course of history is governed by general laws constant over time, since history always proceeds from a lower to a higher stage of development: “the conflicts of innumerable individual wills and individual actions in the domain of history lead to a state of affairs quite similar to that prevailing in the realm of unconscious nature” (Marx and Engels CW 26, 387). Seeking a logic capable of understanding the hidden laws of history, Engels starts from the significance of the actions of individuals and social groups, but the assimilation of history into the realm of unconscious nature leads to the underestimation of human action, almost to the point of its irrelevance. Therefore, Engels’s materialistic philosophy becomes deterministic, and the relation between structure and superstructure turns out to be dichotomous, with the former that, ultimately, determines the social movement in history. If, in the quoted letter to Bloch, economy had to be, in the final analysis, one of the determining factors of history, now it turns out to be the only one. Engels’s analysis seems to have the same results of the philosophies that share the belief in the self-regulating economic machine; thus, once the inner general laws of motion of economy are discovered, the future evolution of society becomes predictable³⁰.

On the other hand, Marx, while believing in the evolutionary progress of history, does not theorize any teleological vision of it, but rather refers to the competing and conflicting specific material interests and political action of social subjects. However, this well-known passage might appear somewhat ambiguous:

The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence,

³⁰ See Meek (1977) and Kurz (2013).

but their social existence that determines their consciousness (Marx and Engels CW 29, *Preface to a contribution to the critique of political economy*, 263).

This quote is often read attributing to the expression “social existence” (in the text) the meaning of “productive forces”; if we interpret Marx's position as meaning that the progress of productive forces makes subjects increasingly self-aware, then he would have a linear view of the progress of society, ultimately dictated by technical and productive amelioration³¹. However, such an interpretation would be reductive. In fact, Marx makes clear in several passages that individual consciousness is not only susceptible to being determined, but becomes itself determinative³²: it is, as mentioned above, a complex dialectical relationship, which the reading of Gramsci helps us to focus on.

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci often recollects this quotation, just to avoid any deterministic interpretation³³. With the same purpose, he cites Marx's *Thesis of Feuerbach* and *Poverty of philosophy*. With reference to the former, Gramsci develops the notion of "subject," defined as the set of social relations as seen above; furthermore, the second thesis emphasizes the active role of social agents and forms one of the foundations of his “philosophy of praxis”³⁴. *Poverty of Philosophy*, on the other hand, is important because there Marx criticizes Proudhon's belief that in civilization everything has existed and acted from eternity. Thus, human reason would not create Truth: it should only unveil it, since history proceeds according to the sequence of ideas (Marx and Engels CW 6, 171). This operation is carried out by Proudhon by assuming that each period is characterized by a negative and a positive side; thanks to the dialectical movement, the negative side is eliminated, while the good side is preserved. This process continues gradually until the negative side is eliminated for good, so as to achieve the perfect state of the world and establish equality, which is, according to Proudhon, the first principle or *social genius*. Had

³¹ For a thorough discussion about this topic, see Ege (2018).

³² We can read in the third *Thesis on Feuerbach*: “the materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated” (Marx and Engels CW 5, 3).

³³ See Gramsci (1992, 458–461). See also Cospito (2004, 231).

³⁴ “The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question” (Marx and Engels CW 5, 3).

Proudhon recognized that men are "actors and authors of their own history" (170), he would understand that history proceeds according to the conflicting interactions of social groups (211). Because of this view, a stadial theory of history is missing in *Poverty of Philosophy*, just as Proudhon does not realize that, between past, present and future, there is no unique linear direction, but rather discontinuities and contradictions, albeit within a framework of overall progress in the long run.

If we leave the "young Marx" to confront texts of the "mature Marx", which Gramsci could not know, we observe that this position was also adopted by Marx during the entire course of his life³⁵.

We refer, first, to the *Ethnological Notebooks* (Marx 1974) and, in particular, to L.H. Morgan's notes on "Ancient Society", where an outline of human progress is sketched, examining the temporal evolution of different cultures. Marx looked upon Morgan's work quite favourably but did not share Engels' extremely positive opinion.

According to Morgan, the process of transition from one period to the next is impersonal, just as all different cultures were totally objective in their processes and constitution. Consequently, Morgan shares the belief in the laws of history: society always advances from a lower stage of development to a higher one³⁶. It is worth noticing that Marx has ignored Chapter 3, Part 1, entitled "Ratio of human progress", where Morgan proposes a timescale of human development, according to the lines just discussed. On the contrary, Marx maintains that social formations build the framework into which societies develop their concrete articulation. In history, no necessity does exist³⁷.

We can find further examples in Marx's reflections on the beginning of the revolutionary movement in Russia. In his letter to the editor of *Otechestvenniye Zapiski* in 1877 (Marx and Engels CW 24, 196–201), he states that his historical works, mainly related to the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe, must not be absolutely interpreted as a philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all

³⁵ For a different interpretation see, for example, Gouldner (1980). Of course, since Marx was not only an economist but also a man involved in politics there are several conflictual elements in his works. See for example his article about the British colonial occupation of India, written in 1853 (Marx and Engels CW 12, 217–222).

³⁶ See the Introduction by Krader to Marx (1974, 3–85).

³⁷ See Lindner (ed.) (2020).

peoples. Indeed, in the letter, even when he writes about the capitalist mode of production, Marx speaks of tendencies, never of absolute necessities.

Similarly, in his letters to Vera Zasulič³⁸, Marx maintains that the results exposed in *Capital* do not allow him to adduce reasons either for or against the destiny of the social revolution occurring in Russia.

In the light of this anti-deterministic interpretation, Gramsci, in his note *Progress and becoming* (in Italian "*Progresso e divenire*") (Gramsci 1992, 357–360), says that progress can be correctly defined as an "ideology" (*ideologia*). Ideology, in Gramsci's language, does not refer to Marxian definition of "false consciousness", but means a specific conception of the world, that is the representation of reality provided by individuals and groups and, as a consequence, a specific collective and individual will³⁹. Each "Truth" thus elaborated is not eternal and absolute, but has practical origins and represents a provisional value; in fact, within the "philosophy of praxis", Gramsci claims the historicity of every conception of world and life (Gramsci 1992, 406). The interaction between the different wills takes place in the social space, where they fight for the hegemony. Here, the role of intellectuals and political bodies is relevant. It is also interesting to note that a similar interpretation can be provided for Sraffa's note D3/12/42: 21–22 in which he talks about ideology; paraphrasing Marx, who affirms that ideologies have no history, no development, he wishes to emphasize, against the idealists, that the transformation of reality is not the autonomous result of thought but can happen only in conjunction with the activities (praxis) of transformation⁴⁰.

The category of "ideology" highlights the role of real human beings acting in history. Because of the lack of any predetermined end, the conflicting interaction of social groups, the outcome of which is unpredictable from time to time, is what makes history. In fact, in Gramsci's words, the historical value of a philosophy "can be "calculated" from the "practical" (in the broadest sense of the word) efficacy it has

³⁸ Vera Zasulič was a Russian revolutionary. In 1881, she wrote a letter to Marx asking him "a life or death question" about the possibility for the Russian commune to undertake the "the road to socialism". Marx's reply is composed of three drafts and the final letter, written, also, in 1881. See Marx and Engels CW 24 (346–371). Curiously, Vera Zasulič forgot and ignored Marx's reply and adopted a deterministic philosophy. For an in-depth description of this case, see Rubel (1947).

³⁹ See Liguori (2004, 131–150).

⁴⁰ See Ginzburg (2015, 60). For the complete notes in the English translation see Kurz (2012, 1557–1558).

acquired. [...] The extent to which it reacts back is precisely the measure of its historical importance” (Gramsci 2007, 194). If philosophy has no practical relevance, it is just an empty elucubration. In the “historical bloc” struggling to establish hegemony:

the material forces are the content and ideologies are the form. This distinction between form and content is just heuristic because material forces would be historically inconceivable without form and ideologies would be individual fantasies without material forces (Gramsci 2007, 172).

4. Conclusions.

In this paper we have tried to sketch some possible lines along which a theory of individual agency and interaction could be conceived in accordance with the Sraffian reappraisal of Classical political economy. In order to give a consistent explanation for the ability of individuals and groups to foster process of transformation and change, we have discussed a possible interpretation of Sraffa’s equations. Focusing on the concept of causality, the equations of *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities* can be interpreted as the “core” of an open system that takes as given historical, social and legal conditions (in this case, the relations outside the core). Therefore, his materialist approach can be a matter of further investigation in the wake of Marx and Engels.

Materialist philosophy is based on the assumption of individuals who produce in society and establish specific social relationships among themselves at a given time in history. Thus, there is no human being “in general”, but rather there are people embedded in a specific historical reality, which are, however, determined by their actions and conflicts. This idea is often juxtaposed with the belief in the development of societies according to a linear progress, where the “structure” determines the “superstructure”, and which proceeds from a lower to a higher stage. Were Marxian anthropology read in such a way (incorrect, in our opinion), then it would be deterministic and irrelevant for the study of social phenomena and social change; for this reason, Gramsci’s lens to interpret the thought of Marx offer us valuable help.

In the note *Regularity and Necessity*, Gramsci explains that in history some forces, which tend to be persistent, operate with a certain degree of regularity and automatism; political economy must understand these forces and Ricardo, Gramsci

adds, plays an important role in this⁴¹, as well as, we can say now Sraffa and the modern reappraisal of Classical political economy. The proposed economic laws must never be interpreted in a naturalistic sense either as “historical necessities”; Ricardo, indeed, was considered by Gramsci as an innovator in the field of economic method from the gnoseological and philosophical point of view and he led Marx to go beyond Hegelian philosophy to develop a new form of historicism (Potier 2020, 266)⁴². Thus, the economic laws represent the material conditions around which a social group will be formed to attain its goals. Among these material conditions one cannot separate the action of culture (in broadest sense); indeed, a complex set of intellectual choices, feelings and passions “lead men to action at any cost” (Gramsci 1992, p. 413). We can compare here Gramsci’s reflection with Marx’s idea of the solidity of popular beliefs: a popular conviction often has as much energy as an actual material strength⁴³.

