

THE RELEVANCE OF CRITICISM

"It is clear that the weapon of criticism cannot replace the criticism of weapons."
K. Marx, Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Political Right. 1843, Introduction¹.



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The question of method is paramount to revolutionary Marxism. This method is not a philosophical device "for armchair theorists," but the very essence of the revolutionary content of the communist program. More than any other principle, it defines Marx's invariable approach, from his so-called "youthful" works to those of his "maturity." This methodological foundation is "*the radical critique of every existing order, radical in the sense that it fears neither its own consequences nor conflicts with the established powers...*". K. Marx, Letter to A. Ruge, 1843; Marx-Engels, Correspondence, Volume I, p. 298, éditions sociales, Paris, 1971.

Critical negativity as a method of the proletariat

The concept of critique finds its most famous justification in the very subtitle of Capital: "Critique of Political Economy." It was present at all stages of Marx's theoretical development and in most of his numerous political and polemical confrontations. He used critique in different ways: as a method of research and exposition, as a means of revealing contradictions, and as an expression of the "struggles and aspirations of our time." These uses of critique allow Marx to differentiate himself from bourgeois science and its ideological abstractions to reveal the reality hidden behind them. This was the case, for example, when he analyzed wages and demonstrated that behind the price of labor power, fair or not, lay exploitation, reification, and alienation. "Critique must bring into the world the principles which the world itself has developed within it" (Marx).

His project is, therefore, both a critique of the categories of bourgeois economics and, "**by its very presentation,**" a ruthless indictment of capitalist society as a whole. To carry out this fundamental critique, we first need a class standpoint, that is, one antagonistic to the entire dominant social order. This is why communist theory must aim to "overthrow all the conditions that make man a base, enslaved, abandoned, and despicable being." But who is responsible for destroying these conditions, for shaking off this servitude? Not "brilliant" or fought individuals, but rather a collective bound together by their identical condition as exploited, by **a class** whose demands are those of all humanity, a class that, while fighting for

¹On the Marxists.org website: <https://www.marxists.org/francais/marx/works/1843/00/km18430000.htm>

its own interests, fights for the interests of all society, a class that fights against everything that enslaves and oppresses it. This **particular class is the proletariat**.

"For a class to be the class of emancipation par excellence, it is necessary, conversely, that another class be openly the class of slavery." K. Marx, Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. 1843.

Therefore, it is by engendering a compact and powerful enemy that the proletariat can, in turn, constitute itself as a class and, therefore, as a party. There is no radical critique, that is, an attack on "the root of things" (Marx), that is not the product of the standpoint of the proletarian class. This class is characterized by being the conscious subject of its own transformative action, of its own negation as a class. Its task is to reveal the fundamental contradictions of social reality by confronting, socially and politically, its historical enemy, the bourgeoisie, and thus overcome itself. Once again: there is no class without class struggle; there is no class struggle without the communist goal of the abolition of classes.

«What makes the Marxist conception of the party (and of classes) original is that it gives priority to the communist element (social and economic) of the future over the political means of the present. Every opportunist party tends to invert this relationship, sacrificing principles to immediate action, putting the interests of the present movement before the general interests of the future.» R. Dangeville, introduction to Marx-Engels, Le parti de classe, I, p. 36, Maspero, Paris, 1973.

To give a first idea of Marx's critical method, it is worth recalling his favorite motto: "Doubt everything"². This starting point orients us towards a "methodological doubt," along the lines proposed by R. Descartes, which involves inquiry, research, and verification, to confirm or invalidate first impressions. Similarly, the Frankfurt School insisted on the need to maintain **critical negativity** in the face of all "ideological curtains": *"The metamorphosis of criticism into affirmation also affects theoretical content, and its truth vanishes into thin air."* M. Horkheimer, Th. W. Adorno, The Dialectic of Reason, p. 15, Gallimard, Paris, 2021. But, more fundamentally, it is to Hegel's dialectic that we must turn, for it was from it that Marx was able to develop his own: the materialist dialectic³.