This anti-deterministic interpretation of the role of the economic science gives relevance to the Gramscian notion of “catharsis”, indicating the shift from the purely economic to the ethical-political moment: man, in fact, is essentially “political man”, acting in society. In this way, Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis explains social phenomena and social changes as historical facts, as the results of the historical subjectivity of groups acting in society and struggling for hegemony (Gramsci 1992, 440–448 and, also, Frosini 2009). Any abstract and speculative research that leads to a teleological view of history is therefore an error. Far from being the rejection of the rational investigation of historical processes, this is the statement that the direction of their development depends on conflicting phenomena and is also influenced by irrational elements. History, therefore, shapes individuals, but it is in the meantime the result of the variously organized action of individuals themselves.

⁴¹ (*Regolarità e necessità*, in Gramsci 1992, 410–414). See, about the role played by Ricardo, the letters to Sraffa in Gramsci and Schucht (1997).

⁴² See, also, Potier (2020) who describes Sraffa’s doubts on Gramsci’s interpretation of Classical political economy.

⁴³ See Gramsci (2007, 172). Gramsci’s analysis of the strength of popular beliefs is in the same note where he defines the idea of “historical bloc”. The young Marx writes in his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*: “Material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But for man the root is man himself” (Marx and Engels CW 3, 182).

In Sraffa's analysis, this is represented by the separation between the system of equations, which describes the quantitative relationships necessary for the viability of the system, and the conditions that determine the quantities produced and the distribution of income, which must be analysed separately and cannot be described only with mathematical language. These conditions are an essential part of the analysis and, we can conclude now, the philosophy of praxis represents a valuable instrument to carry it out. The openness towards the indispensable study of the historical and social context constitutes perhaps the most relevant part of Sraffa's thought, even if it has not always been given due importance, as Sraffa himself seems to foresee in the note D3.12.4:

In this theory it will be thought that the important part is the analytical and constructive. The significance of the historical side will be missed. And yet, this is the truly important, that which gives us a real insight into the mystery of human mind and understanding, into the deep unknown relations of individuals between themselves and between the individual and society (the social, or rather the class mind).

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SOME ASPECTS OF ANTOINE DESTUTT DE TRACY'S ECONOMIC ANALYSIS (1754-1836)⁴⁴

The article examines some aspects of Destutt de Tracy's economic theory, related to the philosophical vision of the founder of *Idéologie*. Describing the process of identification of the person and the emergence of his active will and awareness of his needs, Destutt de Tracy arrives, in the fourth volume (1815) of the *Éléments d'idéologie* (1815), to write a *Traité d'économie politique*, which he will publish in 1823 as an autonomous book. Also, from this editorial choice it appears that, for the author, political economy is based on the study of the individual, his needs and his rationality: it is therefore a branch of the study of ideas. The historical and social dimension, instead, remains mostly in the background of the analysis, in the description of the great exchange to which the production process is reduced. One aspect that seemed interesting to us of his thinking is the attempt to balance some points of economic reflection with a historical vision that moves away from the psychological individualism of the *Éléments*. His observations on inequality, its causes and its consequences seem to us the fruitful result of the intersection between an economic theory that, in itself, does not present particular points of interest, and the passionate attempt to found a system of moral philosophy for a renewed society. The work is structured as follows: paragraph 2 frames the figure of the de Tracy economist within sensistic philosophy, from which he inherits some theoretical aporie; paragraph 3 enters into the merits of several aspects of his economic theory; the concluding remarks can be found in paragraph 4.

Keywords: Destutt de Tracy; Idéologie; Sensualism; Individualism.

⁴⁴ A preliminary Italian version of this paper has been published in *Itinerari di ricerca storica*.
<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/itinerari/article/view/23317>

1. Introduction

Antoine Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836) was the founder of the *Idéologues*: a group of scholars active in France from the years immediately preceding the *Revolution* until the beginning of the age of *Restoration*⁴⁵. As is known, the *Idéologues* held liberal and republican political and economic positions, affirmed freedom of thought and the principle of laicity, applied the scientific method to the study of society and believed that the progress of knowledge should be oriented to the progress of humanity⁴⁶. In 1796 Destutt de Tracy was the first to create the neologism *Idéologie*, used to describe the science of thought of his school⁴⁷; historically, this expression will not be destined to univocal interpretation, but will assume even contrasting meanings⁴⁸, as it has happened, for instance, with Marx.

Starting from the description of the process of self-individuation and the emergence of the active will and consciousness of needs, Destutt de Tracy comes, in the fourth volume (1815) of his main manuscript *Éléments d'idéologie*, to write a *Traité d'économie politique*, which he will publish in 1823 as an autonomous book. Even from this editorial choice it appears that political economy has its basis in the study of the individual, his needs, and his rationality. Political economy is, therefore, a branch of the study of ideas, while its historical and social dimension remains mostly in the background of the analysis in the description of exchange, to which the process of production is reduced.

The present work, which examines some aspects of his economic thought, is structured as follows: paragraph 2 frames the figure of the economist Tracy within the *sensistic* philosophy, from which he inherits some theoretical aporias; paragraph 3 goes into the merits of some aspects of his economic theory; the concluding remarks are in paragraph 4.

⁴⁵ The first lengthy study on *Les Ideologues* was conducted by F. Picavet (1972 [1891]); then detailed overviews came from the more recent works of Georges Gusdorf (1966) and Sergio Moravia (1974).

⁴⁶ See, Faccarello (2010), for a discussion on the historical and cultural context.

⁴⁷ From a philological point of view, the first to come up with the term *Idéologie* was probably Garat, but only orally; hence it is considered fair to attribute the origin of the term to Tracy. See, in this regard, Moravia (1974, p. 370).

⁴⁸ Kennedy (1979, p. 353) states: «it has not yet been fully explained how “ideology” the synonym Destutt de Tracy (1754-1836) proposed in 1796 for “science of ideas” (understood in the sensationalist tradition of Condillac) could come to mean “false class consciousness” less than fifty years later».

2. Destutt de Tracy, *Idéologue* and man of his time

To understand the figure of Destutt de Tracy the economist, it is useful to proceed, as he proposes in the *Avertissement* of the *Traité* (De Tracy 1823), from Destutt de Tracy the philosopher and founder of *Idéologie*.

This is the meaning of the word *Idéologie*:

«*idéologie* est la traduction littérale de science des idées. Il est encore très exact, si l'on égard à l'étymologie grecque du mot idée : car le verbe *eido* veut dire je vois, je perçois par la vue, et même je sais, je conçois. Le substantif *eideas*, que l'on traduit ordinairement par tableau, image, bien analysé signifie donc réellement perception du sens de la vue» (De Tracy 1796: p. 324).

The science of ideas must be interpreted in a *sensistic* perspective: senses are the key to solve problems of gnoseological and epistemological nature (Kennedy 1978). The science of Destutt de Tracy pretends to be the development of the sensory doctrine of Condillac⁴⁹, albeit in an anti-metaphysical and phenomenological direction. The ideas, facts of individual consciousness that derive from sensations, are the conscious contents of the mind: their existence and their relationships should not leave room for metaphysics⁵⁰, nor for the unconscious, or, in general, for a thorough investigation of their process of formation that is supposed to be outside of the individual mind⁵¹. *Idéologie* is exactly the science of ideas in general, i.e., a science that poses itself as "neutral", divorced from value judgments and therefore of universal validity, as long as the logical procedure followed is rigorous; a position whose illusoriness today is evident. This neutrality, we shall see, also applies to the economic theory that is deduced from it, because it descends from the constitutive elements of the nature of the individual⁵².

⁴⁹ See, on this point, Knight (1968) and Parret (1975).

⁵⁰ However, Tracy's analyses do not always avoid metaphysical connotations. Maine de Biran accuses Tracy of conceiving the ideas as something absolute, subsisting in themselves and pre-existing the judgement of sentient and intelligent beings; see (Moravia 1974, pp. 359-362). Comte's position is similar, although he gives Tracy profound credit for anticipating some features of positivism. Indeed, Destutt does not have an explicit metaphysics, yet he seems to provide space for it, as he does not always explain the origin of ideas and sees them as a first principle. We will see this better later for the concept of "Sympathy". On Comte, see Kennedy (1979, pp. 365-366).

⁵¹ Destutt de Tracy's research programme has been called a Lockian programme, a "semantic atomism with consequent structuralism" (Rossi-Landi 1982 [1978], p. 47, *our translation*).

⁵² On this point see Ostachuk (2019) and Chiricò (2020).

The study of all perceptions, in the broadest sense, from sensations to memories, is the study of the human being himself, who exists insofar as he perceives. Sensibility is then associated with the will, because man experiences sensations and feels the desire to act on their stimulus, guided by *le jugement*, which consists in the act of putting the sensations in relation to each other. In addition, from the movement of perceptions and the different degrees and declinations of sensibility comes benevolence toward others (De Tracy 1801, pp. 323-324, 327, 332).

Ideas are manifested through signs, the most significant of which are language and writing («*Tout système peignant directement les idées est une vraie langue ou langage*» De Tracy 1801, p. 348), including mathematical and geometrical language. These systems of signs are a valuable aid to reasoning ("*combiner nos idées élémentaires*"), to its correctness, and to memory; the more signs express "*nuances délicates*", the more our analyses become " *fines et parfaites*" (De Tracy 1801, pp. 350-351). It is, finally, thanks to signs that social relations are born⁵³. To sum up, through *L'Idéologie* Destutt de Tracy aims to illustrate the genealogy of human ideas, aspiring to explain the genesis of the process of thought and its relationship with will and languages.

He refuses to consider the individual as a being of dual nature, possessing an instrumental body and a divine soul (Moravia 1966, p. 401); instead, adopting a *sensistic* perspective, he studies man through a rigorous physiological analysis, examining the psycho-affective functions deriving from processes that concern exclusively the organs and vital functions of which he is composed. Here emerges the important role of his friendship with the physician and physiologist Cabanis. Given these premises, he defines his own method of investigation as *analyse*. Through the analysis it is possible to decompose each idea or concept into the simple ideas that constitute it, which are solidly established in sensory experience. After this decomposition, one can proceed logically to the elaboration of theories (Head 1985, p. 35).

From the study of the senses derives the four fundamental functions of man: feeling (*sentir*), memory (*mémoire*), judging (*juger*), and wanting (*vouloir*). The latter is the first principle from which Tracy undertakes the logical and deductive study of economics.

⁵³ See Stéfani (1981).

With Destutt de Tracy the adoption of the *sensistic* philosophy as the basis of economic theory appears with full awareness. Starting with the will, he follows up the need-effort relationship of the individual, thus drawing an overall representation of all the relationships of the system. Economic theory is not established from the historical analysis of the formation of the "wealth of nations" through the social organization of production; instead, economic categories arise exclusively from the sensations and "ideas" of the sentient subject⁵⁴.

Destutt de Tracy moves along the path that we find, *in nuce*, already in some pages of Condillac's (1776). Indeed, in Destutt it is a complete treatise on political economy that is integrated into the philosophical position founded on the genesis of the isolated subject; it is on this basis that Destutt explains the fundamental category of value and conducts an analysis along the lines traced by Condillac and Say. Rather than for a genuine originality of thought, Destutt's contribution is remarkable precisely because it ideally links Condillac and Say, making explicit the philosophical substratum of the latter's work⁵⁵.

The attention of the philosopher and economist Destutt de Tracy for the subjective assumptions of action is also highlighted in recent contributions in journals of Austrian cultural area; current of thought risen after Hayek's interpretation of our Author (Hayek 1980). We read of Tracy as a promoter of a catallactic and subjectivist vision of society (Salerno 1988, p. 132), whose thought would have found fulfilment in Von Mises' theory of human action (Dorobat 2015). On the other side, also Klein (1985, pp. 65-67) sees in him an antecedent of Lionel Robbins.

The interpretation of his work with reference to the ideal connection between Condillac and Say, structured through the search for the subjective presuppositions of human action, finds confirmation in his own words:

«[C]eci n'est point un Traité d'Economie politique comme un autre. C'est la seconde section d'un Traité de l'Entendement. Mon intention est bien moins d'épuiser tous les détails des sciences morales, que de voir comment elles dérivent

⁵⁴ «[I]l [Tracy] s'efforce de relier sa philosophie première (l'idéologie proprement dite) à la science sociale (économie politique, morale et politique)» (Steiner 1990, p. 671).

⁵⁵ The close analogy between the theories of Say and Destutt de Tracy was already noted by Allix, who describes our Author as «un fidèle reflet de J.B. Say», and continues: «on peut dire que Destutt de Tracy a écrit la préface psychologique de l'économie politique libérale» (Allix 1912, p. 425). Schumpeter considers Tracy a fine thinker to whom nature has not bestowed the gift of originality (Schumpeter 2006 [1954], pp. 474-475).

de notre nature et des conditions de notre existence» (De Tracy 1823, p. 173).

Given his philosophy, the most important conclusion reached by the *Idéologue* in the first part of the *Traité* is the justification of the idea of private property, which cannot be considered as a historical phenomenon precisely because nature has provided men and, in general, sensitive beings, with their own individuality⁵⁶ (De Tracy 1823, pp. 16-17, 19).

Having structured an individualist theory, the author proceeds to aggregate the single individualities to establish a theory of society; the second part of the title of the fourth volume of the *Éléments* is devoted precisely to this task. If man exists only in society, how to define it? The answer Tracy offers is:

«Je ne crains point de le dire: la société est purement et uniquement une série continue d'échanges; elle n'est jamais autre chose dans aucune époque de sa durée, depuis son commencement le plus informe jusqu'à sa plus grande perfection; et c'est là le plus grand éloge qu'on en puisse faire, car l'échange est une transaction admirable dans laquelle les deux contractans gagnent toujours tous deux» (De Tracy 1823, p. 68).

This passage is significant: Destutt de Tracy, aware of Hobbes' analysis, but carrying an optimistic conception of human nature, must justify that the state of nature should not be identified only with the state of war (Moravia 1967, p. 58). Destutt's individualism is not characterized by a one-dimensional view of passions; also influenced by the texts of Adam Smith⁵⁷, he wants to give scientific dignity to the recognition of a plurality of them. On the one hand, he acknowledges that man can be characterized by destructive passions from which, in the most extreme case, the state of war can derive, but he also highlights the benevolent passions that can keep society united and that, thanks to trade, allow to reach an ever greater well-being over time.⁵⁸ He states:

⁵⁶ Property becomes «an ontological fact of human existence» (Head 1985, p. 77). We will return to this point at length in the next section.

⁵⁷ Moravia (1967, p. 77) confirms the profound influence exerted by Adam Smith with his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

⁵⁸ Destutt de Tracy analyses Montesquieu's work in his *Commentaire sur l'Esprit des lois* (1817). Both believed in the civilising virtues of commerce, but whereas Montesquieu believed luxury to be beneficial, Tracy was manifestly against it. We will return to this theme in the next paragraph.

«Il est donc impossible que des rapprochements que notre organisation rend inévitables ne développent pas en nous cette disposition naturelle à sympathiser, ne la fortifient pas par l'exercice, et n'établissent pas entre nous des relations sociales et morales» (De Tracy 1823, p. 67).

The theoretical problem that arises is that Tracy, once introduced the idea of sympathy, cannot provide any adequate justification, considering it a natural disposition of the individual. He does not provide any reliable evidence of it and seems to hope that the study of physiology can offer in the future specific answers, perhaps by the already mentioned friend Cabanis. His assertion is thus the fruit of a profound confidence that the maxim of sympathy can be deduced from the understanding of the *sentient* man (Head 1985, p. 78), without the need for reference to the historical and social determinations of the character of individuals. It is from this postulate of inter-individual collaboration that the idea that commerce always brings benefits to both contracting parties derives⁵⁹.

As we will see in the next section, within the subjectivist and catallactic view of society Destutt finds room to reflect on inequality, in its social, political and economic aspects. Apparently, in the context of the great exchange, which for Tracy constitutes production, there would seem to be no room for inequality. However, given the multiplicity of passions in the individual, he does not fail to note their existence and to speak out in favour of a more egalitarian society, to which Tracy aspires because only in it there would be the greatest respect for individuality and individual property and the law becomes the indispensable tool for directing society towards the protection of the weakest and towards its better functioning.

3. Destutt de Tracy, from the science of ideas to political economy.

In order to understand the path that leads our author from the science of ideas to political economy, which is part of the *Idéologie*, and, in our opinion, takes him further, towards political philosophy and public ethics, it is useful to return briefly to some passages of the exposition of the *Projet d'Éléments d'Idéologie* (De Tracy 1801). The starting point of the author's thoughts and reflection is the simple observation that

⁵⁹ This last statement did not escape Marx, who did not fail to criticise it (Marx 1996 [1867], pp. 173-174).

man first thinks about primary needs (*ses besoins*), and only later about *ses plaisirs*. Thus, man first deals with agriculture, then with war, politics and art and, at last, philosophy, through which it is possible to construct theoretical arrangement through logic, grammar and morality. What is of interest for Destutt de Tracy is, therefore, the knowledge of the human *facultés intellectuelles*, analyzed with the method of natural sciences (*idéologie* is "*l'histoire naturelle de l'homme*" (De Tracy 1801, p. 319)), along the path opened by Locke and Condillac, who "*réellement créé l'idéologie*", as Destutt de Tracy explicitly recalls (De Tracy 1801, p. 3). It is interesting that here the evolution of human activity is seen as the result of the "rational" choice of each individual, rather than as the result of a social organization and hierarchy, involving a division of labour between the creation of means of subsistence and the symbolic communication of political and magical-religious content.

Condillac, although created the *Idéologie*, nevertheless failed to offer an overall theoretical arrangement of it, being founded firmly on experience («*nous avons consulté l'expérience*» (De Tracy 1801, p. 320)), task that, instead, Destutt de Tracy intends to perform in the massive corpus of his *Éléments d'Idéologie*. A first didactic version can be found in the *Projet*, where the birth, expression and combination of ideas are investigated through this new science, which has historical roots in the renewal era following the Revolution of 1789, as we read in the *Préface*, and which is articulated in the *Idéologie proprement dite* (which today we might call physiology and psychology of perception), grammar and logic (De Tracy 1801, pp. 9 ff., pp. 18-19 and note). The *Idéologie*, as already mentioned, is intimately linked to the physiology of perception; however, Destutt de Tracy chooses not to delve into this specific aspect that is far from his training, inviting collaboration and reflection from the physiologist philosophes, and in particular Cabanis, "*dont les travaux précieux jettent un jour tout nouveau sur ces matieres*" (De Tracy 1801, p. 354).

At the end of his work, Destutt de Tracy states that, until the theory of the *Idéologie* is understood and accepted by the public, its practice must be abandoned to a kind of empiricism, "*qui au reste la dirige souvent fort bien*" (De Tracy 1801, p. 354). This sentence is significant since it highlights Destutt de Tracy's focus on the observation of factual reality where theoretical arrangement takes a back seat. The study of *Idéologie* "*consiste tout entiere en observations, et n'a rien de plus mistérieux, ni de plus nébouleux que les autres parties de l'histoire naturelle*" (De Tracy 1801, p. 355). Here

Destutt approaches a total empiricism, whereby simple observations, expressed in appropriate language, give an account of the process of thought, without the need for any theory. For this reason, he concludes, the *Idéologie* is the most effective antidote to avoid metaphysics.

Political economy is part of the *Idéologie*, and the *Traité d'économie politique*, published in 1823, constitutes the fourth book of the *Éléments d'Idéologie*. It is from the *idées*, in fact, that needs and the means to satisfy them arise. Political economy searches for "*la meilleure manière d'employer toutes nos facultés physiques et intellectuelles, à la satisfaction de nos divers besoins*" (De Tracy 1823, pp. I-II). As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the fundamental categories of economics are innate: from our faculty of will and sentiment, the ideas "*de propriété, de richesse, de liberté, de droit et de devoirs, et quelques autres*" are born in us (De Tracy 1823, pp. II-III).