«In its mystical aspect, dialectics became fashionable in Germany because it seemed to glorify existing things. In its rational aspect, it is a scandal and an abomination to the ruling classes and their doctrinaire ideologues, because in the positive conception of existing things, it simultaneously includes an understanding of their fatal negation, their necessary destruction; because, by grasping the very movement of which every formed form is but a transitory configuration, nothing can impose it; because it is essentially critical and revolutionary. (...)» K. Marx, Capital, in Critical Sociology, pages chosen by M. Rubel, pp. 110–111, Payot, Paris, 2008.

Marx respectfully acknowledges that it was Hegel who discovered the dialectical method:

«For him, the third stage can consist of nothing other than the transformation of antithesis, not by the objective suppression of any situation, but by the objective suppression of the alienation alone which deforms this situation. (...) Marx gives as the goal of dialectics the effective transformation of social and natural reality in communist society». P. Touilleux, Introduction aux systèmes de Marx et Hegel, p. 119, Desclée, Tournai (Belgique), 1959.

²D. Riazanov, The confession of Karl Marx, p.4, Spartacus, Paris, 1969.

³On this question, we refer to the reader in our text: «Introduction to the material dialect», in our review of Matériaux Critiques N° 5, also on our website: <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes>

He would never cease to repeat that what he had done was to overturn Hegel's idealist method and put it on its rational feet, that is, to free it from its mystical envelope to reveal its intelligence and the power of its negativity.

*«In the **method** of elaborating the subject, one thing did me a great service: by mere accident (pure chance), I had once again leafed through Hegel's **Logic** (Feiligrath found some volumes of Hegel that had originally belonged to Bakunin and sent them to me as a present). If I ever have time for this kind of work again, I shall be very anxious, in two or three printing plates, to make accessible to men of common sense the **rational basis** of the method which Hegel discovered, but at the same time mystified. »* Marx to Engels, January 14, 1858, Letters on Capital, Éditions Sociales, Paris, 1964.

Thus, contrary to the mystifications of the Stalinist doxa (sophisticated by Althusser), Hegel is indeed at the origin of Marx's materialist dialectic.

«Therefore, contrary to the claims of the Althusserians, who maintain that Marx's work as a scientist owes nothing to Hegel, it must be remembered here that Marx's intellectual trajectory led him from left-wing Hegelianism to the critical, that is to say, revolutionary, use of the principal categories of Hegelian dialectics». J.M. Brohm, The Principles of Dialectics, p. 51, Les éditions de la passion, Paris, 2003.

Marx's inversion of Hegel's dialectic is not at all a rejection; on the contrary. In all his great works, he seeks to utilize its relevance and, like the old mole borrowed from Shakespeare via Hegel, to show that, even when invisible to the unseen, it continues to dig tirelessly to reveal the contradictions of the system in accordance with revolutionary negativity.

«In the symptoms that baffle the bourgeoisie, the aristocracy, and the poor prophets of regression, we find our good friend Robin Goodfellow, the old mole who can work so quickly underground, the excellent miner: revolution.» K. Marx, Speech on the anniversary of the People's Paper, London, April 14, 1856.⁴

Engels also contributed in the form of a tribute to Hegelian dialectical philosophy:

«Just as the bourgeoisie, through large-scale industry, competition, and the world market, practically dissolves all old, stable and venerable institutions, so this dialectical philosophy dissolves all notions of definitive absolute truth and of the absolute states of humanity corresponding to it. Nothing definitive, absolute, or sacred remains before it; it shows the transience of all things and in all things, and nothing remains before it but the uninterrupted process of becoming and passing away, the endless ascent from the lower to the higher, of which it itself is but the reflection in the thinking mind. It recognizes the legitimacy of certain stages in the development of knowledge and society for its time and conditions but goes no further. The conservatism of this way of seeing things is relative; its revolutionary character is absolute, the only absolute, moreover, that allows it to prevail.» F. Engels, Ludwig Feuerbach, and the End of Classical German Philosophy.⁵

On almost every occasion, revisionism and its theoretical diffractions took concrete form in the struggle against Hegelian subjectivism and idealism, seeking to destroy the power of materialist dialectics by transforming it into an "objective science." Of course, it was essentially Lukács's History and Class Consciousness that the Stalinist counterrevolution attacked most violently. The consistency of these attacks confirms the rejection of the contributions of Hegel's dialectics, under the pretext of subjectivism and "idealist

⁴Translation by L. Janover and M. Rubel in De l'usage de Marx en temps de crise, p.14 Spartacus, Paris, 1984.