What we have just seen allows us to make some reflections on our author's conception of political economy. From individual sensations needs are felt, and that particular sensation which is the will pushes the individual to act in order to satisfy them. The best use of individual faculties for such purposes is the object of political economy. From the *idées*, precisely from will and feeling, spring the principles of the market economy and associated life. According to Destutt de Tracy, therefore, the ideas of property and wealth arise together with the idea of freedom and the rights and duties of man, and all have a deep root in the psychology of the individual. The social dimension of economic categories, and the different definitions they have had in different historical and geographical contexts, intervene in his analysis only in a second stage. Individual own personality and property originate simultaneously; the first being the result of the *seule sensibilité*, the second, its complement, the result of the *volonté* (De Tracy 1823, p. 332). It is a necessary birth, because the individual, who has the idea of "self", cannot but accompany it with the idea of property of all his faculties and their effects. From this natural and necessary disposition, the ideas of conventional and artificial property are developed: this is at the basis of economics and morality, which for him are one and the same science. We observe that it seems that for Destutt de Tracy it is economics itself that is the foundation of morality, since the categories of economics arise immediately from the elementary ideas of individuals.

The original link that Destutt de Tracy establishes between *les idées*, the economic activity and the categories to interpret it, leads to a particular vision of value and labour (De Tracy 1823, pp. 33-41 and 334-335). Goods have a value equal to the sacrifice they cost to the producer, i.e. a “real” cost. But goods also have the value of the “advantages” they bring to those who buy them⁶⁰. Thus, labour, like any other good, has two values. The first is «*la somme des objets nécessaires à la satisfaction des besoins qui naissent inévitablement dans l'être animé pendant que son travail s'opère*», and corresponds to the sacrifice that the act of working costs to the subject, who consumes his energies that he has to replenish; it is a natural and necessary value, albeit of a variable amount. The second is «*la masse d'utilité résultante de ce travail*» (De Tracy 1823, p. 36, 334), and corresponds to the value of the product of labour, which is uncertain and variable, because it depends on the evolution of the market of the goods produced. Recognising the difficulty of the calculation of this double task, Destutt de Tracy states that these issues could draw on consideration from infinitesimal calculus, but he does not explain in what way, nor to what kind of deepening this could lead⁶¹.

When dealing with production, Destutt de Tracy manifests a vision close to the thought of Jean-Baptiste Say, since his fourth edition of the *Traité d'économie politique* appeared in 1819 with the editor *Crapelet-Deterville* and with *Charles Robert Prinsep* who conducted the first English translation, published in 1821. Our author expresses opinions widespread and accepted in France, and far from Ricardo's theory that was still prevailing in Anglo-Saxon culture, as if to signify the coexistence of two different traditions of economic thought, the British and the continental⁶².

Immediately after Ricardo's death (1823), classical theories of value and distribution, which had found one of its first formulation in Adam Smith's *Wealth of*

⁶⁰ As is well known, an antecedent of Destutt de Tracy's position could be found in Galiani, who identifies the three sources of the value of goods as "utility", "rarity" and "toil", assigning the latter a prominent role. See (Galiani 1963 [1751], pp. 39-47).

⁶¹ «[P]uisque les variations de notre nature sensible sont renfermées dans certaines limites, nous pouvons toujours y appliquer les considérations tirées de la théorie des limites des nombres. Mais cette observation doit nous apprendre combien le calcul de toutes les quantités morales et économiques est délicat et savant, combien il exige de ménagement, et combien il est imprudent de vouloir y appliquer indiscrètement l'échelle rigoureuse des nombres» (De Tracy 1823, p. 41). See, also, Terrel (2020).

⁶² For the relationship between de Tracy and Ricardo see Ricardo (1962 vol. IX, p. 248): letter to Malthus, 16 December 1822.

Nations which Ricardo had taken up and deepened, saw a rapid process of abandonment. This was due to the difficulties connected to the labour theory of value and to a conflicting vision of the dynamics of the social actors in the society; new theories started to develop to avoid those analytical difficulties which pretend also to present a harmonious picture of social relations.

J.B. Say was one of the protagonists of the departure from the classical approach and he proposed a “new” framework for the theories of value and distribution, albeit some “classical” ideas remain in them.

In the theory of demand, Say introduces the inverse relationship between the price and the quantity demanded of a commodity, very close to the description of the neoclassical demand curve (in the development of his arguments, however, some classical roots are represented by the principle of “effective demand”), and the idea that changes in the quantity demanded cause changes in the cost of production and therefore of the price. This idea is linked to Say's negation of the distinction between natural price and market price, so price variations induced by demand variations can never be considered as effects produced by accidental causes. Within this framework Say highlights the importance of the entrepreneur and he accentuate the role of “utility” and “rarity” as the determinants of value to explain the behaviour of the agents: all of this led him to the elaboration of the Say's law.

Destutt de Tracy appears fully rooted in this vision and he defines production as the action of giving things a utility that they did not have before; consequently, all the work of *manufacturiers et commerçans*, which produces utility, is productive. The sterile class, therefore, is that formed by the idle (De Tracy 1823, p. 339).

The true value of the commodity from the point of view of the formation of wealth is precisely the measure of its utility, which in turn is given by the price we are willing to pay for it⁶³. The best source of wealth for a nation, as well as for an individual, is therefore to engage in the best paid work. Progress means that a commodity becomes cheaper when it is produced more easily, being equal the consumers' desire. Destutt de Tracy continues describing several facts observable in the market economy, without however reconstructing the social relations underlying the phenomenon of value: in fact, labour is considered as a sacrifice, penury, or real cost faced by the

⁶³ This idea is the same as that which, in modern microeconomics, leads to the equilibrium price being identified as the “social marginal benefit” provided by a commodity.

individual, while the value of goods, whose relation to labour he also affirmed, is equal to the market price expressing the utility given by each commodity to consumers. As we have seen, he is aware of the entirely theoretical difficulty of reconciling the two aspects of the value of labour, and seems to think that a more refined analytical tool, such as the theory of limits, i.e. the infinitesimal calculus, would help to overcome it.

We can infer that, according to him, the rational individual should push his productive activity to the point where a further unit of labour has a greater "penury" than the utility he obtains from a further unit of the good he is producing: that is, the individual should equal effort and result at the margin, reaching a situation of equilibrium. In this case, he would consume an amount of "personal faculties" of which he is the owner, obtaining in return a certain amount of goods of equal value. If we transpose this description of the behaviour of the isolated individual to the case of wage labour, we arrive at the assertion that, in equilibrium, each worker receives a remuneration which is equal both to the value of his product and to the value of his effort. This principle is explicitly expressed in the *Cours*, last Say's important work:

«Quand il s'est agi d'évaluer la portion de la richesse produite, due à chaque producteur, j'ai cru pouvoir le faire d'après le profit que chacun d'eux réussit à se faire payer sur la valeur produite; car il est à presumer que l'importance de son concours est proportionnée aux frais que l'on consent à faire pour se le procurer. Telle est (...) la doctrine professée dans le cours de cette ouvrage» (Say 1852, p. 108).

This way of determining the wage raises many problems, such as the quantification of the "real cost" borne by the worker and the actual possibility of selling the goods at the equilibrium price, not to mention the lack of any reference to society and history. Moreover, although the above representation appears to be entirely consequential to the analysis he conducts, it is here no more than a rational reconstruction provided by us with the limited basis in the text we have seen. However, the tension emerges between the absolute individualism of the *Idéologue's* analysis and his confused awareness of the limits of such a method, which can be glimpsed in his proposed reflections on the best ways to increase a nation's wealth and on the causes and consequences of progress.

To analyse income distribution, our author starts from the observation that «[l]a propriété et l'inégalité sont des conditions invincibles de notre nature» (De Tracy 1823, p. 346). Property also invests the working capacities of each person, in line with the definition he gives of it by investigating its origin from our *idées*. It follows from this assumption that there are no non-proprietors: all people, divided by many conflicting interests that are difficult to clarify, are nevertheless united by the fact that they are, without exclusion, *propriétaires* and *consommateurs*, and therefore have an interest in property being protected and in production costs being reduced (De Tracy 1823, p. 183). Destutt de Tracy then presents a concise description of the growth and progress of nations, with the resumption of the "four-stage theory" along Smithian and Malthusian lines, going from the expansion of agriculture to that of manufacturing and trade: processes that bring with them prosperity, but which are always undermined by excessive population growth. In this he sees a further confirmation of the correctness of his naturalistic approach: «[t]out événement inévitable a sa cause dans la nature» (De Tracy 1823, p. 187).

The treatment of the convergence or opposition of interests and inequality is of great interest, although it shows some aporias. He affirms in fact the general opposition of interests and inequality *en moyens*, but immediately afterwards adds that, since everyone has common interests as owners and consumers, there are no classes that are constantly fighting, and this is particularly true for the «*deux grandes classes, les salariés et ceux qui les emploient*» (De Tracy 1823, p. 348). Actually, de Tracy places within the treatment of the progress and decline of nations some observations on the fluctuations of wages, linking them to the growth or contraction of the major sectors of the economy; but this, in his theoretical approach, is to be traced back to the nature of things (exhaustion of available land, more or less favourable conditions for trade, demographic trends). Starting from the idea that what is *réellement utile* to the lower class, is useful to society as a whole, he reiterates that the first interest is the protection of property, followed by a sufficient wage, also for the benefit of society, because «[i]l importe aussi à la société que le pauvre ne soit pas trop malheureux» (De Tracy 1823, p. 349).

A subterranean fracture appears here that runs through Destutt de Tracy's entire epistemological approach: it is the unresolved separation between, on the one hand, what he sees as a "state of nature": in particular, on the one hand, the biological

inequality between the "owned" endowments and faculties of each individual and his instinctive search for resources that are also brought into the sphere of individual property; and, on the other hand, the awareness that the *idées* of associated individuals give rise to the organisation of the economy and society, where inequality is manifested.

Inequality is therefore seen as a natural fact, which nevertheless expresses itself in the institutional and historical dimension. The extent to which this dimension is also the cause, as well as the consequence, of social organisation, seems to be a question that Destutt de Tracy does not consider, even though Smith, in well-known pages of *Wealth of Nations*, had already written penetrating words on the subject, which go in the opposite direction to the *Idéologue's* position⁶⁴.

The aforementioned fracture appears to be recomposed, at least superficially, in the pages in which he observes that any inequality of power or wealth is an injustice; the aim of modern society is to reduce the inequality of power, but, at the same time, the inequality of wealth tends to grow. It is therefore necessary to undertake policies to reduce it as well, through «*moyens doux et jamais violens*» (De Tracy 1823, p. 225) and protecting property. Destutt de Tracy rightly observes that perhaps the greatest evil of wealth inequality is that it resurrects the imbalance in social power, together with the fact that great misery and great fortunes often coexist in *oisifs* employing unproductive workers, with the overall final result being the impoverishment of the nation as a whole. Society should therefore aim at increasing its wealth avoiding serious inequalities. This task is more or less difficult according to historical

⁶⁴ «[T]he very different genius which appears to distinguish men of different professions, when grown up to maturity, is not upon many occasions so much the cause, as the effect of the division of labour» (Smith 1981 [1776], p. 23).

Human inequality is a debate that seems destined to have no end: for example, in the last twenty years of the last century, we remember the controversial volume by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray (Herrnstein, Murray 1994). Herrnstein and Charles Murray (Herrnstein, Murray 1994), focused on the ineliminable biological differences between individuals and containing the alleged demonstration of the heritability of 60% of the IQ, which would explain the social inferiority of African-Americans in the USA; to which Stephen J. Gould and Noam Chomsky R. J. responded, among others (Chomsky 1995, Gould 1996). In the same years, a study by Jared Diamond (Diamond 1997) investigated inequality from an epistemological perspective opposite to that of the *Idéologue*, starting from the examination of social structures with the tools of archaeology, anthropology, geography, economic history and other disciplines, and showing how inter-individual differences should rather be seen as different possibilities of adaptation to different material circumstances and ways of life, in turn influenced by the circumstances themselves.

circumstances, the development of institutions and culture, geographical situations and geopolitical balances (De Tracy 1823, pp. 226-229). Remarkably, the author's analysis here opens up to the historical-evolutionary perspective, distancing itself from the accentuated naturalism and individualism we have encountered up to now⁶⁵. It is precisely the malfunctioning of institutions that can lead to the decadence and dissolution of society:

«cette inégal répartition [of wealth], ramenant l'inégalité de pouvoir, que la société avait commencé par contenir et était destinée à détruire, produit son affaiblissement et quelquefois sa dissolution totale» (De Tracy 1823, p. 229).

As Destutt notes, using an example taken from the history of ancient Rome, men always and everywhere pursue their own interests, but it is the state of society that is different. Destutt de Tracy emphatically rejects the vague language and vision that anthropomorphise nations with expressions such as *dégénération* and *amollissement*: in the latter case, for example, the population of the country will almost certainly be distributed among no more than a hundred people «gâté[s] par l'habitude du pouvoir et la facilité des jouissances» and the rest prey to oppression and misery (De Tracy 1823, p. 231). From this point of view, we can still stress how the interest of the poor is identified with the interest of society. Luxury, therefore, can only be condemned by the author, who identifies it as unproductive consumption on the part of the income-earning class, which destroys and not builds. The same applies to public spending, which must therefore be reduced to a minimum and financed by tax revenues *modérés, variés, and anciens* (De Tracy 1823, p. 232, 353).

However, the theoretical conundrum remains unresolved as to how, and why, a society composed of subjects structurally more or less suited to “winning” or “losing” in the competition of the market and politics can and should reduce inequalities. A few years earlier, in 1819, Saint-Simon stated that, in the cooperation that should reign in the *société industrielle*, there should be no inequality other than the one which derives from the working capacity and the investment made, and that it would be absurd, ridiculous and disastrous to try to remove it (Saint Simon 1965 [1819], pp. 112-113)⁶⁶. Thus, for Saint-Simon, the fair and acceptable inequality is that sanctioned

⁶⁵ It has been observed that Say and Destutt de Tracy's scientific project tends to minimise the role of history in the constitution of the social sciences. (Steiner 1990a). See, also, Yuva (2020).

⁶⁶ See, also, Soliani (2009).

by the market. Other forms of inequality, which arise from the organisation of the political-administrative body and of the Court, are instead to be suppressed, because they are incompatible with the *société industrielle*, which will be founded on the principles of economic efficiency and universal fraternity of the *Nouveau Christianisme*, with a better moral and physical life. Destutt de Tracy, on the other hand, seems to fear inequality because of the imbalance of power it causes, even if the cause of it is in the nature of things. So, it is right to limit it, of course with *doux et jamais violens* means, because it could disturb the social order, endangering the right to property and making everyone poorer and unhappier. It is therefore necessary to reduce the negative effects of the property rights to ensure its social acceptance: «[i]l importe aussi à la société que le pauvre ne soit pas trop malheureux» (De Tracy 1823, p. 349).

4. Concluding remarks.

The *idéologue* Antoine Destutt de Tracy was a multifaceted figure between the Enlightenment and the Restoration period, heir to *Empiricism* and *Sensism*. His efforts to scientifically analyse the thought and behaviour of man and society created a philosophical current that fought for a secular culture oriented towards the well-being of society. As we briefly noted in the first part, this aspect of his work has attracted interest in the cultural debate from then until now. Less attention has been paid to his economic analysis, apart from the authoritative contributions we have quoted, so much so that Schumpeter's *History of Economic Analysis*, as we have seen, devotes a footnote to him, in which it stresses his lack of originality, while, to quote a recent text, *Nouvelle histoire de la pensée économique* (Béraud and Faccarello 1993) does not mention him at all. However, an interesting aspect of his thought, which we have tried to highlight, is the attempt to weld economic reflection with a historical vision that moves away from the psychological individualism of the *Éléments*. His observations on inequality, its causes and consequences seem to us to be the fruitful result of the intersection between an economic theory that, in itself, presents no particular points of interest, and the passionate attempt to found a system of moral philosophy for a renewed society. A significant "almost" identity is that between the date of the *Projet d'Éléments d'Idéologie* (1801) and the date of *Olbie* (1800), Jean-Baptiste Say's utopian text, which bore the subtitle *Essai sur les moyens d'améliorer le*

moeurs d'une nation; the first morality book for the inhabitants of *Olbie* was a good *Traité d'Economie politique*. Not a mere coincidence.

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ANALYTICAL MARXISM AND ITS WIDE (OR NARROW?) LEGACY⁶⁷

In 1978 Cohen's book *Karl Marx's Theory of History* gave rise to the Anglo-Saxon movement of Analytical Marxism and the foundation of the *September Group*, intended to interpret Marx according to what they defined the standard scientific criteria of the XX century; namely, analytical philosophy. After 20 years, the Group ended its task, concluding that Marxist economic theory is based on incorrect assumptions and makes no sense. However, something of Marx has remained in the thought of these scholars. The aim of the present paper is to discuss the two main directions taken after the dismissal of the *Group*.

The first legacy of analytical Marxism is centred only on some normative aspects relating to moral issues and distributive justice, while the second one has its focus only on some empirical studies on class analysis. As a result, we illustrate how almost no explanatory power remains of both streams of Analytical Marxism and we investigate the reasons for their narrow legacies. We argue how they have neglected the importance of the economic theory and historical analysis, which, on the contrary, are the basis of Marxian analysis and epistemology. Recalling to his *Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, a major concern of Marx is the creation of tools to analyse the "contradictions of material life", trying to link the analytical and abstract part of the theories with the concrete as a totality comprising many determinations and relations. We show how *Analytical Marxism* ends up eliminating the most original elements of Marx's thought and tradition, wiping out its heuristic power, and reducing it to an anodyne description of societies in which there are groups with different interests, which the economic or political market does not always manage to compose.

Keywords: Marx, Rational choice theory, Empiricisms, Analytical Philosophy.

⁶⁷ This paper is unpublished.

1. Introduction

In 1978, Cohen's book *Karl Marx's Theory of History* (Cohen 1978) gave rise to the Anglo-Saxon movement of *Analytical Marxism* (since now *AM*) and the foundation of the *September Group*⁶⁸ intended to bring together various scholars to interpret Marx according to what they defined as the standard scientific criteria of the XX century, namely analytical philosophy.

Hardly one can attribute a unique meaning to analytical philosophy when referring to *AM*. For this purpose, Cohen (Cohen 2000) argues that all *AM* can be defined both in a broad sense and in a narrow one. The broad sense refers to the historical period in which *Analytical Marxism* is born; in fact, when different interpretations rose in continental Europe in the 70s and 80s⁶⁹, the Anglo-Saxon Marxism was still weak and *AM* had the purpose to reinforce it. In order to accomplish this task, *AM* opposes "western" dialectical reasoning⁷⁰ for two reasons: firstly, it is considered as a lazy and approximate way of thinking (Roemer 1989); secondly, dialectical reasoning necessarily leads to methodological holism and, as a result, an ontological independence is given to collective subjects; but this would correspond to a teleological reasoning which must be discarded⁷¹. Then, for example, Cohen's book has precisely the aim to interpret historical materialism adopting a different method, namely *functional explanations*.

AM, recognizing how the social context has changed with respect to Marx's period, rejects the identification of Marxism with proletarian philosophy, since proletarians cannot be considered as the main actors of history leading to social changes and, eventually, to socialism, and pretends to reconstruct Marxism on different basis (Levine 2003). This leads to the discussion of the interpretation of *AM* in the narrow sense, as mentioned above.

⁶⁸ Between the members of the group we mention: Pranab Bardhan (Berkeley), Samuel Bowles (Amherst), Robert Brenner (Los Angeles), G. A. Cohen (Oxford), Joshua Cohen (Cambridge, Massachusetts), Philippe van Parijs (Louvain-la Neuve), John Roemer (Yale), Hillel Steiner (Manchester), Robert Van der Veen (Amsterdam), and Erik Wright (Madison). The *Group* was dismissed after more or less 20 years arguing that Marxist economic theory made no sense and based on incorrect assumptions. We will come back to this point in the next paragraphs.

⁶⁹ For a critical and constructive synthesis Perry (2021).

⁷⁰ In response of *AM* critique of dialectical reasoning the Pittsburgh School tries to adopt an analytical dialectical reasoning. See, for example, Furner (2019) and Evans (2021).