⁵On the website Marxists.org: https://www.marxists.org/francais/engels/works/1888/02/fe_18880221_1.htm

romanticism," in the name of a scientific, productivist, and progressive vision characteristic of bourgeois materialism, which has been described as vulgar.

«Every time an opportunist attack is launched against revolutionary dialectics, it is under the slogan: down with subjectivism (Bernstein against Marx, Kautsky against Lenin, etc.)» G. Lukács, Dialectics and Spontaneity, In Defense of History and Class Consciousness. Editions de la Passion, Paris, 2001.

These attacks on the revolutionary aspect of dialectics under the pretext of idealism and subjectivism had already been refuted by Marx himself when he defined the specificity of his method in the famous Ad Feuerbach theses:

*«This explains why the **active aspect** was developed by idealism, in opposition to materialism - but only abstractly, because idealism naturally does not know real and concrete activity as such .» K. Marx, The German Ideology, Theses on Feuerbach, p. 31 Éditions Sociales, Paris, 1975.*

“This essential observation contrasts vulgar bourgeois materialism and abstract idealism, proposing a synthesis/overcoming of both the former and the latter, which have polarized the history of classical philosophy. Indeed, as Henri Lefebvre points out, "based on this term 'materialism' a radically false interpretation of Marxist doctrine has spread (...) According to this interpretation, Marx reduced all human actions to self-interested motives - and to the lowest and most vulgar of these motives, material interests and needs (...)." H. Lefebvre, Understanding Karl Marx, p. 49, Bordas, 1977.

Now, Marx's **new** revolutionary materialism, being dialectical, integrates the "active" side of idealism, rejecting the passive and stagnant aspect of contemplative materialism. This synthesis/overcoming (and, in overcoming, what is overcome is abolished, suppressed, but also preserved, having lost its immediate existence) then corresponds to revolutionary praxis, that is, to "practical-critical" activity. In other words, for Marxism, **there can be no objective reality without the intervention of the subject.**

«Only Marx and Engels defined the unity of the two fundamental tendencies of classical philosophy, starting from its highest form, but profoundly transforming this form. In this way, they solved the problem posed by the thought of their time not by an eclecticism or an arbitrary «synthesis», but by a leap forward. » H. Lefebvre, p. 123.

For Lukács, following Engels, the study of Hegel's thought is never an end in itself; it always serves to found his own conception of an "orthodox," that is, revolutionary, Marxism. In his view, only through the proletarian perspective can we escape vulgar distortions in order to perceive things as they are and distinguish them from their deceptive appearances. This "method" is "our best working instrument and our sharpest weapon" (Engels). It is not a set of formal recipes to be applied to social phenomena, but a radically different and specific vision of the capitalist world, situated from the point of view of the proletariat as the last, exploited but also revolutionary class in history.

"Moreover, every method is necessarily linked to the being of the corresponding class"
G. Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness, p. 205, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1960. It is because the object and the subject are one and the same that the proletariat, as a revolutionary class, can abolish its exploitation by creating a classless society.

The rejection of criticism is the rejection of Marxism

One of the main counterrevolutionary mystifications was the invention of a mechanical and anti-dialectical separation between, on the one hand, the method, renamed "dialectical materialism" and codified as "science," and its dogmatic application to history, which came to be called "historical materialism." This separation was systematized by Stalin in "his" pamphlet "Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism" of 1938, establishing an epistemological break between dialectical materialism and historical materialism. It has since been taken up by all the epigones of the fossilized and falsified vision of "Marxism," dating back from G. Plekhanov to Gramsci, Marta Harnecker, G. Politzer, and L. Althusser⁶. This Stalinist "Marxism" claims to want to constitute a new epistemology as a "proletarian science" that would be superior to bourgeois science. Materialist dialectics is from the beginning and always historical (that is, in history). They are not two separate entities, one of which, the "method," would exist in itself and would have to be applied to history, then to nature, and then to other domains of knowledge. This was the beginning of the counterrevolutionary creation of "Dia-Mat" as an "objective science" valid for all human knowledge, as theorized by Lysenko. The very notion of "science" entails the productivist and scientific deviations inherent in the bourgeois vision.⁷