⁷¹ See Callinicos (2015; pp. 191- 210).

Wright (1989, pp. 38-9) proposes the following definition of the four main characteristic of *AM*:

1. A commitment to *conventional scientific norms* in the elaboration of theory and the conduct of research.
2. An emphasis on the importance of *systematic conceptualisation*.
3. A concern with a relatively *fine-grained specification* of the steps in the theoretical arguments linking concepts.
4. The importance accorded to the *intentional action of individuals*.

This classification is very general and does not permit a unique interpretation. In the literature, different works aimed to provide a more detailed analysis of these four features of *AM*⁷², but, for the purpose of this paper, the previous definition is useful to start to identify the two main schools of *AM* which were the most influential so to discuss which can be their legacies. Summarising, the relevant aspects that differentiate the two schools of *AM* regard the role of micro-foundations in the social sciences. The first current of thought retains micro-foundations as an essential aspect for a proper theory and has been labelled *Rational Choice Marxism* (since now *RCM*), whose most prominent exponents are Jon Elster, John Roemer and Adam Przeworski. On the contrary, according to the second school, micro-foundations are helpful to order theoretically the categories used in the macro-explanations; but not all the phenomena are really micro-founded. We call this second group of thinkers (between others, Gerald A. Cohen, Erik Olin Wright and Andrew Levine) *Clinical Marxism* (since now *CM*) because this current of thought starts with Cohen, but Levine and Wright made some revision of his work in order to interpret historical materialism on more solid basis.

The paper is structured as follows: paragraph 2 deals with *RCM* and on how its legacy is centred on some normative aspect relating to moral issues and distributive justice, paragraph 3 deals with *CM*, discussing how its legacy is centred only on some empirical studies on class analysis, and paragraph 4 concludes arguing that the very limited legacy of both schools is due to their neglecting of the importance of the economic theory, to their ambiguous interpretation of the meaning of historical analysis and to a misleading interpretation of Marxian economic theory if interpreted through the lens of classical political economy.

⁷² See for an extensive review of the literature Veneziani (2008; 2010).

2. Rational individuals and Marx's dismissal.

To interpret *RCM*, we can adopt point 2 and 3 of the definition of *AM* previously mentioned and substitute point 1 and 4 respectively with:

1.1 The use of state of the arts methods of analytical philosophy and positivist social science (Roemer 1986, 3-4).

4.1 Methodological individualism and rational choice theory⁷³.

Indeed, according to *RCM* methodological individualism and micro-foundations are the best explanatory strategy in the social sciences and the tools provided by neoclassical economics are the best mean to carry it out. Many critics rejected *RCM* especially for its reductionist conception of individual agency, and some of them did it on an a-priori methodological ground (Sayers 1989; Bronner 1990). We suggest that point 1 and 4 should be also evaluated per se, asking if they can rightly be the proper explanatory strategy in the social sciences. Later in the paragraph, we will try to show that *RCM* is not able to provide any decisive support both for it and for a better understanding of Marx's thought.

In his well-known book *Making Sense of Marx* (1985, p.5), Elster makes a critique of Marx on his perspective of the dynamics of historical phenomena in tune with the dynamics of the productive forces of capitalism. Then, he argues that in Marx's opinion capitalism would disappear when its inherently limited way of developing the productive forces is no longer required for their further progress (Elster 1985, p. 158). Capitalism will not naturally collapse, but naturally creates the condition for its own collapse. The cornerstone of this explanation is the labour theory of value, whose conclusions were exasperated by Marx's elusive and rhetorical character (Elster 1985, p. 239). The author remarks that the labour theory of value cannot be the instrument to carry out the analysis, since in the social science the specification of a micro-mechanism is a necessary step for the credibility of a macro law. Neoclassical formalization, conducted along the lines of methodological individualism and micro-foundations, is the language to be used⁷⁴. Moreover, methodological individualism

⁷³ See Veneziani (2017).

⁷⁴ According to Roemer (1988, p. 7) Marxism must live without Marx, and in this sense: «I will rephrase the challenge in a language that I hope is comfortable to contemporary students of these questions, so that they will not have to battle with the linguistic and logical oddities of Marxist discourse. It is unfortunate, I think, that these oddities are preserved in much modern Marxist

and micro-foundations are supposed to successfully reduce the time span between *explanans* and *explanandum* - between cause and effect - as much as possible, so to avoid spurious explanations; the argument raised by Elster ultimately states the belief in the so-called principle of *sufficient reason*, i.e. for each cause there must be necessarily one effect and *viceversa*. At this point we must put aside for a while Elster since, just from an economic perspective, all he has to say is based on the pivotal works of Roemer (Elster 1985; p. 119).

Roemer's approach tries to revise Marx's economic system in terms of general equilibrium theory along the lines of Walras, Von Neumann and, quite surprisingly, Sraffa's price equations⁷⁵. His interpretation has the purpose to mix the following ideas:

1. Marxian and Sraffian analyses avoid the concept of neoclassical general equilibrium and consider instead a different solution concept which Roemer interprets in terms of *reproducibility* of the economic system; the latter is so opposed to the neoclassical concept of *scarcity*.

2. In neoclassical models, workers consume bundles of goods that they choose, while in Marxian theory there is assumed to be a subsistence bundle of goods for workers, so to establish a materialist approach, although, we can say, a very restrictive one.

3. In Marxian (and classical) theory, competition among capitalists leads to an "equilibrium" characterized by equal profit rates in all sectors, while in neoclassical models' firms maximize profits.

By point 1 Roemer expresses the idea that stocks at the beginning of period $t+1$ must always exceed stocks at period t , generating a surplus. Formally, if the vector of produced commodity is ω , the reproducibility condition is represented by the following condition:

$$\omega - [Ax + (Lx)b] + x \geq \omega$$

where x is the aggregate vector of activity levels necessary for the feasibility of the production process and $[Ax + (Lx)b]$ is the production function with fixed technological endowment A and no fixed capital, where L represents the factor of

debate, because they unnecessarily dissuade those who do not already share the ideas from becoming acquainted with them».

⁷⁵ Roemer (1981, p. 14) draws inspiration by Morishima (1973). See, about Morishima's economic theory, Kurz and Salvadori (1992).

production labour and where b is a constant useful for the formalization of point 2. Then, Roemer proves that the only possible equilibrium price vector is the so-called *equal-profit-rate* price vector (*EPR*), so formalizing point 3⁷⁶.

The goal that Roemer wants to achieve with his demonstration is the sole discussion of the following point: is the falling rate of profit a necessary tendency of the capitalist system? According to the equilibrium solution provided the answer is no. This is in line with Okishio's theorem (Okishio 1961) according to which capitalist technical innovation will always be able to produce a rising rate of profit. Yet, Roemer observes that, if one takes fixed capital into account, then the rate of profit might be shown to fall but, in Chapter 5 (Roemer 1981), he treats fixed capital to demonstrate how Okishio's theorem can be successfully generalized. Drawing inspiration from Von Neumann production models it is possible, in fact, to deal with fixed capital⁷⁷; more specifically Roemer analyses fixed capital within a joint-product framework with n commodities and m processes, each of which uses some inputs and labour and produces some outputs⁷⁸. Roemer, firstly shows the existence of the equilibrium price vector and profit rate for the reproducibility of the system, and then he shows how with a viable cost-reducing innovation, i.e., any process currently in operation at existing prices becomes more profitable at time $t+1$, the profit rate can never fall.

It must be noted that in the models provided Roemer explicitly avoids the discussion about the unicity and stability of the equilibrium, which on the contrary is a fundamental part for the validity of a general theory. When the value specification of the capital endowment is represented by a vector of physically heterogeneous capital goods in the general equilibrium equations, the equilibrium is deprived of the sufficient persistence necessary for it to be approached by adjustment processes, and is therefore unable to have the role traditionally assigned to equilibria: to be a centre of gravitation of actually observed variables. In this way, general equilibrium theory cannot be argued to have any explanatory-predictive role (Garegnani 1960).

Still, thanks to Roemer's mathematical formalization, *RCM* reaches its final verdict: Marx's economic ideas can be dismissed. We also remark that Roemer himself does

⁷⁶ The solution provided by Roemer refers firstly to a linear model, see Roemer (1981; Chapter II-IV), then he tries to generalize the solutions in a convex environment. See, also, Roemer (1980).

⁷⁷ See on this point Kurz and Salvadori (1993).

⁷⁸ See, on this point, Pasinetti (1980).

not completely believe in the explanatory power of general equilibrium theories⁷⁹, moreover Marx's economic theory does not have its focus only on the tendency of the profit rate and this is something that *RCM* scholars have always ignored⁸⁰; however, with the addition of *RCM*'s explanation about exploitation Marx's dismissal becomes truly effective.

The starting point for a Marxian theory of exploitation is the *Morishima's Fundamental Marxian Theorem* (Roemer 1982) according to which the exploitation of laborers by capitalists is a necessary and sufficient result of the existence of a price-wage set yielding positive profits, in other words exploitation is synonymous with positive profits. However, *RCM*'s study of exploitations does not depend on the labour theory of value but is based on the initial endowments of property relationships with an exclusive concern on asset inequalities. The main consequence is that if exploitation exists in capitalism, it may exist in socialism as well; as a result, since exploitation may always occur, socialism is not necessarily a better system than capitalism (Roemer 1980; p. 524)⁸¹.

In general, we can say that these results obtained by *RCM*, i.e. the rate of profit may always increase so that capitalism doesn't automatically end, and exploitation is not a peculiar manifestation of the dynamics of capitalism, Marx's economic ideas are dismissed and the only Marxian's legacy provided by *RCM* is the discussion on how effective changes to institution can only be the result of a right behavioural *ethos* based on different principles than capitalism's self-interest⁸². In this regard, *RCM* are influenced by the writing of the young Karl Marx interpreted as a writer who has often condemned capitalism on a moral ground. Thus, *RCM* scholars share the idea that self-interest cannot generate optimal results in the social world thanks to the self-regulation of the market; they are eager to adopt different principles (namely: reciprocity, cooperation, altruism, solidarity) to strengthen policies in favour of equal

⁷⁹ «The equilibrium method will prevent one from seeing the most important aspects of the Marxian theory of capital. Knowing no other method, I use the equilibrium method, with the vague thought that, when rereading these pages in twenty years, its obsolescence as a modelling tool for Marxian theory may be clear» (Roemer 1981, p. 10).