«Science is therefore complicit with capitalism. And this complicity does not stop providing machines to capital: it also corrupts experience. Abstract labor and commodity fetishism become the touchstones of experience, completely stripping it of its normative qualities. » A. Feenberg, *Philosophy of Praxis, Marx, Lukács and the School of Frankfurt*, p. 410, Lux / humanités, Montreal, 2016.

Since then, "Lysenkoism" has come to mean "science" subsumed by ideology, in which facts are hidden and disguised to serve the Stalinist form of capitalist dictatorship. Lysenko officially decreed that genes and chromosomes did not exist and that the genetics of Mendel and Morgan was a "bourgeois science." His "theories" descended into pathological delirium and a farce rivaled only by Stalin's claim to "build socialism in one country," of which Lysenko represents only the alienated and absurd reflection in the "scientific" sphere. Once again, for us, it is the notions of **concrete totality** and **revolutionary negativity** that must serve in critical analysis and that constitute the basis of the "philosophy of praxis." **"The reign of the category of totality is the bearer of the revolutionary principle in science."** G. Lukács, cited above, p. 48. Another aspect is the excessively deterministic view of the economy as the most complete, and often sufficient, causality to understand capitalism.

"While bourgeois science and philosophy pursue the disappointing specter of 'objectivity,' Marxism renounces this illusion from the outset and in every respect. It cannot be a 'pure' science or a 'pure' philosophy but criticizes the 'impurity' of all known bourgeois science and philosophy, mercilessly exposing its hidden 'presuppositions.' And this critique, in turn, in no way claims to be 'pure' in the bourgeois sense of the term. It does not undertake itself in an 'objective' manner, but, on the contrary, maintains the closest relationship with the practical struggle that the working class is waging for its liberation, a struggle of which it feels and wishes to be the simple theoretical

⁶As J. Gabel rightly notes, "Lukács' Marxism is the antithesis of Althusser's." *Études dialectiques Méridiens Klincksieck*, p.85, Paris, 1990.

⁷We have written about this topic in the article "On the Margins of the Health Crisis: Towards a Marxist Critique of Science" in our journal *Matériaux Critiques* No. 4, as well as on the website: <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes>

expression." K. Korsch, *The Materialist Conception of History, Marxism and Philosophy*, pp. 137–138, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1968.

Like the forces of production, the method of materialist dialectics is not neutral:

«Now, what makes the Lukacsian problematic current (...) is precisely the refusal to consider the technical process of production as neutral; the understanding (or intuition) that capitalism produces not only a certain use of machines, but a certain structure of the machines themselves and of the mechanical system of production, a dehumanizing, reified and oppressive structure. The critique of the total submission of the worker to the machine, of the mechanical and brutalizing parcel out of tasks in Taylorism, is today one of the most important themes of Marxist thought, a theme whose beginnings are to be found in Marx's own Capital.» M. Loewy, *Marxism and Revolutionary Romanticism*, p. 130, Le Sycomore Publishing, Paris, 1979.

Working conditions at Amazon demonstrate the current state of the technical process subject to the laws of capitalism:

"Amazon determines the average performance of employees at a given site and assigns each worker a score based on this. If you score below 25%, you receive a warning," notes Garfield Hylton. *If you accumulate three, you're called for a disciplinary interview.*

This could lead to dismissal. In some distribution centers, including Coventry, the system was revised at the end of 2024:

*"Amazon now measures its employees' downtime, that is, the periods of time during which they are not engaged in any productive activity," explains Stuart Richards. "So much so that some workers no longer dare to take breaks or go to the bathroom," Rachel Fagan laments*⁸.

Scientific falsification would also take the form of economism, against which Lenin fought hard, that is, the reduction of reality to a single unilateral causality.

«The economism of vulgar Marxists constantly forgets, in fact, when it attempts to eliminate this gap through progressive transitions, that relations based on capital are not simple relations relative to the techniques of production, "purely" economic relations (in the sense of bourgeois economics), but economic and social relations in the true sense of the word. It fails to see that "the capitalist production process, considered in its cohesion, or as a process of reproduction, not only produces commodities and surplus value, but also produces and reproduces the very relations found on capital, on the one hand the capitalist and on the other the wage earner..."» Marx, *Capital*. G. Lukács, already cited, pp. 286–287.

The contribution of the young Lukács

The essential contribution of the young Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* (written between 1919 and 1923), in continuity with Marx, is therefore to have (re)situated reification as a totalizing process of human alienation at the center of revolutionary Marxism.

«For Lukács, the term reification (a neologism used to translate the German concept Verdinglichung, which could be translated as «reification») refers to the process by which the products of human labor activity (and labor itself) are converted into a universe of things and

⁸Le Monde, At Amazon, British unions warn of grueling work schedules, J. Zaug, February 5, 2025, on: https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2025/02/05/chez-amazon-les-syndicats-britanniques-alertent-sur-les-cadences-infernales_6533190_3234.html

relations between things, a «reified» system that is independent and alien to human beings, dominating them by its own laws.» Mr. Loewy, already cited, p. 127.

Just as Hegel had been treated by Vulgate as a "dead dog," Lukacs also had to suffer the opprobrium of the nascent counterrevolution and, after having tried to resist, was forced, through self-criticism, to "denounce" his main work, to which he tried, at the end of his life, to attach himself.

«It is surely one of the greatest merits of History and Class Consciousness to have restored to the category of totality, which the «scientific» pretensions of social-democratic opportunism had completely relegated to oblivion, the central methodological place that it had always occupied in Marx's work. » G. Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, Afterword from 1967, p. 396, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1984.

It is significant that, even today, a good number of immediatists and plush militants consider Lukács's work to be sophisticated and uninteresting nonsense, preferring to continue wallowing in the vulgar and "scientific" understanding of economism. But the most disturbing thing about Lukács is that he took the liberty of criticizing some of Engels's interpretations, which lent themselves to crude caricatures, especially regarding the mechanical application of dialectics to nature, to define universal laws of matter. This is primarily his unfinished and fragmentary work of 1878-80 entitled "Dialectics of Nature." "Lukács seems to be claiming that one can only speak of dialectics for the history of men and not of nature." Michael Loewy, already cited, p. 104. We will leave Lukács to clarify his thinking. On this question, as on many others, we must adopt a critical and humble attitude.

«Not only are they the form in which the conformity of social evolution to the laws is manifested, for a given sociological type (that of the already incontestable economic preponderance of a class), but also, within this type, they are only valid for the specific form of capitalist domination.» G. Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, p.282, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1984.

Marxism, or the materialist conception of history, does not aspire to understand the universe, nor to serve any purpose other than that of being the most relevant theoretical expression of the proletariat's struggle to deny itself as a class and achieve the global human community. Like Lukács, Antonio Labriola, from the end of the 19th century, waged a vigorous principled struggle to define the materialist conception of history against its denaturalization and dilution by the social democratic tradition of Kautsky and Plekhanov. This struggle implies a precise exposition of the dialectical method:

«But this revelation of realist doctrine was not, and does not intend to be, the rebellion of material man against ideal man. On the contrary, it was and is the discovery of the true and proper principles and driving forces of all human development, including all that we call the ideal, under certain positive factual conditions, which carry within them the reasons, the law, and the rhythm of their own becoming.» A. Labriola, Essays on the Materialist Conception of History, p. 112, Gordon & Breach, Paris, 1970.