⁸⁰ Roemer acknowledges the importance of the Marxian theory of crises, but he has soon abandoned any project for its construction. See Roemer (1992).

⁸¹ See, again, Roemer (1982; 1986). For a critical comment Tarrit (2006) and Vrousalis (2021).

⁸² For example, Elster (1989; p. 115) states: «I do not believe that self-interest provides the full explanation for adherence to norms. There must be some further explanation, X, of why norms exist».

income distribution for an equality of opportunity and a just society. With respect to these points, RCM develops in two similar directions but with some differences.

Elster and Przeworski are more interested in the collective action and its possible failures. According to their vision, rational choice theory requires that preferences are weakly ordered (i.e., complete and transitive); beliefs are updated efficiently (that is, are consistent with Bayes's Rule) and knowledge satisfies logical omniscience (i.e. full awareness of all logical implications of all statements that are held true)⁸³; most of the time these conditions are not satisfied. Indeed, Przeworski (1985) maintains that methodological individualism and rational choice theory within a game theoretical framework, still remain the best tools to carry out the analyses in the social sciences so to build schemes, norms and implementations for a just society from an income perspective (Przeworski 1989; 2021). Elster, instead, rejects the idea that men can choose their own character (Elster 2000; 2016), and discusses a broad concept of rationality, beliefs, biases and cognitive errors: he aims to providing micro-foundations for the Marxist theory of ideologies (Elster 2016; p. 143). His main purpose is to stress the psychological mechanisms by which ideological beliefs are formed and entrenched and he states that Marxist theory will be able to get out its stagnant state if, and only if, it adopts methodological individualism.

Roemer examines collective action and its organisation in order to assess the conditions for the establishment of socialism. In *Socialism Revised* (Roemer 2017; p. 265) he affirms:

[W]ith capitalism we have a precise positive definition in terms of property relations and markets, with a largely ex post ethical justification, while with socialism we have primarily an ethical justification with no consensus upon the economic mechanism. Some readers may hope that I will here outline what that socialist economic mechanism should be. Unfortunately, I cannot: I think the discovery of socialism's economic mechanism will come only through experimentation. But that experimentation must be guided by the right ethical conception.

This is significant; Roemer looks at socialism as an ethical phenomenon and, by adopting a game-theoretical framework, he tries to formalize the so-called Kantian

⁸³ See for an extensive summary Landa (2006; p. 436).

optimization⁸⁴ to trace its feasibility within a market system, i.e. a system that works thanks to the action of self-interest (Roemer 2019)⁸⁵; furthermore, he reorients his version of socialism away from the Marxist formulation of the elimination of exploitation to a modern formulation of the elimination of distributive injustice, along the lines traced by Rawls (Roemer 2017; p. 304).

We remark that *RCM* focuses on ethical principles and studies the ideal “just society” at a highly abstract level; this is due to the fact that *RCM* adoption of the neoclassical tool has only led to the dismissal of Marx’s economic ideas, and in virtue of their subsequent focus on the ability of ethical principles to lead to social changes, they have abandoned any reference to it⁸⁶. Indeed, neoclassical economic theory, which assume preferences as given and utility maximisers individual, cannot provide any useful help to describe collective action and, so, *RCM* scholars have shifted all their arguments on a different theoretical level. *RCM* analyses are then founded on the psychology of a generical individual, detached from any historical contextualisation and the “just society” is not identified with a particular model of society or specific institution. In this way, *RCM* interest in stressing the importance of micro-foundations in order to highlight the role of human beings’ actions in the real world leaves unresolved the problem to identify which are the material instruments in the specific historical context thanks to which the right socialist *ethos* can be realized.

3. Marx Clinical Revision.

CM analytical approach has been defined as a revision of Cohen’s *functional explanation* of Marx’s historical materialism. Before discussing this theoretical proposal, however, we briefly would like to emphasize how *CM* opposes *RCM* for the results it has reached. This is the case of Cohen (1988) and Levine (2003) who

⁸⁴ With Kantian optimization Roemer intends a behavioural rule according to which each agent acts choosing the action that he thinks everyone should do.

⁸⁵ On the same line, for instance, Corneo (2017), that applies the same line of thought in order to understand the possible obsolescence of capitalism.

⁸⁶ A partial confirmation of our interpretation can be found in the previous quote when Roemer argues that he cannot outline any socialist economic mechanism; we can argue that this is inevitable and could not be otherwise, since *RCM* focus on ethical principles is always made without any reference to the economic theory. See, also, Elster (2016).

firmly contrast RCM idea that the only way to save Marxism is to concoct out of Marx's normative view⁸⁷. They argue that this idea is only due to RCM failure in its original purpose of reconstructing Marxism on a different theoretical level and, so, they were forced to draw their unavoidable conclusion: that analytical Marxism, despite itself, has brought Marxism itself to its end (Levine 2003; p. 139)⁸⁸. The reason of this failure lies in the fact that the alleged ontological reducibility of all social actions at the micro-individual level does not necessary entail explanatory reducibility. What is explanatory in the social phenomena cannot be specified a priori since micro-foundations are not always feasible⁸⁹.

To support this statement Levine (1986) uses the distinction between *tokens* and *types*; *tokens* are particular instances: for example, a particular strike by a group of workers in a particular factory or an idea in the head of a particular individual. *Types* are characteristics that tokens may have in common. Thus, a particular strike – a *token* event – can be subsumed under a variety of possible *types*: strikes, class struggles, social conflicts, etc. The *type/token* distinction forces two different kind of explanatory projects: the first one seeks to explain why *token* events occur while the second one has to explain the nature of the *types* that fall within its domain. The methodological individualist is committed to the micro-reducibility of both projects; however, in the social sciences while the first one, *type-reductionism*, is possible, the second one is impossible. This is due because of the so-called *supervenient* properties and relations, i.e., when many distributions of properties of individuals can realise the same social *type*⁹⁰. Levine's conclusion is, therefore, that a proper inquiry strategy in the social

⁸⁷ On this point, however, we will see how Cohen has changed his mind.

⁸⁸ It must be specified that Levine never uses the expression *Rational Choice Marxism*; however, since the authors he criticises are precisely those of RCM, we can correctly use interchangeably AM or RCM when referring to his thought.

⁸⁹ On this point, see, also, Veneziani (2007).

⁹⁰ To clarify this point, Levine (Wright, Sober, Levine 2003; p. 63) proposes an example from evolutionary biology; namely the property of "fitness". To every *token* of fitness (i.e. the fitness of a particular organism in a particular environment), there corresponds a particular configuration of physical facts about the organism in question. In each of these instances, the physical facts explain why this particular organism has the degree of fitness it does. There is no reason to believe, he argues, that any single physical property corresponds to the general category "fitness". In all likelihood, fit organisms share no physical properties in virtue of which they are all fit. The only explanatorily relevant property they share is that they are instances of a single (supervenient) *type*. Thus, while a *token* reduction of individual instances of fitness to physical mechanisms is possible, a *type* reduction is not. Fitness is supervenient on its micro-realizations.

domain must be built acknowledging that relations among individuals are explanatory as well as the irreducible properties and relations among aggregate social entities. A social scientist must be both reductionist and anti-reductionist. Thanks to this explanation, CM develops its analytical theoretical apparatus whose starting point, as anticipated before, is Cohen revision of Marx's historical materialism by means of *functional explanation*.

In the book *Karl Marx Theory of History* (Cohen 1978), Cohen does not think that the idea to construct a materialistic philosophy according to *functional explanation* is original because he thinks that *functional explanation* is inherent in Marx (Cohen 2003; p. 46). The author comments the following well-known passage of Marx:

The totality of these relations of production *constitutes* the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which *correspond* definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life *conditions* the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that *determines* their existence, but their social existence that *determines* their consciousness (Marx and Engels CW 29, *Preface to a contribution to the critique of political economy*, 263, *emphasis added*).

All the emphases added in the text are, according to Cohen, examples of *functional explanations*: Marx seems to distinguish firstly two different items (relations of production/economic structure, political superstructure/social consciousness, consciousness/social existence) and then he establishes an explanatory relationship between them. However, Marx did it roughly, because he never mentions the use of *functional explanation* and from an epistemological point of view, he is silent on the meaning of explanation in the social science.

This is the reason for which Cohen thinks that his own analytical foundation for historical materialism is needed (Cohen 1982). He aims to show that human history has a determinate structure, being the framework of the continuous growth of human productive power, and that different forms of society rise and fall according to their ability to enable and promote such growth. Applying *functional explanation* to historical materialism means that specific kind of production relations prevail because they are capable to foster the development of the productive forces and the existing level of the latter always determines which relations of production would

raise their level. In other words: if at time t there are production relations of kind R , that is because different R -type relations are suitable to the development of the forces at t , given the level of their development at t^{91} .

Eventually, the goal pursued is to construct on more solid basis an orthodox materialistic philosophy, according to which there is a linear view of the progress of society, ultimately dictated by individual will and intelligence to improve human existence by the transformation of nature and the advancement of human knowledge.

Cohen's theory has been criticized for its technological determinism⁹²: therefore, he weakened his initial position and began to privilege normative analysis along the line previously discussed of *RCM* (see Cohen 2009). On the other side, Levine, Wright and Sober came into scene with their *Clinical Marxism* (Levine, Wright and Sober 1992).

Levine, Wright and Sober look favourably at the theory of Cohen, and the original way to get rid of his determinism is the following: history must be taken into account. This does not mean assuming that what can be known has an irreducible historical dimension either that through history it is possible to have a progressive knowledge of the real. According to these authors, what is really revolutionary in Marx's thought, similarly with Darwin's theories, is the discover that the nature of the objects described is subjected to continuous process of historical transformation (Levine and Sober 1985; p. 305). More specifically, within a historical materialistic philosophy claims about the leading forces and mechanisms, able to foster processes of changing are made. The leading forces are represented by the development of production relations; however, there is no necessary direction for these social evolutions to follow, but their trajectories are opened to a variety of different outcomes.