Similarly, he criticized the bourgeois myths that infest the labor movement, such as parliamentarism in politics and the fascination with "progress" in philosophy:

«Progress has been and is, until now, partial and unilateral. The minorities who participate in

it call it human progress; and proud evolutionists call it the development of human nature. All this partial progress, which until now has developed in the oppression of men by men, has its foundation in the conditions of opposition, through which economic antitheses have engendered all social antitheses; from the relative freedom of the few has arisen the servitude of the many, and the law has been the protector of injustice. Progress, seen in this way and appreciated in its clear notion, appears to us as the moral and intellectual summary of all human misery and all material inequalities. » Ibid., p. 153.

Returning to Lukács, in addition to emphasizing the point of view of totality as a real distinction between Marxism and bourgeois sciences, he also emphasized, against immediacy, **the essential importance of the goal of the proletarian movement.**

«This final goal is not, however, opposed to the process as an abstract ideal; it is, as a moment of truth and reality, as the concrete meaning of each stage reached, immanent to the concrete moment; therefore, its knowledge is precisely the knowledge of the direction taken (unconsciously) by the tendencies directed towards the totality, of the direction that is called upon to concretely determine at a given moment the correct action, taking into account the interest of the global process, of the liberation of the proletariat.» G. Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, Afterword from 1967, p. 44, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1984.

This objective corresponds to the purely communist program that definitively surpasses all transitional programs erroneously theorized and historically outdated as "democratic revolution," "permanent revolution," or "double revolution." The visible expression of this "maximum" program is the organization of the proletariat into a class party. The fundamental category with which Lukács justifies this party organization is that of mediation, an indispensable link between immediacy, steeped in contingency, and totality in the making, an instrument of the process of revolutionary overcoming. The adequate form of class consciousness for the proletariat, which allows the passage from immediacy to totality and the unification of theory and praxis, is the historical party with its conscious will crystallized in its disciplined organization. The proletariat constituted as a class is one that associates in and for a revolutionary program. On the other hand, as Flora Tristan said, the proletariat deprived of its association is not constituted as a class.

«The proletariat only realizes itself by suppressing itself, carrying its class struggle to the end and thus establishing a classless society. The struggle for this society, of which the dictatorship of the proletariat is also only a simple phase, is not only a struggle against the external enemy, the bourgeoisie, but at the same time a struggle of the proletariat against itself: against the devastating and degrading effects of the capitalist system on its class consciousness.» G. Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, pp. 106–107, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1984.

It is therefore impossible to separate the restored and adequate use of the Hegelian method from its revolutionary and critical use by Marx.

«The inseparability of Marx's theory and the Hegelian method is in turn inseparable from the revolutionary character of that theory, that is to say, from its truth. It is in this sense that this first relationship has been generally ignored or misunderstood or denounced as the weakness of what was fallaciously becoming a Marxist doctrine. » Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, thesis 79, pp. 72–73, Gallimard, Paris, 1996.

This is why "orthodox" Marxism, in the Lukacsian sense, surpasses and goes beyond all philosophies, both old idealism and of the old materialism, to propose a new, totalizing worldview: that of communism: a classless, stateless society. It is also in this sense that Marxism cannot be considered a philosophy.

«We will not say, therefore, that there exists a Marxist philosophy, but neither will we say that Marxism has no philosophy in the sense that it possesses an original vision of the world (inseparable from its transformative action), that of communism, which is opposed to the world vision of class societies and capitalism.» Le fil du temps No. 13: The philosophical question in Marxist theory, November 1976. p.26.

If you will, Marxism is not a philosophy because it affirms itself as the negation and death of the philosophical sphere, and is its last, in the sense that it carries out the project of human de-alienation that defined the philosophical approach.

«Clearly, it was not Marx who invented the thesis of a re-negation of philosophy, which would be its practical realization, bringing with it the denial of its autonomy in the overcoming of the Hegelian system, seen as the completion of the discipline, but also as its theoretical confinement. What Marx does have is the clarity of the conditions for this overcoming realization: the fusion of philosophy and social revolution.» J. Robelin, Deaths and Transfigurations of Philosophy with Marx, p. 13, Kiné Editions, Paris, 2022.

The relevance of the critique of Marxist dialectics is thus reestablished as a theoretical and practical weapon, a prerequisite for the revolutionary use of critique by the working class.

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