What these authors propose is a *weak* variant of orthodox historical materialism (Wright, Sober and Levine 1992). Cohen has provided an explanation of the overall trajectories of historical development by *functionally* linking together concepts such as forces and relations of production; the *weak* variant states that what in Cohen's theoretical view is supposed to be historically necessary is not a sufficient condition for it to happen. Indeed, many aspects of the social life have nothing to do with the connection between forces and relations of productions. These authors are not

⁹¹ See Cohen (1978; Chapter IX) for a detailed analysis of *functional explanation*.

⁹² See Elster (1985; Ch. V). For a detailed retrospective description, see, Tarrit (2019).

interested in the “laws” of motion of history, rather, they try to trace the possible paths that history can follow according to, and shaped by, the conflictual interactions between the classes.

However, it is precisely from this that some problems for *CM* emerge.

Significantly, Levine left the academic career to devote his intellectual activity to journalism and political activism. Indeed, he was convinced that socialism is a phenomenon far different from the one discussed by *RCM* scholars, and, subsequently, by Cohen, and was, also, deeply disappointed with the direction that *AM* was undertaking: namely, its analysis on distributive justice and normative values. Also Sober never published anything else about the epistemology of *CM*. Erik Olin Wright, instead, has left us interesting materials.

Wright’s first writings are centred on the relations between empirical analysis and theoretical social research. In the article *The Value Controversy and Social Research* (Wright 1979) he enters into the discussion about Marx’s labour theory of value and its relationship with Sraffa’s price equations. He argues that, from the sociological point of view the Marxist account is more relevant than the Sraffian; since the former can easily take into account the class struggle, whereas classes play almost no role in the latter. The reason lies in the role mathematics has in Sraffa’s theoretical system: here, Wright maintains, the mathematical calculation has the status of a proof about a process of causation and what is demonstrated in the theoretical model is supposed to be true also in the real world. Then, any redundant step in the calculation is viewed as a redundant step in the calculation of a real world’s causal process (Wright 1979; p.43). Since the heart of Sraffa’s account is the claim that socio-technical conditions of production and the real wages constitute the mechanism which determine real profits, behavioural arguments within Sraffa’s approach can be introduced only by studying the choices and decisions of the actors involved into the determination of the conditions of production and the level of real wages. This approach is reductive, Wright goes on, since there are still too many unresolved issues in the conceptualization of social classes, especially from an empirical point of view.

However, Wright, in his later writings, has a sort of epistemological break; firstly, he interprets Marxism as a comprehensive paradigm that juxtaposes the epistemology and methodology adopted with the practices prevailing in the current social science. Later, he rejects this opposition and tries to revitalize class analysis

through a synthesis of different theoretical apparatuses⁹³. He aims to bringing together three visions of “classes”: class as exploitation, class as opportunity hoarding, and class as individual attributes, respectively *Marxist*, *Weberian*, and *status-attainment* approaches, each dealing with a distinct set of problems (Wright 2009; 2015)⁹⁴. Briefly, the *Marxist* tradition identifies exploitation and domination within the fundamental class division in capitalist society between capitalists and workers, but it forgets the middle classes. So, the *Weberian* approach identifies opportunity hoarding as the central mechanism that differentiates middle-class jobs from the broader working class by creating barriers and restricting the supply of people for desirable employment. The *status-attainment* approach focuses on the process through which individuals are sorted into different positions in different class structures or, on the contrary, marginalized; this approach helps to specify the individual attributes that explain which people have access to those jobs, and who is excluded from stable working-class jobs.

With his reconciliatory attitude, Wright’s main goal is not to construct a comprehensive general theory, according to his vision it is more helpful to focus on specific set of problems, mechanisms and provisional explanatory theories (Wright 2009; p. 115).

Wright’s research agenda has just his focus on empirical cases, and the neglect of the importance of any general theory represents a serious threat for a wide legacy of *CM*.

In the case of economics, for instance, a comprehensive theoretical framework that gives evidence to the main connections, and suggests causal relations, is the necessary prerequisite for the study of capital accumulation, technical progress, economic growth. Naturally, in the chosen area it is possible to focus on a specific aspect: this means that the analysis is carried out on a lower level of abstraction and an organic interconnection with other social sciences can provide a precious contribution.

⁹³ In *Classes* (Wright 2015) he states: « Nearly four decades have passed since this early work on class. In the intervening period I have rethought the underlying logic of my approach to class analysis a number of times. While I continue to work within the Marxist tradition, I no longer feel that the most useful way of thinking about Marxism is as a comprehensive paradigm that is incommensurate with “bourgeois” sociology».

⁹⁴ On this point: Burawoy (2020).

4. Concluding remarks.

We have singled out the following hallmarks of the two schools of AM. The first one, RCM, is centred on normative aspects concerning the problem of collective action due to the psychology of the individuals with the aim to create a just society; the second one, CM, devotes its attention mainly on specific, empirical studies about social classes, and denies the relevance of any possible general theory.

Now we would like to recall some epistemological insight provided by Marx himself in the *Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx and Engels CW 28; pp. 17-48). In this text, a major concern of Marx is the creation of tools to analyse the “contradictions of material life”. He is aware of the existence of many intermediate terms between the most abstract and analytical parts of the analysis and the concrete as a totality comprising many determinations and relations. To address this issue, Marx’s develops his method of *determined* abstractions, in opposition to *generic* abstraction, in order to create a hinge between the analytical part of the theory and its historical dimension⁹⁵. Apparently, both RCM and CM do not take into consideration this side of Marx’s epistemology.

We have seen that neoclassical economics is for RCM the tool thanks to which RCM dismisses Marx’s basic ideas. RCM scholars centre on the tendency of the profit rate and the meaning of exploitation; once they have demonstrated that the first does not necessary fall and the second can exist in all the social system, their attention has switched on the collective action question. To describe the motivation, felling and passions of the individual, they analyse the psychological factors, looking for *generic* features able to describe his behaviour. Then, through deductive procedures they build models to predict the conducts when the state of the world approximates the hypotheses assumed. Within the method of *determined abstraction* Marx proposes to proceed in the opposite direction: the conditions of the models must approximate the conditions of the world. Moreover, through *generic* abstraction, the actions of the individual are described independently of the institutional context in which they are supposed to happen and, as we have anticipated in paragraph 2, this will always leave unresolved the problem to identify the material instrument to apply the results of the models. In addition, RCM has put aside the study of purely theoretical

⁹⁵ See Lange (1970) and, more recently, Ginzburg (2016).

economics and pretends to build piece by piece a «sociology» with the aim to be a science that is not dependent upon value judgments⁹⁶.

In the second case, instead, we have showed how CM's reject of the orthodox version of Cohen's historical materialism led to the neglecting of any importance of general theories and to the focus on specific cases. Again, the method of *determined abstraction* suggests that it is possible the reconstruction of the concrete reality as a synthesis of many particular determinants, organically combined, proceeding from the simple to the complex, and without disregarding the influence of the historical and social circumstances in relation to which they actually manifest. In other words, taking history into account as CM claims to do does not mean that one should only concentrate on specific cases and ignore the construction of general theories; rather, it is possible to venture outside the internal relations of a general theory through a proper integration of inductive and deductive elements that the problems under scrutiny demand. This can provide interesting and fruitful results. *Western Marxism*, criticised for its laziness by the AM, has, instead, emphasised this point, thus being able to represent a far more important legacy of Marx.

Moreover, AM has failed to interpret Marx as a classical economist and classical theory of value and distribution cannot be expressed within a neoclassical framework. This is due to the concept of social surplus, whose characteristics can perhaps be seen in its simplest form in Quesnay's *Tableau Economique*. Quesnay saw that if the social product – which he considered to consist entirely of agricultural commodities – was to reproduce itself year after year without increase or diminution, a part of it had to be put back into production. Besides the necessary replacement of the means of production, this part included the subsistence of the agricultural labourers. What remained of the annual product after deducting this part constituted a “surplus”, or “*produit net*”, of which society could dispose without impairing the conditions of its survival. The fact that the subsistence of workers was considered necessary for reproduction established a direct link between this analysis of reproduction and that of the division of the product among the classes, not individuals, into which society is divided. Thus, Quesnay linked the surplus with the

⁹⁶ We can make here a comparison between RCM and the attempt pursued by Pareto in his *Traité de sociologie générale* (Pareto 1916), in which his sole aim was to research into experimental reality by applying to the social sciences methods which have proved their worth in the fields of physics, chemistry, astronomy, biology and other similar sciences. See (Pietro-Tonelli and Bousquet 1994).

landowners' share of the social product. And when Smith extended Quesnay's notion of surplus by showing that surplus originated from production in general and not from agricultural production alone, profits emerged as a second component of the surplus alongside the rent of land, thus providing the basis for the theory of distribution of the classical economists down to Ricardo and Marx. Within a classical framework, the separate determination of the real wage and social product entails a structuring of the analysis which is radically different from that of the theories which were to become dominant later. The surplus theories have, so to speak, a core which is isolated from the rest of the analysis because the wage, the social product and the technical conditions of production appear there as already determined. It is in that "core" that we find the determination of the shares other than wages as a residual – a determination which will also entail the determination of the relative prices of commodities. There we shall find, more generally, an analysis of the relations between, on the one hand, the real wage, the social product and the technical conditions of production (treated as the independent variables) and, on the other hand, the "shares other than wages", constituting the surplus, and the relative prices (treated as the dependent variables). However, this treatment of real wages, social product and technical conditions of production as independent variables in the "core" in no way entailed a denial of the existence of influences of any single one of these three sets of "independent" variables upon the other two, nor did it imply the denial of influences which prices and the shares other than wages could have upon any of the three 'independent' variables of the core. This treatment only implied a study of these influences which was separate from, and not simultaneous with, the examination of the relationships characteristic of the "core". The interaction between the three independent variables of the "core" was freely admitted by the classical economists and by Marx, so the representation of the entire economic process (production, distribution and accumulation of capital) that Marx develops in his work cannot at all be integrated within a neoclassical framework.

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